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# ***THE CHAPTER'S DUE*** ***(HARDBACK)***

*An Ultramarines novel*

*By Graham McNeill*

War is unending in the life of a Space Marine. After defeating tau forces, Captain Uriel Ventriss of the Ultramarines has returned to the Chapter's home world of Macragge, but there is little respite. The Ultramarines are thrust back into battle, and this time the enemy is the Chapter's greatest nemesis. The traitorous Iron Warriors, led by renegade Warsmith Honsou, have gathered together a massive and brutal warband. Their target is the realm of Ultramar. Their objective is total annihilation. It is a final showdown between legendary Space Marines, and Uriel Ventriss must take on the might of Honsou if he is to save his Chapter's home world.

## **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. In addition to many previous novels, Graham's written a host of SF and Fantasy novels and comics, as well as a number of side projects that keep him busy and (mostly) out of trouble. 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.



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The following is an excerpt from *The Chapter's Due* by Graham McNeill.

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THE INTERIOR OF the Orbital Command Centre was dry and parched, filled with cloying scents from the recessed cog shrines to the Machine-God. A bank of humming machinery filled one wall, with a row of hardwired servitors plugged into each station. A battered command throne sat in the corner of the chamber, linked to the wall of machinery by a host of cables running across the floor. From here, Master Unathi of the Adeptus Mechanicus kept watch over Axum and Tarentus.

Unathi commanded the orbital defences of Tarentus, a series of geostationary missile stations, gun batteries and a small fleet of system monitors. Each of these vessels made elliptical patrol circuits of the triple planets, but none were to be seen on the orbital plot displayed on the main picter. Instead, a hazy image of what looked like a fortress of spikes and hateful donjons swam in the sea-green display. Quintus knew of no such fortifications on Tarentus, and wondered where this vile structure was located and why it was displayed on his command centre picter.

The interior security door slid shut behind him and he said, 'Very well, Master Unathi, what has you all riled up?'

'That,' said Master Unathi, pointing with a waving, snake-like mechadendrite towards the image of the fortress. Quintus returned his gaze to the picter, now

seeing a familiar outline amid its jagged crenellations. As disturbing as it was, Quintus saw the outline of something that had once been magnificent and honourable buried beneath the layers of obscene embellishments.

‘Emperor’s blood.’ hissed Quintus. ‘It can’t be...’

Quintus had longed for something, anything, to remind him of what it meant to be a warrior of the Ultramarines, but this was more than he’d bargained for. A phrase that had been a popular saying of Sergeant Patrobus of the 5th came back to him, a phrase Quintus had never really understood until this moment.

Be careful what you wish for.

‘My lord?’ said Nkiru, seeing the blood drain from his face.

‘Is that what I think it is?’ he said, afraid of the answer.

‘Clarification: what do you think it is?’ replied Unathi, and Quintus was reminded of the literal-mindedness of the Martian priesthood.

‘Is that the *Indomitable*?’

‘Affirmative,’ said Unathi.

QUINTUS MARCHED THE length of the city walls with Nkiru at his side. His Quaestor jogged to keep up with him, dodging inbetween the hurried preparations that had turned Axum from an industrious agricultural centre of trade into a defensive bulwark. Thousands of men and women manned the walls, each clad in the blue uniform jackets marked with the three bound corn sheaves heraldry of Tarentus. The city’s defence auxilia had responded in record time, the citizen militia answering the call to arms with alacrity and determination.

Such was the norm on worlds governed by the Ultramarines.

Quintus wore his battle armour, the plates polished and gleaming blue. The ivory of his shoulder guards and the gold of his chest plate glittered in the sunlight and though his legs were a dull iron colour, he was no less magnificent a sight. His bolter was clamped to his thigh and an ebonite-hilted sword was slung at his back beneath a cream cloak edged with repeating geometric motifs.

Word had been passed to the other cities of Tarentus and an astropathic alert hurled through space towards Macragge. Quintus stopped by a projecting redoubt and watched as the gunners spun the cranks to elevate the barrel of a defence turret heavenward. Falling sparks of light dropped through the evening sky, like a distant meteor shower sparkling over the mountains of the north. On any other day Quintus would have enjoyed such a sight, but this was no meteor shower.

The orbital defences were destroyed, blasted to destruction by the unimaginable firepower of the Indomitable, the shattered wreckage falling to the planet below and burning up as it hit the atmosphere. The remaining system monitors were being recalled even now, though Quintus had no expectation that they would make any difference to the conflict he knew was coming. The two monitors in orbit around Tarentus had been hunted down and destroyed by the fleet of vessels that swarmed around the gargantuan star fort.

With the destruction of the planetary defences, Quintus had no doubt an assault was coming. But whoever these attackers were, they would find that every city of Ultramar had teeth and knew how to fight.

He gave a nod of acknowledgement to the gunners and looked up through the shimmering haze of the dome arcing overhead.

‘Will it protect us?’ asked Nkiru, following his gaze.

‘The dome is strong, and protected by layers of voids, but against the weapons of a Ramilies-class star fort I fear it will be battered down in moments.’

‘Then we are doomed?’

‘If destruction is our enemies’ only thought, then we have little hope of surviving a bombardment.’

‘Then why do we stand the defences to arms?’ asked Nkiru, and Quintus was pleased to note the absence of fear in his Quaestor’s voice.

‘Because we are in the presence of the enemy and the Codex Astartes tells us that is what we must do,’ said Quintus,

‘Of course,’ said Nkiru.

‘But beyond that,’ elaborated Quintus, ‘the star fort above us is the Indomitable, which was lost with all hands six months ago. Ever since Lord Calgar defeated an infernal lord of the Ruinous Powers it has been hidden within the wilderness space of Ultramar. If it is back, it is certain those who command it seek to humble us beyond simple destruction from orbit.’

‘Do you know who commands it?’

‘Not for certain,’ said Quintus, reaching up to touch the eagle on his breastplate, ‘but after seeing the corruption of the Indomitable’s character I fear the worst.’

THE PLANET ON the viewscreen was a shimmering orb of pale yellow and soft blue, its outline hazed by the warmth of its temperate climates and near-constant weather systems. It had been simplicity itself to

overwhelm the planet's orbital defences and though the power of the Indomitable was such that its guns could reduce its cities to ashen cinders, Honsou knew a far worse fate awaited its defenders.

He stood in the command chapel of the Basilica Dominastus, the vast citadel rearing from the heart of the star fort that had, until recently, been the command centre for the Ultramarines garrison. Those Ultramarines were now all dead, slain in the siege fought to capture the Indomitable.

In the crew pits below him, the warriors who had followed him from Medrengard eagerly awaited the unleashing of the star fort's new power. Cadaras Grendel, the horribly scarred killer, clenched and unclenched his fists in anticipation of violence. The Newborn watched with the interest of a student, while Ardaric Vaanes stood apart from his fellow warriors.

Honsou turned from his inner cabal towards the molten alcove behind him where a Techmarine might once have linked with the star fort's weapon systems and surveyors. Instead of a Techmarine, a monstrous form – part organic, part machine, part warp-matter – held court over the modified slaves and warriors filling the corrupted chapel.

A diabolical hybrid of Dreadnought and warp-spawn, the daemon lord M'kar was a hulking mass of dark iron and fluid flesh that seethed with immaterial energies and aeons-old malice. Its splay-clawed feet burned the deck where it stood, and its hideous bulk rippled with unnatural life where the armoured plates of the Dreadnought's sarcophagus no longer held sway. Its horned head was bestial and raw, like burned meat left to spoil, and its fangs were cruel and hooked like barbs. Two arms of inconstant form hung from its wide,



armoured shoulders. Powerfully muscled with warp-spawned power, dark pistons and chains, they slithered like the limbs of Adept Cycerin. Glossy and black, one arm terminated in an enormous mechanical piston hammer, the other in a rotary cannon of fearsome calibre.

Eyes alive with unholy light regarded the planet on the viewscreen with a hate of such purity that it was almost physical. This creature had trod the worlds of men when the Legions had carved the Imperium from the raw meat of the galaxy, and had spent millennia honing that hatred. It was a creature of ultimate darkness, a chosen avatar of the primal gods of the empyrean.

To Honsou, M'kar represented a weapon to bring about the destruction of all his nemesis cared for. The worlds of Ultramar were dear to Uriel Ventris, the only warrior ever to defy him and live, and that made them targets for Honsou's rage. He cared little for the Long War, that aeons-long conflict waged by the followers of Horus Lupercal ever since their defeat in a time so long ago that it might as well have never existed.

M'kar, however, still carried that bright torch of hatred for the Ultramarines, and that was all that mattered to Honsou.

He had learned of the daemon lord's existence from ancient texts he'd salvaged from the ruined fortress of Khalan-Ghol, and had set out to bend the daemon lord to his will.

With the help of Moriana, the damned seer who guided the wars of the Despoiler, Honsou had unlocked the secret of M'kar's fate. Imperial propaganda told that Marneus Calgar of the Ultramarines had defeated M'kar and torn the daemon limb from limb, thus banishing it back to the warp, but Moriana had told Honsou the truth

of that encounter. M'kar had been defeated, this much was true, but it had not been destroyed. Unable to unmake the daemon's essence, Marneus Calgar had imprisoned it within the Indomitable, a Ramilies-class star fort that roamed the forgotten places within the darkest corners of Ultramar.

The daemon's power was bound with hateful incantations and sigils, and the more it struggled, the tighter they pulled. And there it had remained for decades until Honsou had set his course upon freeing it. The Iron Warriors and the thousands of soldiers Honsou had rallied to his banner during Huron Blackheart's Skull Harvest laid siege to the star fort and released the daemon lord from his incarceration.

Now his vengeance upon Uriel Ventris and the Ultramarines was within Honsou's grasp.

'Tarentus,' hissed M'kar, its voice a hideous melange of depthless echoes from another world and a grating mechanical growl. 'I remember this world as it was when the Imperium was young. Nothing has changed.'

The words were spoken with a disgusted hiss, as though the idea that such places could endure without change was anathema to the daemon lord.

'Do you need the Indomitable to break the dome open first?' asked Honsou.

The daemon lord turned its smouldering eyes upon him, and Honsou felt the full force of its spite, an age of hatred for the scions of Guilliman that had gone unquenched for ten thousand years. The daemon shook its head with a sucking sound of wet meat and the clatter of corroded gears.

'You think such a paltry barrier can withstand my daemon army?'

'I don't know, can it?'

The daemon laughed, the sound like a consumptive's death rattle.

'You have a need to flirt with death, Halfbreed,' hissed M'kar, pointing an outstretched talon towards Honsou. 'One day you will go too far.'

'So people keep telling me, but here I am.'

'Defy me and I will tear your soul apart,' promised M'kar.

Honsou shook his head and turned away. 'No, you won't. You need me.'

'We shall see,' spat the daemon.

Honsou nodded towards the planet in the viewscreen.

'I'm waiting,' he said. 'Let's see what you can do.'

QUINTUS LISTENED TO the streaming vox updates from Master Unathi with a growing sense of unease. Despite his earlier confident words to Nkiru, there was no indication that any assault was inbound. Darkness had fallen and the night air smelled of turned earth and harvested crops. Blazing arc lights swept the ground before the high walls of Axum and stabbed into the sky to unmask enemy fliers.

Every gun in the city was trained on the sky, and the tension hung on a knife-edge. This level of readiness could not be maintained for long, and Quintus was on the verge of ordering a relaxation of the city's defensive posture when he tasted something rank on the wind blowing in from the east.

It began as a foulness that reminded him of the blazing fields of dead xeno organisms on Ichar IV when the killing was done. Vast, city-sized pyres of alien corpses were burned to ashes in the aftermath of the fighting, and the stench of charred alien meat was a rank aftertaste that no rebreather could completely dispel.

Quintus tasted something similar, a horrid reek of dead things and corruption; a foulness that was unnatural and unclean. It was the antithesis of all that was good and pure in the world, and Quintus gagged as it swept over the ramparts.

He turned his gaze to the east, the autosenses of his visor easily penetrating the gloom of the far-off fields. His heart lurched as he saw hectare upon hectare of rotted vegetable matter, hundreds of kilometres square of mulched crop and decayed fields. The entirety of the east was lost, a swelling sea of rotten vegetation and sterilised earth.

An arc light next to Quintus blew out in sprays of fat orange sparks, and he turned his attention back to the city as the dark wind surged like a swirling miasma. He tasted ashes and the sour bile of despair, a bleak hopelessness that swept through him like a virus. Quintus angrily shook himself free of the sensation, gritting his teeth as he focussed on his duty as commander of this world.

Marneus Calgar had handed Quintus the Praefecture Staff, charging him with the defence of Tarentus, and he'd be damned before he failed in that duty to his Chapter Master.

Lights began failing throughout the city and a grotesque buzzing swelled on the edge of hearing, like a static-filled picter with a billion signals shrieking and screaming all at once.

Soldiers dropped to their knees as the sourceless sound blared. No decibel meter would have registered more than background noise, for it resonated in the mind, the sound of madness and pain combined. Soldiers fired their rifles at unseen enemies, their shots stabbing wildly into the darkness. Cries of fear turned to terror and pain

as screaming defence auxilia fighters turned their swords and pistols on each other, fighting as though confronted by their worst nightmares made real.

The dark wind blew ever stronger and the air beneath the dome seethed with light as storms of unnatural colours blew to life with unnatural swiftness. Shapes moved in the clouds, like sharks through a billowing cloud of blood in the ocean. Quintus felt a host of hungry eyes looking down upon his city, mountainous creatures with bodies so vast they could not exist in this world, slaving beasts of hideous appetite and aeons-old lust for the souls of mankind. Unearthly laughter drifted on the wind and the clouds gathered together in one giant thunderhead.

An arcing bolt of lightning lanced from the clouds, flashing into existence with impossible brightness. It slammed down in the centre of the city, but instead of a fleeting blaze of light, the lightning remained in place. Like a frozen pict image, the lightning bolt connected the sky and the earth in a looping, twisting tracery of energy.

Quintus felt the air grow thin, as though reality had become membranous and a multitude of hitherto unseen worlds pressed in from all around. He stared at the impossible lightning bolt, watching in horror as it seemed to unfold like a tear ripped in the curtain of night.

He opened his mouth to shout a warning, but it was already too late.

The tear opened wider and an unstoppable army of nightmares poured from the lightning.

‘This,’ said Cadaras Grendel, ‘is impressive.’

Honsou had to agree with his lieutenant, watching the scenes of carnage unfolding on the planet below. Flayed

beasts with obsidian horns and claws ripped flesh from the bones of the city's defenders, while formless things of jelly-like ooze with teeth devoured the corpses of the fallen. Winged bat-creatures of utter darkness capered in the air, filling the city with their apocalyptic shrieking.

A violent tide of warp-spawned abominations filled the city, killing and destroying without mercy. Towering juggernauts of brazen flesh demolished entire buildings with their bulk, while howling pack hunters with raw meat skin dragged weeping victims from their hiding places. A riot of horrific forms rampaged below, and there was nothing the defenders could do to stop it.

'That must be their leader,' said Honsou, pointing to the image of a warrior in blue armour fighting against the hordes with an energy-sheathed sword. 'One of Calgar's lackeys.'

'A veteran,' said Ardaric Vaanes, the renegade Raven Guard warrior Honsou had recruited prior to leaving Medregard. 'And a broken one at that.'

Honsou looked closer, now seeing the ivory trims on the warrior's armour and the dull gleam of bionics beneath the swarming monsters that beset him. The veteran's sword plunged into the body of a wiry daemon with skin the colour of an infected wound. Black ichor sprayed, but before the warrior could withdraw his blade, a scaled minotaur creature with russet skin and crackling horns gored him and hurled his body from the walls. Honsou lost sight of the veteran as his body broke on the ground and the pack predators fell upon him with claw and fang.

'Is this how we are going to conquer Ultramar?' asked the Newborn, its dead skin bathed in the reflected light of the city's death. 'It doesn't seem very... honourable.'

‘Honourable?’ hissed Grendel with a bark of bitter amusement. ‘What the hell’s honour got to do with anything?’

‘And who said anything about conquest?’ said Honsou.

‘So what are we doing here?’ asked Vaanes.

‘We’re here to destroy,’ said Grendel with relish, the scars around his mouth and eyes weeping infected fluid. Vaanes grimaced in disgust, and not without reason.

Grendel’s face was a horrific mask of poorly-healed scars, his Astartes ability to survive mortal wounds tested to its limit by the damage done to him in the closing moments of the battle to take the Indomitable. An Imperial agent had shot Grendel with an archaic melta pistol and though his armour and sheer venom saved his life, his face was horribly burned. To see him with the Newborn was like seeing two twins standing together, for its face was as dreadfully malformed as Grendel’s.

A patchwork melange of stolen skin sewn together from the corpses of Medrengard, the Newborn’s face was a hideous fleshmask through which its all too familiar stormcloud grey eyes stared with pain-filled innocence. Honsou almost laughed at the thought, knowing of the slaughters and murder it had done in his name. Crafted by daemonic womb-mothers, torn into existence by the Savage Morticians and clad in the armour of the Iron Warriors, there was nothing innocent about the Newborn.

Alone of Honsou’s followers, Ardaric Vaanes had come through their many conflicts without disfigurement, save the ritual cuts on his angular cheeks and a trio of scars above his left eye where long service studs had been removed. The plates of his battle armour

were black, its shoulder guards without any heraldic devices. Scouring winds on the planet where Honsou had consulted Moriana had stripped his armour bare, and Vaanes had chosen not to renew them.

‘Is that right, Honsou?’ demanded Vaanes. ‘Are we just here to serve your vengeance?’

‘What if we are?’

Vaanes shrugged, as though the matter were of no real import. ‘I need to know what I’m fighting for. It’s been a long time since I’ve known.’

‘You fight because that’s what he damn well tells you to do,’ spat Grendel. ‘That’s a good enough reason to kill Imperials, isn’t it?’

‘Good enough for you, Grendel,’ snapped Vaanes.

Honsou let them spar, knowing that a little dissent in his underlings was never a bad thing. Fight amongst themselves and they couldn’t unite to unseat him. The Newborn watched impassively, its loyalty to Honsou won through months of indoctrination and psycho-conditioning. Even the latest bouts of seizures, lunatic ravings and visions of a life unlived hadn’t dented that devotion.

‘We’re here to kill Uriel Ventris and hurt him where it matters most,’ said Honsou.

‘No,’ said a voice from above, as a shadow fell upon them, its touch icy and unclean.

Honsou turned his head and saw the dread form of M’kar standing over them, its armoured skin alive with trceries of warp energy. Traces of the Dreadnought it had possessed were still visible beneath its undulant warp-flesh, and Honsou saw the burned remnants of the Ultramarines inverted omega symbol at its shoulder.



‘Your vengeance means nothing, Halfbreed,’ hissed the daemon. ‘The heart of Guilliman’s empire must burn. The Eternal Powers require it. All else is irrelevant.’

The daemon turned away, its every step like the hammer of a coffin nail.

Honsou bit back a venomous comment, feeling his warriors’ eyes upon him.

‘What next?’ said Grendel.

‘Let the monster have its moment and destroy this world’s cities,’ said Honsou, nodding towards the viewscreen. ‘This planet means nothing to us, it’s just the lighting of the fuse.’

‘And then?’ asked Vaanes.

‘Then we wait for the Ultramarines to react,’ said Honsou.

‘They’ll come here in force,’ promised Vaanes.

Honsou grinned. ‘That’s what I’m counting on.’

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