



WARHAMMER
40,000

DAN ABNETT

THE KEELER IMAGE

AN EISENHORN STORY



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THE KEELER IMAGE

Dan Abnett

Medonae the Eater, so called because of his appetites, had declared an auction, and word of this sale brought dealers and speculators from across the subsector, despite the isolation of his home.

An item in the catalogue drew my attention. I sent an agent in advance to confirm the provenance, and when word came back to me that it seemed authentic, I made arrangements to attend the sale in person.

Medonae the Eater dwelt on a war-burned rock called Pallik. Its orbit and revolutions blessed Pallik with a complex and irregular pattern of days and nights, some long, some short, some bright, some dim, which had led to the publication of various thick zodiacs and ephemeris tracts. I was not much bothered with learning the names and durations of the day-night cycle. All I knew was that I should avoid the long and formidable ‘burnday’, a periodic event when all three suns rose together.

Many of those attending the auction arrived by cutter and orbital boat, setting down in the bleak flats of the desert outside the sloping walls of Medonae’s palace. Others came into the local city, Baryt Prime, and then hired caravans to trek them out to the palace, four hundred miles beyond the city gates. Caravans made the trip almost daily, laden with goods from the city’s produce markets, such as Medonae’s appetite.

I set down on a mesa three miles from the palace, and made the way on foot. It was a lowday, when only the second sun made an appearance in the heavens, and then only for a brief interval of six and a half standard hours.

It was cold and dry. Through my glare shields, the sky was a deep, rich blue and the sun a white ball that cast lens flare when I turned my head. Light glinted on the hulls of shuttles and cutters parked on their landing frames on the desert

floor. I saw the thin dust plume of a caravan procession ten miles out.

The palace was of fair size. It was all that remained of a city that had been levelled by war. Portions of it sloped away into the desert sands in litters of rubble, suggesting that a great deal more of the ancient habitation lay below ground, or was at least buried in the bosom of history.

Sentinels at the gatehouse watched me approach.

‘You come to Medonae?’ asked one, his voice a vox-hiss through his rebreather mask. Both of them were dressed in plate and body gear that had once been *Astra Militarium* issue, now repainted in the bright colours of a circus.

‘I do,’ I replied.

‘Your name?’

‘Gregor Eisenhorn,’ I replied. I saw no reason to lie.

‘And your standing?’

I showed them my Inquisitorial rosette.

Neither blanched.

‘Have you come to purge us, sir?’ one of them laughed.

‘I don’t know,’ I answered. ‘Has anyone here denied the sanctity of the Throne?’

‘Not us,’ chuckled the other. ‘We are all obedient to Holy Terra here, all of us.’

‘Then my business is purely to bid and buy,’ I said.

I was admitted.

The entry halls of the palace were busy with visitors. Each one, it seemed, had brought an ample entourage. Medonae’s servitors were conveying trays of food and drink from the kitchens, each new dish announced by a liveried chamberlain who declared the name of the delicacy as though it were another guest at the proceedings. I was offered a flask of water – a ritual gift for any traveller arriving out of the desert – which I took, and a beaker of wine that I did not. Various lots from the forthcoming sale had been set on display throughout the halls so that they could be viewed. I saw prayer wheels from the Long Graves of Thracian, diadems from the Slave Worlds, a fine bust of Saint Kiodrus still in its satin-lined box, and a good oil of Guilliman, done by Manxis of Eustis Majoris, or so the ticket stated. The composition was well enough, but the brushwork lacked the finesse of Manxis himself. I thought that, most likely, it was a copy or the work of his school.

I was admiring it when a voice at my shoulder said, ‘I know why you’re here.’

I turned.

‘I am Medonae,’ the man said. He was tall, slender, smiling, dressed in a green

bodyglove and half-cloak. He wore what might be described as too much jewellery, including a tiara of pearl and crystal.

‘You are Medonae?’

‘I am, in fact, his mouth,’ the man said. His smile was alarmingly broad. ‘He speaks through me, and I conduct his business.’

‘You are his proxy, or an avatar?’ I asked.

‘An avatar,’ he replied. The tiara and the rings, I realised, were part of a more extensive suite of telekine systems that allowed Medonae to puppet the man and operate through him.

‘You are Gregor Eisenhorn,’ he said, ‘of the ordos.’

‘I am.’

‘Your reputation precedes you. There can be only one item in this sale that would attract an individual such as yourself. Would you like to see it?’

He led me to a side chapel. The lowday sun fell pale through the bars of the tall windows. The object stood on a pedestal, protected by light screens. It was a vitreous plate milled in plastek, about a third of a metre square.

‘Magnificent, isn’t it, sir?’ Medonae’s mouth said.

It was the most appalling thing I had ever seen.

Exquisite.

‘I’ll leave you to enjoy it,’ he said.

I wasn’t alone in the room. Several other visitors were viewing the piece. One was a hard-set man with extensive augmetic optics sutured into his skull.

‘Quite a thing,’ he mused.

‘Indeed,’ I replied.

‘Genuine,’ he added. His optics whirred. ‘I can gauge the age of the glass, the plastek sheath. The format of the plate matches the kind she was known to use. A miracle beyond measure that something so fragile could have survived so long, when so much else perished.’

‘Truly,’ I agreed.

‘But even more,’ he went on, ‘the image itself. The composition. She had an extraordinary eye as a remembrancer. I doubt any soul in the Imperium has ever matched her skill at the capture of pictis.’

‘This they say of her,’ I said. ‘An exceptional gift. Which is why she was chosen, of course, for the expedition.’

‘To think,’ he sighed, ‘that someone had that kind of superlative talent, beyond any before or since, and yet that is *still* not the thing she is most famous for.’

He looked at me. His optics clicked and buzzed.

‘What do you think?’ he asked. ‘Do you think the most incredible thing about it is that it is an original pict, made ten thousand years ago, by the hallowed founder of the Imperial truth? Or that it is a pict of Horus Lupercal?’

‘I think the most incredible thing about it,’ I replied, ‘is that it is sitting on sale here and not sequestered in a vault on far-off Terra.’

Euphrati Keeler was a remembrancer. In the last years of the Great Crusade, armed with a good eye and a picter, she had been appointed to the 63rd Expeditionary Force, to observe and record the operation of the Luna Wolves. Her work was remarkable. Her fame spread. The Warmaster himself regarded her with favour. In that distant age, the God-Emperor had decreed that the operation of the Imperium should be documented by artists and historians to make a chronicle of the foundation of the Age of Man. Such had been the mindset then: that the great work of engineering a civilisation should be honestly, freely and independently recorded.

That does not sound like the Emperor I know.

Such freedom ended, of course, in the atrocities that followed, in the years of bloodshed we now call the Heresy War. Keeler was present on the ground at the start of it. She was a witness to the first acts of bloodshed. She stood in time at the zero point where history turned a corner, and she did so with a picter in her hand, capturing that transformation.

Her story did not end there. She so easily might have been one of the trillions extinguished in the fires that followed. Her name is not commonly known today... except that it *is*, as Saint Euphrati. She was blessed with divine grace and gifts, and from her – and those few close to her in those bleak years – the essence of the Imperial Creed was born. She was one of the first saints. From her, and those disciples around her, arose the tenets of the Lectitio Divinitatus, the truth of us all, that the Emperor of Mankind is not a man, but a god. It is through her that the truth was recognised. It was in her that our faith was born.

The man with the optics was called Sejan Karyl. We returned to the main halls and sat together, talking of what we had seen.

‘The pict itself isn’t the prize, you know?’ he said.

‘It is beyond value,’ I said. ‘An image of Lupercal, in life, before he fell. The beauty and strength of his visage speaks to the depth of the catastrophe that occurred.’

‘Some might say that none should look upon it, ever,’ he said.

‘Who might say that?’

‘The Inquisition,’ he replied, ‘of which, I hear, you are a part.’

‘I believe it should be seen,’ I said. ‘As a warning – to show how even the greatest perfection can be blackened... To refresh our determination to guard against the dark.’

He shrugged.

‘If,’ he said, ‘it is Horus *before* he fell.’

‘You think it after?’

‘Would that not be a stranger lesson? If that was his face *after* Chaos stole him? Chaos hides its nature well.’

‘You say it’s not the prize,’ I said, changing the subject.

‘According to the catalogue,’ he said, ‘it comes with notes. Some frail documents written in her hand, describing the image and the circumstances of its capture.’

‘You’ve seen them?’

Karyl shook his head.

‘They are reserved for the successful buyer alone. But I have heard of their contents.’

I had too, naturally. That was partly why I had come. It was said the notes were revelatory. That they showed, in Keeler’s own, authenticated script, that she considered Horus a man, not a transformed, daemonic being. Further, they related that it had been commonly known at the time that the Emperor denied his divinity. He had formally declared that he was not a god, and sought to suppress the notion that he was. The *Lectitio Divinitatus* was already growing back then. The notes showed that the Emperor wanted it proscribed and forbidden.

They showed that the Emperor did not believe himself to be a god. Keeler and her companion saints had created the foundation of Imperial faith *against* the Emperor’s express wishes.

That was a different kind of heresy, and I wasn’t sure if the heretic was Keeler or, somehow, the Emperor himself.

‘There’s no way to know the truth,’ I said.

‘The truth is in the writing,’ said Karyl.

‘The *danger*,’ I corrected him, ‘for truth is arbitrary. It’s what people will do with it that matters. If one, shall we say, stood against the Imperial truth, one might use a pict and manuscript from such an august and exceptional source as the basis for a new creed.’

‘To undermine the faith and deny the Emperor’s divinity?’

‘It is not reaching to imagine so.’

‘And that, I presume, is why the Inquisition is here... To seize the image and remove that possibility.’

‘I never said why I was here,’ I replied.

‘Not you.’

He nodded gently in the direction of a woman on the far side of the hall. She was talking with other guests.

‘Halanor Kurtecz,’ said Karyl. ‘Ordo Hereticus. So I am told.’

‘If the Ordo Hereticus wanted the Keeler image,’ I replied, ‘they would have stormed the palace, taken it, put all within to the sword, and levelled the site from orbit.’

‘Maybe,’ he said. ‘Unless they wanted to find out who was interested first, to observe the individuals a relic of this kind brings out of the woodwork.’

He was right. I had thought as much. The sale was private, but it was still bait of the first magnitude. From my seat, I could see at least six persons of interest from the ordo watch-lists: renegades, recidivists and heretics, lured into the open by the mouth-watering promise of a truly blasphemous artefact. If I had been in control of Ordo Hereticus operations, I would have stayed my hand, planted agents in the palace, and waited for the sale. Then, in one stroke, I would have taken possession of the heretical image, and also ended a dozen key enemies of the Imperium, possibly obtaining enough information, via torture and interrogation, to bring down most of the cult networks in the subsector.

In a way, that was why I had come. I didn’t want the Keeler image. I wanted to see it, but I had no desire to own it. It was too dangerous to exist. I had come to see who the offering of it might bring out.

One in particular.

And I was sure I had found her. Karyl, with his sharp, augmented eyes, had spotted her already. Halanor Kurtecz. She was no inquisitor. Sensor templating and psionic pattern recognition had registered enough positives: disguise, masking, juvenat treatments... They could all hide a lot.

But I was reasonably sure that Halanor Kurtecz was in fact the arch-heretic Lilean Chase.

The Cognitae, the oldest, greatest and most pernicious cult of Chaos in history, was present in the person of their legendary and elusive leader. Only something like the Keeler image of Horus Lupercal had the power to draw her out of hiding.

My long and bloody work was about to be completed.

Half an hour before the start of the sale, I was summoned to see Medonae.

He was in a private chamber. His mouth, all smiles as before, greeted me at the door and led me in.

Medonae the Eater had stopped being a functional human being many years ago. His appetite had got the better of him. His pallid, physical bulk, a pyramid of flesh that weighed over nine tons, was supported in a frame of suspensor pods and lifter bars. He no longer had discernible limbs. Gangs of slaves worked to massage oils into his flesh to keep it supple, a never-ending process, while trains of servitors carried in a ceaseless procession of foodstuffs that were fed to him by hovering cyberdrones high in the framework rigging.

It was hard to make out his actual face: just a small dot near the summit of the mountain of meat.

‘My dear Inquisitor Eisenhorn,’ he said, using his mouth. ‘I wanted a word. I have a feeling that today will not end well. I want your assurance that you will not seek to prosecute me.’

‘You have staged a sale, Medonae,’ I replied. ‘I know of no laws you have broken.’

‘Your assurance, please, sir.’

‘You have it. May I say, Medonae, that if you feel this auction will go badly, you should not have orchestrated it.’

‘I would not have,’ his mouth said, smiling. ‘I worked to arrange a private sale for the image. A private sale. But it was not to be.’

‘What do you mean?’ I asked. My psychic powers detected a slight tremor. Fear, perhaps, or trepidation. The infinitesimal artificial delay between Medonae’s thought process and its delivery by his mouth avatar gave me a window into his mind.

‘I decided an auction would be best,’ his mouth was saying.

I was forced to arrange this sale against my will, his mind was thinking.

I threw myself to the left.

Lasbeams, bright as a sun’s heart, scorched the ground where I had been standing.

Medonae had been coerced into this face-to-face meeting too. I cursed myself for not realising sooner that a man like Medonae the Eater, so ashamed of his physical state that he used an avatar for personal interaction, would never request to see anyone in person.

I rolled hard, incidentally knocking the mouth off his feet. The teeth of the trap were two cyberskulls, sweeping down from the high roofspace, their las kill-

systems cycling for a second shot. A beam scored the floor behind me. Another struck the mouth as he rose, cutting him clean through. He dropped again with a gasp, face down, spattering the tiles with the gore and internal organs released by his bisection.

High above, in the rigging, Medonae's real mouth wailed with pain from the psychic feedback.

I cut loose, unleashing my mind at the grinning cyberskulls that whizzed towards me. One fierce mental jab, and I blew out the auto-control mechanisms, freeing them from the psionic impulse that directed them. One plunged like a meteor into the ground and exploded. The other whistled over my shoulder at high speed, out of control, and smashed against the chamber wall.

Sparks showered down from Medonae the Eater's rigging. My jab had burned out Medonae's telekine array too.

Three men burst into the chamber. I recognised them as members of Halanor Kurtecz's entourage. They were heavysset, powerful, fast.

And psyk-shielded.

I went for my sidearm, but the first was on me. He had a hooked dagger, which I blocked. I rolled backwards, hurling him over me onto the floor. I was back on my feet before he was, and swept his legs out from under him.

Turning, I drew my Tronsvasse handgun and cut down the other two. The impact of the shots smashed both of them down hard.

The first man landed on my shoulders, his arm around my throat, bending me backwards. Only the wrist of my gun hand was stopping his dagger from plunging into my face. I threw an elbow, but it didn't connect. The man's strength was augmented. He was an engineered killer, a lifeward or a Cognitae murderform.

I have been crippled for decades. My feet, legs and lower back are sheathed in a heavy scaffold of metal calipers to allow me movement. I stamped backwards with one iron-shod boot and crushed the arch of the killer's left foot.

He snorted in agony. His grip slackened slightly, and I tried the elbow again.

As he reeled backwards, I swung around and struck him across the head with my Tronsvasse. He fell sideways, his skull cracked, blood squirting from his ear.

Shots tore past me. More members of the Kurtecz crew had rushed into the chamber. They were firing hard-round autopistols and las-snubs.

I fired back as I ran for cover, smashing through a row of startled onlookers: bemused servitors with their trays of fine food who had come to a standstill, order systems shut, and were watching the pandemonium unfold. I knocked two

clean over, and they fell, spilling their trays. Ambush fire from my would-be killers ripped into the line, dropping more of the confused slave-units. Plates smashed. Trays of gourmet food crashed to the ground.

My attackers fanned out across the room. My shots – snapped off between the milling, bewildered servitors – were driving Lilean Chase’s men into cover on the far side of Medonae’s mass. One of them had holstered his pistol and was deploying a rotator cannon from the pack on his back.

I ducked.

The raking fire ripped across the floor, chewed through the servitors, and demolished the tiled decoration of the wall. Chips of enamelled ceramics and glass from the ornate windows showered in all directions. I heard the cannon’s motor whining as the gunman changed munitions packs.

Shots screamed in from another angle. This was fire from a hellgun. The shots, placed with indecent accuracy, exploded brackets on the rigging that supported Medonae’s mass.

There was a long, ugly shriek of metal giving way, then the whole nine-tonne bulk of Medonae the Eater rolled sideways, hurling servitors and squealing slaves into the air.

Medonae rolled like a landslip and crushed the killers where they crouched in ambush.

One survived, broke free, and ran. Another hellgun shot detonated his head.

I rose, cautiously. The air smelled of smoke, blood, food and skin oil. Slaves were wailing, weeping, nursing broken limbs.

Harlon Nayl padded into view, his hellgun up to his cheek and ready to fire.

‘All right?’ he asked me.

‘Fine,’ I replied.

Nayl had been my advance agent.

‘I was wondering where you were,’ I said.

‘Keeping out of sight, like you told me,’ he said.

I looked at the tumbled mass of Medonae the Eater. He was alive, helpless, mewling. Slaves were struggling to right him before his own bodyweight compressed his organs into failure. The blood of Chase’s men seeped out from under him.

‘I gave him an assurance,’ I said.

‘I didn’t,’ said Nayl with a grin. He knelt beside his final kill, rolled the body over and fished something out of the man’s jacket. He showed me.

An Inquisitorial badge. Nayl raised his eyebrows significantly.

‘Cognitae, Harlon,’ I said, ‘posing as Ordo Hereticus.’

He shrugged.

‘We have to find Chase.’

‘You mean Kurtecz?’ he asked.

‘That’s the name she’s using.’

‘It’s really her?’

‘Seems so,’ I said. ‘I can’t believe we’ve finally got this close.’

‘Well, it’s been a jolly journey getting here,’ said Nayl. ‘The fun, the friendship. The journey’s more important than the destination, isn’t that what they say?’

I looked at him.

He sighed.

‘Just trying to lighten the mood,’ he said.

‘Chase will want the Keeler image,’ I said. ‘Come on.’

Death, gunfire and word that the Ordo Hereticus was cutting loose had caused panic in the palace. Guests and prospective buyers were fleeing with their entourages. Nayl and I pushed through the press of bodies and made for the side chapel where the image had been put on display.

Sejan Karyl was lifting the Keeler image off its stand. His hands were gloved. An armoured carry-casket lay open at his feet ready to receive it.

‘Helping yourself?’ I asked. I aimed my Tronsvasse at him.

Karyl smiled ruefully.

‘I think the sale is off,’ he said, ‘and this is something I am anxious to obtain.’

He laid the glass plate gently in the casket, then turned back to the display stand. Under the velvet cushion was a small packet. Keeler’s writings, the real prize.

‘I can’t let you take that,’ I said. ‘Halanor Kurtecz... Have you seen her?’

‘No,’ said Karyl. He was busy with the packet, opening the seal.

‘Leave that,’ I said. ‘Think carefully, Karyl. When did you last see Kurtecz?’

‘She fled, I think,’ he said. He smiled. ‘It’s funny... I never thought I’d be grateful to the Ordo Hereticus, but thanks to them, this is now mine.’

Nayl took a step towards him, his hellgun aimed.

‘My boss said put it down, so put it down. You’ve got some front. There are two guns trained on you and you *still* think you’re going to walk out of here with that?’

I glanced around. Karyl was confident in something. But what?

‘I should thank you too, I suppose,’ Karyl said to me. ‘But for you, the ordo

would not have driven this operation, and Kurtecz—’

‘She isn’t Ordo Hereticus. She isn’t Halanor Kurtecz,’ I said. ‘Her name is Lilean Chase.’

Karyl looked at me. An expression of delight filled his face.

‘Oh,’ he said, laughing. ‘I had thought so *highly* of you, but now I find you’re a dolt like all the rest. Lilean Chase? You’re so wrong, it’s hysterical.’

He opened the packet and began to read.

‘Delightful,’ he murmured. ‘Keeler is quite explicit. The Emperor is not a god. He disavows any effort to name him so. You see, here? She states that it was her encounter with daemons in the presence of Horus Lupercal that drove her to extremes of belief. If daemons exist, then to her a god must exist too. The universe could not be so cruel, otherwise. The existence of a god was necessary to counterbalance the horror of the warp. The Lectitio Divinitatus is based on a lie. Imperial faith is based upon fear. The “saint” admits it.’

‘Hand that to me,’ I said. ‘It is a deeply heretical text. It’s going nowhere.’

‘This?’ Karyl smiled, gesturing with the papers. ‘This is just the bonus prize, our reward for being patient today. It will make a nice addition to our library. It doesn’t tell us anything we didn’t already know.’

‘You are Cognitae,’ I said.

‘Yes, Gregor. Lilean sends her regards. She had hoped to meet you in person one day, given the years you’ve been searching for her. But she’s busy elsewhere. She sent me to collect this. *Your* road ends here.’

Nayl raised his hellgun and aimed it at the man’s head.

‘I don’t think you’re in much of a position to issue threats like that,’ he said.

‘I’m not,’ said Karyl. ‘Today... this sale, it was a sting operation. The Ordo Hereticus learned that Medonae had the image. They knew it would be an irresistible lure to heretic groups. They coerced him into announcing an auction rather than trying to sell it privately. They knew the Cognitae would send an agent to get it.’

He grinned.

‘That’s *me*, by the way.’

‘Halanor Kurtecz—’ I began.

‘Is an inquisitor,’ he replied. ‘Ordo Hereticus. She’s running this operation. This sale was bait for the prize *she’s* after.’

‘The Cognitae—’

‘Gods, *no!* A far *greater* heretic. The renegade psyker, the diabolus... Gregor Eisenhorn. This was all for your benefit, Gregor. *You* are the wanted man here.

Your ex-masters, the Ordo Hereticus, want you ended.'

From the halls behind me, I heard screams and the sound of weapons-fire. With Nayl covering Karyl, I went back to the chamber door to look.

Ordo Hereticus kill-teams were sweeping into Medonae's palace, slaughtering every living thing they could find. They had co-opted Tempestus Scions to do the bloodwork. I saw Inquisitor Kurtecz among the stormtroops, ordering them on, relaying messages to find me and detain me at all costs.

I had believed I was setting a trap for Chase and the wretched Cognitae, but in truth it was a trap set for me. I was impressed at the skill and flair with which Kurtecz and her colleagues had lured me out of hiding.

I was horrified to see, now more clearly than ever, how much of an outcast I had become. To the Ordo Hereticus, I was as abominable as the Cognitae.

Today, the Cognitae were but a footnote, and Chase had used her opportunist cunning to lift a great treasure while the ordo and I kept each other busy.

I had been outplayed by both sides: the Cognitae *and* my former masters.

I felt sick. The ordos were blind if they could not distinguish between me and a threat as malevolent as the Cognitae cult. I had been right to cut my ties and continue my work alone. That knowledge gave me some small comfort.

Harlon cried out. I turned to find him knocked to the ground. Karyl had the sealed carry-casket in his hand, and was aiming a lasgun at Nayl.

Impressive. It took a lot to outsmart Harlon Nayl, especially when he had a gun to your head.

'I'll be leaving now, Gregor,' said Karyl.

I shot at him. My blasts withered in mid-air. Karyl – or whatever his true name was – was a high-function psyker. That's how he'd floored Nayl, and why he had seemed so confident. He'd hidden the power earlier, but now it was boiling out of him. I took the brunt of it, and it hurled me back into the wall.

I felt several ribs break.

But, at last, someone had underestimated me. I was a high-function psyker *too*. Karyl had power, but Chase should have sent someone with considerably more. Staying in the dark places had its advantages. People didn't know what I was truly capable of. Chase did not appreciate who she was dealing with.

My power had been blocked earlier by the Inquisition's mind-shields. Now it was free, and it was fuelled by my anger and frustration.

I yelled a single word of power.

The force of it, like a flaming shockwave in the air, struck Sejan Karyl and threw him not just into the chamber's back wall but *through* it. Stonework

ruptured. A terrible, blinding light shone in through the demolished hole.

I pulled down my glare shields and helped Nayl to his feet. He pulled on his goggles too, and we drew up the heavy hoods of our coats.

Outside, the desert was too bright to look at. The heat was immense. While we had been inside the palace, lowday had ended, a brief night had flickered past, and burnday had begun.

Karyl lay on his back on a heap of rubble. Every bone in his body was shattered, but he was still alive. Blood from his wounds was cooking off him, and his exposed flesh was frying. He held the packet of Euphrati Keeler's ancient manuscript in one blackened claw of a hand, but the paper was already burning.

He was trying to put it out, but he was on fire too.

I watched his body burn, the papers with it.

'Get Medea on the vox,' I said to Nayl. 'Tell her to bring the guncutter in. We need rapid extraction.'

He nodded, and I heard him speaking Glossia into his vox headset.

I opened my mind.

+ Cherubael? Can you hear me? +

+ Of course, Gregor. +

+ I need your assistance +

+My, my, Gregor. Do you need me to come and kill lots and lots of people for you? +

I hesitated. I thought for a moment of the Tempestus Scions and Inquisition teams ploughing through the palace at our heels, just minutes away from finding us.

'Yes,' I said, with great reluctance.

+ I didn't quite hear that, Gregor. +

+ Yes. +

Nayl and I took the armoured carry-casket and set off into the burning desert. Medea was en route, less than a minute away.

We got a fair distance clear of the palace, and I turned to look back, in time to see a light come down from the sky that was brighter and more dreadful than the burnday glare of the three suns.

Medonae's palace began to die with volcanic finality.

I looked away.

From somewhere, I heard a deep, satisfied laugh.

It was probably the daemonhost, delighting in his slaughter, but just for a moment, I thought it had come, echoing, from the casket in my hand.

From the smiling, noble image that Euphrati Keeler had made so long before.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dan Abnett is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *The Unremembered Empire*, *Know No Fear* and *Prospero Burns*, the last two of which were both *New York Times* bestsellers. He has written almost fifty novels, including the acclaimed Gaunt's Ghosts series, and the Eisenhorn and Ravenor trilogies. He scripted *Macragge's Honour*, the first Horus Heresy graphic novel, as well as numerous audio dramas and short stories set in the Warhammer 40,000 and Warhammer universes. He lives and works in Maidstone, Kent.

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