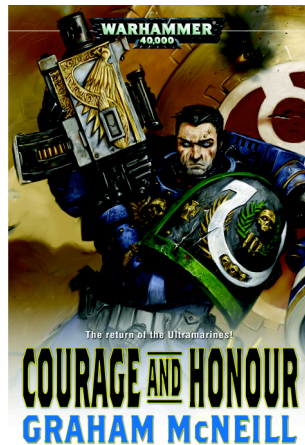


COURAGE AND HONOUR

An Ultramarines novel

by Graham McNeill

The noble Ultramarines epitomise the Space Marines, the genetically enhanced warriors who protect the Imperium from its foes. Newly returned from the Eye of Terror, Captain Uriel Ventris must redeem himself in the eyes of his battle-brothers, who fear he may have been tainted by Chaos. When the planet Pavonis is invaded by tau, what better opportunity could Uriel have to join his Chapter in combat and prove that his honour is beyond reproach?



About the Author

Hailing from Scotland, Graham McNeill narrowly escaped a career in Surveying to join Games Workshop, where he worked for six years as a games developer. As well as fourteen novels, Graham has written a host of sf and fantasy short stories. He lives in Nottingham, UK.

•ULTRAMARINES•

THE ULTRAMARINES OMNIBUS
(Featuring the novels NIGHTBRING, WARRIORS OF
ULTRAMAR and DEAD SKY BLACK SUN)
by Graham McNeill

THE KILLING GROUND
By Graham McNeill

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A traitor had once made his home among the tumbled slopes of the Owsen Hills. The late Kasimir de Valtos had dwelt in a lofty, marble-fronted villa, finely constructed and lavishly appointed with every amenity his wealth and position could provide. His extensive estate ran with game, servants attended to his every need, and the thousands of workers that slaved in his many weapon mills, engine assembly yards and artillery manufactory could only dream of their master's luxurious lifestyle.

Wealth, position and power had been his, but now the traitor was dead and his estate was overgrowing, his palatial demesne little more than stumps of stonework scattered throughout waving fields of untended grass. Vengeful workers had looted his villa of anything worth stealing in the wake of the civil war that his schemes had unleashed. They had cast its walls to ruin and set fires where once he had plotted to become an immortal god.

Such were the dreams of men, grandiose and fleeting.

An ornamental lake rippled in the sunlight before the ruined villa, fed by an underground aqueduct linked to the wide river that flowed south from Tembra Ridge in the north. The river cut a path through the de Valtos estate, splitting into dozens of narrow watercourses as it threaded its way through the undulant terrain. Eventually, these smaller rivers came together and meandered southwards to join the Brandon River on its journey to the ocean in the west.

Though the de Valtos lands were abandoned, the landscape silent and the forests growing wild, they were far from empty. Scattered throughout the Owsen Hills, stealthy observers patiently kept watch on the many sharp-sided gullies and shallow valleys.

The traitor was dead, but his lands were still important.

A tremor in the grass was the first sign of movement, a barely discernible bow wave as a stealthy humanoid figure in olive-coloured armour ghosted slowly from the trees at the base of a low hill. It moved gracefully, crouched over, its every step carefully placed as its helmeted head swung back and forth, scanning the terrain with the patient eye of a hunter.

Or a scout, thought Uriel Ventris from his position of concealment in a tumbled fan of rocks on the slopes of the hill above the ruined villa.

Soon, other scouts followed the first from the trees, moving in pairs as they eased towards the fallen stones of the de Valtos villa. There were eight in total, their movements slick and professional.

Though the scouts advanced with a smooth, precise gait, there was something fundamentally wrong with their movements, something inhuman. Their posture was subtly different, as if their bone structure wasn't quite right or their feet were shaped differently to those of humans.

The Ultramarines had learned much of the ways of the tau and their rapidly expanding empire on the killing fields of Malbede, Praetonis V and Augura.

That experience was being put to good use here on Pavonis.

The lead scout reached the edge of the ruins, and placed a gloved hand to the side of its helmet, a tapered dome with a vox aerial on one side and a gem-like optical device on the other.

Watching the scouts spread out, Uriel saw that they had read the ground well.

Just as he had done earlier that day.

A flashing icon lit up on the inner surface of Uriel's helmet visor, an insistent urging from his senior sergeant to release the killing precision of his warriors. He ignored it for the time being. Instincts honed on a hundred battlefields were telling Uriel that the prey was not yet fully in the killing box, and the risk of their target detecting vox-traffic was too great.

No sooner had the scout finished his silent communication than a prowling vehicle with curved flanks emerged from the trees. It had the bulk of a tank, but hovered just above the ground, bending the stalks of grass as it drew close to the scouts. A rotary-barrelled

cannon spun lazily below its tapered prow, and flaring dorsal engines kept it aloft with a barely audible hum.

The tank was unmistakably alien, its curved lines and silent menace putting Uriel in mind of a shark prowling the seabed.

From the intelligence files Uriel had read en route to Pavonis from Macragge, he recognised it as a Devilfish, a troop carrier analogous to the Rhino. It was fast, agile and armoured to the front, but vulnerable to attacks from the rear. Codex ambush tactics would serve them well here.

The alien tank came to a halt, and a pair of flat discs with under-slung weapon mounts detached from the vehicle's frontal fins. They hovered just above the tank, twitching sensor spines rotating on their upper surfaces.

Sniffer dogs.

Uriel glanced anxiously towards the grassy mounds spread throughout the ruins of the de Valtos villa.

Apparently satisfied that there was nothing in the immediate vicinity, the hovering discs returned to their mounts on the Devilfish, and the lead scout unsnapped a device from the rigid backpack he wore. Uriel watched as a pair of thin legs extended from the device and the scout planted it in the ground in front of him.

Lights flickered on the domed surface of the device, and Uriel's auto-senses detected a low-level pressure pulse sweep over the landscape.

Some kind of three-dimensional cartographic device? Imperial forces that had fought the tau before had christened these warriors Pathfinders, and the name was an apt one. These troops were thrown out ahead of an army to reconnoitre the ground before it and plot the best routes of advance.

The Pathfinders were working quickly, and every second Uriel delayed gave them more time to detect his warriors. The Ultramarines were in place, and, as Uriel watched the enemy scouts at work, he knew it was time to unleash them.

‘Primary units, engage,’ he whispered into his throat mic, knowing it was the last order he would need to issue in this engagement.

The Pathfinder’s head snapped up as soon as the words left Uriel’s mouth, but it was already too late for the tau.

Two Space Marines from Uriel’s Devastator section rose from the rocks to the east of the ruined villa, carrying bulky missile launchers on their shoulders. The tau scattered, and the Devilfish’s engines rose in pitch as the driver angled his frontal section towards the threat.

Uriel smiled grimly as the Devastators fired their weapons, the missiles swooshing through the air on arcing contrails of smoke.

The first detonated above a pair of Pathfinders as they sought to reach the cover of the trees, shredding their bodies into torn masses of butchered meat and shattered armour plates. The second slammed into the frontal armour of the Devilfish with a thunderous bang

followed by a smeared explosion of black smoke and shrapnel.

The Devilfish rocked under the impact of the missile, but its armour remained intact. Its rotary cannon spooled up, and a burst of heavy-calibre shells blitzed from the weapon, tracing a blazing arc between the tank and its attackers. The ground above the villa exploded as the hillside disintegrated under the blizzard of impacts, but Uriel's warriors had already ducked back into cover.

The roaring of the cannon was tremendous, but Uriel still heard the metallic cough of two more missiles being launched. He glanced over to the west, where the other half of the Devastator section opened fire. The tank tried to reverse its turn, but the missiles were faster.

One punched through the rear assault ramp as the other slammed into the left engine nacelle. The back of the Devilfish exploded in a spray of red-hot fragments, scything down another Pathfinder. A secondary blast completed its destruction, and the blazing vehicle crashed to the ground.

Uriel rose from the rocks, and locked his bolter in the crook of his arm. Behind him, a ten-strong squad of blue-armoured Space Marines rose with him, matching his pace as he set off towards the killing ground.

The surviving aliens made for the cover of the villa, but Uriel knew they wouldn't reach it.

As the Pathfinders reached the ruined dwelling, the grassy mounds within its fallen walls shifted, and a combat squad of Ultramarines scouts cast off their camo-cloaks.

The scouts opened fire, bolter rounds punching through the lightly armoured Pathfinders, and hurling them from their feet. Two were killed instantly, and a third screamed in agony as the explosion of a mass-reactive shell ripped his arm from his shoulder.

The two remaining Pathfinders returned fire, their rifles spitting bright bolts among the scouts in dazzling bursts of light and sound. The aliens fired a last defiant burst before fleeing for the trees, all pretence of stealth forgotten in their desire to escape the trap that had been set for them.

Uriel dropped to one knee and swung his gleaming, eagle-plated bolter to his shoulder. The weapon's targeting mechanism was synced to his helmet, and he tracked the zigzagging pattern of an enemy warrior for a moment before pulling the trigger.

His bolter slammed back with a fearsome recoil, and the Pathfinder dropped, the bottom half of his right leg pulped by the shell's detonation. Seeing that escape wasn't an option, the last tau warrior halted and threw down his weapon. He turned, and began walking back towards the blazing wreck of the Devilfish with his hands in the air.

'You've gotten rusty with your targeting rituals,' said a voice at Uriel's side. 'You were aiming for the middle of his back, weren't you?'

Uriel turned, and slung his bolter. Then he reached up to disengage the vacuum seals at his gorget. Pressurised air hissed, and he lifted his golden-winged helm clear. He turned towards the speaker, a Space

Marine in the livery of a veteran sergeant of the Ultramarines, his red helmet encircled by a white laurel wreath.

‘I was,’ admitted Uriel, ‘and you’re right about the targeting rituals, I fell out of the habit while I was away.’

‘Best get back into the habit then, quickly.’

‘I will,’ said Uriel, surprised at the sergeant’s caustic tone.

‘We should get down there. The scouts are securing the prisoner,’ said the sergeant before making his way downhill.

Uriel nodded and followed Learchus.

It felt good to lead warriors in combat, even if his involvement had been minimal once the planning had been done. Smoke from the smouldering Devilfish caught in the back of Uriel’s throat, the trace chemicals triggering a number of sensory impulses within him. He tasted the abrasive compounds used to etch the insignia on the vehicle’s hull, the alien lubricants used on the engine mounts, and the coarse, roasted scent of the seared crew.

Uriel ran a hand over his scalp, the dark hair cut short. A band of silver had developed at his temples, though his grey, storm cloud eyes were as sharp as ever. Cut from a classical mould, Uriel’s features were angular and sharp, without the distinctive flattening common to some members of the Adeptus Astartes.

His physique was lean for a Space Marine, although, cloaked in his new armour, he was as bulky and fearsome as the rest of his warriors. The sword of Idaeus was belted at Uriel's waist, and a green cloak hung from his shoulders, secured with a pin in the shape of a white rose that recalled his last journey to Pavonis.

Uriel surveyed the utter destruction of the enemy as Learchus formed the warriors of the 4th Company into a perimeter around the site of the ambush.

Two Space Marines guarded the tau prisoner, the only survivor of the ambush, who knelt facing an upright slab with his hands on his head. A pair of Rhino APCs idled on what had once been a wide gravelled driveway. Their side doors were open, and a Space Marine gunner manned the storm bolter mounted on the vehicle's forward cupola. The kill-team of scouts gathered their photo-absorptive camo-cloaks from the ruins, cloaks that ensured the first inkling most targets had of the scouts' presence was the sound of the shot that blew their head off.

Watching Learchus issue his orders, Uriel was struck by how his friend had changed since he and Pasanus had marched from the Fortress of Hera and into exile.

Learchus had promised to look after Uriel's warriors, and he had done a fine job, rebuilding the company after the losses taken on Tarsis Ultra, and leading its warriors in battle against a host of orks on Espandor. The sergeant's orders were obeyed with alacrity and respect, and, though Uriel was sure it was

just his imagination, it was as though Learchus carried himself a little taller than before.

Command had been good for him, it seemed.

Uriel beckoned to Learchus, walking towards the wreckage of the Devilfish.

‘Sergeant,’ said Uriel as Learchus approached and snapped to attention. Learchus hammered his fist against his breastplate, and then reached up to remove his helmet.

Learchus was everything a Space Marine should be: tall and proud, with a regal countenance that was the image of the heroes carved in luminous marble upon the steps of the Temple of Correction on Macragge. His blond hair was cropped tightly to his skull, his features wide and clearly of the most illustrious lineage.

Each of the worlds of Ultramar had differing quirks of genetics that no amount of genhancement could eradicate, making it an easy matter to identify from where a warrior hailed. Learchus was unmistakably a native of Macragge, fortress-world of the Ultramarines, and a planet from which the greatest of heroes had marched onto the pages of legend.

‘Captain,’ said Learchus.

‘Is everything all right?’

‘Everything is in hand,’ said Learchus. ‘Sentries are in place, enemy weapons are gathered, and I have deployed long-range pickets to watch for follow on forces.’

‘Very good,’ said Uriel, keeping his tone light, ‘but that’s not what I was asking.’

‘Then what were you asking?’

‘Are you planning on leaving me anything to do?’

‘Everything that needs attending to is being done,’ replied Learchus. ‘What orders are left to give?’

‘I am the captain of this company, Learchus,’ said Uriel, hating that he sounded so petulant. ‘The orders are mine to give.’

Learchus was too controlled to show much in the way of emotion, but Uriel saw a shadow cross his face, and guessed the reason for his stiff formality. He decided not to press the point. The company’s leaders had to be seen to display unity of purpose, especially now, so soon after Uriel’s return.

‘Of course, sir. Sorry, sir,’ replied Learchus.

‘We’ll talk about this later,’ said Uriel, turning and marching towards the captured Pathfinder. ‘Now, let’s see what our prisoner has to say for himself.’

The alien heard their approaching steps, and turned his helmeted head to face them. One of the Space Marine guards delivered a sharp blow to the alien’s neck with the butt of his bolter, and it sagged against the stub of broken wall with a shrill yelp of pain.

The captive gripped the stonework, and Uriel saw that he had only four fingers on each hand.

‘Get him up,’ said Uriel.

Learchus reached down and hauled the prisoner to his feet, and Uriel was impressed by its defiant body language. This creature was from an alien species, a race

utterly apart from humanity, yet the hostility in its posture was unmistakable.

‘Take it off,’ said Uriel, miming the act of lifting off a helmet.

The alien didn’t move, and Uriel drew his bolt pistol, tapping the barrel against the side of the alien’s helmet.

‘Off,’ he said.

The tau reached up, unsnapped a trio of clips and a cable-feed where it attached to his armour, and lifted clear the helmet.

Learchus snatched it from the alien, and Uriel found himself looking down at the face of the prisoner.

The creature’s skin was the colour of weathered lead, grey and textured like old linen, with a sheen to it that might have been perspiration. It had a curious odour, a pungent mix of smells that Uriel found impossible to place: part animal, part burned plastic and hot spices, but wholly alien.

A glossy topknot of white hair trailed from the top of its scalp to the base of its neck, held in place by gold bands studded with gems.

The alien looked up at Uriel with eyes of dull red, set deep in a flat face without any visible indication of a nose. A curious vertical indentation, like an old surgical wound or birth scar, sat in the centre of its forehead, and the cast of its features, though alien and strange, suggested that their captive was female.

The alien’s amber pupils burned with hostility.

‘This is a world of the Imperium,’ said Uriel.
‘Why are you here?’

The alien spat a brief torrent of language, a lyrical stream of unfamiliar tones and exotic multi-part words. Uriel’s enhanced cognitive faculties were able to sort the streams into word groupings, but he could make no sense of them. He hadn’t expected to understand the alien’s language, but had held out a vague hope that it might have had a grasp of Imperial Gothic.

‘Do. You. Understand. Me?’ he said, slowly and carefully enunciating each word.

Once again, the captive spoke in her singsong language, and Uriel knew that she had simply repeated the words she had already spoken.

‘Do you know what it’s saying?’ asked Learchus.

‘No,’ said Uriel, ‘but I don’t need a translator to understand the sense of it.’

‘So what’s it saying?’

‘It sounds like name, rank and number to me. I think she’s called La’tyen.’

‘She?’

‘Yes,’ said Uriel. ‘At least, I think it’s female.’

‘So, what do you want done with her?’

‘Cuff her and stick her in one of the Rhinos. We’ll take her back to Brandon Gate and put her in the Glasshouse,’ said Uriel. ‘I’ll have a Xenolexicon servitor brought down from the Vae Victus to enable an interrogation. We need to find out how many more of her kind are on Pavonis.’

‘You think there are more?’

‘Probably,’ said Uriel, moving away from the prisoner. ‘Brandon Gate is only sixty kilometres to the east over flat and open terrain. These hills are a logical spot for an enemy force to scout with a view to attacking. Pathfinders are the eyes and ears of a tau battle force, and I’d be surprised if her unit was operating alone.’

‘If there are other units, we’ll find them,’ said Learchus. ‘The after-action telemetry from the Zeist Campaign helped us find this one, and if this battle is anything to go by, we shouldn’t have much trouble finishing them off.’

‘This wasn’t a battle,’ said Uriel.

‘No?’ asked Learchus, marching in step with Uriel. ‘What was it then?’

‘For all my adrenal system reacted once we engaged, it might as well have been a training exercise,’ said Uriel. ‘Everything about this fight was textbook, from the diversionary shot to the concealed kill-team and the fire support group.’

‘And that is a bad thing?’ asked Learchus. ‘We executed a perfect Codex-pattern ambush; the tau were caught completely off guard. We fooled their tank crew into making a rudimentary manoeuvring error, and then we gunned down the survivors. Would that all engagements were fought with such precision.’

‘I agree, but the Pathfinders were incredibly lax in their advance. From what I’ve heard of the battles the Chapter has fought against the tau over the last few

years, it's a trait I'm surprised to find in warriors with such a reputation for being careful.'

'Perhaps they were new troops, yet to be tested in combat,' suggested Learchus.

'That's certainly possible,' conceded Uriel. 'Although it still feels strange that we destroyed them so easily.'

'We fight with the Codex Astartes as our guide precisely because the order it brings to our battles makes them seem easy to those who are not schooled in its ways.'

'I know that, Learchus. You don't need to remind me.'

'Don't I?' asked Learchus. 'You were exiled once already because you failed to heed its teachings.'

'Aye, and I saw the error of my ways on Medrengard,' said Uriel, fighting down his irritation at Learchus's words, even though he knew they were justified.

'I hope that is true.'

'I swear to you it is, my friend,' said Uriel. 'I suppose it's been so long since I fought with such sublime warriors under my command, I'd almost forgotten what it is to have the advantage in a tactical situation. For so long it was just Pasanius and myself against impossible odds.'

'Clearly not that impossible,' noted Learchus. 'After all, you both made it back.'

The Fortress of Hera. Uriel had not dared believe he would once again stand before its glittering, marble immensity for fear that the more he wanted it the more it would fade away.

Soaring walls of purest white towered above them, crowned by majestic towers capped with golden weapon-domes and lined with adamantine siege-hoardings that were as beautiful as they were deadly. Like a living structure of indescribably beautiful coral, the fortress appeared to grow out of the very rock of the mountains, a mighty edifice conceived by the genius of the Ultramarines primarch in a long-forgotten age.

It stood on the mightiest chain of mountains, a testament to one man's genius and legendary vision. As wondrous and colossal a structure as it was, the Fortress of Hera was no monument to arrogance. Rather, it was a masterpiece of design and construction that lifted the soul and reminded all who looked upon it that they could aspire to great things. It was a creation of visual poetry and magnificence that spoke to the heart and not the ego.

Uriel and Pasanus stood alone in the wide, statue-lined plaza at the end of the Via Fortissimus, the grand processional road that wound from the lower reaches of the mountains all the way to the Porta Guilliman. The great gate of the fortress was a towering golden slab engraved with the ten thousand deeds of Roboute Guilliman, and Uriel vividly remembered the awful sound of it closing behind him.

The dolorous crash of adamantium had sounded like the final sound at the end of all things, and now, as

the gate slowly began to open, the illumination that shone from within was like the first light at the dawn of creation.

Behind them, the hull of the Thunderhawk that had brought them from the Grey Knight vessel in orbit creaked and popped as it cooled after its rapid descent through the atmosphere. Lifter-servitors were already unloading the power armour of the Sons of Guilliman they had brought back from Salinas, and, within moments, the gunship would depart for the cold dark of space once more.

‘We’re home,’ said Pasanus, but Uriel was too choked with emotion to reply.

His closest friend and battle-brother was crying, tears of joy falling unashamedly from his eyes as he swept his gaze over the high walls and glittering ramparts of the fortress.

Uriel reached up and touched his face, not at all surprised to find that he too was weeping with the sheer, boundless sense of homecoming that threatened to unman him with its intensity.

‘Home,’ he said, as though afraid to give voice to the idea.

‘Did you ever think we’d see it again?’ asked Pasanus, his voice wavering and brittle.

‘I always hoped we would,’ said Uriel, ‘but I tried not to think about it too much. I knew that if I dwelt on what we’d lost I wouldn’t have the strength to go on.’

‘I thought about home all the time,’ confessed Pasanus. ‘I don’t think I’d have made it back without the hope we’d see it again.’

Uriel turned to Pasanus and placed his hand on his friend’s shoulder guard. Pasanus was a giant of a Space Marine, by far the biggest Uriel had ever known, and, fully armoured, he towered over Uriel. Pasanus’s right arm ended abruptly at the elbow, the limb shorn from him beneath the surface of another world by a creature from the dawn of time.

His armour had been repaired and renewed by the artificers of the Grey Knights, and, with its restoration, a piece of Pasanus’s soul that had been rent asunder by his exile was made whole once more.

‘We each hold on to what keeps us going, my friend,’ said Uriel. ‘For you it was the idea of home, for me it was the quest itself. Without that balance between us, I don’t think either of us would be standing here now.’

Pasanus nodded, and swept Uriel into a crushing, one-armed bear hug. The big warrior’s emotions were raw and wounded, but they were healing. They had shared adventures and horrors on their journey, and, to come through it alive, let alone whole in spirit, was a miracle of which both were suddenly and acutely aware.

Uriel felt Pasanus’s massive strength and laughed.

‘You’re crushing the life out of me, you fool!’ he gasped.

Uriel's armour had been destroyed on their quest for redemption, and he wore a simple chiton of pale blue with the sword his former captain had entrusted to him belted at his waist. Pasanius joined Uriel's laughter, the last of the darkness that had cloaked his soul banished by the bright sun of Macragge and the gift of friendship freely given.

Pasanius released Uriel as the Porta Guilliman opened further and the light from within the fortress grew in intensity.

Both warriors stood proudly to attention, their backs ramrod straight and heads held high.

They had endured their quest into the darkness at the heart of the galaxy and within the souls of men, each trial bringing them closer to this final redemption. The end of that quest was at hand, and Uriel felt his heart pound within his ribless torso as it would at the moment of battle.

Three warriors stepped from the dazzling brightness of the fortress, three giants who lived in the legends of the Ultramarines, and whose names stood for courage and honour the length and breadth of the Imperium.

Leading the trio, resplendent in the vast and terrible Armour of Antilochus, and bearing the Gauntlets of Ultramar, was Marneus Calgar, Chapter Master of the Ultramarines. A warrior without peer and strategist beyond compare, Calgar was the epitome of what it meant to be a commander of the Adeptus Astartes.

At Calgar's side marched a towering warrior clad in lustrous blue armour, his head haloed with a crystalline hood. This was Varro Tigurius, Chief Librarian of the Ultramarines, and Uriel felt the power of the mighty warrior's gaze upon them, a bright light that would seek out any darkness and expunge it without mercy.

To Calgar's right was the most venerable member of the Ultramarines still on active duty, Chaplain Ortan Cassius, the Master of Sanctity and keeper of the Chapter's soul. Unlike his battle-brothers, Cassius wore armour of deepest black, and where his comrades were warriors of fair countenance, the Chaplain's face was a nightmarish patchwork of scarred flesh and bionics.

As these incredible, legendary warriors marched towards them, Uriel and Pasanius dropped to their knees, their heads bowed. To stand in the presence of one of these warriors would have been an honour unmatched, but to be greeted by three such giants amongst the Astartes was truly incredible.

'You return to us, Uriel Ventris,' said Lord Calgar, and Uriel's heart soared to hear the welcome and respect in his voice. 'I had not thought to ever lay eyes on you again.'

Uriel looked up into Lord Calgar's face, revelling in the sight of so perfect a warrior. Marneus Calgar's features were as hard as granite hewn from the deepest quarry, yet there was wisdom and nobility within them, his eyes cold as steel and yet filled with humanity.

‘Nor I you, my lord,’ said Uriel, unable to keep his tears from falling.

‘Varro here said we would see you again, but I didn’t believe him,’ said Calgar. ‘I should have known better.’

‘Yes,’ agreed Tigurius, ‘you should have. Did I not say the Sentinel of the Tower would fight alongside us when the Thrice Born is clad in flesh once more?’

‘Aye, that you did, Varro,’ said Calgar, ‘and one day you will explain what that means.’

Calgar turned from his Chief Librarian, and placed the open palm of his heavy gauntlet upon Uriel’s head. The Chapter Master’s grip could crush the hardest metal, yet could cradle the most delicate glass sculpture without fear of its destruction. Uriel’s life was in his lord and master’s hand, yet he could think of no one to whom he would more gladly entrust his fate.

‘What say you, Uriel?’ asked Calgar. ‘Do you return to us in glory?’

‘We return to our Chapter having completed our Death Oath,’ replied Uriel.

‘Then you will be welcomed,’ said Calgar.

‘The creatures I saw in my vision,’ said Tigurius, and Uriel sensed his words were laden with meaning beyond his understanding. ‘The daemonic brood creatures... you found them?’

‘We did, my lord,’ confirmed Uriel, ‘on a world taken by the Ruinous Powers. We found them and destroyed them. Our journey has been long and hard, and we have seen much that is terrible, but also much that is

glorious and inspirational. I have seen men become monsters, and monsters that became heroes.'

'And you will stand with this, Pasanius?' asked Cassius with a grimace that appeared sardonic, but which was simply a fact of the hideous scars he bore. 'You did so once before, and were cast from your Chapter. That must have been a wound as grievous as the loss of your arm.'

Pasanius shrugged. 'I am whole within, my Lord Chaplain.'

'That remains to be seen,' said Tigurius, addressing them both. 'You have returned to us as brothers, but you have trodden the soil and breathed the air of a damned world. Brother Leodegarius of the Grey Knights vouches for the purity of your flesh, and his word is all that allowed you to descend to the surface of Macragge alive.'

Tigurius loomed over Uriel and Pasanius, the crystalline matrix of his hood leaping with shimmering wych fire.

'You will tell me all that occurred on your journey,' stated Tigurius, the dark pupils of his eyes crackling with the light of ancient powers, 'and woe betide you if I discover any taint in your souls.'

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