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THE DEATH OF URIEL VENTRIS



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THE DEATH OF URIEL VENTRIS

By Graham McNeill

*'Each man is a spark in the darkness.
Would that we all burn as bright.'*

He had been wrought to bring death.

All his kind had been birthed with ancient gene-craft and knowledge culled from bygone ages with singular purpose.

To kill.

From the depths of Pavonis to the Spear of Espandor he had brought ruination down upon the heads of rebels, xenos and heretics.

With blade and bolter, he had been an instrument of the Emperor's will. He had served captains, Chapter Masters and - latterly - a primarch.

He was not perfect. He had made mistakes.

Hubris had led him along dark paths, but each time he had found his way back to the light. He had watched battle-brothers die, seen friends betrayed, and fought beside those he would once have called foe.

But in all things, he had served with courage and honour. Now that was at an end.

The wavering skull-visage hovering over him promised as much. Burning eyes smouldered red as its rasping voice spoke of the agony he was to suffer, describing in detail the torments of the damned soon to be worked upon every inch of his flesh.

He would be split from crown to heel.

He would be cut, burned and broken.

'Pain can be endured,' he told the skull. 'I have known pain before.'

'Not like this,' the skull assured him.

*Searing brightness filled his vision, hot and piercing.
The skull disappeared as the light entered him, accompanied by the smell of smoke.
It burned his throat; spicy, earthy and woody.
Sweetgrass, like the gold-green fields of Calth's deepest arcologies, growing wild and far from the lethal radiation of his home world's blue sun.
Words spilled over him, but he did not know them.
Glittering blades descended, wielded by porcelain-masked surgeons. The skull-visaged speaker had spoken truthfully.
This pain was like nothing he had ever known.
For over two hundred years he had brought violent death to the enemies of the Emperor.
But now it was over.
His name was Uriel Ventris.
And this was his death.*

But first, *life*...

Uriel opened his eyes, sitting bolt upright with a cry of shock on his lips. His vision adjusted to the low light in a heartbeat.

Rock surrounded him, the natural stone walls of a cave.

Shadows and light danced upon walls of gold-veined marble. The back of the cave was shrouded in darkness. Even with his enhanced sight, he couldn't see what lay there.

His instincts told him it was nothing good.

Uriel coiled his legs beneath his body and rose to his feet in one smooth motion. His limbs were stiff, the muscles in his legs and shoulders burning, as if he'd come off a hard, months-long combat rotation.

He had no memory of battle, save the long years fighting the plague-hosts of the Archenemy throughout Ultramar. A quick check of his body revealed he bore no wounds. He was unarmoured, clad only in a simple training *chiton* of pale blue, like the ones he'd worn at Agiselus as a boy.

The entrance shimmered with light, and Uriel slowly walked towards it, wondering what he would find beyond the darkness of the cave.

Fronds of cliff-climbing plants hung like a curtain over the entrance, and as he pushed them aside, a sigh of warm air washed over him. Moist and freighted with the smell of loamy earth, fresh-turned and rich with nutrients.

Uriel took another breath.

His neuroglottis sifted a potent mix of nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium.

Agri world?

No, not an agri world.

Uriel stepped from the cave, high on a cliff overlooking a sweeping vista of natural wonder like a great work of art come to life.

His heart soared at the sight of snow-mantled peaks rearing above him, their cloud-tipped summits shawled with evergreen highland firs. Silver domes built on grassy plateaux dotted the mountainsides, and darting flyers left pale contrails against the aching blue of the sky.

A city glittered on the horizon, a wonder of gleaming glass arches, palaces of white marble and fluttering azure flags. Transit lines snaked across the landscape in harmony with its contours, and sunlight glittered on tall towers.

Something tugged at Uriel's memory, but he couldn't place it. A feeling he'd seen this city before. In his many years of service to the Golden Throne, Uriel had fought on hundreds of different planets, but this was not one of them.

At least not *this* version of it.

And then he knew where he'd seen this city before. Upon his every return to Macragge, Uriel would walk the circuit of frescoes encircling the Temple of Correction - an act of devotion to his primarch and a way to remember the world he once knew.

He would always stop at a heartbreaking work entitled *Dawn on the Last Day of Numinous City*.

The artist had rendered the sun over the city with such beauty and skill that some said it was possible to feel the last rays of its light before it had been poisoned into toxic lethality.

'Calth looks different with sky overhead, doesn't it?'

Uriel spun around, fists bunched and ready to fight.

A man sat on a raised boulder behind him, soaking in the view and the warm afternoon, his skin ruddy from the light of a hundred different stars. He, too, wore a training chiton, and had the bulk of a Space Marine. His grizzled face was lined and his shaven skull was pierced with four golden service studs. His grey eyes were deep pools of experience, but still shone with a youthful sparkle.

They were eyes Uriel knew.

'Idaeus?' he said, and a surge of grief damped his heart for the warrior who had shaped him in so many ways; the warrior who had died on Thracia so very long ago.

Captain Idaeus dropped from the boulder, held out his hand and said, 'Hello,

Uriel. Welcome to Calth-that-was.'

Uriel remembered the pain of watching his former captain die on Thracia, obliterated in the explosion that destroyed a vital bridge to save the flank of an Imperial assault.

He tried to speak, but the words wouldn't come.

Uriel studied Idaeus face, following the grooves of age, the scars of war and the pitted burn mark on the side of his neck where a rad-burst from a breached engine core had almost killed him.

Idaeus was just as Uriel remembered him.

Was that what this was - a memory given form?

Had his mind retreated into fantasy to spare him from...

From what?

A skull-faced monster looming over him.

Wicked blades and blood.

The image faded, and he felt himself take Idaeus' hand, feeling the calluses on his captain's palm, the ridge line of a scar where a greenskin grenade fragment almost cost him three of his fingers.

None of this is real.

Uriel knew that with deep certainty, but the emotions clogging his throat and constricting his chest felt *very* real.

'Am I dead?' asked Uriel, finally able to speak.

'I don't think so,' said Idaeus. 'At least, not yet.'

'So what is this?'

Idaeus strolled to the edge of the cliff.

'I told you, this is Calth-that-was.'

'The Archenemy murdered Calth thousands of years ago,' said Uriel. 'They poisoned the sun and burned all life from the surface.'

'That they did.'

'So how is this possible?'

Idaeus turned and spread his hands wide 'I don't know, Uriel. Perhaps you are dreaming? Perhaps you *are* dying, and this is a last gift of beauty from the universe? All I know is that I am happy to see you, my boy. You've come a long way since Thracia.'

Uriel smiled, happy - despite the strangeness of this meeting - to see Idaeus.

'A great deal has happened since...'

'My death?' finished Idaeus. 'I know. I died in service of the Emperor, so there

is nothing to regret. Did we win on Thracia?'

Uriel nodded. 'We did. The rebels were routed and the *Pax Imperialis* restored.'

Idaeus grinned and slapped a palm on Uriel's shoulder.

'Most impressive,' he said. 'And then? I presume you took the captaincy?'

'I did, though your legacy shaped everything I did.'

'Then I trained you well, Uriel. It's every leader's job to train their replacement.'

They stood together at the edge of the cliff, and Uriel saw a path heading down the mountain, a switchbacking route leading to the plains below. He hadn't noticed it *before*, but in this place, in this time... he should not be surprised at such things.

A white-walled structure lay at the foot of the cliff, a sprawling barracks, with training courtyards at each compass point and a punishingly brutal fighting ring at its heart.

'You remember that place?' asked Idaeus.

'I do,' said Uriel. 'Vividly. But the Agiselus Barracks are on Macragge, not Calth.'

Idaeus shrugged. 'This is not the real world, Uriel. Here we are not constrained by logic or planetary geography.'

Uriel's eyes narrowed at Idaeus' words. 'That sounds like you know more than you are telling me.'

'There's some truth in that my boy, but shall we venture downhill? I'll wager there are some familiar faces who'll be pleased to see you.'

'My memories of Agiselus beg to differ.'

The route down from the cave was treacherous and filled with heart-stopping moments where Uriel felt sure he would slip and fall from the cliff. Sharp stones scored his bare soles, and loose shale cascaded downhill in mini avalanches.

'If this is not real, can we not simply... *appear* at the bottom of the cliff?' asked Uriel.

'Maybe,' laughed Idaeus, relishing the challenge of their descent. 'But where's the fun in that? The nature of the risk defines the reward.'

Uriel was about to answer when he heard crunching footsteps behind them. He turned to see a group of boys running over the ridgeline above them. Twelve of them ran as if a host of genestealers were hot on their heels, legs burning and arms pistoning hard as they sought to win the race.

At the head of the pack was a powerful, strong-limbed boy with close-cropped hair and the hard-edged features of someone who had never known second

place.

'Learchus,' said Uriel.

At the sound of his voice, the boys turned and raced downhill, following the path he and Idaeus had taken. They leapt and tumbled towards them, determination making their features older than their years.

Uriel saw the stocky form of Cleander, a bully who had made his life a misery at Agiselus. Cleander was inseparable from Learchus, but he had become a heroic warrior of the Ultramarines, finally meeting his end honourably on Pavonis.

Behind him, Uriel saw a dark-haired youth with a serious face he barely recognised. Gulfs of time and experience separated them, but he could not fail to know his own youthful Calthian features.

Behind his younger self came the lumbering form of Pasanius. Even at this young age, his body was already enormous. Upon his elevation to the line ranks of the Adeptus Astartes, the Chapter's Techmarines had been forced to fashion his armour from Tactical Dreadnought plates.

'Hard to believe you were ever that young,' said Idaeus.

'I can barely believe it myself,' agreed Uriel as the boys raced towards them, apparently oblivious to their presence. 'If I could tell him the things I know now...'

'What would you tell him?'

Uriel thought for a moment, watching the flinty eyes of his younger reflection focus on Learchus' back.

'I would tell him to remember the teachings of the Codex Astartes, to trust that doing the right thing will always be doing the honourable thing.'

'Don't you think he knows that already?'

'He knows the words, but not the cost.'

The boys were almost upon them, and Uriel looked for safe ground to stand aside and let the boys past. The path was narrow, and there was nowhere to step with confidence.

He looked back in time to see the young Uriel pick up the pace to overtake Learchus. Learchus looked over his shoulder, cocking his arm back. Uriel knew what was coming next. Learchus slashed back with his elbow.

And blinding light burst before him as pain exploded in Uriel's face. He stumbled, hands flying to his face in surprise as fiery agony seared through him.

He staggered, the pain swimming his vision with red.

Too great for so insignificant a blow.

It felt as though his skull had been cracked open, as if rusted nails were scraping the interior of his skull.

Uriel blinked away the pain and turned away.

White light filled his vision, but when it cleared, he saw they were no longer on the mountainside. The running boys, too, had vanished.

Instead, the gates of Agiselus loomed before him; dark steel and banded adamantium.

'I remember approaching these gates many times,' he said, looking down at his hands to see the skin of his knuckles was split and bloodied. 'Each time, the gates were closed.'

'Do you remember why?' said Idaeus.

Uriel saw his former captain was also bloodied. The scar on his neck had expanded to his face. The left side of it was ridged and dark, one eye milky and white.

'No matter what hardships we'd suffered, we had to work together and push them open.'

Idaeus placed his hands flat on the gate 'Shall we?'

Uriel joined him, pushing hard on the black metal. It felt hot to the touch, like placing his palms on the blade of a sword fresh from the forge. He felt it burning, but kept up the pressure.

Heat spread up his arms, as though molten fire was pumping through his veins and burning them from the inside out.

The heat coiled around his bones, fusing them and turning the marrow to magma.

He gritted his teeth and pushed harder, fighting through the pain. His fingers blackened, the flesh peeling back as the awful, intolerable heat filled him.

Uriel screamed and gave one last surge of anger-fuelled strength. The fight to get back into Agiselus every night had never been this painful, never this desirable. Finally, a vertical sliver of torchlight grew between the halves of the gate. The sight gave Uriel strength, and he pushed through the pain, drawing it inwards and using it.

The gates swung open, and Uriel fell forwards onto his knees.

He looked down at his hands, the skin rough and textured from decades of war, but unburned and whole. He exhaled deeply and looked up as Idaeus offered him a hand up.

He took it, and Idaeus hauled him to his feet. The captain's face was worse than before.

His chiton was almost entirely gone, the fabric burned and ashen. The cataracted eye was now molten and glutinous, its fluid dribbling down a burn-scarred cheek.

'What is happening?'

Idaeus' mouth was gummed with scars, and it took him a moment to respond. When his words came out, they were wet and bubbling, forced up through a throat thick with blood.

'No decision is without consequence, Uriel,' said Idaeus. 'Remember that.'

'What decision?'

'This one,' said Idaeus, tapping a blackened finger against Uriel's chest. 'The one you're making right now.'

For a moment, it felt as though Idaeus' finger pressed beyond the barrier of flesh and muscle, through the ossified bone shield protecting the myriad super-organs beneath.

The moment passed, and Idaeus turned away, limping through the open gateway.

Uriel felt a mix of emotions surge through him as he followed Idaeus within, gripped by a strange sense of events spiralling beyond his control.

Inside the courtyard, the day transformed into night.

The pale blue sky darkened instantly to sable-black. Torches flickered in iron sconces, and a full moon bathed the hardpacked earth in silver.

Arrayed in uniform ranks were a hundred Space Marines, each armoured in the cobalt blue of the Ultramarines, their shoulder guards edged in the vivid green of the Fourth Company.

Uriel held himself taller at the sight of these titans in gleaming war-plate. He was so proud of these warriors, and loved every one of them, though he had the sudden, sinking sensation that this might be the last time he would see them.

Suffocating grief touched Uriel, threatening to overwhelm him. His eyes misted with a sudden swell of emotion.

The image of his warriors wavered, and it seemed to Uriel as if decades were passing with every breath. The ranked-up Space Marines remained unmoving and unflinching as creeping stains of rust spread across cracked and aged surfaces of once-inviolable war-plate.

Uriel blinked, and his warriors were once again as he remembered them.

He forced down his emotions.

This was not a time for grief.

What is it then?

He didn't know, but as the familiar smell of lapping powder and the tang of sacred oils caught in his throat, the memories they evoked returned with physical force.

Physical and mental exhaustion, pride and - above all else - a ferocious determination to win a place within the hallowed ranks of the Ultramarines.

Hard times, to be sure; but entirely worthwhile.

All the pain and suffering Uriel endured had forged the steel in his soul, moulded the fire of his youth and tempered him into a weapon to serve the God-Emperor.

Movement drew his eye, and Uriel saw shafts of moonlight catching the woven metal of the clenched gauntlet upon the company standard. Ancient Peleus held the mailed fist banner aloft, and Uriel's heart filled with deserved pride at all his warriors had accomplished.

'The Swords of Calth,' said Uriel.

His command squad stood with Peleus, heads held high and their numerous honour markings and purity seals bright in the moonlight.

Brutus Cyprian, a warrior so powerful he had once ripped open a t'au battlesuit with his bare hands.

Petronius Nero, the company champion and slayer of the legendary blade-dancer, Xiomagra.

Livius Hadrianus, with his battered, heat-patterned meltagun held across his chest.

Apothecary Selenus, who had saved the life of every man in the company more than once, and preserved the legacy of the fallen.

These heroes had come together during the t'au invasion of Pavonis, a war that now seemed a lifetime ago. Uriel knew each man's heart as well as his own, and he could have picked no finer brothers to fight at his side.

A warrior stepped from the ranks, his bearing noble and his power unmistakable. His helm was the muted crimson of a sergeant, but as Uriel watched, the colour bled out of it becoming the same blue as his armour. A golden wreath appeared at his brow and captain's insignia faded in on his shoulder guard between his squad markings.

'Learchus?' said Uriel.

The warrior turned towards him, the red lenses of his visor accusing him with their steely gaze. In their youth, Uriel and Learchus Abantes had been rivals, enemies even, but years of battle had wrought a bond of brotherhood between them. 'You left us,' he said, his tones clipped and precise.

It took Uriel a moment to understand Learchus' meaning. 'The Death Oath...' he said.

'Death Oath?' said Idaeus. 'You went on a Death Oath?'

Uriel nodded. 'A long time ago. I took your teachings a little too literally and believed I knew better than the Codex Astartes how to act.'

'You left us,' said Learchus. 'You are leaving us right now.'

'What? No,' said Uriel, stepping in front of Learchus and gripping his shoulder guards. The gold of the wreath at his brow reflected the moonlight. 'I am your captain, Learchus, and I will be until the Emperor takes me to His side.'

Learchus shook his head.

'You left us,' he repeated. 'We are left behind.'

With that, Learchus snapped hard to attention and spun on his heel until his back was to Uriel.

As Learchus completed his about-face, the rest of the company followed suit. A hundred heels slammed down in unison as the Fourth Company turned their backs on Uriel.

'Learchus, what are you doing?' cried Uriel.

He turned to Idaeus. 'I endured this once before, walking in exile from the Fortress of Hera to an uncertain future. I have no wish to relive that moment. Why does my mind conjure a vision of my greatest shame?'

'I don't know, Uriel,' said Idaeus. 'Everything here has meaning, but it is for you to understand its significance.'

In desperation, Uriel turned back to Learchus and put a hand on his shoulder guard.

No sooner had he touched his comrade's armour than Learchus crumbled to dust, his form disintegrating in the blink of an eye. The wind that blew the company standard carried the ashen remains away, and Uriel watched in open-mouthed horror as a wave of dissolution blew through the company.

As if formed of mist, every warrior of the company blew away until only one remained.

He, too, wore the colours of a sergeant but one of his arms was the gleaming metal of a cybernetic replacement. His armour was colossal, crafted from the remains of damaged suits of Terminator armour.

'Pasanius! Emperor's mercy, it's good to see you.'

'Mercy? The Emperor *has* no mercy,' said Pasanius. 'His sons learned that. The warriors of the storm, they knew it, and soon we'll have to accept it. A new era is upon us. Upon *you*. Isn't that why you came here?'

'I don't know why I'm here,' said Uriel. 'Is this a dream? A vision of the warp? I don't know.'

'It's *you*,' said Pasanius. 'This. It's all *you*. What's past is prologue, and what awaits at the end is up to *you*.'

'I don't understand.'

'I know you don't, but you will,' said Pasanius, and he placed his augmetic hand at the centre of Uriel's chest. Uriel felt the heat of his old friend's hand through the thin material of the chiton.

'The Noctis Aeterna has fallen, Uriel, and only the strongest will survive the coming war. You have to be *strong*. You have to *endure*. Remember that.'

Burning heat flowed from Pasanius' palm, and Uriel dropped to his knees. Pasanius came down with him, keeping his hand pressed tightly to Uriel's chest.

The pain was indescribable. Uriel's primary heart pulsed like a newborn star within his flesh, and furnace heat spread from the treacherous organ, surging along his limbs like liquid metal in a mould.

'Pasanius? What are you doing?' gasped Uriel between breaths that felt like drawing shards of glass into his lungs. 'What's happening to me?'

'What happens to all living things that seek to survive,' said Pasanius. 'Change.'

'Please, make it stop!'

Pasanius shook his head and lifted his other arm to the night sky.

'Time to go,' he said, and an awful sensation of dread settled upon Uriel as Pasanius vanished, and he saw the hues of moon and sky reverse.

A creeping shadow slid over the surface of the silver moon, as a bleached, lifeless white bled into the sky.

The walls of Agiselus peeled away, pristine marble flaking like cinders lifting from charred timber. Veins of rust spread through the white walls as the stonework crumbled to reveal its bones of corroded iron mesh.

With the disintegration of the walls, Uriel saw the lush landscape around the barracks wither. The forested mountains blackened to become vast slag heaps of industrial debris as the city on the horizon reassembled itself into a series of skull-mouthed manufactoria, belching toxic fumes and poisonous waste from soaring flare-stacks.

What had once been a landscape of natural beauty was now a smog-wreathed hellscape, a devastated wasteland threaded by sluggish, rainbow-sheened rivers of petrochemicals.

'No,' said Uriel, recognising the dead sky and the hateful black sun presiding over this nightmarish landscape 'By the Emperor's mercy, no!'

'Weren't you listening?' said Idaeus, except the voice was no longer that of Idaeus. 'The Emperor *has* no mercy. He's a monster and a madman. I told you that before, but you didn't listen then either.'

Uriel had not heard that voice for decades, but its mocking cadence and bitter tones were forever etched in his mind. He knew it as well as his own.

Idaeus looked up, but the burned face of his former captain was gone.

In its place was the face of a warrior in burnished war-plate, steel-dust grey and chevroned with yellow and black. One arm was ebon black and cursed, the other held a monstrous axe.

His scalp was shaven and scarred, one eye a burning red cybernetic replacement. Uriel remembered firing the shot that cost him that eye.

'Honsou...' said Uriel.

'Tell me,' said the Iron Warrior, 'did you ever think you'd return to the Eye of Terror?'

Uriel could not be on Medrengard.

This was not Honsou.

It could not be.

But now the searing fire in Uriel's heart had a focus.

The litany of Honsou's crimes was a legacy of slaughter; planets razed, entire populations murdered, and bloodshed so prodigious it seemed inconceivable a single individual could have orchestrated it all.

Honsou's death was long overdue, but he had managed to escape the depths of Calth and flee Ultramar on the corpse-hauler *Shendao*. Astrogators and warp-divinators surmised he had taken the captured ship to the Eye of Terror.

But what had become of him after that was a mystery.

Most likely he was dead, dust and bones upon one of the hundreds of battlefields around the Cicatrix Maledictum.

No, this could not be Honsou.

And yet...

Uriel roared and charged the Iron Warrior.

The figure that had once been Idaeus rose to its feet and awaited his attack. The Iron Warrior dropped the black-bladed axe and spread his arms in a gesture of empty challenge.

Uriel's fist smashed into Honsou's cheek, snapping his head back with ferocious impact. Honsou took the blow stoically, reeling from a second thunderous punch.

Blood coated the Iron Warrior's face in a grotesque mask, but he wasn't fighting

back.

Uriel bore Honsou to the ground, pummelling him as they fell. His fists slammed down again and again. Uriel reached for a weapon, something to finish his foe once and for all.

His fingers closed on cold steel, and he pushed himself upright. His breathing rasped hard in his chest and he looked down to see he had picked up Honsou's black-bladed axe.

Its weight was perfectly balanced, the grip textured for his hands. Uriel felt the power within the blade, a power so great it could slay gods.

He swung the weapon wide, arcing it up to bring down in executioner's stroke. The blade growled in pleasure, the bloodthirst at its heart eager for the kill.

Uriel roared and hurled the weapon away.

Honsou laughed and spat a wad of blood.

'You never could kill me,' said Honsou.

'There's nothing of you here to kill.'

'So sure of that, are you?'

'Yes,' said Uriel. 'Your face'

'What about it? I grant you it's not as handsome as it once was, but I've seen worse. Trust me, a lot worse.'

'You were once a Space Marine but even a Space Marine's skull should have been pulped by the beating I just gave you.'

Honsou retrieved his axe, but made no move to attack Uriel.

They circled one another wanly beneath the light of the black sun. The blasted hinterlands stretching out in every direction were bleached of all life by the deathly sun, bereft of colour and signs of habitation.

Nothing could live here; nothing natural, anyway.

Scattered across Medrengard, conclaves of muttering heretic tech-priests laboured within bloodied forge-temples, and technovirus-infused monsters of flesh and steel roamed its junkyard forest of rust and debris.

Carrion-scrapers circled over ancient battlefields while the bones of the dead drifted on the sands of pale deserts.

In the distance; Uriel saw an ironclad mountain rise from the wasteland and climb to the sky with the ratcheting boom of impossibly deep world-gears. Squatting at the base of the mountain was a damned city of blighted strongholds, protected from attack behind layered defences of basalt walls and forests of razorwire, and overlooked by cliffs of artillery batteries.

Dark thoughts crowded Uriel's mind at the sight of this nightmarish world,

recollections of gut-wrenching confessions made to Chaplain Clausel in the candlelit gloom of the Reclusiam aboard the *Vae Victus*.

Enclosed in the dark folds of blood-rich flesh...

The essence of his soul grafted to another...

Unfleshed...

'Memories of this place haunted me for years after Pasanus and I returned to Macragge,' said Uriel.

'I'm amazed they didn't just shoot the pair of you down as soon as you appeared at the gates,' said Honsou.

'A Grey Knight by the name of Leodegarius tested our faith and flesh on Salinas,' said Uriel. 'He declared us free of taint, and the word of such a captain carries great weight.'

'Still...' said Honsou. 'Can they ever *really* know? Can you? The Savage Morticians opened you up, worked their dark arts in the core of your being. How can you be sure they didn't plant some little piece of Chaos to bring back with you? The ways of the Archenemy are insidious, you know.'

Uriel shook his head, amused by Honsou's transparency. 'Now I *know* you're not him,' said Uriel. 'Honsou would never be so blatant. He would probe for weakness, test my defences and flank me when I least expected it. You're not him. I know that for a fact, but I cannot look at you without the same hatred I felt all those years ago.'

'Hatred is an underrated emotion,' said Honsou. 'It was all that sustained me when I was at the bottom of the wheel's turn. It gave me focus when everyone wanted to crush me.'

'There are better emotions than hate for that.'

'None as pure.'

Uriel knew he could never reason with such a monster. Some souls had fallen too far into darkness ever to return to the Emperor's light. Too blinded by their own evil or ignorance, they were lost in a swamp of their own making.

Honsou had become a figure of evil legend in Ultramar, his deeds still spoken of in hushed whispers for fear that the mere utterance of his name might reach him in some far-flung daemon world and draw him back.

His Bloodborn invasion of Ultramar had been repulsed, but only at the cost of millions of lives and almost a third of the Chapter's warriors.

But seeing him here now - wherever *here* was - Uriel saw the truth of his oncenemesis.

'I used to fear you,' said Uriel.

'I *am* fearsome,' agreed Honsou.

'Not that way. I mean in the sense that you were a dark mirror of my potential, the final destination of the path I was on. You say hate sustained you? Discipline sustained me. The rules I broke, the edicts of the Codex Astartes I flouted? Ignoring them was the quick and easy choice. The *hard* choice was doing the right thing, doing what needed to be done no matter how difficult. That's what you could never grasp, because you served only one master. Yourself. And that's why I no longer fear what you represent. I am a servant of the Golden Throne, and I am stronger for that.'

'You're still a *servant*, though,' said Honsou. 'And servant's just another word for slave.'

'You never did understand me, did you?' said Uriel. 'Even with everything you learned from the Newborn, you never understood. You had the genetics, the armour and the weapons, but you were never *really* a Space Marine. You were not trained among equals, never took strength from bonds of brotherhood, and you never learned how much stronger those bonds make us.'

'Then illuminate me, O wise one.'

'To be truly free, you need discipline'

'That doesn't make any sense.'

'For every freedom you desire, there is a constant discipline you must implement until it becomes so ingrained a habit that it is as natural as breathing,' said Uriel, seeing a rolling cloud of dust appear over each horizon.

Approaching vehicles, a lot of them.

His words grew stronger as he spoke, the truth of them armouring him in certainty.

'From the physical to the emotional to the strategic and the tactical, the Codex Astartes taught me how to apply that universal formula to every aspect of my life.'

The cloud on the horizon was breaking up now, and between blustering squalls of ferrous dust, Uriel saw snatches of an armoured host of unstoppable force converging on him, like a noose around the neck of a condemned heretic.

'So how does any of that help you now?' asked Honsou, looking past Uriel to the approaching iron tide. 'All the discipline in the world won't save you from what's coming.'

Uriel looked straight into the black sun, stark against the sky like a cyclopean eye staring down at him. It blinked, and the edges rippled with a smoky umbra. The whiteness of the sky around it gleamed oddly, like spots of light reflecting

on ivory plates of ceramite.

'Of course it will,' he said.

'How?'

'By not giving in. That's it, isn't it? You are my weakness given voice. You want me to give in, to abandon my principles in the face of pain and adversity, but I will not. Whatever this place is, whatever is approaching, I will endure it. You think I will break here? I will not. You think I will succumb to you? That will never happen.'

Honsou shrugged and backed away from him as the horde of diabolical war-machines roared out of the dust towards Uriel.

They came as hulking, spike-hulled tanks and biomechanical constructs of brass and bone, bearing banners of flayed skin and leering, blood-stained mutants that clung to their hulls like psychotic parasites.

Uriel could not hope to fight such numbers and win, but that he *would* fight was what truly mattered.

'You're going to die here, Ventris.'

Uriel looked back to the host of snarling daemon-vehicles surrounding him. He knew the faces of the men clinging to them; they were the faces of every foe he had ever killed, and the faces of enemies he had *yet* to kill.

Whatever this was, whatever nightmare he had fallen into, he knew it had not broken him. In the face of pain, dark memories and temptations to weakness, he remained true to himself.

The words of the Codex Astartes returned to Uriel, as they always did in times of hardship.

'The warrior who acts out of honour cannot fail. His duty is honour itself. Even his death - if it is honourable - is a reward and can be no failure, for it has come through duty. Seek honour as you act, therefore, and *you will know no fear.*'

'Fine words,' said Honsou with a grin as the guns of every one of the clanking monstrosities lowered to aim right at Uriel's heart. 'But just remember one thing.'

'What's that?'

'You *chose* this. All of it.'

Uriel's world exploded in pain and fire.

But, mercifully, it was short.

The chamber echoed with the last of his screams.

Gore coated the gleaming ceramic tiles of its walls. It dribbled in thick ropes from the slab upon which the gene-wrought form of Uriel Ventris lay.

Whirring autoclaves vented superheated steam, and the blades of auto-chirurgeons were bright red and sticky with congealed, hyper-oxygenated blood.

Hissing censers billowed with scented fumes, and choirs of chanting acolytes stood in shadowed alcoves around the chamber's perimeter.

Red-robed figures in blood-stiffened aprons retreated from the slab, their chimeric features hidden within their shadowed hoods.

Two others descended from the glass-fronted gallery above, their steps leaden and their hearts filled with foreboding.

They approached the slab, the body upon it already cooling as its vital functions stilled.

Auto-lungs wheezed one last time and then ceased their rhythmic rise and fall. Bio-monitors flatlined and the jagged sine-waves of brain activity plateaued.

'Did it work?' asked the first figure, a skull-faced giant in black armour.

His companion, plated in ivory and cobalt, consulted the chattering machinery, inloading data streams to his gauntlet.

'He is dead,' he said at last. 'So, yes, it worked.'

'Now what do we do?'

'Now we wait,' said Apothecary Selenus. 'And we pray he crosses the Rubicon.'

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

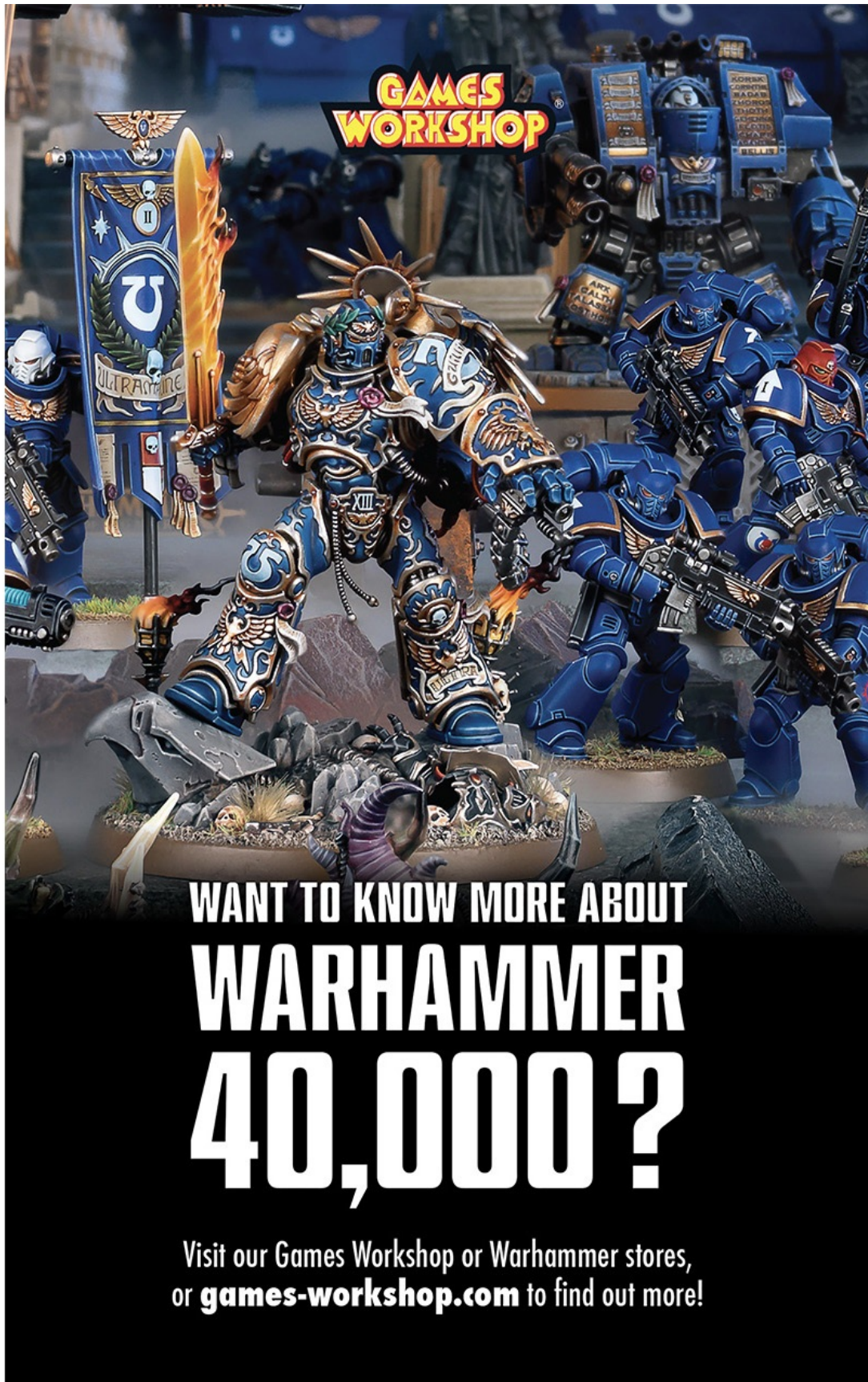
Graham McNeill has written many Horus Heresy novels, including *The Crimson King*, *Vengeful Spirit* and his *New York Times* bestsellers *A Thousand Sons* and the novella *The Reflection Crack'd*, which featured in *The Primarchs* anthology. Graham's Ultramarines series, featuring Captain Uriel Ventris, 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 the Forges of Mars trilogy, featuring the Adeptus Mechanicus. For Warhammer, he has written the Warhammer Chronicles trilogy *The Legend of Sigmar*, the second volume of which won the 2010 David Gemmell Legend Award.

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