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PRIESTS OF MARS

Graham McNeill

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hailing from Scotland, **Graham McNeill** worked for over six years as a Games Developer in Games Workshop's Design Studio before taking the plunge to become a full-time writer. Graham's written more than twenty and Fantasy novels and comics, as well as a number of side projects that keep him busy and (mostly) out of trouble. His Horus Heresy novel, *A Thousand Sons*, was a New York Times bestseller and his Time of Legends novel, *Empire*, won the 2010 David Gemmell Legend Award. Graham lives and works in Nottingham and you can keep up to date with where he'll be and what he's working on by visiting his website.

Join the ranks of the 4th Company at www.graham-mcneill.com

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The dockers' bar didn't have a name; no one had ever thought to give it one. But everyone around the busy port knew it, a bunch of converted cargo containers welded together and fitted with rudimentary power and plumbing. Who really ran it was unclear, but a steady stream of disgruntled and exhausted dock workers could always be found filling its echoing, metallic spaces.

'This is where you do your off-duty drinking?' said Ismael, his slurred tone telling Abrehem and Coyne exactly what he thought of this dive. 'No wonder we're usually behind schedule.'

Abrehem was already regretting taking the overseer up on his offer of drinks for the crane crew, but it was too late to back out now. They'd made their quota, for the first time in weeks, and Ismael had offered to take them out drinking in a rare moment of largesse.

'Yeah,' said Abrehem. 'It's not much, but we like it.'

'Damn, it stinks,' said Ismael, his face screwed up in disgust.

The loader-overseer was already drunk. The shine served at the first few bars they'd visited had almost knocked him off his feet. Ismael didn't drink much, and it was showing in his mean temper and cruel jokes at the expense of men who didn't dare answer back.

A nighttime crowd already thronged the bar's bench seats, and the pungent reek of engine oil, grease, lifter-fuel, sweat and hopelessness caught in the back of his throat. Abrehem knew the aroma well, because he stank of it too.

Faces turned to stare at them as Ismael pushed his way through the crowd of dock workers to the bar, a series of planks set up on a pair of trestles, upon which sat two vats that had once been the promethium drums of a Hellhound. Some men claimed to be able to tell what kind of tanks the varieties of shine had been brewed in, that each one gave a subtly different flavour, but how anyone could taste anything after a few mouthfuls was beyond Abrehem.

Coyne took Abrehem's arm as he set off after Ismael.

'Thor's balls, you shouldn't have taken him up on that drink,' whispered his fellow operator.

Abrehem knew that fine well, but tried to put his best face on. 'Come on, he's not a bad boss.'

'No,' agreed Coyne. 'I've had worse, that's for sure, but there's some lines you just shouldn't cross.'

'And getting drunk on shine with a man that can get you thrown off shift is one of them, I know.'

'We'll be lucky if he gets away without a beating tonight,' said Coyne. 'And when he wakes up with a cracked skull, we'll be the ones he blames. I can't lose this

assignment, Abrehem, I've a wife and three young'uns to support.'

'I know that,' said Abrehem, annoyed that Coyne always thought of his own woes before anyone else's. Abrehem had a wife too, though she was a stranger to him now. Both their young ones had died of lung-rust before their fifth year, and the loss had broken them beyond repair. Toxic exhalations from the sprawling Mechanicus refineries fogged the hab-zones surrounding the Navy docks, and the young were particularly susceptible to the corrosive atmospherics.

'Come on,' said Coyne. 'Let's try and get this over while we still have jobs.'

'We'll have one drink and then we'll go,' promised Abrehem, threading his way through the sullen drinkers towards the bar. He could already hear Ismael's nasal voice over the simmering hubbub of gloomy conversation. Abrehem knew most of the faces, fellow grafters on the back-breaking labour shifts handling the supply needs of a busy tithe-world.

Times were busy enough normally, but with the Mechanicus fleet at high anchor needing to be furnished with supplies to last an indefinite time, the docks and their workers were being stretched to breaking point. Yes, there had been some accidents and deaths that could no doubt be traced back to excessive consumption of shine distilled in scavenged fuel drums, but the lives of a few drunk dockers mattered little in the grand scheme of things.

Hundreds of fleet tenders were making daily trips back and forth from the loading platforms, fat and groaning with weapons, ammo, food, fuel, spare uniforms, engine parts, machine parts, surgical supplies, millions of gallons of refined fluids for lubrication, drinking, anointing and who knew what else. It was hard, dangerous work, but it was work, and no man of Joura could afford to pass up a steady, reliable credit-stream.

Abrehem reached the bar to find Ismael loudly arguing with the shaven-headed barkeep at the drum. With a gene-bulked and partially augmented ogryn nearby, it was a poor fight to pick. Abrehem had seen the creature take off a man's head with the merest twist of its wrist, and knew it wasn't above a bit of casual violence when its tiny brain was fogged with shine. The filters in his eyes read the scrubbed ident-codes on the augmetics applied to the ogryn's arms and cranium.

Backstreet, fifth-gen knock-offs. Crude and cheap, but effective.

'Have you tried this?' demanded Ismael. 'This bloody idiot is trying to poison me!'

'It's a special blend,' said Abrehem, taking a glass from the barkeep and sliding an extra couple of credit wafers across the bar. 'Unique, in fact. Takes a bit of getting used to, that's all.'

The barkeep gave him a fixed stare and nodded to the exit. Abrehem understood and took the three drinks from the bar as Coyne steered Ismael away from the glowering ogryn. With his overseer out of earshot, Abrehem leaned over the bar and said, 'We'll down these and be on our way. We're not here for trouble.'

The barkeep grunted, and Abrehem followed Coyne and Ismael to a bench seat located in the corner of the containers away from most of the bar's patrons. This

part of the bar was mostly empty, located as it was next to the latrines. The stink of stale urine and excrement was pungent, and only marginally more offensive than the acrid fumes of their drinks.

‘Emperor’s guts,’ swore Ismael. ‘It stinks here.’

‘Yeah, but at least we have a seat,’ said Coyne. ‘And after a day’s shift at the docks, that’s all that matters, right?’

‘Sure,’ agreed Abrehem. ‘You get to our age and a seat’s important.’

‘I spend my days sitting down in a control cab,’ pointed out Ismael.

‘*You* do, we don’t,’ said Coyne, unable to keep the resentment from his voice.

Fortunately Ismael was too drunk to notice, and Abrehem shot Coyne a warning glance.

‘Come on, let’s sink these and we’ll get out of here,’ said Abrehem, but Ismael wasn’t listening. Abrehem followed his gaze and sighed as he saw a familiar face hunched low over a three-quarters-drunk bottle of shine.

‘Is that him?’ said Ismael.

‘Yeah, it’s him,’ agreed Abrehem, putting a hand on Ismael’s arm. ‘Leave him alone, it’s not worth it. Trust me.’

‘No,’ said Ismael, throwing off Abrehem’s hand with an ugly sneer. ‘I want to see what a real *hero* looks like.’

‘He’s not a hero, he’s a drunk, a liar and a waste of a pair of coveralls.’

Ismael wasn’t listening, and Abrehem gave Coyne a nod as their overseer made his way over to the man’s table. Abrehem saw the ogryn heft a length of rebar as long as Abrehem’s leg and start moving through the crowded bar, parting knots of men before it like a planetoid with its own gravitational field. A few of the more sober patrons, sensing trouble, headed for the exit, and Abrehem wished he could follow them.

He cursed and sat next to Ismael as he planted himself on a stool at the drunk’s table.

‘You’re him,’ said Ismael, but the man ignored him.

Abrehem studied the man’s face. Lined with exhaustion and old before its time, a network of ruptured capillaries around his ruddy cheeks and nose spoke of a lifetime lived in a bottle, but there was a hardness there too, reminding Abrehem that this man had once been a soldier in the Guard.

A *bad* soldier if the stories were to be believed, but a soldier nonetheless.

‘I said, “you’re him”, aren’t you?’ said Ismael.

‘Go away,’ said the man, and Abrehem heard the sadness in his voice. ‘Please.’

‘I know you’re him,’ said Ismael, leaning forwards over the table. ‘I saw you on shift last week, and heard all about you.’

‘Then you don’t need me to tell you again,’ said the man, and Abrehem realised he wasn’t drunk.

The bottle in front of him was an old one, and the drink in his hand was untouched.

‘I want to hear you tell it,’ said Ismael, his tone viperous.

‘Why bother? I’ve told it over and over, and no one believes me,’ said the man.

‘Come on, hero, tell me how you killed the Iron Warrior. Did you breathe on him

and he keeled over dead?’

‘Please,’ said the man, an edge of steel in his voice. ‘I asked you nicely to leave me alone.’

‘No, not till you tell me how you took on an entire army of Traitor Space Marines,’ spat Ismael, reaching for the man’s bottle.

The man slapped Ismael’s hand away and before anyone could stop him, he had a knife at the overseer’s throat. It glinted dully in the low light. Abrethem scanned the serial number on the blade: 250371, Guard-issue, carbon steel and a killing edge that could cut deeper than a fusion-weld in the right hands.

The ogryn reached their table, the rebar slamming down and sending their drinks flying. Broken glass and splintered wood flew. Abrethem fell away from the table onto the ribbed floor. The stink was worse down here, and he rolled as the ogryn stepped in close to where Ismael was pinned against the wall by the knife-wielding man.

‘Put down knife. Put down man,’ said the ogryn in halting, child-like speech.

The man didn’t acknowledge its words, pressing the knife into Ismael’s throat with enough force to draw a thin line of blood.

‘I’d kill you if I thought it would stop anyone else asking the same damned questions over and over,’ said the man. ‘Or maybe I’ll just kill you because I feel like crap today.’

‘Put knife down. Put man down,’ repeated the ogryn.

Before the man could comply, metal shutter doors throughout the bar crashed open and a chorus of vox-amplified voices blared inside. Sodium-tinged light flooded through the doors and from his vantage point on the floor, Abrethem saw strobing spotlights mounted on the backs of giant vehicles. Black-armoured figures poured into the bar, clubbing men to the ground with vicious blows from shock mauls and the butts of automatic shotguns. Metal-skinned hounds on chain-leashes barked with augmetic anger, their polished steel fangs bared. Hungry red eyes fixed on the bar’s patrons.

‘Collarmen!’ shouted Coyne, scrambling away from the overturned table. Abrethem struggled to his feet, suddenly sober at the sight of the impressment teams as they dragged men out to the rumbling confinement vehicles. The man with the knife stepped away from Ismael, and the overseer bolted for the nearest way out, sobbing in fear and confusion.

The bar was in uproar. Concussion sirens brayed and blinding light strobed through the bar, all designed to stun and disorientate. Abrethem’s ocular cutoffs screened him from the worst of the light, but the horns were still deafening. Men encased in black leather and gleaming carapace armour with bronze, faceless helmets swept through the bar like soldiers clearing a room. Abrethem saw Ismael shot in the back by a soft round and slammed into a metal wall with the force of the impact. He slumped to the ground, unconscious, and two of the growling cyber-hounds dragged the overseer’s limp body outside.

A hand grabbed his shoulder. ‘We’ve got to get out of here!’ cried Coyne.

Abrethem looked for a way out. The collarmen and their mastiffs had all the exits covered, or at least all the obvious ones. There had to be a few they didn’t know about.

‘This way,’ said the man with the knife. ‘If you don’t want to get taken, follow me.’

The man ran, but the ogryn grabbed him by the scruff of the neck as it dumbly watched the methodical subduing tactics of collarmen. Soft rounds slammed the ogryn, but it hardly seemed to feel them, and Abrethem rolled behind the grunting creature as it tried to make sense of what was happening and why these men were shooting it.

The knifeman struggled in the ogryn's grip, but he was as helpless as a child against its strength.

'Let go of me, damn you!' yelled the man.

'Forget him,' said Coyne. 'There's a back way out through the latrines.'

Abrethem nodded and moved past the stupefied ogryn as a flurry of soft rounds battered the container wall next to his head. From the deformation of the sheet steel, Abrethem didn't reckon those 'soft' rounds were particularly soft.

Coyne pushed open the flimsy door to the latrines and was immediately flung back as a shock maul slammed into the side of his head. He dropped, poleaxed, to the ground. Abrethem skidded to a halt and tried to reverse his course. A crackling baton swung at his head, but he ducked and ran back the way he'd come. He heard the metallic cough of a shotgun blast and pain exploded in his lower back as his legs went numb under him. Abrethem crashed to the floor again, feeling twitching spasms of pain shooting up and down his spine.

Mesh-gauntleted hands hauled him upright and he was dragged through the shattered remains of the bar, with its former clientele pleading, threatening and bargaining with the collarmen. Abrethem tried to struggle, but was held fast. Once the collarmen had you, that was it, you were bound to life aboard a starship, but that didn't stop him from trying to beg for his freedom.

'Please,' he said. 'You can't... I have... permits. I work! I have a wife!'

He blinked away static interference as they dragged him outside, the discordant wail of the sirens making him feel sick and the constant barking of the cyber-hounds setting his teeth on edge. The collarmen dumped him at the open doors of the growling volunteer-wagon, and fresh hands hauled him upright. His legs were still weak, but he was able to stand as a clicking bio-optic was shone in his eyes and overloaded his filters.

'Exosomatic augmetics,' said a voice, surprise evident even muffled by a vox-grille.

'Tertiary grade,' said another. 'We can pull a full bio-ident and service history off them.'

'Got it. Loader-technician Abrethem Locke, assigned to Lifter Rig *Savickas*.'

'A lifter-tech with tertiary grade augmetics? Got to be black market.'

'Or stolen.'

'They're not stolen,' gasped Abrethem as his filters recalibrated. Three men in glossy black armour stood before him. Two held him upright. Another consulted a data-slate. 'They were my father's.'

'He was bonded?' demanded a fourth voice, heavily augmented by vox-amplification.

Abrethem turned to see a magos of the Adeptus Mechanicus, swathed in hooded crimson vestments, only the hot coals of a tripartite optic visible in the shadows. A black and gold stole with cog-toothed edges and a host of blurred numbers hung

from his neck, and a heavy generator pack was fixed to his back. A haze of chill air gusted from its vents like breath, causing a patina of frost to form on the nearest collarman's armour.

'Yes, to Magos Xurgis of the 734th Jouran Manufactory Echelons.'

'Then you might be useful. Bring him and do not damage his optics,' said the magos, turning away and moving on down the ragged line of collared men and women, floating on a shimmering cushion of repulsor fields.

'No, please! Don't!' he cried, but the men holding him gave his pleas no mind. A bulked-out servitor with piston-driven musculature hauled him inside the iron-hulled vehicle, where at least thirty other men were shackled in various states of disarray. Abrehem saw Coyne and Ismael trussed like livestock ready for slaughter. The ogryn sat with its back resting against the interior of the confinement compartment with a bemused smile on its face, as though this were a mild diversion from its daily routine instead of a life-changing moment of horror.

'No!' he screamed as the steel doors slammed shut, leaving them sealed in dim, red-lit darkness.

Abrehem wept as he felt the engine roar and the heavy vehicle moved off. He kicked out at the doors, almost breaking bone as he slammed his heels into the metalwork again and again.

'Won't do you any good,' said a voice behind him.

Abrehem turned angrily to see the man who'd threatened Ismael with the knife. He no longer had his weapon, and his hands were bound before him with plastek cuffs. Like the ogryn, he seemed unnaturally calm, and Abrehem hated him for that.

'Where are they taking us?' he said.

'Where do you think? To the embarkation platforms. We've been collared and we're on our way to the bowels of a starship to shovel fuel, haul ammunition crates or some other shitty detail until we're dead or crippled.'

'You sound pretty calm about it.'

The man shrugged. 'I reckon it's my lot in life to get shit on from on high. I think the Emperor has a very sick sense of humour when it comes to my life. He puts me through the worst experiences a man could have, but keeps me alive. And for what? So I can go through more shit? Damn, but I wish He'd have done with me.'

Abrehem heard the depths of the man's anguish and an echo of something so awful that it didn't bear thinking about. It sounded like the truth.

'Those things you told the regimental commanders really happened, didn't they?' said Abrehem.

The man nodded.

'And all that stuff on Hydra Cordatus? It was all true?'

'Yeah, I told the truth. For all the good it did me,' said the man, holding out a cuffed hand to Abrehem. 'Guardisman Julius Hawke. Welcome to the shit.'