

THE HORUS HERESY

*Graham McNeill*  
**THE OUTCAST DEAD**

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*New York Times* bestselling author



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Graham McNeill

# THE OUTCAST DEAD

## Graham McNeill

The galaxy is burning. The Emperor's loyal primarchs prepare to do battle with Warmaster Horus and his turncoat Legions on the black sand of Isstvan. Such dark times herald new and yet more terrible things still to come, and when Astropath Kai Zulane unwittingly learns a secret that threatens to tip the balance of the war, he is forced to flee for his life. Alongside a mysterious band of renegades, he plunges into the deadly underworld of Terra itself, hunted like a criminal by those he once trusted. In the face of betrayal, Kai must decide where his own loyalties lie and whether some truths should be buried forever.



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hailing from Scotland, Graham McNeill worked for over six years as a Games Developer in Games Workshop's Design Studio before taking the plunge to become a full-time writer. Graham has 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](http://www.graham-mcneill.com)

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AT THE HEART of the web of towers within the City of Sight lay the Conduit, the nexus of all intergalactic communication. Carved by an army of blind servitors from the limestone of the mountains, these high-roofed chambers were filled by black-clad infocytes plugged into brass keyboards and arranged in hundreds of serried ranks. Once each telepathic message had been received and interpreted – and sifted by the cryptaesthesians – it was processed and passed on by the Conduit to the intended recipient by more conventional means. Looping pneumo-tubes descended from the shadowed ceilings like plastic vines, wheezing and rattling as they sped information cylinders to and from the clattering, clicking keystrokes of the infocytes.

Overseers in grey robes and featureless silver masks drifted through the ranks of nameless scribes on floating grav-plates that disturbed the scattered sheets of discarded meme-papers covering the floor. The smell of printers' ink, surgical disinfectant and monotony filled the air alongside a burnt, electrical smell.

Those of the Administratum who had seen the Conduit found the sight utterly soulless and monstrously depressing. Working as an administrator was bad enough, where faceless men and women were lone voices among millions, but at least there was a slim possibility that talent might lift a gifted individual from the stamping, filing, and sorting masses. This repetitive drudgery allowed for no such escape, and few administrators ever returned to the Conduit, preferring to turn a blind eye to its harsh necessity.

Vesca Ordin drifted through the Conduit on his repulsor plate, information scrolling down the inside of his silver mask as his eyes darted from infocyte to infocyte. As his eye glided over each station, a noospheric halo appeared over its operator with a host of symbols indicating the nature of the message being relayed. Some were interplanetary communications, others were ship logs or regularly scheduled checks, but most were concerned with the rebellion of Horus Lupercal.

In all his thirty years of service in the Conduit, Vesca had always prided himself on making no judgement on the messages he passed. He was simply one insignificant pathway among thousands through which the Emperor ruled the emerging Imperium. It did not become a messenger to get involved. He was too small in the grand scheme of things, just an infinitesimally tiny cog in an inconceivably vast machine. He had always been content in the certainty that the Emperor and his chosen lieutenants had a plan for the galaxy that was unfolding with geometric precision.

The Warmaster's treachery had seen that certainty rocked to its foundations.

Vesca saw the glaring red symbol that indicated a more urgent communication, and he flicked his haptically-enabled gauntlets to bring a copy of the message up onto his visor. Another missive from Mars, where loyalist forces were struggling to gain a foothold in the Tharsis quadrangle after insurrection had all but destroyed the red planet's infrastructure.

The Martian campaign was not going well. The clade masters had taken it upon themselves to insert numerous operatives in an attempt to decapitate the rebel leadership, but the killers were finding it next to impossible to penetrate the rigorous bio filters and veracifiers protecting the inner circles of the rebel Mechanicum Magi. This was yet another death notice bound for one of the clade temples. Callidus this time.

Vesca sighed, flicking the message back to the station. It seemed distasteful that the

Imperium should rely on such shadow operatives. Was the threat of the Warmaster so great that it required such agents and dishonourable tactics? The fleets of the seven Legions despatched to bring Horus Lupercal to heel were likely even now waging war on Isstvan V, though confirmation of victory had yet to filter through from the various astropathic relays between Terra and the Warmaster's bolthole.

The daily vox-announcements spoke of a crushing hammerblow that would smash the rebels asunder, of the Warmaster's treachery inevitably destroyed.

Then why the use of assassins?

Why the sudden rush of messages sent from the Whispering Tower to the fleets forming the second wave behind the Iron Hands, Salamanders and Raven Guard? These were concerns that normally did not trouble Vesca, but the assurances being passed throughout the Imperium seemed just a little too strident and just a little too desperate to sound sincere.

More and more messages wreathed in high-level encryption were being sent from Terra to the expeditionary fleets in order to determine their exact whereabouts and tasking orders. A veteran of the Conduit, Vesca had begun to realise that the Imperium's masters were desperately trying to ascertain the location of all their forces and to whom they owed their loyalty. Had the Warmaster's treachery spread further than anyone suspected?

Vesca floated over to a terminal as a request for confirmation icon shimmered to life over the terminal of an infocyte. Despite each operative being hard-wired to a terminal, the staff of the Conduit were not lobe-cauterised servitors. They were capable of independent thought, though such things were frowned upon.

A noospheric tag appeared over the head of the infocyte.

'Operative 38932, what is the nature of your query?'

'I... uh, well, it's just...'

'Spit it out, Operative 38932,' demanded Vesca. 'If this is important, then clarity and speed must be your watchwords.'

'Yes, sir, it's just that... it's so unbelievable.'

'Clarity and speed, Operative 38932,' Vesca reminded him.

The infocyte looked up at him, and Vesca saw the man was struggling to find the words to convey the nature of his request to him. Language was failing him, and whatever it was he had to ask was finding it impossible to force its way out of his mouth.

Vesca sighed, making a mental note to assign Operative 38932 a month's retraining. His repulsor disc floated gently downwards, but before he could reprimand Operative 38932 for his lax communication discipline, another request for confirmation icon appeared over a terminal on the same row. Two more winked to life on another row, followed by three more, then a dozen.

In the space of a few seconds, a hundred or more had flickered into existence.

'What in the world?' said Vesca, rising up to look over the thousands of infocytes under his authority. Like the visual representation of a viral spread, white lights proliferated through the chamber with fearsome rapidity. The infocytes looked to their overseers, but Vesca had no idea what was going on. He floated down to Operative 38932's terminal and ripped the sheet of meme-paper from his trembling fingers.

He scanned the words printed there, each letter grainy and black from the smudged ink of the terminal. They didn't make sense, the words and letters somehow jumbled in the wrong order in a way that was surely a misinterpretation.

'No, no, no,' said Vesca, shaking his head and relieved to have found the solution. 'It's a misinterpreted vision, that's all it is. The choirs have got this one wrong. Yes, it's the only possible explanation.'

His own hands were shaking and no matter how hard he tried to convince himself that

this was simply a misinterpreted vision, he knew it was not. An incorrect vision might have triggered two or three requests for confirmation, but not thousands. With a sinking feeling in his gut that was like having the air sucked from his lungs, Vesca Ordin realised his infocytes were not requesting confirmation on the veracity of the message.

They were hoping he would tell them it wasn't true.

The meme-paper slipped from his fingers, but the memory of what was printed there was forever etched on the neurons of his memory, each line a fresh horror building on the last.

*Imperial counter-strike massacred on Isstvan V.*

*Vulkan and Corax missing. Ferrus Manus dead.*

*Night Lords, Iron Warriors, Alpha Legion and Word Bearers are with Horus Lupercal.*