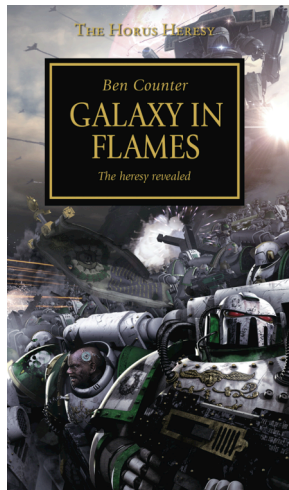


# ***GALAXY IN FLAMES***

*A Horus Heresy Novel*

*By Ben Counter*

Having recovered from his grievous injuries, Warmaster Horus leads the triumphant Imperial forces against the rebel world of Istvaan III. Though the rebels are swiftly crushed, Horus's treachery is finally revealed when the planet is razed by virus bombs and Space Marines turn on their battle-brothers in the most bitter struggle imaginable.



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## **About the Author**

Freelance writer Ben Counter is one of Black Library's most popular SF authors. An Ancient History graduate and avid miniature painter, he lives near Portsmouth, England.

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The following is an excerpt from *Galaxy in Flames* by Ben Counter  
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‘I was there,’ said Titus Cassar, his wavering voice barely reaching the back of the chamber. ‘I was there the day that Horus turned his face from the Emperor.’ His words brought a collective sigh from the Lectio Divinitatus congregation and as one they lowered their heads at such a terrible thought. From the back of the chamber, an abandoned munitions hold deep in the under-decks of the Warmaster’s flagship, the Vengeful Spirit, Kyril Sindermann watched and winced at Cassar’s awkward delivery. The man was no iterator, that was for sure, but his words carried the sure and certain faith of someone who truly believed in the things he was saying. Sindermann envied him that certainty. It had been many months since he had felt anything approaching certainty.

As the Primary Iterator of the 63rd Expedition, it was Kyril Sindermann’s job to promulgate the Imperial Truth of the Great Crusade, illuminating those worlds brought into compliance of the rule of the Emperor and the glory of the Imperium. Bringing the light of reason and secular truth to the furthest flung reaches of the ever-expanding human empire had been a noble undertaking. But somewhere along the way, things had gone wrong.

Sindermann wasn't sure when it had happened. On Xenobia? On Davin? On Aureus? Or on any one of a dozen other worlds brought into compliance?

Once he had been known as the arch prophet of secular truth, but times had changed and he found himself remembering his Sahlonum, the Sumaturan philosopher who had wondered why the light of new science seemed not to illuminate as far as the old sorceries had.

Titus Cassar continued his droning sermon, and Sindermann returned his attention to the man. Tall and angular, Cassar wore the uniform of a moderati primus, one of the senior commanders of the Dies Irae, an Emperor-class Battle Titan. Sindermann suspected it was this rank, combined with his earlier friendship with Euphrati Keeler, that had granted his status within the Lectitio Divinitatus; status that he was clearly out of his depth in handling.

Euphrati Keeler: imagist, evangelist...

...Saint.

He remembered meeting Euphrati, a feisty, supremely self-confident woman, on the embarkation deck before they had left for the surface of Sixty-Three Nineteen, unaware of the horror they would witness in the depths of the Whisperhead Mountains.

Together with Captain Loken, they had seen the warp-spawned monstrosity Xayver Jubal had been wrought into. Sindermann had struggled to rationalise what he had seen by burying himself in his books and learning to better understand what had occurred. Euphrati had no such sanctuary and had turned to the growing Lectitio Divinitatus cult for solace.

Venerating the Emperor as a divine being, the cult had grown from humble beginnings to a movement that was spreading throughout the Expedition fleets of the galaxy – much to the fury of the Warmaster. Where before the cult had lacked a focus, in Euphrati Keeler, it had found its first martyr and saint.

Sindermann remembered the day when he had witnessed Euphrati Keeler stand before a nightmare horror from beyond the gates of the Empyrean and hurl it back from whence it had come. He had seen her bathed in killing fire and walk away unscathed, a blinding light streaming from the outstretched hand in which she had held a silver Imperial eagle. Others had seen it too, Ing Mae Sing, Mistress of the Fleet's astropaths and a dozen of the ship's arms men. Word had spread fast and Euphrati had become, overnight, a saint in the eyes of the faithful and an icon to cling to on the frontier of space.

He was unsure why he had even come to this meeting – not a meeting, he corrected himself, but a service, a religious sermon – for there was a very real danger of recognition. Membership of the *Lectitio Divinitatus* was forbidden and if he were discovered, it would be the end of his career as an iterator.

‘Now we shall contemplate the word of the Emperor,’ continued Cassar, reading from a small leather chapbook. Sindermann was reminded of the Bondsman Number 7 books in which the late Ignace Karkasy had written his scandalous poetry. Poetry that had, if Mersadie Oliton's suspicions were correct, caused his murder.

Sinderman thought that the writings of the Lectitio Divinitatus were scarcely less dangerous.

‘We have some new faithful among us,’ said Cassar, and Sindermann felt every eye in the chamber turn upon him. Used to facing entire continents’ worth of audience, Sindermann was suddenly acutely embarrassed by their scrutiny.

‘When people are first drawn to adoration of the Emperor, it is only natural that they should have questions,’ said Cassar. ‘They know the Emperor must be a god, for he has god-like powers over all human species, but aside from this, they are in the dark.’ This, at least, Sindermann agreed with.

‘Most importantly, they ask, “If the Emperor truly is a god, then what does he do with his divine power?” We do not see His hand reaching down from the sky, and precious few of us are blessed with visions granted by Him. So does he not care for the majority of His subjects?’

‘They do not see the falsehood of such a belief. His hand lies upon all of us, and every one of us owes him our devotion. In the depths of the warp, the Emperor’s mighty soul does battle with the dark things that would break through and consume us all. On Terra, he creates wonders that will bring peace, enlightenment and the fruition of all our dreams to the galaxy. The Emperor guides us, teaches us, and exhorts us to become more than we are, but most of all, the Emperor protects.’

‘The Emperor protects,’ said the congregation in unison. ‘The faith of the Lectitio Divinitatus, the Divine Word of the Emperor, is not an easy path to follow. Where the

Imperial Truth is comforting in its rigorous rejection of the unseen and the unknown, the Divine Word requires the strength to believe in that which we cannot see. The longer we look upon this dark galaxy and live through the fires of its conquest, the more we realise that the Emperor's divinity is the only truth that can exist. We do not seek out the Divine Word; instead, we hear it, and are compelled to follow it. Faith is not a flag of allegiance or a theory for debate; it is something deep within us, complete and inevitable. The *Lectitio Divinitatus* is the expression of that faith, and only by acknowledging the Divine Word can we understand the path the Emperor has laid before mankind.'

Fine words, thought Sindermann: fine words, poorly delivered, but heartfelt. He could see that they had touched something deep inside those who heard it. An orator of skill could sway entire worlds with such words and force of belief.

Before Cassar could continue, Sindermann heard sudden shouts coming from the maze of corridors that led into the chamber. He turned as a panicked woman hurled the door behind him open with a dull clang of metal. In her wake, Sindermann could hear the hard bangs of bolter rounds.

The congregation started in confusion, looking to Cassar for an explanation, but the man was as nonplussed as they were.

'They've found you,' yelled Sindermann, realising what was happening.

'Everyone, get out,' shouted Cassar. 'Scatter!'

Sindermann pushed his way through the panicking crowd to the front of the chamber and towards Cassar. Some members of the congregation were producing guns, and from their martial bearing, Sindermann guessed they were Imperial Army troopers. Some were clearly ship's crewmen, and Sindermann knew enough of religion to know that they would defend their faith with violence if they had to.

'Come on, iterator. It's time we got out of here,' said Cassar, dragging the venerable iterator towards one of the many access corridors that radiated from the chamber.

Seeing the worry on his face, Cassar said, 'Don't worry, Kyril, the Emperor protects.'

'I certainly hope so,' replied Sindermann breathlessly. Shots echoed from the ceiling and bright muzzle flashes strobed from the walls. Sindermann threw a glance over his shoulder and saw the bulky, armoured form of Astartes entering the chamber. His heart skipped a beat at the thought of being the enemy of such warriors. Sindermann hurriedly followed Cassar into the access corridor and through a set of blast doors, their path twisting through the depths of the ship. The Vengeful Spirit was an immense vessel and he had no idea of the layout of this area, its walls grim and industrial compared to the magnificence of the upper decks.

'Do you know where you are going?' wheezed Sindermann, his breath coming in hot, agonised spikes and his ancient limbs already tiring from exertion he was scarcely used to.



‘Engineering,’ said Cassar. ‘It’s like a maze down there and we have friends in the engine crew. Damn, why can’t they just let us be?’

‘Because they are scared of you,’ said Sindermann, ‘just like I was.’

‘And you are certain of this?’ asked Horus, Primarch of the Sons of Horus Legion and Warmaster of the Imperium, his voice echoing around the cavernous strategium of the Vengeful Spirit.

‘As certain as I can be,’ said Ing Mae Sing, the 63rd Expedition’s Mistress of Astropaths. Her face was lined and drawn and her blind eyes were sunken within ravaged eye sockets. The demands of sending hundreds of telepathic communications across the galaxy weighed heavily on her skeletal frame. Astropathic acolytes gathered about her, robed in the same ghostly white as she and wordlessly whispering muttered doggerel of the ghostly images in their heads.

‘How long do we have?’ asked Horus.

‘As with all things connected with the warp, it is difficult to be precise,’ replied Ing Mae Sing.

‘Mistress Sing,’ said Horus coldly, ‘precision is exactly what I need from you, now more than ever. The direction of the Crusade will change dramatically at this news, and if you are wrong it will change for the worse.’

‘My lord, I cannot give you an exact answer, but I believe that within days the gathering warp storms will obscure the Astronomican from us,’ replied Ing Mae Sing, ignoring the Warmaster’s implicit threat. Though she could not see them, she could feel the hostile

presence of the Justaerin warriors, the Sons of Horus First Company Terminators, lurking in the shadows of the strategium. ‘Within days we shall hardly see it. Our minds can barely reach across the void and the Navigators claim that they will soon be unable to guide us true. The galaxy will be a place of night and darkness.’

Horus pounded a hand into his fist. ‘Do you understand what you say? Nothing more dangerous could happen to the Crusade.’

‘I merely state what I see, Warmaster.’

‘If you are wrong...’

The threat was not idle – no threat the Warmaster uttered ever was. There had been a time when the Warmaster’s anger would never have led to such an overt threat, but the violence in Horus’s tone suggested that such a time had long passed.

‘If we are wrong, we suffer. It has never been any different.’

‘And my brother primarchs? What news from them?’ asked Horus.

‘We have been unable to confirm contact with the blessed Sanguinius,’ replied Ing Mae Sing, ‘and Leman Russ has sent no word of his campaign against the Thousand Sons.’

Horus laughed, a harsh Cthonic bark, and said, ‘That doesn’t surprise me. The Wolf has his head and he’ll not easily be distracted from teaching Magnus a lesson. And the others?’

‘Vulkan and Dorn are returning to Terra. The other primarchs are pursuing their current campaigns.’

‘That is good at least,’ said Horus, brow furrowing in thought, ‘and what of the Fabricator General?’

‘Forgive me, Warmaster, but we have received nothing from Mars. We shall endeavour to make contact by mechanical means, but this will take many months.’

‘You have failed in this, Sing. Co-ordination with Mars is essential.’

Ing Mae Sing had telepathically broadcast a multitude of encoded messages between the Vengeful Spirit and Fabricator General Kelbor-Hal of the Mechanicum in the last few weeks. Although their substance was unknown to her, the emotions contained in them were all too clear. Whatever the Warmaster was planning, the Mechanicum was a key part of it.

Horus spoke again, distracting her from her thoughts.

‘The other primarchs, have they received their orders?’

‘They have, my lord,’ said Ing Mae Sing, unable to keep the unease from her voice.

‘The reply from Lord Guilliman of the Ultramarines was clean and strong. They are approaching the muster at Calth and report all forces are ready to depart.’

‘And Lorgar?’ asked Horus.

Ing Mae Sing paused, as if unsure how to phrase her next words.

‘His message had residual symbols of... pride and obedience; very strong, almost fanatical. He acknowledges your attack order and is making good speed to Calth.’

Ing Mae Sing prided herself on her immense self-control, as befitted one whose emotions had to be kept in check

lest they be changed by the influence of the warp, but even she could not keep some emotion from surfacing. ‘Something bothers you Mistress Sing?’ asked Horus, as though reading her mind.

‘My lord?’

‘You seem troubled by my orders.’

‘It is not my place to be troubled or otherwise, my lord,’ said Ing Mae Sing neutrally.

‘Correct,’ agreed Horus. ‘It is not, yet you doubt the wisdom of my course.’

‘No!’ cried Ing Mae Sing. ‘It is just that it is hard not to feel the nature of your communication, the weight of blood and death that each message is wreathed in. It is like breathing fiery smoke with every message we send.’

‘You must trust me, Mistress Sing,’ said Horus. ‘Trust that everything I do is for the good of the Imperium. Do you understand?’

‘It is not my place to understand,’ whispered the astropath. ‘My role in the Crusade is to do the will of my Warmaster.’

‘That is true, but before I dismiss you, Mistress Sing, tell me something.’

‘Yes, my lord?’

‘Tell me of Euphrati Keeler,’ said Horus. ‘Tell me of the one they are calling the saint.’

Loken still took Mersadie Oliton’s breath away. The Astartes were astonishing enough when arrayed for war in their burnished plate, but that sight had been nothing compared to what a Space Marine – specifically, Loken – looked like without his armour.

Stripped to the waist and wearing only pale fatigues and combat boots, Loken glistened with sweat as he ducked and wove between the combat appendages of a training servitor. Although few of the remembrancers had been privileged enough to witness an Astartes fight in battle, it was said that they could kill with their bare hands as effectively as they could with a bolter and chainsword. Watching Loken demolishing the servitor limb by limb, Mersadie could well believe it. She saw such power in his broad, over-muscled torso and such intense focus in his sharp grey eyes that she wondered that she was not repelled by Loken. He was a killing machine, created and trained to deal death, but she couldn't stop watching and blink-clicking images of his heroic physique. Kyril Sindermann sat next to her and leaned over, saying, 'Don't you have plenty of pict of Garviel already?'

Loken tore the head from the training servitor and turned to face them both, and Mersadie felt a thrill of anticipation. It had been too long since the conclusion of the war against the Technocracy and she had spent too few hours with the captain of the Tenth Company. As his documentarist, she knew that she had a paucity of material following that campaign, but Loken had kept himself to himself in the past few months.

'Kyril, Mersadie,' said Loken, marching past them towards his arming chamber. 'It is good to see you both.' 'I am glad to be here, Garviel,' said Sindermann. The primary iterator was an old man, and Mersadie was sure he had aged a great deal in the year since the fire that had nearly killed him in the Archive Halls of the Vengeful

Spirit. 'Very glad. Mersadie was kind enough to bring me. I have had a spell of exertion recently, and I am not as fit as once I was. Time's winged chariot draws near.'

'A quote?' asked Loken.

'A fragment,' replied Sindermann.

'I haven't seen much of either of you recently,' observed Loken, smiling down at her. 'Have I been replaced by a more interesting subject?'

'Not at all,' she replied, 'but it is becoming more and more difficult for us to move around the ship. The edict from Maloghurst, you must have heard of it.'

'I have,' agreed Loken, lifting a piece of armour and opening a tin of his ubiquitous lapping powder, 'though I haven't studied the particulars.'

The smell of the powder reminded Mersadie of happier times in this room, recording the tales of great triumphs and wondrous sights, but she cast off such thoughts of nostalgia.

'We are restricted to our own quarters and the Retreat. We need permission to be anywhere else.'

'Permission from whom?' asked Loken.

She shrugged. 'I'm not sure. The edict speaks of submitting requests to the Office of the Lupercal's Court, but no one's been able to get any kind of response from whatever that is.'

'That must be frustrating,' observed Loken and Mersadie felt her anger rise at such an obvious statement.

'Well of course it is! We can't record the Great Crusade if we can't interact with its warriors. We can barely even see them, let alone talk to them.'

'You made it here,' Loken pointed out.

‘Well, yes. Following you around has taught me how to keep a low profile, Captain Loken. It helps that you train on your own now.’

Mersadie caught the hurt look in Loken’s eye and instantly regretted her words. In previous times, Loken could often be found sparring with fellow officers, the smirking Sedirae, whose flinty dead eyes reminded Mersadie of an ocean predator, Nero Vipus or his Mournival brother, Tarik Torgaddon, but Loken fought alone now. By choice or by design, she did not know. ‘Anyway,’ continued Mersadie, ‘it’s getting bad for us. No one’s speaking to us. We don’t know what’s going on any more.’

‘We’re on a war footing,’ said Loken, putting down his armour and looking her straight in the eye. ‘The fleet is heading for a rendezvous. We’re joining up with Astartes from the other Legions. It’ll be a complex campaign. Perhaps the Warmaster is just taking precautions.’

‘No, Garviel,’ said Sindermann, ‘it’s more than just that, and I know you well enough to know that you don’t believe that either.’

‘Really?’ snarled Loken. ‘You think you know me that well?’

‘Well enough, Garviel,’ nodded Sindermann, ‘well enough. They’re cracking down on us, cracking down hard. Not so everyone can see it, but it’s happening. You know it too.’

‘Do I?’

‘Ignace Karkasy,’ said Mersadie.

Loken’s face crumpled and he looked away, unable to hide the grief he felt for the dead Karkasy, the irascible

poet who had been under his protection. Ignace Karkasy had been nothing but trouble and inconvenience, but he had also been a man who had dared to speak out and tell the unpalatable truths that needed to be told.

‘They say he killed himself,’ continued Sindermann, unwilling to let Loken’s grief dissuade him from his course, ‘but I’ve never known a man more convinced that the galaxy needed to hear what he had to say. He was angry at the massacre on the embarkation deck and he wrote about it. He was angry with a lot of things, and he wasn’t afraid to speak of them. Now he is dead, and he’s not the only one.’

‘Not the only one?’ asked Loken. ‘Who else?’

‘Petronella Vivar, that insufferable documentarist woman. They say she got closer to the Warmaster than anyone, and now she’s gone too, and I don’t think it was back to Terra.’

‘I remember her, but you are on thin ice, Kyril. You need to be very clear what you are suggesting.’

Sindermann did not flinch from Loken’s gaze and said, ‘I believe that those who oppose the will of the Warmaster are being killed.’

The iterator was a frail man, but Mersadie had never been more proud to know him as he stood unbending before a warrior of the Astartes and told him something he didn’t want to hear.

Sindermann paused, giving Loken ample time to refute his claims and remind them all that the Emperor had chosen Horus as the Warmaster because he alone could be trusted to uphold the Imperial Truth. Horus was the



man to whom every Son of Horus had pledged his life a hundred times over.

But Loken said nothing and Mersadie's heart sank. 'I have read of it more times than I can remember,' continued Sindermann. 'The Uranan Chronicles, for example. The first thing those tyrants did was to murder those who spoke out against their tyranny. The Overlords of the Yndonesic Dark Age did the same thing. Mark my words, the Age of Strife was made possible when the doubting voices fell silent, and now it is happening here.' 'You have always taught temperance, Kyril,' said Loken, 'weighing up arguments and never leaping past them into guesswork. We're at war and we have plenty of enemies already without you seeking to find new ones. It will be very dangerous for you and you may not like what you find. I do not wish to see you come to any harm, either of you.'

'Ha! Now you lecture me, Garviel,' sighed Sindermann. 'So much has changed. You're not just a warrior any more, are you?'

'And you are not just an iterator?'

'No, I suppose not,' nodded Sindermann. 'An iterator promulgates the Imperial Truth, does he not? He does not pick holes in it and spread rumours. But Karkasy is dead, and there are... other things.'

'What things?' asked Loken. 'You mean Keeler?'

'Perhaps,' said Sindermann, shaking his head. 'I don't know, but I feel she is part of it.'

'Part of what?'

'You heard what happened in the Archive Chamber?'

‘With Euphrati? Yes, there was a fire and she was badly hurt. She ended up in a coma.’

‘I was there,’ said Sindermann.

‘Kyril,’ said Mersadie, a note of warning in her voice.

‘Please, Mersadie,’ said Sindermann. ‘I know what I saw.’

‘What did you see?’ asked Loken.

‘Lies,’ replied Sindermann, his voice hushed. ‘Lies made real: a creature, something from the warp. Somehow Keeler and I brought it through the gates of the Empyrean with the Book of Lorgar. My own damn fault, too. It was... it was sorcery, the one thing that all these years I’ve been preaching is a lie, but it was real and standing before me as surely as I stand before you now. It should have killed us, but Euphrati stood against it and lived.’

‘How?’ asked Loken.

‘That’s the part where I run out of rational explanations, Garviel,’ shrugged Sindermann.

‘Well, what do you think happened?’

Sindermann exchanged a glance with Mersadie and she willed him not to say anything more, but the venerable iterator continued. ‘When you destroyed poor Jubal, it was with your guns, but Euphrati was unarmed. All she had was her faith: her faith in the Emperor. I... I think it was the light of the Emperor that cast the horror back to the warp.’

Hearing Kyril Sindermann talk of faith and the light of the Emperor was too much for Mersadie.

‘But Kyril,’ she said, ‘there must be another explanation. Even what happened to Jubal wasn’t beyond physical

possibilities. The Warmaster himself told Loken that the thing that took Jubal was some kind of xeno creature from the warp. I've listened to you teach about how minds have been twisted by magic and superstition and all the things that blind us to reality. That's what the Imperial Truth is. I can't believe that the Iterator Kyril Sindermann doesn't believe the Imperial Truth any more.'

'Believe, my dear?' said Sindermann, smiling bleakly and shaking his head. 'Maybe belief is the biggest lie. In ages past, the earliest philosophers tried to explain the stars in the sky and the world around them. One of them conceived of the notion that the universe was mounted on giant crystal spheres controlled by a giant machine, which explained the movements of the heavens. He was laughed at and told that such a machine would be so huge and noisy that everyone would hear it. He simply replied that we are born with that noise all around us, and that we are so used to hearing it that we cannot hear it at all.'

Mersadie sat beside the old man and wrapped her arms around him, surprised to find that he was shivering and his eyes were wet with tears.

'I'm starting to hear it, Garviel,' said Sindermann, his voice quavering. 'I can hear the music of the spheres.' Mersadie watched Loken's face as he stared at Sindermann, seeing the quality of intelligence and integrity Sindermann had recognised in him. The Astartes had been taught that superstition was the death of the Empire and only the Imperial Truth was a reality worth fighting for.

Now, before her very eyes, that was unravelling.

‘Varvarus was killed,’ said Loken at last, ‘deliberately, by one of our bolts.’

‘Hektor Varvarus? The Army commander?’ asked Mersadie. ‘I thought that was the Auretians?’

‘No,’ said Loken, ‘it was one of ours.’

‘Why?’ she asked.

‘He wanted us... I don’t know... hauled before a court martial, brought to task for the... killings on the embarkation deck. Maloghurst wouldn’t agree. Varvarus wouldn’t back down and now he is dead.’

‘Then it’s true,’ sighed Sindermann. ‘The naysayers are being silenced.’

‘There are still a few of us left,’ said Loken, quiet steel in his voice.

‘Then we do something about it, Garviel,’ said Sindermann. ‘We must find out what has been brought into the Legion and stop it. We can fight it, Loken. We have you, we have the truth and there is no reason why we cannot—’

The sound that cut off Sindermann’s voice was the door to the practice deck slamming open, followed by heavy metal-on-metal footsteps. Mersadie knew it was an Astartes even before the impossibly huge shadow fell over her. She turned to see the cursive form of Maloghurst behind her, robed in a cream tunic edged in sea green trim. The Warmaster’s equerry, Maloghurst was known as ‘the Twisted’, as much for his labyrinthine mind as the horrible injuries that had broken his body and left him grotesquely malformed.

His face was thunder and anger seemed to bleed from him.

‘Loken,’ he said, ‘these are civilians.’

‘Kyril Sindermann and Mersadie Oliton are official rememberers of the Great Crusade and I can vouch for them,’ said Loken, standing to face Maloghurst as an equal.

Maloghurst spoke with Horus’s authority and Mersadie marvelled at what it must take to stand up to such a man.

‘Perhaps you are unaware of the Warmaster’s edict, captain,’ said Maloghurst, the pleasant neutrality of his tone completely at odds with the tension that crackled between the two Astartes. ‘These clerks and notaries have caused enough trouble; you of all people should understand that. There are to be no distractions, Loken, and no exceptions.’

Loken stood face-to-face with Maloghurst and for one sickening moment, Mersadie thought he was about to strike the equerry.

‘We are all doing the work of the Great Crusade, Mal,’ said Loken tightly. ‘Without these men and women, it cannot be completed.’

‘Civilians do not fight, captain, they only question and complain. They can record everything they desire once the war has been won and they can spread the Imperial Truth once we have conquered a population that needs to hear it. Until then, they are not a part of this Crusade.’

‘No, Maloghurst,’ said Loken. ‘You’re wrong and you know it. The Emperor did not create the primarchs and the Legions so they could fight on in ignorance. He did

not set out to conquer the galaxy just for it to become another dictatorship.’

‘The Emperor,’ said Maloghurst, gesturing towards the door, ‘is a long way from here.’

A dozen soldiers marched into the training halls and Mersadie recognised uniforms of the Imperial Army, but saw that their badges of unit and rank had been removed.

With a start, she also recognised one face – the icy, golden-eyed features of Petronella Vivar’s bodyguard. She recalled that his name was Maggard, and was amazed at the sheer size of the man, his physique bulky and muscled beyond that of the army soldiers who accompanied him. The exposed flesh of his muscles bore freshly healing scars and his face displayed a nascent gigantism similar to Loken’s. He stood out amongst the uniformed Army soldiers, and his presence only lent credence to Sindermann’s wild theory that Petronella Vivar’s disappearance had nothing to do with her returning to Terra.

‘Take the iterator and the remembrancer back to their quarters,’ said Maloghurst. ‘Post guards and ensure that there are no more breaches.’

Maggard nodded and stepped forwards. Mersadie tried to avoid him, but he was quick and strong, grabbing her by the scruff of her neck and hauling her towards the door. Sindermann stood of his own accord and allowed himself to be led away by the other soldiers.

Maloghurst stood between Loken and the door. If Loken wanted to stop Maggard and his men, he would have to go through Maloghurst.

‘Captain Loken,’ called Sindermann as he was marched off the practice deck, ‘if you wish to understand more, read the Chronicles of Ursh again. There you will find illumination.’

Mersadie tried to look back. She could see Loken beyond Maloghurst’s robed form, looking like a caged animal ready to attack.

The door slammed shut, and Mersadie stopped struggling as Maggard led her and Sindermann back towards their quarters.

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