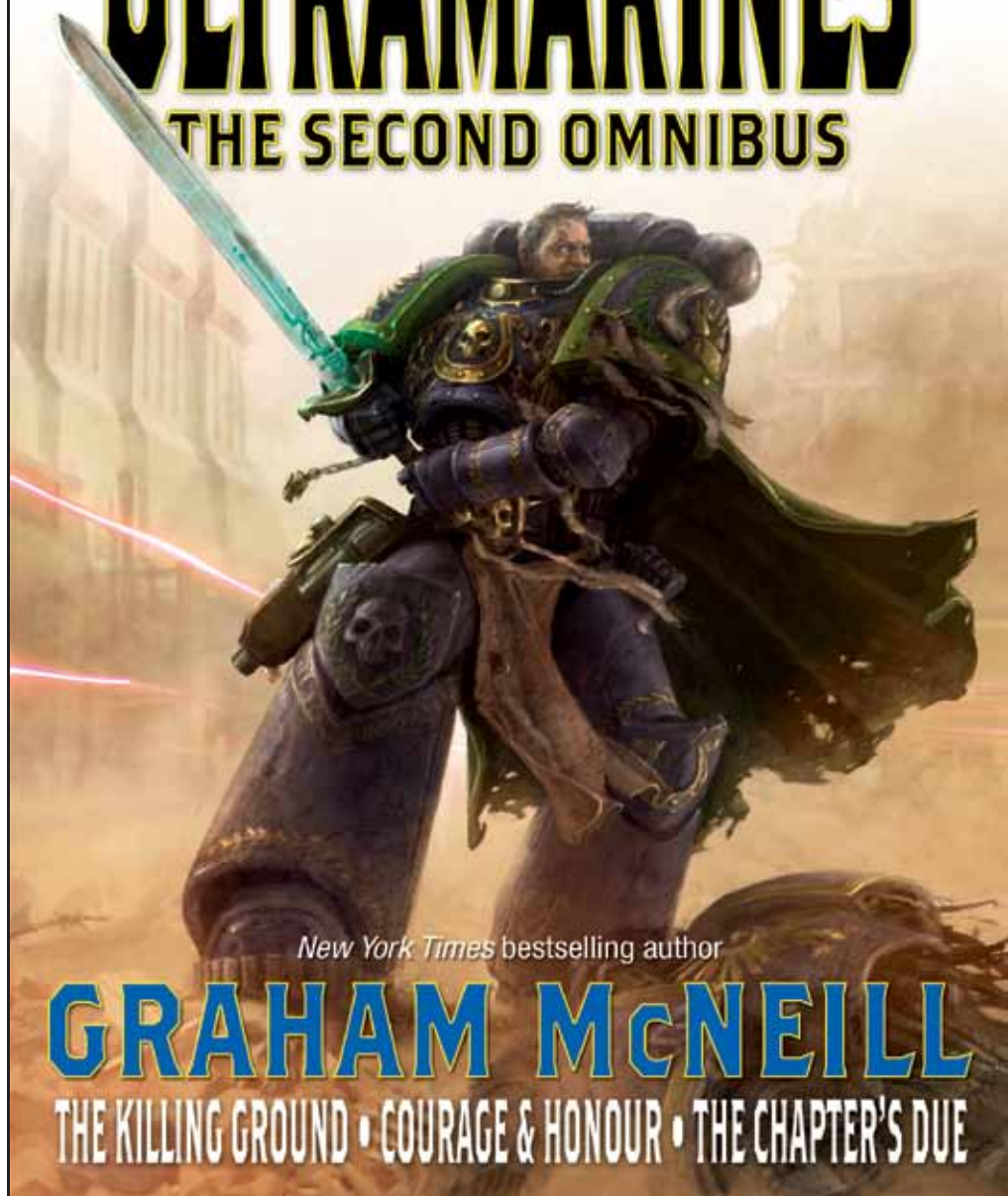


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ULTRAMARINES: THE SECOND OMNIBUS

Graham McNeill

The Ultramarines have been the honourable cornerstone of the Adeptus Astartes throughout their ten thousand year history. Captain Uriel Ventris fights to prove that he is worthy to return to the hallowed ranks of the Chapter after his exile to the Eye of Terror, and that he is free of the insidious taint of Chaos. But as the Iron Warriors move against Ultramar, a grim premonition comes to light: Ventris will have a part to play in the coming war, for good or ill.

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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 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. 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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THEY HAD REACHED the edges of the city and followed the road until reaching a wide gate, strung with coloured ribbons and garlands of faded flowers. More of the prayer strips hung from the wire and it had the effect of making the gate look almost festive.

'How are we going to play this?' asked Pasanius.

'Carefully,' said Uriel. 'It's the only way we can. I want to be honest with these people, but I don't want to be gunned down by some overeager Guardsman with an itchy trigger-finger.'

'Good point. Best we don't mention where we've been.'

'Probably not,' agreed Uriel. 'Not yet, at least.'

Pasanius nodded to the horizon. 'Here they come.'

Uriel watched as a trio of boxy, bipedal machines stalked through the landscape towards the city, moving with a wheezing, mechanical gait. Painted a deep rust red, each was, much to Uriel's relief, emblazoned with a golden eagle on their frontal glacis. Two bore side-mounted autocannons, while the third sported a lascannon that hummed with a powerful electric charge.

'There's more than these three,' said Pasanius, his head cocked to one side.

'I know,' said Uriel. 'There's one on our right and another two in the woods to the left.'

'Autocannons and a lascannon... They'll make a mess of us if they open fire.'

'Then let's not give them reason to, eh?'

'Sounds good to me.'

Uriel watched as the three visible Sentinels slowed and approached the gate with greater caution now that they had spotted the two of them. Guns were trained, hissing hydraulics powered up and arming chambers unmasked the war spirits within the weapons.

'Easy now,' whispered Uriel.

All three Sentinels had their weapons firmly aimed at them.

'If they open fire...,' said Pasanius, his grip twitching on the grip of the bolter.

Uriel spotted the gesture and said, 'Slowly. Very slowly, put down that gun.'

Pasanius looked down at the weapon, as though he had forgotten he was carrying it, and nodded. With his truncated arm raised, he knelt and placed the bolter on the ground. The Sentinel armed with the lascannon followed his movements.

None of the other vehicles moved, content simply to cover them with their weapons.

'Why aren't they doing anything?'

'Communicating with their commanding officer I expect.'

'Damn, but I don't like this,' said Pasanius.

'Nor I,' said Uriel, 'but what choice do we have? We have to make contact with Imperial authorities sometime.'

'True. I just wish we weren't doing it with a company's worth of heavy weaponry pointed at us.'

The Sentinels before them didn't move, but Uriel could hear the sounds of the ones out of sight moving around to confirm that they were alone. He hoped the Lord of the Unfleshed had managed to get his followers clear of the city, for if the commanding officer of these soldiers was even halfway competent, he would order a search of the city to confirm that they were alone.

At last, Uriel heard the rumbling of tracked vehicles and a staggered column of a dozen Chimeras came into view. No sooner had the armoured vehicles appeared than the Sentinels opened up with dazzling searchlights. Uriel blinked away spots of brightness from his eyes as they adjusted to the blinding light.

Even though dawn was lighting the eastern skyline, the beams from the spotlights were intense and Uriel had to squint to make out any detail behind them. Mortal eyes would have been blinded, but those of a Space Marine could filter out all but the most searing light.

As Uriel's eyes focused, he saw the Chimeras spread out, a squadron's worth of heavy weaponry aimed squarely at him and his sergeant. Doors cranked open and scores of soldiers disembarked from the backs of the vehicles.

'They're good, I'll give them that,' hissed Pasanus, and Uriel was forced to agree.

The soldiers were clad in armour composed of gleaming red plate fringed with fur-edged mail and short, crimson cloaks tied over their left shoulders. Their rifles were aimed unwaveringly at the pair of them, each soldier advancing with a fluid motion that kept his weapon steady.

Their helmets were conical affairs of bronze metal with angled cheek plates and flexible aventails. Each warrior also carried a heavy sword with a curved blade, and nothing in their appearance gave Uriel the impression that they were simply for ornamentation.

'They've gone to a lot of trouble for just the two of us,' whispered Pasanus.

'I know, and how did they know we were here?'

'I suppose we'll find out soon enough,' said Pasanus. 'Looks like they're coming in.'

A sergeant with ocular implants integral to his helmet waved two squads forward. A heavy, square device was planted in the centre of the gate and a cable run back to the lead Chimera by a robed engineer with a heavy backpack of hissing cogs and bronze instruments.

A flickering glow built around the box attached to the gate and a crackle of electrical discharge flared along the length of the fence. Barely had the glow faded than the soldiers were coming through, the magnetically sealed gates swinging open with a booted kick.

The red-clad soldiers spread out, moving in pairs to expertly envelop them in overlapping fields of fire.

'Clear!' shouted one soldier, and the cry was repeated by his opposite number.

Up close, Uriel saw that they were professional soldiers indeed. They kept a precise distance from their targets, while still remaining close enough for it to be impossible to miss if this encounter turned violent.

None even seemed fazed by the fact that their guns were aimed at warriors who clearly had the bulk of Astartes.

The sergeant with the ocular implants came forward with his curved sword drawn, and Uriel could see that the weapon was a form of falcata, a single-edged blade that pitched forward towards the point. Such weapons were heavy and capable of delivering a blow with the power of an axe, yet with the precision and cutting edge of a sword. The hilt was hook-shaped with quillons in the shape of flaring eagle wings.

Using the tip of his blade, the sergeant hooked Pasanus's bolter away from him and gestured a soldier behind him to carry it away. The soldier struggled under the weight of the gun and Uriel watched as it was handed off to the eager looking engineer.

The sergeant looked Uriel up and down, his face invisible behind a combination vox/rebreather attachment and his bionics. With their only gun taken away, the soldiers relaxed a fraction and Uriel felt his respect for them drop a notch, for Uriel still carried his sword. In any case, the soldiers should know that a Space Marine was as proficient a killer with his bare hands as he was with a weapon.

No one moved until the top hatch on one of the Chimeras opened and a slender figure in the uniform of an officer emerged. Uriel saw that it was a woman, a tall, long-limbed woman who dropped to the ground with the assured movements of someone used to being in the field.

She pulled off her helmet and ran a hand across her scalp. Her hair was dark and cut short, her features angular and chiselled. She marched from her Chimera, trailed by a shorter man bearing a portable vox-caster on his back.

Like every one of her soldiers, she too bore a sheathed falcata. A golden eagle medal shone

brightly on her uniform jacket. The woman halted beside her sergeant, clearly surprised to see two such warriors standing before her. To her credit, her surprise lasted for only the briefest of seconds.

'Who are you?' she asked.

'I am Uriel Ventris and this is Pasanus Lysane,' answered Uriel.

'You are Adeptus Astartes?'

It was asked as a rhetorical question, but Uriel nodded and said, 'We are Ultramarines.'

Again, Uriel saw surprise, but just as quickly it was masked. 'Ultramarines? You are a long way from home. How did you come to be here?'

'With respect,' said Uriel, 'we do not even know where here is. What planet is this?'

Ignoring Uriel's question, the female officer said, 'You are trespassing on prohibited ground, Uriel Ventris. To enter Khaturian carries a penalty of death.'

Uriel shared a shocked look with Pasanus. The sheer physical presence and legendary prowess of a Space Marine was enough to render most mortals speechless with awe and reverence, but this woman seemed unconcerned that she faced two of the Emperor's finest.

Anger touched Uriel and he took a step forward.

Immediately, a host of lasguns snapped up, and the soldiers' posture of vigilance was instantly restored.

'We are Space Marines of the Emperor,' snarled Uriel, the frustrations of the time they had spent exiled from the Chapter boiling to the surface. He gripped the hilt of his sword and said, 'We are warriors of the Fourth Company of the Ultramarines Chapter and you will show us some damned respect!'

The woman did not flinch from Uriel's outburst, but her hand flashed to her falcata.

'If you were to try to draw that weapon, I could cut you down before it was halfway drawn,' promised Uriel.

'And you would be dead a moment later,' she promised.

'Maybe so, but at least I would have silenced your insolent tongue,' snapped Uriel.

He felt a restraining hand on his arm and turned to see Pasanus, a look of resigned amusement in his eyes.

'Remember when I asked you how we were going to play this?' asked Pasanus 'You said, "Carefully". Does this fit any definition of careful?'

Uriel's anger vanished and he smiled at the absurdity of his behaviour in the face of so much firepower. He released his sword hilt and returned his gaze to the female officer, who glared furiously at him with her hand still held firmly on the grip of her weapon.

Pasanus stepped between her and Uriel. 'Look, before this gets out of hand and someone gets killed, let's everyone take a breath and we'll start again. We are strangers on this world and didn't know that to come here was forbidden. We're just trying to get back to our Chapter and could really use your help. Can you at least tell us what planet we're on and who's in charge?'

The woman relaxed a fraction and released her weapon. She took a deep breath, smoothed the front of her uniform jacket and laced her hands behind her back.

'Very well,' she said. 'I am Colonel Verena Kain, commanding officer of the Achaman Falcatas, and this world is called Salinas.'

'Who's in charge?'

'Governor Leto Barbaden is the Imperial Commander of this world,' said Colonel Kain.

'Can you take us to him?' asked Uriel.

'You'll have to travel under armed escort until your identities can be verified.'

'Verified?' asked Uriel. 'You don't believe we are Adeptus Astartes? Are you blind?'

'Trust me,' snapped Kain. 'I have spent decades fighting the Emperor's enemies, and some of them looked just like you, so you'll forgive me if I don't entirely trust that you are all you seem.'

Uriel was about to retort when Pasanus said, 'Colonel Kain has a point, Uriel. Come on, what does it matter anyway? We're going where we need to go.'

'I suppose so,' said Uriel.

'You'll travel in the back of a Chimera,' said Kain, gauging their bulk. 'It will be cramped, but you can squeeze in I'm sure.'

'Indeed,' said Pasanius, leading Uriel forward under the watchful gaze and lasguns of the Guardsmen.

As they marched towards the waiting Chimeras, Pasanius turned to address Colonel Kain one last time. 'One other thing,' he said. 'What year is it?'