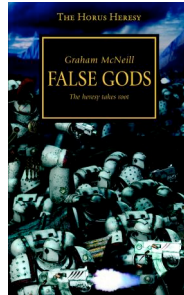


FALSE GODS

A Warhammer 40,000 Horus Heresy novel

By Graham McNeill

The Great Crusade that has taken humanity into the stars continues. The Emperor of Mankind has handed the reins of command to his favoured son, the Warmaster Horus. Yet all is not well in the armies of the Imperium. Horus is still battling against the jealousy and resentment of his brother primarchs and, when he is injured in combat on the planet Davin, he must also battle his inner daemons. With all the temptations that Chaos has to offer, can the weakened Horus resist? The epic tale of the Horus Heresy continues in the sequel to Horus Rising. The fate of the galaxy now rests in the simple choice of one man: loyalty or heresy?



About the Author

Hailing from Scotland, Graham McNeill narrowly escaped a career in surveying to join Games Workshop, where he worked as a games developer for six years. In addition to seven novels of carnage and mayhem, Graham has also written a host of short stories. He lives in Nottingham, UK.

More Horus Heresy from the Black Library

HORUS RISING

By Dan Abnett

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

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MERSADIE OLITON FORCED herself to watch the blade stab towards Loken, knowing that this strike must surely end his life. But, as always, he swayed aside from the lethal sweep with a speed that belied his massive Astartes frame, and raised his sword in time to block yet another stabbing cut. A heavy cudgel looped down at his head, but he had obviously anticipated the blow and ducked as it slashed over him.

The armatures of the practice cage clattered as the weapons swung, stabbed and slashed through the air, mindlessly seeking to dismember the massive Astartes warrior who fought within. Loken grunted, his hard-muscled body shining with a gleaming layer of sweat as a blade scored his upper arm, and Mersadie winced as a thin line of blood ran from his bicep.

As far as she could remember, it was the first time she had ever seen him wounded in the practice cages.

The smirking blond giant, Sedirae, and Loken's friend Vipus had long ago left the training halls, leaving her alone with the Captain of 10th Company. Flattered as she was that he'd asked her to watch him train, she soon found herself wishing that he would finish this punishing ritual so that they could talk about what had happened on Davin and the events that now led them to war on its moon. Sitting on the cold, iron benches outside the practice cages, she had already blink-clicked more images to store in her memory coils than she would ever need.

Moreover, if she was honest, the sheer... obsessiveness of Loken's desperate sparring was somehow unsettling. She had watched him spar before, but it had always been an adjunct to their

normal discussions, never the focus. This... this was something else. It was as though the Captain of the Luna Wolves—

No, not the Luna Wolves, she reminded herself: the Sons of Horus.

As Loken deflected yet another slashing blade, she checked her internal chronometer again and knew that she would have to leave soon. Karkasy wouldn't wait, his prodigious appetite outweighing any notion of courtesy towards her, and he would head for the Iterators' Luncheon in the ship's staterooms without her. There would be copious amounts of free wine there and, despite Ignace's newfound dedication to the cause of remembrance, she did not relish the thought of such a smorgasbord of alcohol landing in his path again.

She pushed thoughts of Karkasy aside as the hissing mechanical hemispheres of the sparring cage withdrew and a bell began chiming. Loken stepped from the cage, his fair hair, longer than she had seen it before, plastered to his scalp, and his lightly freckled face flushed with exertion.

'You're hurt,' she said, passing him a towel from the bench.

He looked down, as though unaware of the wound.

'It's nothing,' he said, wiping away the already clotted blood. His breathing came in short bursts and she tried to mask her surprise. To see an Astartes out of breath was utterly alien to her. How long had he been training before she had arrived in the halls?

Loken wiped the sweat from his face and upper body as he made his way to his personal arming chamber. Mersadie followed him and, as usual, could not help but admire the sheer physical perfection of his enhanced physique. The ancient tribes of the Olympian Hegemony were said to have called such specimens of physical perfection Adonian, and the word fit Loken like a masterfully crafted suit of Mark IV plate. Almost without thinking, Mersadie blink-clicked the image of his body.

'You're staring,' said Loken, without turning.

Momentarily flustered, she said, 'Sorry, I didn't mean—'

He laughed. 'I'm teasing. I don't mind. If I am to be remembered, I'd like it to be when I was at my peak rather than as a toothless old man drooling into my gruel.'

'I didn't realise Astartes aged,' she replied, regaining her composure.

Loken shrugged, picking up a carved vambrace and a polishing cloth. 'I don't know if we do either. None of us has ever lived long enough to find out.'

Her sense for things unsaid told her that she could use this angle in a chapter of her remembrances, if he would talk more on the subject. The melancholy of the immortal, or the paradox of an ageless being caught in the flux of constantly changing times – struggling flies in the clotting amber of history.

She realised she was getting ahead of herself and asked, 'Does that bother you, not getting old? Is there some part of you that wants to?'

'Why would I want to get old?' asked Loken, opening his tin of lapping powder and applying it to the vambrace, its new colour, a pale, greenish hued metallic still unfamiliar to her. 'Do you?'

'No,' she admitted, unconsciously reaching up to touch the smooth black skin of her hairless augmetic scalp. 'No, I don't. To be honest, it scares me. Does it scare you?'

'No. I've told you, I'm not built to feel like that. I am powerful now, strong. Why would I want to change that?'

'I don't know. I thought that if you aged maybe you'd be able to, you know, retire one day. Once the Crusade is over I mean.'

'Over?'

'Yes, once the fighting is done and the Emperor's realm is restored.'

Loken didn't answer immediately, instead continuing to polish his armour. She was about to ask the question again when he said, 'I don't know that it ever will be over, Mersadie. Since I joined the Mournival, I've spoken to a number of people who seem to think we'll never finish the Great Unification. Or if we do, that it won't last.'

She laughed. ‘Sounds like you’ve been spending too much time with Ignace. Has his poetry taken a turn for the maudlin again?’

He shook his head. ‘No.’

‘Then what is it? What makes you think like this? Those books you’ve been borrowing from Sindermann?’

‘No,’ repeated Loken, his pale grey eyes darkening at the mention of the venerable primary iterator, and she sensed that he would not be drawn any further on the subject. Instead, she stored this conversation away for another time, one when he might be more forthcoming on these uncharacteristically gloomy thoughts.

She decided to ask another question and steer the conversation in a more upbeat direction, when a looming shadow fell over the pair of them and she turned to see the massive, slab-like form of First Captain Abaddon towering over her.

As usual, his long hair was pulled up in its silver-sheathed topknot, the rest of his scalp shaved bare. The captain of the First Company of the Sons of Horus was dressed in simple sparring fatigues and carried a monstrous sword with a toothed edge.

He glared disapprovingly at Mersadie.

‘First Captain Abaddon—’ she began, bowing her head, but he cut her off.

‘You bleed?’ said Abaddon and took Loken’s arm in his powerful grip, the sonorous tone of his voice only accentuating his massive bulk. ‘The sparring machine drew Astartes blood?’

Loken glanced at the bulging muscle where the blade had cut across the black, double-headed eagle tattoo there. ‘Yes, Ezekyle, it was a long session and I was getting tired. It’s nothing.’

Abaddon grunted and said, ‘You’re getting soft, Loken. Perhaps if you spent more time in the company of warriors than troublesome poets and inquisitive scribes you’d be less inclined to such tiredness.’

‘Perhaps,’ agreed Loken, and Mersadie could sense the crackling tension between the two Astartes. Abaddon nodded curtly to Loken and gave her a last, barbed glance before turning away to the sparring cages, his sword buzzing into throaty life.

Mersadie watched Loken's eyes as they followed Abaddon, and saw something she never expected to see there: wariness.

'What was all that about?' she asked. 'Did it have anything to do with what happened on Davin?'

Loken shrugged. 'I can't say.'

DAVIN. THE MELANCHOLY ruins scattered throughout its deserts told of its once civilised culture, but the anarchy of Old Night had destroyed whatever society had once prospered many centuries before. Now Davin was a feral world swept by hot, arid winds and baking under the baleful red eye of a sun. It had been six decades since Loken had last set foot on Davin, though back then it had been known as Sixty-Three Eight, being the eighth world brought into compliance by the 63rd Expeditionary force.

Compliance had not improved it much in his opinion.

Its surface was hard, baked clay clumped with scrubby vegetation and forests of tall, powerfully scented trees. Habitation was limited to primitive townships along the fertile river valleys, though there were many nomadic tribes that made their lonely way across the mighty, serpent-infested deserts.

Loken well remembered the battles they'd fought to bring this world into compliance, short sharp conflicts with the autochthonic warrior castes who made war upon one another, and whose internecine conflicts had almost wiped them out. Though outnumbered and hopelessly outclassed, they had fought with great courage, before offering their surrender after doing all that honour demanded.

The Luna Wolves had been impressed by their courage and willingness to accept the new order of their society and the commander – not yet the Warmaster – had decreed that his warriors could learn much from these brave opponents.

Though the tribesmen were separated from the human genome by millennia of isolation, and shared few physical traits with the settlers that came after the Astartes, Horus had allowed the feral

tribesmen to remain, in light of their enthusiastic embracing of the Imperial way of life.

Iterators and remembrancers had not yet become an official part of the Crusade fleets, but the civilians and scholars who hung on the coattails of the expeditionary forces moved amongst the populace and promulgated the glory and truth of the Imperium. They had been welcomed with open arms, thanks largely to the dutiful work undertaken by the chaplains of the XVII Legion, the Word Bearers, in the wake of the conquest.

It had been a good war; won rapidly and, for the Luna Wolves, bloodlessly. The defeated foe was brought into compliance quickly and efficiently, allowing the commander to leave Kor-Phaeron of the Word Bearers to complete the task of bringing the light of truth and enlightenment to Davin.

Yes, it had been a good war, or so he had thought.

Sweat trickled down the back of his head and ran down the inside of his armour, its greenish, metallic sheen still new and startling to him, even though it had been months since he had repainted it. He could have left the job to one of the Legion's many artificers, but had known on some bone-deep level that he must look to his battle gear himself, and thus had painstakingly repainted each armoured segment single-handedly. He missed the pristine gleam of his white plate, but the Warmaster had decreed that the new colour be adopted to accompany the Legion's new name: the Sons of Horus.

Loken remembered the cheers and the cries of adoration laid at the feet of the Warmaster as his announcement had spread through the Expedition. Fists punched the air and throats were shouted hoarse with jubilation. Loken had joined in with the rest of his friends, but a ripple of unease had passed through him upon hearing his beloved Legion's new name.

Torgaddon, ever the joker, had noticed the momentary shadow pass over his face and said, 'What's the matter, you wanted it to be the Sons of Loken?'

Loken had smiled and said, 'No, it's just—'

‘Just what? Don’t we deserve this? Hasn’t the commander earned this honour?’

‘Of course, Tarik,’ nodded Loken, shouting to be heard over the deafening roar of the Legion’s cheers. ‘More than anyone, he has earned it, but don’t you think the name carries a whiff of self aggrandisement to it?’

‘Self aggrandisement?’ laughed Torgaddon. ‘Those remembrancers that follow you around like whipped dogs must be teaching you new words. Come on, enjoy this and don’t be such a starch arse!’

Tarik’s enthusiasm had been contagious and Loken had found himself once again cheering until his throat was raw.

He could almost feel that rawness again as he took a deep breath of the sour, acrid winds of Davin that blew from the far north, wishing he could be anywhere else right now. It was not a world without beauty, but Loken did not like Davin, though he could not say what exactly bothered him about it. A sour unease had settled in his belly on the journey from Xenobia to Davin, but he had pushed it from his thoughts as he marched ahead of the commander onto the planet’s surface.

To someone from the nightmarish, industrial caverns of Cthonia, Loken could not deny that Davin’s wide-open spaces were intoxicatingly beautiful. To the west of them, soaring mountain peaks seemed to scrape the stars and further north, Loken knew that there were valleys that plumbed the very depths of the earth, and fantastical tombs of ancient kings.

Yes, they had waged a good war on Davin.

Why then had the Word Bearers brought them here again?

Some hours before, on the bridge of the Vengeful Spirit, Maloghurst had activated the data-slate he held in his twisted claw of a hand; the skin fused and wet pink, despite the best efforts of the Legion apothecaries to restore it. He had scanned the contents of the communiqué within the slate once more, angry at the turn of phrase used by the petitioner.

He did not relish the prospect of showing the message to the Warmaster and briefly wondered if he could ignore it or pretend the missive had never come before him, but Maloghurst had not risen to become the Warmaster's equerry by insulating him from bad news. He sighed; these days the words of bland administrators carried the weight of the Emperor and, as much as Maloghurst wanted to, he could not ignore this message in particular.

The Warmaster would never agree to it, but Maloghurst had to tell him. In a moment of weakness, Maloghurst turned and limped across the Strategium deck towards the Warmaster's sanctum chamber. He would leave the slate on the Warmaster's table, for him to find in his own time.

The sanctum doors slid smoothly aside, revealing the dark and peaceful interior.

Maloghurst enjoyed the solitude of the sanctum, the coolness of the air easing the pain of his raw skin and twisted spine. The only sound that broke the stillness of the sanctum was the breath rasping in his throat, the abnormal rearward curvature of his spine placing undue pressure on his lungs.

Maloghurst shuffled painfully along the length of the smooth surfaced oval table, reaching out to place the slate at its head, where the Warmaster sat.

It has been too long since the Mournival gathered here, thought Maloghurst.

'Evening, Mal,' said a voice from the shadows, sombre and tired.

Maloghurst turned in surprise towards the source of the voice, dropping the slate to the table, ready to rebuke whoever had seen fit to violate the Warmaster's sanctum. A shape resolved out of the darkness and he relaxed as he saw the familiar features of the commander, eerily red-lit from below by the light of his gorget.

Fully armoured in his battle plate, the Warmaster sat at the back of the darkened sanctum, his elbows resting on his knees and his head held in his hands.

'My lord,' said Maloghurst. 'Is everything alright?'

Horus stared at the terrazzo-tiled floor of the sanctum and rubbed the heels of his palms across his shaved skull. His noble, tanned face and wide spaced eyes were deep in shadow and Maloghurst waited patiently for the Warmaster's answer.

'I don't know anymore, Mal,' said Horus.

Maloghurst felt a shiver travel down his ruined spine at the Warmaster's words. Surely, he had misheard. To imagine that the Warmaster did not know something was inconceivable.

'Do you trust me?' asked Horus suddenly.

'Of course, sir,' answered Maloghurst without pause.

'Then what do you leave here for me that you don't dare bring me directly?' asked Horus, moving to the table and lifting the fallen data-slate.

Maloghurst hesitated. 'Another burden you do not need, my lord. A remembrancer from Terra, one with friends in high places it would seem: the Sigillite for one.'

'Petronella Vivar of House Carpinus,' said Horus, reading the contents of the slate. 'I know of her family. Her ancestors chronicled my father's rise, back in the days before Unification.'

'What she demands,' spat Maloghurst, 'is ridiculous.'

'Is it, Maloghurst? Am I so insignificant that I don't require remembrance?'

Maloghurst was shocked. 'Sir, what are you talking about? You are the Warmaster, chosen by the Emperor, beloved by all, to be his regent in this great endeavour. The remembrancers of this fleet may record every fact they witness, but without you, they are nothing. Without you, all of it is meaningless. You are above all men.'

'Above all men,' chuckled Horus. 'I like the sound of that. All I've ever wanted to do was to lead this Crusade to victory and complete the work my father left me.'

'You are an example to us all, sir,' said Maloghurst, proudly.

'I suppose that's all a man can hope for during his lifetime,' nodded Horus, 'to set an example, and when he is dead, to be an inspiration for history. Perhaps she will help me with that noble ideal.'

‘Dead? You are a god amongst men, sir: immortal and beloved by all.’

‘I know!’ shouted Horus, and Maloghurst recoiled before his sudden, volcanic rage. ‘Surely the Emperor would not have created such a being as me, with the ability to grasp the infinite, to exist only for this short span! You’re right, Mal, you and Erebus both. My father made me for immortality and the galaxy should know of me. Ten thousand years from now I want my name to be known all across the heavens.’

Maloghurst nodded, the Warmaster’s furious conviction intoxicating, and dropped painfully to one knee in supplication.

‘What would you have me do, my lord?’

‘Tell this Petronella Vivar that she may have her audience, but it must be now,’ said Horus, his fearsome outburst quite forgotten, ‘and tell her that if she impresses me, I will allow her to be my personal documentarist for as long as she desires it.’

‘Are you sure about this, sir?’

‘I am, my friend,’ smiled Horus. ‘Now get up off your knees, I know it pains you.’

Horus helped Maloghurst rise to his feet and gently placed his armoured gauntlet on his equerry’s shoulder.

‘Will you follow me, Mal?’ asked the Warmaster. ‘No matter what occurs?’

‘You are my lord and master, sir,’ swore Maloghurst. ‘I will follow you until the galaxy burns and the stars themselves go out.’

‘That’s all I ask, my friend,’ smiled Horus. ‘Now let’s get ready to see what Erebus has to say for himself. Davin, eh? Who’d have thought we’d ever be back here?’

Two hours after making planetfall on Davin.

The communication from Erebus of the Word Bearers that had brought the 63rd Expedition to Davin had spoken of an old tally, the settling of a dispute, but had said nothing of its cause or participants.

After the carnage on Murder and the desperate extraction from the Extranus, Loken had expected a warzone of unremitting ferocity,

but this warzone, if indeed it could be called that, was deathly quiet, hot and... peaceful.

He didn't know whether to be disappointed or relieved.

Horus had come to the same conclusion not long after they had landed, sniffing the air of Davin with a look of recognition.

'There is no war here,' he had said.

'No war?' Abaddon had asked. 'How can you tell?'

'You learn, Ezekyle,' said Horus. 'The smell of burnt meat and metal, the fear and the blood. There is none of that on this world.'

'Then why are we here?' asked Aximand, reaching up to lift his plumed helmet clear of his head.

'It would seem we are here because we have been summoned,' replied Horus, his tone darkening, and Loken had not liked the sound of the word 'summoned' coming from the Warmaster's lips.

Who would dare to summon the Warmaster?

The answer had come when a column of dust grew on the eastern horizon and eight boxy, tracked vehicles rumbled across the steppe towards them. Shadowed by the Stormbirds that had flown in with the Warmaster, the dark, brushed steel vehicles trailed guidons from their vox-antenna, emblazoned with the heraldry of an Astartes Legion.

From the lead Rhino, a great, devotional trophy rack stood proud of the armoured glacis, hung with golden eagles and books, and sporting jagged lightning bolts picked out in lapis lazuli.

'Erebus,' spat Loken.

'Hold your tongue,' warned Horus as the Rhinos had drawn closer, 'and let me do the talking.'

BIZARRELY, THE YURT smelled of apples, although Ignace Karkasy could see no fruit in any of the carved wooden trays, just heaped cuts of meat that looked a little on the raw side for his epicurean palate. He could swear he smelled apples. He glanced around the interior of the yurt, wondering if perhaps there was some local brew of cider on offer. A hairy-faced local with impenetrable black eyes had already offered him a shallow bowl of the local liquor, a foul-

looking brew that smelled like curdled milk, but after catching a pointed glance from Euphrati Keeler he'd politely declined.

Like the drink, the yurt was crude, but had a primitive majesty to it that appealed to the romantic in him, though he was savvy enough to know that primitive was all very well and good unless you had to live there. Perhaps a hundred people filled the yurt – army officers, strategium adepts, a few remembrancers, scribes and military aides.

All come for the commander's War Council.

Casting his gaze around the smoky interior, Karkasy had seen that he was in illustrious company indeed: Hektor Varvarus, Lord Commander of the Army, stood next to a hunched Astartes giant swathed in cream coloured robes who Karkasy knew must be the Warmaster's equerry, Maloghurst.

An unsmiling figure in the black uniform of a Titan commander stood to attention at the forefront of the gathering, and Karkasy recognised the jowly features of Princeps Esau Turnet, commander of the Emperor Titan, Dies Irae. Turnet's Titan had led the armada of enormous battle machines into the heart of the megarachnid territory on Murder and had earned the Legio Mortis the lion's share of the glory.

Karkasy remembered the huge Titan that towered over the architectural presentation that Peeter Egon Momus had given back on Sixty-Three Nineteen, and shivered. Even motionless, it had provoked an intense reaction in him, and the thought of such incredible destructive power being unleashed didn't bear thinking about.

The hissing collection of silver struts and whirling cogs that encased scraps of flesh in a vaguely humanoid form must be the Mechanicum adept, Regulus, and Karkasy saw enough brass and medals hanging from puffed out, uniformed chests to equip a battalion.

Despite the presence of such luminaries, Karkasy found himself stifling a yawn as he and the rest of the audience listened to the Davinite lodge master, Tsi Rekh, performing an elaborate chant in the local tongue. As interesting as it had been to see the bizarre,

almost-human locals, Karkasy knew that simply bearing witness to this interminable ceremony of welcome couldn't be the reason why Captain Loken had authorised his presence at the War Council.

A bland faced iterator named Yelten translated the lodge priest's speech into Imperial Gothic, the precisely modulated timbre of his voice carrying the words to the very edges of the yurt.

Say what you like about the iterators, thought Karkasy, they can certainly enunciate to the back row.

'How much longer is this going to go on for?' whispered Euphrati Keeler, leaning towards him. Dressed in her ubiquitous combat fatigues, chunky army boots and tight white vest top, Keeler looked every inch the spunky frontierswoman. 'When is the Warmaster going to get here?'

'No idea,' said Ignace, sneaking a look down her cleavage. A thin silver chain hung around her neck, whatever was hanging on it, hidden beneath the fabric of her top.

'My face is up here, Ignace,' said Euphrati.

'I know, my dear Euphrati,' he said, 'but I'm terribly bored now and this view is much more to my liking.'

'Give it up, Ignace, it's never going to happen.'

He shrugged. 'I know, but it is a pleasant fiction, my dear, and the sheer impossibility of a quest is no reason to abandon it.'

She smiled, and Ignace knew that he was probably a little in love with Euphrati Keeler, though the time since the xeno beast had attacked her in the Whisperheads had been hard for her, and to be honest, he was surprised to see her here. She'd lost weight and wore her blonde hair scraped back in a tight ponytail, still beautifully feminine, despite her best attempts to disguise the fact. He'd once written an epic poem for the marchioness Xorianne Delaquis, one of the supposed great beauties of the Terran court – a despicable commission that he'd loathed, but one that had paid handsomely – but her beauty was artificial and hollow compared to the vitality he now saw in Keeler's face, like someone born anew.

Well out of his league, he knew, what with his generously proportioned physique, hand-dog eyes and plain, round face; but his

looks had never deterred Ignace Karkasy from attempting to seduce beautiful women – they just made it more of a challenge.

He had made some conquests by riding the adulation for his earlier work, Reflections and Odes garnering him several notable carnal tales, while other, more easily impressed members of the opposite sex had been seduced by his witty badinage.

He already knew that Euphrati Keeler was too smart to fall for such obvious flattery, and contented himself with counting her simply as a friend. He smiled as he realised that he didn't think he'd ever had a woman as a friend before.

'To answer your question seriously, my dear,' he said. 'I hope the Warmaster will be here soon. My mouth's as dry as a Tallarn's sandal and I could use a bloody drink.'

'Ignace...' said Euphrati.

'Spare us from those of moral fibre,' he sighed. 'I didn't mean anything alcoholic, though I could fair sink a bottle of that swill they drank on Sixty-Three Nineteen right about now.'

'I thought you hated that wine,' said Keeler. 'You said it was tragic.'

'Ah, yes, but when you've been reduced to drinking the same vintage for months, it's surprising what you'll be willing to drink for a change.'

She smiled, placing her hand over whatever lay at the end of the chain around her neck and said, 'I'll pray for you, Ignace.'

He felt a flicker of surprise at her choice of words, and then saw an expression of rapt adoration settle over her as she raised her picter at something behind him. He turned to see the door flap of the yurt pushed aside and the massive bulk of an Astartes duck down as he entered. Karkasy did a slow double take as he saw that the warrior's shining plate armour was not that of the Sons of Horus, but was the carved granite grey of the Word Bearers. The warrior carried a staff crowned with a book draped in oath paper, over which wound a long sash of purple cloth. He had his helmet tucked into the crook of his arm, and seemed surprised to see all the remembrancers there.

Karkasy could see that the Astartes's wide-featured face was earnest and serious, his skull shaved and covered with intricate scriptwork. One shoulder guard of his armour was draped in heavy parchment, rich with illuminated letters, while the other bore the distinctive icon of a book with a flame burning in its centre. Though he knew it symbolised enlightenment springing forth from the word, Karkasy instinctively disliked it.

It spoke to his poet's soul of the Death of Knowledge, a terrible time in the history of ancient Terra when madmen and demagogues burned books, libraries and wordsmiths for fear of the ideas they might spread with their artistry. By Karkasy's way of thinking, such symbols belonged to heathens and philistines, not Astartes charged with expanding the frontiers of knowledge, progress and enlightenment.

He smiled to himself at this delicious heresy, wondering if he could work it into a poem without Captain Loken realising, but even as the rebellious thought surfaced, he quashed it. Karkasy knew that his patron was showing his work to the increasingly reclusive Kyril Sindermann. For all his dreariness, Sindermann was no fool when it came to the medium, and he would surely spot any risqué references.

In that case, Karkasy would quickly find himself on the next bulk hauler on its way back to Terra, regardless of his Astartes sponsorship.

'So who's that?' he asked Keeler, returning his attention to the new arrival as Tsi Rekh stopped his chanting and bowed towards the newcomer. The warrior in turn raised his long staff in greeting.

Keeler gave him a sidelong glance, looking at him as though he had suddenly sprouted another head.

'Are you serious?' she hissed.

'Never more so, my dear, who is he?'

'That,' she said proudly, snapping off another pict of the Astartes warrior, 'is Erebus, First Chaplain of the Word Bearers.'

And suddenly, with complete clarity, Ignace Karkasy knew why Captain Loken had wanted him here.

Stepping onto the dusty hardpan of Davin, Karkasy had been reminded of the oppressive heat of Sixty-Three Nineteen. Moving clear of the propwash of the shuttle's atmospheric rotors, he'd half run, half stumbled from beneath its deafening roar with his exquisitely tailored robes flapping around him.

Captain Loken had been waiting for him, resplendent in his armour of pale green and apparently untroubled by the heat or the swirling vortices of dust.

'Thank you for coming at such short notice, Ignace.'

'Not at all, sir,' said Karkasy, shouting over the noise of the shuttle's engines as it lifted off the ground. 'I'm honoured, and not a little surprised, if I'm honest.'

'Don't be. I told you I wanted someone familiar with the truth, didn't I?'

'Yes, sir, indeed you did, sir,' beamed Karkasy. 'Is that why I'm here now?'

'In a manner of speaking,' agreed Loken. 'You're an inveterate talker, Ignace, but today I need you to listen. Do you understand me?'

'I think so. What do you want me to listen to?'

'Not what, but who.'

'Very well. Who do you want me to listen to?'

'Someone I don't trust,' said Loken.

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