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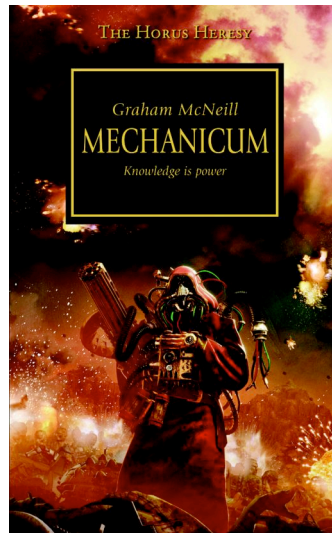
MECHANICUM

A Horus Heresy novel

By Graham McNeill

As the flames of treachery spread outwards through the Imperium, Horus mobilises those forces who are loyal to him, and plots to subvert or destroy those who stand against him. A battle is being fought for the heart and soul of all the Imperial forces – the Astartes, the Imperial army, the Titan Legions and more.

In this epic tale, Graham McNeill tells the story of the civil war on Mars, and the genesis of the Dark Mechanicum.



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 nine novels, Graham has written a host of SF and Fantasy stories and comics. He lives and works in Nottingham.

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The following is an excerpt from *MECHANICUM* by Graham McNeill. Published by the Black Library. Games Workshop, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

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IT NEVER RAINED on Mars. Not any more. Once, when Mars first had known life, back in an age long unknown to man, mighty storms had torn across the landscape, gouging channels in the rock and carving sweeping coastlines from the towering cliffs of the great Mons. Then the world had endured its first death and the planet had become a cratered red wasteland of empty dust bowls and parched deserts.

But the red planet lived to breathe again.

The terraforming of Mars had begun in earliest days of the golden age of man's expansion to the stars, bringing new life and hope to the surface, but in the end, this was a remission, not a cure. Within the span of a few centuries, the planet had died its second death, choking on the fumes of volcanic forge complexes, continent-sized refineries and the effluent of a million weapons shops.

It never rained on Mars.

That thought was uppermost in the mind of Brother Verticorda as he guided the battered bipedal form of *Ares Lictor* up the gentle slopes of Olympus Mons towards the colossal volcano's caldera. Resembling a brutish, mechanical humanoid some nine metres tall, the *Ares Lictor* was a Paladin-class Knight, a one-man war machine of deep blue armour plates and fearsome array of weaponry beyond the power of even the strongest of the Terran Emperor's Astartes to bear.

Ares Lictor walked with an awkward, loping gait, thanks to a stubborn knee joint that no amount of ministrations from the tech-

priests could restore to full working order, but Verticorda handled his mount with the practiced ease of one born in the cockpit.

It never rained on Mars.

Except it was raining now.

The brushed orange skies above were weeping a thin drizzle of moisture, patterning Verticorda's cockpit, and he felt the cold wetness through the hard-plugs in his spine and the haptic implants in his fingers.

He realised that he too was weeping, for he had never expected to witness such a sight, the heavens opening and precipitation falling to the surface of the red planet. Such a thing had not happened in living memory – and on Mars that was a *long* time...

Two other war machines followed behind Verticorda, his brothers in arms and fellow knights of Mars. He could hear their chatter over the Manifold, the synaptic congress that linked their minds, but had not the words to convey his own sense of wonder at the sight that greeted them on this day of days.

The sky above Olympus Mons raged.

Billowing storm clouds heaved as though ancient, forgotten gods battled within them, slamming their mighty hammers against wrought iron anvils and hurling forked bolts of lightning at one another. Mars's largest moon, Phobos, was visible as a yellowed irregularity behind in the clouds, its cratered surface at its closest point to the surface of Mars in decades.

The mighty volcano, the largest mountain in Tharsis region and indeed the solar system, towered above the Martian landscape, the dizzyingly high escarpments of its cliffs rising to almost thirty kilometres above the surface of the planet. Verticorda knew this region of Tharsis intimately; he had marched *Ares Lictor* from the Fabricator General's forge on the eastern flanks of the mighty volcano three decades ago, and he had led his brother warriors across its slopes uncounted times.

More lightning flashed and the thousands gathering at the base of the volcano gazed fearfully into the gathering tempest from towering hab-stacks and ironclad bulwarks of Kelbor-Hal's domain. Abused

skies cracked and roared, distorting under the overpressure of something unimaginably vast, and the atmospherics lighting up the sky as far as any eye, fleshy or augmetic, could see.

Crowds in their thousands, their tens of thousands, were following the Knights up the slopes of Olympus Mons, but they had not the speed or manoeuvrability of the war machines. This wonder was for the Knights of Taranis and them alone.

A shape moved in the clouds above and Verticorda halted his mount at the sheer edge of the caldera's escarpment with a release of pressure on his right hand. The machine reacted instantly, the bond he had forged with it in years of battle like that of two comrades in arms who had shared blood and victory in equal measure.

Verticorda could feel the anticipation of this moment in every sizzling joint and weld within the *Ares Lictor*, as though it – more than he – was anticipating the glory of this day. Golden light flashed above and the drizzle of rain became a downpour.

A zigzagging pathway had been cut into the cliff, leading to the base of the caldera, nearly two kilometres below. It was a treacherous path in ideal conditions, but in this deluge it was close to suicide.

'What do you say, old friend?' said Verticorda. 'You up for this?'

He could feel the machine straining beneath him and smiled, easing up the power and walking the Knight towards the edge of the cliff. The steps were designed for the long stride and wide tread of a Knight, but were slick and reflective with the rain. It was a long way down and not even the armour or energy shields that protected a Knight in battle would save them from a fall from this height.

Verticorda guided *Ares Lictor's* first step onto the cut path and felt the slipperiness beneath its feet as though he walked upon it himself. Each step was dangerous and he took care to ensure each one was taken with the utmost reverence. Step by step, centimetre by centimetre, he walked *Ares Lictor* down the path to the cratered plain below.

Golden light suddenly burst from the clouds above, dazzling and brilliant, and bolts of scarlet lightning danced like crackling spiderwebs between the ground and sky. Verticorda almost lost his footing as he instinctively looked up.

A great floating city of gold was descending from the heavens.

Like a mountainous spire sheared from the side of some vast basalt landmass, the city was studded with light and colour, its dimensions enormous beyond imagining. A great, eagle-winged prow of gold marked one end of the floating city and towering battlements, like the highest towers of the mightiest Martian spire, rose like gnarled stalagmites from the other.

Rippling engines flared with unimaginable power on the colossal edifice's underside and Verticorda stood amazed at the technology required to prevent such a monstrous creation from plummeting to the ground. Flocks of smaller craft attended the larger one, its dimensions only growing larger the more it emerged from its concealing clouds.

'Blood of the Machine...' hissed Yelsic, rider of the Knight at his back. 'How can such a thing stay in the air?'

'Concentrate on your descent,' warned Verticorda. 'I don't want you losing your footing behind me.'

'Understood.'

Verticorda returned his own attention to the pathway, negotiating the last three hundred metres bathed in a cold sweat. He let out a long, shuddering breath as he took his first step onto the surface of the Olympus Mons caldera, enjoying the strange new sensation of mud sucking at his feet.

By the time the Knights reached the base of the cliff, the enormous craft had landed, its gargantuan bulk surely offset by some dampening field to prevent it from collapsing under its own weight or sinking deep into the Martian surface. Roiling clouds of superheated steam and condensing gasses billowed outwards from the ship and as they swept over *Ares Lictor*, Verticorda smelled the scents of another world: hard radiation, the ache of homelands long forgotten and thin, achingly cold, mountain air.

He told himself it was ludicrous to sense such things from a ship that had just made the fiery descent through a planet's atmosphere, yet they were there as plain as day.

'Spread out,' said Verticorda. 'Flank speed.'

The Knights loping alongside him moved into a combat spread as they strode through the hot, moist mists. Verticorda felt no threat from this unknown craft, yet decades of training and discipline would not allow him to approach it without taking precautions.

At last the mist thinned and Verticorda pulled up as the enormous golden cliff of the vessel's flanks rose up before him like a mountain freshly deposited on the planet's surface. Its scale was awe-inspiring, more so than even the fastnesses of the Titan Legions or the data mountains of the Temple of All Knowledge.

Even the mightiest forge temple of Mondus Gamma on the Syria Planum paled in comparison to the scale of this vessel, for it had been fashioned with deliberate artifice and not the combined forces of millions of years of geological interaction. Every plate and sheet of the enormous vessel was worked with the care of a craftsman and Verticorda struggled to think of a reason why so many would labour for so long and with such devotion to ornament a vessel designed for travel between the stars.

The answer came a heartbeat after the question.

This was no ordinary vessel, this was a craft built with love, a craft built for a being beloved by all. No ordinary man could inspire such devotion and Verticorda suddenly felt an overwhelming fear that he was in the presence of something far greater and far more terrifying than anything he could ever have imagined.

A shrieking blast of steam vented from the ship and a colossal hatchway was limed in golden light. Huge pneumatic pistons – larger than a Titan – slowly lowered a long ramp, easily wide enough for a regiment of gene-bulked skitarii to march down in line abreast. The ramp lowered with no sign of strain on the vessel, and the brightness within poured out, bathing the red Martian landscape in a warm, welcome glow.

Verticorda twisted *Ares Lictor* around on its central axis, and felt a shiver travel the length of his spine as he saw the entire rim of the volcano's crater lined with onlookers. With a thought, he increased the magnification through the viewscreen and saw thousands of robed adepts, menials, tech-priests, logi and workers gathered to watch the events unfolding below.

Crackling, voltaic viewing clouds coloured the sky behind the crowds and flocks of servo-skulls buzzed overhead, though none dared approach within the swirling electromagnetic field that surrounded the craft.

The huge ramp crunched down onto the Martian soil and Verticorda squinted into the light that blazed from within. A silhouette moved within the light, tall and powerful, glorious and magnificent.

The light seemed to move with him, and as Verticorda watched the figure descend the ramp, a shadow fell across the surface of the plain on which the craft had landed. Though he was loath to tear his gaze from this magnificent figure, Verticorda looked up to see a convex ellipse of darkness bite into the glowing outline of the sun.

The light from the storm-wracked skies faded until the only illumination came from the golden warrior – for there could be no doubt that this sublime figure was a man made mighty by battle – stepped onto the Martian soil for the first time.

Verticorda felt the collective gasp from the thousands of spectators in his bones, as though the very planet shuddered with pleasure to know this individual's touch.

He looked back down and saw the warrior standing before him, tall and clad in golden, armour, each plate wrought with the same skill and love as had been lavished upon his vessel. The warrior wore no helm and was fitted with no visible breathing augmetics, yet seemed untroubled by the chemical-laden air of Mars.

Verticorda found his gaze dwelling on the warrior's face, beautiful and perfect as though able to see beyond the armoured exterior of *Ares Lictor* and into Verticorda's soul. In his eyes, his so

very ancient eyes, Verticorda saw the wisdom of all the ages and the burden of all knowledge contained within them.

A crimson mantle flapped in the wind behind the giant warrior and he carried an eagle-topped sceptre clutched in one mighty gauntlet. The golden giant's eyes scrutinised the blue-armoured form of Verticorda's mount, from its conical glacis to the aventailed shoulder plates upon which the wheel and lightning bolt symbol of the Knights of Taranis was emblazoned.

The warrior reached out towards him. 'Your machine is damaged, Taymon Verticorda,' he said, his voice heavy and yet musical, like the most perfect sound imaginable. 'May I?'

Verticorda found himself unable to form a reply, knowing that anything he might say would be trite in the face of such perfection. It didn't occur to him to wonder how this sublime warrior knew his name. Without waiting for a reply, the warrior reached out and Verticorda felt his touch upon the joints of *Ares Lictor's* knee.

'Machine, heal thyself,' said the warrior, the purpose and self-belief in his voice passing into Verticorda as though infusing every molecule of his hybrid existence of flesh and steel with newfound purpose and vitality.

He felt the warmth of the warrior's touch though the shell of his mount, and gasped as trembling vibrations spread through its armoured frame of plasteel and ceramite. He took an involuntary step back, feeling the movements of his mount flow as smoothly as ever they had. With one step, he could feel the *Ares Lictor* move as though it had just come off the assembly lines at Modus Gamma, its stubborn knee joint flexing like new.

'Who are you?' he gasped, his voice sounding grating and pathetic next to the mighty timbre of this golden warrior's voice.

'I am the Emperor,' said the warrior.

It was a simple answer, yet the weight of history and the potential of a glorious future were carried in every syllable.

Knowing he would never again hear words spoken with such meaning, Verticorda and *Ares Lictor* dropped to one knee,

performing the manoeuvre with a grace that would have been impossible before the Emperor's touch.

And in that moment, Taymon Verticorda knew the truth of the being standing before him.

'Welcome to Mars, my lord,' he said. 'All praise to the Ommissiah.'

SWATHED IN FADED and tattered robes of rust red, the six Mechanicum Protectors stood unmoving before her, as still as the towering statues of the magi who stared down upon the thousands of scribes, back within the great Hall of Transcription of the Librarium Technologicus. Their iron-shod boots were locked tight into the ship's deck restraints while she had to hold onto a metal stanchion just to avoid cracking her head on its fuselage or tumbling about the hold when it had taken off.

The interior of the ship was bare and unadorned, as functional as it was possible to be. No unnecessary decorations or aesthetic elements designed to ease the eye were included in its design. It perfectly epitomised the organisation to which it belonged.

Dalia Cythera ran a hand through her cropped blonde hair, feeling the dirt and grease there and longing for one of her weekly rotations in the Windward sump's ablutions block. She had a feeling, however, that her cleanliness was the furthest thing from the minds of these Protectors.

None of them had spoken to her other than to confirm her name when they had removed her from the cell beneath the Librarium in which Magos Ludd had locked her a week earlier. He'd discovered the enhancements she'd made to the inner workings of her cogitator and hauled her from the work line in a rage, angry hashes of binaric static canting from his vocaliser.

Seven days alone in complete darkness had almost broken her. She remembered squeezing herself into a tiny ball when the cell door finally opened and she had seen the bronze, death masks of the Protectors, their gleaming weapon-staves and the unforgiving light of their eyes.

Ludd's blurted protests at the Protectors' intrusion soon ceased when they had invited him to scan the biometric security encryptions carried within their staves. She was frightened of the Protectors, but then she guessed she was supposed to be. Their masters in the Mechanicum had designed them that way, with their enhanced bulk, weaponised limbs and glowing green eyes that shone, unblinking, behind brass, skull-faced masks.

Within moments, she had been hauled from the cell and dragged through the cavernous, echoing scriptoria where she'd spent the last ten years of her life, her limbs loose and weak.

Thousands upon thousands of robed scribes, ordinates, curators and form-stampers filled the scriptoria, and as she had been carried towards the enormous arch that led to the world beyond, she realised she would be sad to leave the knowledge that passed through it.

She would not miss the people, for she had no friends here and no colleagues. None of the pallid-skinned adepts looked up from the monotony of their work, the sea-green glow of their cogitators and the flickering lumen globes floating in the dusty air leeching their wizened features of life and animation.

Such a state of being was foreign to Dalia and it never failed to amaze her that her fellow scribes were so blind to the honour of what they did.

The recovered knowledge of Terra and the new wonders sent back from across the galaxy by the thousands of remembrancers accompanying the manifold expeditions of the Great Crusade passed through this chamber. Despite that glorious flood of information, carefully logged and filed within the great libraries of Terra, every one of the faceless minions ceaselessly, blindly, ground themselves into old age repeating the same bureaucratic and administrative tasks every waking hour of every day, oblivious or uncaring of the wealth of information to which they were privy.

Without the insight or even will to question the task they had been given to perform, the scribes shuffled from their hab-stacks through the same kilometres of well-trodden corridors every day and performed their duties without question, thought or awe.

The rustle of paper was what Dalia imagined the ocean to sound like, the clatter of adding machines and the rattle of brass keys on the typesetters like the motion of uncounted pebbles on a beach. Of course, Dalia had never seen these things she imagined, for the seas of Terra had long since boiled away in forgotten wars, but the words she read as she copied text from the reams of paper and armfuls of data-slates carried in daily by muscled servitors had filled her mind with possibilities of worlds and ideas that existed far beyond the confines of Terra's mightiest scriptorium.

Emerging from the musty darkness of the Librarium Technologica, she had been blinded by the brightness of the day, the sky a brilliant white and the sun a hazy orb peeking through scraps of clouds the colour of corrosion.

The air was cold and thin at this altitude. She could just make out the tips of the slate-coloured mountains that crowned the world over the teeming roofs and spires crammed together in this part of the Imperial Palace. She had longed to see those mountains in all their glory, but her escorts marched her through dark streets that sweated steam and oil and voices towards an unknown destination without pause.

That destination turned out to be a landing platform, upon which sat a vapour-wreathed starship, its hull still warm and groaning from the stresses of an atmospheric entry.

She was led into the cavernous hold and deposited onto the floor while the Protectors took up their allocated positions and the maglocks secured them to the deck. With a juddering roar and sudden lurch, the starship lifted off, and Dalia had been thrown to her knees by the violence of the ascent. Fear gripped her as she clung to a protruding stanchion and the angle of incline increased sharply.

The thought that she was leaving the planet of her birth struck her forcefully and she experienced terrible panic at the thought of venturing beyond her known horizons. No sooner had she chided herself for such timidity than the panic subsided and she felt her stomach cramp as she realised how hungry she was.

The roaring of the starship and the vibrations on its hull grew louder and more violent until she was sure the craft was going to tear itself apart. Eventually, the noise changed in tone and the starship began to level out, powering through the void at unimaginable speeds.

She was travelling on a starship...

Now, with a moment free to think, she now wondered where she was going and why these Mechanicum Protectors had plucked her from the Librarian's cells, and for what purpose. Curiously, she felt no fear of this strange voyage, but she attributed that lack to the mystery and interest of it being enough to overshadow any wariness she felt.

Over the next day or so, her escorts – she did not now think of them as captors – resisted her every attempt at communication, save to instruct her to eat and drink, which she did ravenously, despite the food's chemical artificiality.

They did not move from their locked positions at all during the journey, standing as mute guardians and offering her no diversion save in the study of their form.

Each one was tall and powerfully built, their physiques gene-bulked and augmented with implanted weaponry. Ribbed cables and coloured wires threaded their robes and penetrated their flesh through raw-looking plugs embedded in their skin. She had seen Protectors before, but she had never been so close to one before now.

They smelled unpleasantly of rotten meat, machine oil and stale sweat.

They were armed with giant pistols with flaring barrels and tall staves of iron, topped with a bronze and silver cog, from which hung a scrap of parchment that fluttered in the gusting air within the cold compartment.

A set of numbers was written on the parchment, set out in a four by four grid and Dalia quickly worked out that each line added up to the same number, no matter which way they were combined – vertically, horizontally or diagonally. Not only that, but each of the

quadrants, the four centre squares, the corner squares and many other combinations added up to the same figure.

‘Thirty-four,’ she said. ‘It’s always thirty-four.’

The design was familiar to her and Dalia knew she had seen it before. No sooner had she wondered where than the answer came to her.

‘The Melancholia,’ said Dalia, nodding at the parchment.

‘What did you say?’ asked the Protector.

His voice was human, but echoed with a metallic rasp beneath his bronze mask, and Dalia was momentarily taken aback that he’d actually responded to something she said.

‘The symbol on your parchment,’ she said. ‘It’s from an engraving. I saw it in a book I transcribed five years ago.’

‘Five years ago? And you still remember it?’

‘Yes,’ nodded Dalia, hesitantly. ‘I remember things I’ve read and don’t forget it.’

‘It is the symbol of our master,’ said the Protector.

‘It’s from an engraving of one of the old master prints,’ said Dalia, her eyes taking on a glazed look as she spoke, talking more to herself than the Protector. ‘It was so old, but then everything we transcribe in the great hall that’s not from the expedition fleets is old. It was a picture of a woman, but she looked frustrated, like she was annoyed at not being able to invent something ingenious. She had all sorts of equipment around her – weights, an hourglass and a hammer – but she looked sad. As if she just couldn’t get the idea to take shape.’

The Protectors glanced at one another as Dalia spoke, each one gripping their staves tightly. Dalia caught the look and her words trailed off.

‘What?’ she said.

The Protector disengaged the mag-lock clamps securing him to the deck and he stepped towards her. The suddenness of his motion took her by surprise and she stumbled backwards, falling onto her backside as he loomed over her, the green glow of his eyes shining brightly within his tattered hood.

‘I begin to see why our master sent us to fetch you,’ said the Protector.

‘You can?’ asked Dalia. ‘And you were sent for me? Me? Dalia Cythera?’

‘Yes, Dalia Cythera. Rho-Mu 31 was sent to fetch you from Terra.’

‘Rho-Mu 31?’

‘That is our designation,’ said the Protector.

‘What, all of you?’

‘All of us, each of us. It is all the same.’

‘Alright, but why were you sent to fetch *me*?’ asked Dalia.

‘We were sent to fetch you before you were executed.’

‘Executed?’ exclaimed Dalia. ‘For what?’

‘Magos Ludd had invoked the Law of the Divine Complexity,’ explained Rho-Mu 31. ‘Individuals so accused attract the attention of our master.’

Dalia thought for a moment, her eyes fluttering beneath her lids as she recalled what that law concerned. ‘Let me think... That’s the belief that the structure and working of each machine has been set down by the Ommissiah and is therefore divine... and that to alter it is, oh...’

‘You see now why we came for you?’

‘Not really,’ admitted Dalia. ‘Anyway, who *is* your master, and what does he want with me? I’m just a Transcriber of Remembrance, I’m nobody.’

Rho-Mu 31 shook his head, making a fist and placing it over the silver and bronze cog atop his staff. ‘You are more than you realise, Dalia Cythera,’ he said, ‘but that, and more, will become clear to you when you meet our master, High Adept Koriel Zeth, Mistress of the Magma City.’

‘The Magma City?’ asked Dalia. ‘Where is that?’

‘At the edge of the Daedalia Planum, on the southern flank of Arsia Mons,’ said Rho-Mu 31, lifting his stave and touching it to an opaque panel on the vibrating hull of the starship. A flickering light

crackled and the panel began to change, slowly becoming more and more translucent until finally it was virtually transparent.

When this transformation was complete, Dalia gasped at the sight before her, her face bathed in a fiery red glow from the planet below. Its surface was clad in fire and metal, its atmosphere choked with striated clouds of pollution. Teeming with gargantuan sprawls of industry larger than the continents of Old Earth, the world seemed to throb with the heartbeat of monstrous hammers.

Plumes of fire and towering stacks of iron rose from its mountainous southern regions and networks of gleaming steel spread out like cracks in the ground through which fractured light spilled into the sky.

‘Is that...?’

‘Mars,’ confirmed Rho-Mu 31. ‘Domain of the Mechanicum.’

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