

CHAOS CHILD

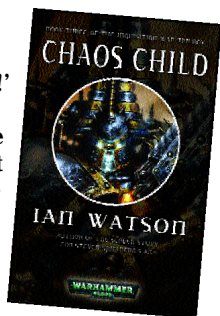
BOOK THREE OF THE INQUISITION
WAR TRILOGY • BY IAN WATSON

**'Draco found and entered the Black Library!'
declared Eldrad.**

Hidden in the webway, guarded by terrible forces, its location known only to Great Harlequins, that repository of knowledge about daemons should have been forever secure. Draco should never have been able to find the Library, let alone enter it. Yet he had done so.

Even worse, Draco had robbed it.

IN THE WAR-TORN galaxy of the 41st millennium, the holy Inquisition bears the endless duty of protecting mankind from corruption by the Dark Powers. Devastated by the death of his closest ally, renegade Inquisitor Jaq Draco prepares to surrender his very soul to the gods of Chaos, so he may discover the mythical place where time is reversed and the dead may rise again. Only by renouncing his fanatical faith in the God-Emperor can he hope to achieve his ultimate goal – and an eternity of damnation!



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from
CHAOS CHILD

A WILD REGION of a southerly continent of the planet Karesh consisted of boulder-strewn goat pastures. Beneath those rugged pastures were limestone caverns. In a certain cavern was an exit from the webway.

Below ground, phosphorescent lichens flourished. From the other side of the cavern the misty blue glow of the webway might have seemed to the casual eye to be merely a more intense patch of natural luminosity. Thus was the terminus camouflaged.

In any case, why should anyone have come down from the surface to search? Such caverns were huge and spooky and dark. Idle curiosity was rarely wise.

Evidently some goatherd had intruded at one time or other. Maybe he had been searching for one of his animals which fell down a shaft or strayed too far into a cave. Facing the opening to the webway was a cairn consisting of three billygoat skulls. The horns poked defensively at the blue tunnel, as though to impale whatever might emerge.

The skull-cairn implied that the locals were primitive folk. Lex suggested re-entering the webway to find a more advanced world. Jaq was still deep in shock at Meh'lindi's death, and felt unable to make a decision. Lex and Grimm debated the issue.

To re-enter the webway would be to take such a random risk. They needed food and drink and rest. They had to hide. They had to think. In their hands was an alien Book of Fate – written in inscrutable script in a language which none of them knew, not now that she was dead.

The book was a key to so many secrets. This business of the Emperor's Sons, for instance! Since the book supposedly contained prophesies about the final apocalypse, there must be details about those Sons in this book – if the Sons genuinely existed. One only had a Harlequin's word for this, and Zephro Carnelian's too. Both parties could have been lying. This book was the proof. The proof couldn't be read.

Nor could they risk contacting any Imperial authorities. The Inquisition numbered in its ranks profound experts upon the eldar race. Those would have sacrificed an arm to be able to scan this book. Alas, the Inquisition was infiltrated by conspirators and at war with itself. Jaq had been branded a heretic and renegade.

What of the place in the webway where time supposedly could turn backwards? Back to a time when Meh'lindi was still alive? Better not think of that! Not even Great Harlequins knew where that place was – if it existed at all. Only someone supremely illuminated might be able to find such a place. An extraordinary magician...

Such as... a master of this Book of Fate? Such as... someone who had undergone daemonic possession, and redeemed himself?

'You're still in trauma,' Lex told Jaq sternly at the mere mention of such matters.

'I shall pray for clarity,' said Jaq numbly. He didn't pray.

'Listen,' said Grimm, 'I once visited a farming moon so superstitious that even wheels were banned. 'Cos wheels represented godless science. Perils of witchcraft, hmm? Even on that moon there were anti-grav floaters and a swanky capital equipped with a spaceport.'

KARESH PROVED TO be a similar planet. Not that wheels were prohibited – but the rural peasantry were whelmed in ignorance and dread.

Finding one's way out of the cavern took a while. Half an hour after surfacing, they had spotted a goatherd. The fellow fled at sight of the trio. An hour's trek brought them to a hamlet of dry-stone hovels.

Stunted peasants were in awe of Lex's superhuman stature. Was that mighty chest of his – with the ribs beneath his muscles all fused into solid bone – a human chest? What were those sockets in his spine? (Aye, through which his lost armour had

once interfaced with him!) The peasants were leery of abhuman Grimm. They were dismayed by stern Jaq, and by his scaly mesh armour. However, their dialect was comprehensible – so this world could not be too detached from the Imperium.

Dimly the peasants remembered tales of a team of powerful strangers roving a neighbouring province once upon a time, equipped with dreadful weapons, rooting out deviants.

Psykers were feared hereabouts. The sign of the horns was used to ward off evil, which must not otherwise be spoken about too much. Offerings must be made to a nameless menace, which was at once terrible – yet also benign, in so far as it kept its distance. Was this menace the Emperor himself, dimly understood? These peasants eased the trio on their way in the direction of ‘the city’ with offerings, including a new beige robe for Jaq, and a great loose homespun vest for Lex, which had been the property of a local prodigy, a farmer of grotesque obesity.

The ‘city’ proved to be a tatty town, although furnished with a landing field. Peasants would drive surplus goats there for slaughter. Far away across a sea, goats’ brains were much in demand by gourmets. It was in this town that the trio finally discovered the name of the world they were on – a detail which had been beyond the goatherds’ ken.

Planet Karesh.

Its capital was Karesh City. Once a fortnight, chilled brains were flown to Karesh City from this province. Otherwise, the region might have been even more isolated. The next such flight was due only a couple of days later. In exchange for bed and board at a hostelry near the landing strip, Grimm reluctantly surrendered a finely tooled silver amulet depicting one of his ancestors.

With one of the smallest gems prised from the cover of the *Book of Rhana Dandra*, Lex bribed the pilot of the cargo plane.

ANOTHER TINY GEM bought them lodgings in Karesh City. There it fell to Lex and Grimm to scrutinize the register of interstellar shipping due to call at this world. Jaq continued to be riven by grief for his dead assassin-courtesan. Was he obsessed by the quest for the luminous path and for truth – or for the supposed occult place where he might snap the spine of time itself and bring Meh’lindi back into existence? Sometimes it seemed to Grimm and Lex that the latter might be the case. Surely this was

just the consequence of bereavement. Having encountered an inquisitor of the stripe of Baal Firenze, Lex respected Jaq's tormented loyalty to truth. Since Meh'lindi had died serving Jaq, some of that loyalty had become symbolised by Meh'lindi for the time being.

Lex understood all too well how deeply the death of close comrades could affect a person. Inscribed repetitively upon the bones of his left hand, from which he had once dissolved the flesh in acid, were the names of two fellow Space Marines who had died decades ago.

Yeremi Valance and Biff Tundrish, from Trazior Hive, upon distant Necromunda.

The surgeons of his fortress-monastery had grafted new nervewires and synthmusclefibre and pseudoflesh in the aftermath of Lex's self-imposed penitential ordeal. Decades later, Lex's hand still itched inwardly with the memory of those names.

THE INTERSTELLAR MERCHANT and passenger ship *Free Enterprise of Vega* seemed suitable as a route out of Karesh. According to the register its captain held an ancient hereditary free charter. This captain ought to be a man of honour, unlikely to murder passengers if he suspected that their baggage was valuable. The captain wouldn't wish to lose his Imperial charter to trade freely where he chose without too much obligation to the merchant fleet administration. An enterprising spirit such as he would surely want a huge ruby such as could buy half a dozen interstellar trips. He would be discreet.

What clinched the matter, for Jaq, was the destination of the ship: Sabulorb!

Meh'lindi had once walked upon Sabulorb. Three years prior to meeting Jaq, that very planet was the scene of her bravest and most harrowing feat. In the gruesome guise of a genestealer hybrid Meh'lindi had infiltrated a genestealer nest. She had killed its patriarch. She had escaped alive.

To walk where she had walked, albeit with horror in her heart. To see what she had seen. To be where she had been!

IN THEIR HOTEL suite, its windows plasteel-shuttered for privacy, Grimm raised a possible objection.

'Look, boss, I agree it's over a century since she was there, 'cos of all the time you spent in stasis. Sabulorb might still be infested.'

Genestealers were furtive. They tried to establish their control by guile. To penetrate society from behind the scenes by using normal-seeming hybrids as a facade was their goal. To prey on society until it could be monstrously transformed.

The plasteel shutters were embossed with floral motifs. Fragrances seeped from tiny grilles set in the hearts of the metal flowers. Walls were richly brocaded, and topped with a frieze of blossoms. A painting framed in filigree depicted a gauze-clad nymph dancing provocatively and inviolably upon a venus mantrap in a steamy jungle.

'Do you reckon,' asked Grimm, 'that her killing the patriarch resulted in any kind of public exposure of the menace? She went there in secret, remember.'

Oh, indeed. Her visit had been a cruel experiment on the part of the Director Secundus of the *Officio Assassinorum*. Meh'lindi had wrought some havoc, but clandestinely. She had reported back only to the Director Secundus of her shrine.

'That genestealer coven could still be patiently beavering away under another patriarch and another magus,' Grimm pointed out. 'They could have covered up the harm she did them. Huh, there might have been other covens in any case. What's the chain of authority for anyone intervening?'

Lex pondered. Untold hours of study in the scriptories of the fortress-monastery had been devoted to the traditions of the Imperial Fists, his Chapter. He had also familiarized himself to some degree with the intricacies of Imperial organization. Very few people could possibly grasp all of those in any great detail.

'As I recall,' said Lex, 'the shrine ought to have notified the *Adeptus Terra*. It should have informed the *Administratum*. The *Administratum* ought to have mobilized a Chapter of Space Marines.'

In a galaxy so vast, with so many urgent demands upon less than a million Space Marines – and with billions of officials involved in the Imperial bureaucracy alone – decisions might be delayed for years, dire though genestealers were. The outcome could take decades.

Grimm scratched his hairy rubicund cheek. 'That director – Tarik Ziz, damn his soul – could have suppressed her report, not wanting his nasty experiment to be known. Nothing might have happened yet. Taking up residence on Sabulorb could be risky.'

Jaq grimaced.
To walk where she had walked!

GRIMM AND LEX visited the captain of the *Free Enterprise*, on board his vessel at the spaceport, to enquire about commercial prospects on Sabulorb and its political stability, with a view to booking passage there. Alternatively, they might wish passage to a different world aboard his ship. The magnificent ruby which Lex showed to the captain spoke volumes.

Lex himself did not speak much at all, leaving this to Grimm. Already, back in the tatty town an ocean away, with Grimm's assistance Lex had torn the long-service studs from his brow with pincers. Lex retained the studs in a pouch. He must become incognito. Surrender of the studs had been painful to Lex's soul, if not physically daunting. Was not an Imperial Fist able to endure most pain? Did not a Fist privately relish pain?

Lex's sheer musculature might nevertheless proclaim his calling to anyone who had ever encountered the legendary warriors or who had watched devotional holos. That tattoo on one cheek, of a skeletal fist squeezing blood from a moon, might identify his actual Chapter to an aficionado. This hypothetical person, observing the eight livid puckers disfiguring Lex's brow, might even conclude that he had been discharged in disgrace. If even better informed, this person might wonder why Lex had been released from his vows at all, instead of being sentenced to experimental surgery, and his organs harvested for pious use.

Lex was most unlikely to meet such a totally knowledgeable person. With his coarse vest and groin-cloth, and great bare leathery legs, Lex seemed to be a barbarian slave owned by Jaq, whose trusted factotum Grimm was.

Should anyone ever spy the patchwork of old scars on Lex's trunk, where potent extra organs had been implanted by Marine surgeons, those marks would imply that Lex must have been savagely whipped to make an obedient servant of him – after his capture from some feral world, probably. If anyone caught a glimpse of those spinal sockets, why then, at some stage the slave had been used as a servitor cyborged to some bulldozer or crane.

As to the injuries in his brow, Lex must have been impaled in the head with a multi-toothed cudgel, and his thick skull had survived the impact.

To further the barbaric image, in public Lex suppressed his fluent and gracious command of Imperial Gothic. He parodied the scum lingo of the lower levels of his erstwhile home-hive on Necromunda. He was a Fist, a thinker. He could pretend cleverly.

Grimm and Lex learned from the spry elderly captain that Sabulorb was most certainly politically stable... nowadays. There had been – whisper it – alien vermin on that world. Blessedly, Space Marines had cleansed the planet around seventy-five standard years earlier. Space Marines, no less! Ultramarines, by name! The captain plainly made no mental connection between those Marines and the barbaric giant who stood in his cabin.

‘Uh, did any of those Ultramarines stay on?’ asked Grimm. ‘To set up a recruiting base?’

They had not done so. The cities of Sabulorb had required a good deal of repair before the economy got back on track. Much devastation had occurred, and many deaths. Be assured: that was all in the past. Sabulorb had passed through its phase of reconstruction into relative prosperity once more. Moreover, this was Holy Year on Sabulorb. Pilgrims were flocking there with fat purses.

How perfect for the trio that Sabulorb expected many visitors from other worlds.

How predictable that there should have been so much damage and death three-quarters of a century earlier. That action by Ultramarines had occurred twenty-five years after Meh'lindi visited Sabulorb. Hardly a rapid response by the Imperium – though speedier than some responses. Had a clerk mis-routed a report? Had Tarik Ziz suppressed the information? Had intelligence about the infestation come from some other source?

Whatever the reason, twenty-five years had allowed the covens to become much stronger, and their response to a challenge correspondingly more violent. Yet even so, Sabulorb was clean.

THE JOURNEY FROM Karesh to Sabulorb consisted of an initial plasma-boost outward to the jump-zone on the periphery of the Karesh system. This took over three days. Then came a jump through the warp, of only seventy hours, yet bridging light years. *Free Enterprise* emerged on the outskirts of the Lekkerbek system, a prosperous port of call.

Inward, once again for several days. Outward, once again for a few days more. A second similar jump took *Free Enterprise* to

the edge of the Sabulorb system. Since Sabulorb's sun was a massive red giant, the journey inward required almost a week.

In all, including a stopover on Lekkerbek, it was a journey of almost three weeks.

DURING THE WHOLE of this time Jaq remained secluded in the suite of three connecting cabins. Lex preferred not to show himself. But Grimm roamed the ship, as a mechanically-minded squat would. Amongst the passengers already on board were scores of pilgrims, and scores more boarded at Lekkerbek. All were agog to be present at the unveiling of the True Face of the Emperor – a ceremony which occurred only once every fifty standard years, in Shandabar City on Sabulorb.

So as not to disabuse pious fellow passengers, Grimm refrained from enquiring too specifically into the nature of the ceremony. Plainly many pilgrims had saved for half a lifetime to afford the trip. To behold their deity's true face would bless them utterly, guaranteeing peace everlasting for their souls, and bliss. These fervent folk presumed that Grimm and his reclusive master and his seldom-glimpsed slave were on the same pilgrimage.

In private, Grimm was sarcastic enough about pilgrimages in general to merit a warning snarl from Jaq.

'Would you appreciate your own squattish ancestors being mocked, little one? Those are your object of reverence. We cannot gainsay these people's devotion!'

Lex nodded agreement to this reprimand. In his own area of the suite Lex was often praying to Rogal Dorn, Primarch and progenitor of the Imperial Fists – those Fists whom he had, some might say, deserted. Through Dorn, by proxy, he prayed to the Emperor on Earth.

Lex also spent time studying a scanty *General Guide to Sabulorb*. The captain sold copies to the pilgrims, but he had handed one gratis to Grimm since the ruby was so spectacular.

The *General Guide* contained hardly any information about the Holy Year ceremony itself. Pilgrims would already know all about it. Mainly the guide discoursed about the planet; and this was of compelling interest to Lex, who was accustomed to assessing the vital statistics of a world thoughtfully prior to combat.

To circle its giant sun took Sabulorb ten of Earth's years. Each season lasted for three whole years. The inhabitants counted in standard Imperial years.

'That's sensible of them,' remarked Grimm. 'Otherwise, imagine asking anyone's age! Gosh, I'm almost two years old; I'm getting married. Oh dear, I'm eight years old; I'm dying.'

Due to the small tilt of its axis all the seasons of Sabulorb were similar: cool. Its sun was huge but diffuse. It did not radiate a great deal of heat.

Much of the three great flat continents of Sabulorb was covered by cool deserts (and permanent ice-caps shrouded the poles). Deserts of grit abutted on deserts of pebbles or of sand; and one must beware of the pernicious powder deserts. A circulatory system of rivers stretched long irrigating limbs throughout those continents, from freshwater sea to freshwater sea.

One might imagine that those rivers had been dug as giant canals at some time in the distant past – and that the basins of the seas may have been blasted out by unimaginable explosions. Debris had formed the deserts. The basins had been filled with water pumped from within the planet's crust.

Here and there on land were what might be ancient ruins, eroded to stumps. Or were those natural formations? In the seas, according to the guide, algae and vast weed-mats yielded oxygen. The waters teemed with fish and froggy batrachian creatures which lived on the weed-mats. On land, herds of camelopards grazed belts of vegetation along the rivers. Those quadrupeds sported humps and snaky necks. Scaly-sided sand-wolves preyed on them.

'Huh,' said Grimm, 'life's too simple on Sab—'

Where was the biological link between the amphibians of the seas and the grazers on land? What's more, the balance of camelopards and sand-wolves – of prey and predator, which must constantly seesaw up and down – was too simplistic in a cosmos which generally indulged itself in a fester of pullulating life-forms preying upon one another in a chain of ravenous consumption.

'Somebody or something kitted the planet out—'

No such life-forms could have arisen on Sabulorb of their own accord. A red giant became a giant by expanding. Once, that sun would have been much smaller and hotter – and Sabulorb would have been a frozen world far from its luminary. While expanding, that sun would have swallowed any warmer inner worlds. Faced by impending destruction, intelligent creatures on one of those doomed inner worlds may have prepared Sabulorb for habitation. Or perhaps, with its rumour of ruins,

Sabulorb was akin to Darvash, the desert world where Tarik Ziz was in hiding. (Oh, to boil Ziz alive in his dreadnought suit! That would be incense to Meh'lindi's soul.) Aeons ago, Darvash had undergone some preliminary planetary modification at the hand of some elder race. The ancient edifices on Darvash had been huge and intact – not weathered away to stubs, as on Sabulorb.

'I think inscrutable aliens visited Sabulorb vastly long ago,' suggested Lex. 'Hence the batrachian creatures in its seas...'

Jaq cared nothing at all about such speculation or about the origin of Sabulorb, although Grimm had listened with interest to Lex's thoughts.

'Quite a bright big brute you are,' Grimm had commented. Lex had merely chuckled ominously, and relapsed into his mockery of scum lingo: 'Hrunt grunt. Bigman hear 'im. Bigman hunt 'im.'

'Oh, I shiver in me boots,' said Grimm, though not quite so cockily.

THEY ALSO ABSORBED the dialect of Sabulorb through a hypnocasque, provided as another bonus by the captain. Other passengers were obliged to pay.

The Sabulorbish language was full of *-ings*. 'Be giving me alms.' 'Be riding this camelopard.' Everything was larded with present participles as if partaking of sacred time – or of eternal timelessness.

FOREVER MEH'LINDI WAS in Jaq's thoughts, unshakably, agonizingly. Whenever he lit incense in his sub-cabin, the smoke writhed, hinting spectre-like at the silhouette of his Lady of Death.

Surely his devotion had undergone a bias for which he would once have scourged himself on grounds of heresy.

Had he lost his clarity?

Or was it the case that by allowing the memory of Meh'lindi to haunt and torment him, and by letting this obsess him, he might crank up obsession to a perfervid state of mind – aye, of psychic mind! – which would transcend all ordinary bounds? Dared he invite possession by a daemon of deadly lust so as to conquer the daemon within him, and thus become illuminated – immune to Chaos, able to scry and use the secrets of the *Book of Rhana Dandra* in the service of righteous duty? And maybe to bring Meh'lindi back as well. He must not think of this possibility! He must not let Captain Lexandro d'Arquebus of the

Imperial Fists, his barbaric slave, suspect that his former wild words still haunted his thoughts.

He must purge such thoughts. He must lock them up in a private oubliette. Truly the notion of retrieving Meh'lindi from beyond death was an impossible and demented fantasy!

Jaq recalled the two occasions on which Meh'lindi had wrapped her lethal tattooed limbs around him, ecstatically – though for a higher purpose.

Meh'lindi had served him well, and thus the Imperium, so excellently. Let her image in his mind (and in his very nerves!) continue to serve obsessively as a means of whetting his consciousness – as a personal icon, a fetish, feeding him energy in a manner akin to Lex's bond with Rogal Dorn! Aye, inspiring Jaq tormentingly to strive to the very bounds of sanity, and perhaps beyond – and beyond again, into purity sublime.

This would not be heresy, but true fidelity and consecration, in the service of Him-on-Earth.

Alone, Jaq toyed with the speckled pebble on a thong which he wore around his neck – Meh'lindi's bogus spirit-stone. It hadn't fooled the eldar for long. Eldar souls might indeed suffuse into stones, but human souls did not. The stone was only a pretty pebble.

Might it serve, nonetheless, as an amulet for Jaq? As a focus for his own psychic consciousness, to imbue that faculty with agonized passion?

If there was any actual resonance with Meh'lindi, this surely resided in the Assassin card in Jaq's Tarot pack. That card from the suit of Adeptio had once come to resemble Meh'lindi closely. Did it still do so? In the wake of her death, had the resemblance faded?

From his robe Jaq removed his Tarot in its insulated wrapping of flayed mutant skin. Closing his eyes, by feel and by concentration he stripped open the cards, and cut them.

There she was: Assassin of Adeptio. The cropped raven hair, the golden eyes. The flat ivory planes of her face. She was bare to the waist. Tattooed beetles walked across her dainty breasts, decorating old scars. She was so lithe, such a wonderful weapon. Jaq's eyes could have bled. Her image in the psycho-active liquid-crystal wafer was so waxen and stiff. Her eyes were so empty. She was death itself now. She was oblivion.

The cards! Oh stupidity! Zephro Carnelian's mocking image must still haunt the pack, an infiltrator in their midst in the

guise of a Harlequin! Carnelian might be able to snoop on Jaq through the card.

If the trio were to hide successfully, that Harlequin card would have to be destroyed, not merely insulated. Why hadn't Jaq thought of this until now? Ach, his capacity for analysis was askew because of the tragedy.

If a single card was destroyed, the integrity of the pack would be impaired.

Before wrapping the cards again, Jaq slipped Meh'lindi's image into an inner pocket. He had no need of protection and insulation against her. The Assassin card was the perfect icon, and fetish, and memento mori.

FREE ENTERPRISE WAS due to make its second jump through the warp. Jaq, Lex and Grimm were waiting for the warning klaxon in the little lounge connecting their cabin-cubicles. Let passengers and crew only think the purest thoughts while the ship was in transit through the sea of lost souls – where predators lurked!

Jaq removed the thong, and pebble, from around his neck. He held the speckled stone over the mouth of the disposal chute for Lex and Grimm to see.

'I must cleanse myself of distractions,' he said.

'Aw, don't, sire,' protested Grimm.

However, Lex nodded solemnly. 'Aye,' said the giant. 'Just as I removed my service studs.'

Jaq let the stone fall, to be incinerated, and the ashes voided into space.

'More distressingly,' Jaq went on, 'I must also destroy my Tarot pack, in case Carnelian can trace us through it.'

Just then the klaxons wailed. *Free Enterprise* was entering the grey realm of the immaterial, awash with psychic currents. May they not be assaulted by gibbering entities, scratching at the hull. May they not be trapped in a maelstrom, to become a lost space hulk in which drifted mummified corpses.

Where more appropriate for Jaq to dispose of the cards? Probably the ashes would not pass directly into the warp, due to the ship's energy shields; but rather would disperse into vacuum once the *Free Enterprise* emerged into reality again.

Down the chute Jaq rid himself of his own significator card – of the high priest enthroned and gripping a hammer. Ice-blue eyes. Scarred, ruttled face. Slim, grizzled moustaches and beard.

Might he become as blank to scrutiny as any of the Emperor's fabled Sons were to their paralysed sire.

The Emperor's spirit imbued these cards, which He had once allegedly designed. If the fervent pilgrims could only have seen Jaq consign to ashes the Emperor card itself, that grim blind face encased in the prosthetic Golden Throne!

Jaq rid himself of the Space Marine card. Let Captain Lexandro d'Arquebus be anonymous. The card had begun to duplicate Lex. An olive complexion, notched by duelling scars. Ruby ring through his right nostril. Dark lustrous eyes and pearly teeth.

Jaq dropped the Squat card down the hole.

'Oops,' said the real abhuman, as if a queasy flutter had upset his stomach for a moment. Whether the card had resembled Grimm or not was a moot point. All squats looked much alike with their bulbous noses and chubby red cheeks, their bushy red beards and prodigious handlebar moustaches. Grimm's ruddy head of hair had grown back by now with typical vigour.

Most squats who travelled outside their home systems – usually to serve the Imperium – dressed similarly, in those beloved green overalls of theirs, and quilted red flak jackets, and forage caps and big clumpy boots.

JAQ BARELY BLINKED at the contaminated Harlequin card. Into fire, into ash, into void. Away, away, quickly.

Many more cards flew down the chute.

The Daemon card from the suit of Discordia presented itself. Jaq hesitated, because it was flickering.

'What you seen, boss?' Grimm also saw, and groaned.

In the past, this card had adopted the semblance of the hydra: a writhing knot of jelly tentacles, due to cross contamination from the Harlequin card. Now it was a daemon pure and simple – if such a thing were ever simple. Snarling fangs, cruel claws reaching out. It flickered.

Of a sudden it was altering. The hideous face was puckering. The neck was shrinking. The head sank low into the chest. Curved horns shifted.

Instinctively Jaq cast an aura of protection. But he still held the card.

'Dump it!' squawked Grimm.

The daemon's body fluctuated so! Mocking faces were appearing all over its skin, only to vanish again. Lips were opening as if

to speak. Cruel thin lips. Fat slobbery lips. Twisted lips. Opening and closing. Opening again elsewhere.

Lex gasped at the sight – in a way which suggested *recognition*. 'In Dorn's name, destroy it!'

Jaq knew the image well enough from restricted codexes he had once scrutinized in a shielded daemonological laboratory of the Ordo Malleus.

This was Tzeentch, the Changer of the Ways, the would-be Architect of Fate. Recollection of studying that image once upon a time on Earth, in the bosom of the inner Inquisition, brought to this malign mirage almost a twinge of nostalgia as well as of horror.

Tzeentch embodied the path of anarchy and mutability and turmoil, whereby to unpluck the threads of events. Was it Change itself with which Jaq must risk meddling perilously, rather than rampant Slaaneshi desire?

To seek a route to the place in the webway where time and history might twist! Where Meh'lindi might still be un-dead! From which she might be summoned back!

Anguish gripped Jaq. Lex seemed paralysed by the image he witnessed, as if his strength was enchained. Grimm almost gibbered but the little man's babblings were as froth; babblings about the danger of summoning a daemon whilst in the warp itself...

That froth was bothersome.

'I already cast an aura of protection,' snarled Jaq. 'I have my force rod ready!' He stared at the card.

Might Tzeentch preside over the first stage of his transfiguration en route to illumination? One of Tzeentch's greater daemons, some cunning playful uncaring Lord of Change? Was this the meaning? Nevertheless, Jaq would keep a hidden kernel of his own spirit intact. Oh, temptation.

Smoke formed uncanny patterns around the daemon's head, pregnant with revelations, with visions.

The card could be a litmus of the perils besetting Jaq. A gauge of his progress. A warning signal.

Sanity reasserted itself. Grimm was right. If this situation continued, instead of pure thoughts horrors might coagulate around *Free Enterprise*. Were those horrors already suckering to the hull, scritty-scratching at the welded plates, cackling, seeking entry? Pink, long-armed blurs would rush through the ship. So it was written in the *Codex Daemonicus*.

But to incinerate this card!

To whom might he pray for guidance now that he had burnt the Emperor card, director of the pack? To His Lady of Death, perhaps?

Lex uttered a strangulated grunt. He lurched slowly towards Jaq as if tearing chains of adamantium loose from rock.

'Hear me!' Jaq cried. 'As I am your lord inquisitor!' Lex paused, perhaps glad not to approach closer. 'If I'm ever to use the *Book of Rhana Dandra* I must meddle with some occult forces. I'm fully trained to cope. This card can warn me – like a radiation monitor.'

Jaq wrapped the Daemon card securely in the mutant skin which had formerly protected and insulated the whole pack.

'There, it's safe—'

All of the remaining cards he consigned to oblivion.

A regular captain of Space Marines such as Lex might rightly be appalled by a glimpse of Chaos. He wasn't a Terminator Librarian, a psychic specialist. Yet he had staunchly endured a brief sojourn on a Chaos world. The glimpse of Tzeentch had seemed to ravage Lex inwardly, as if kindling anew some ancient nightmare. With horny fingernails Lex scratched at his huge left hand as if he might tear away the flesh and lay bone bare. Or else to inflict some pain upon himself?

Lex was detaching himself spiritually from this brief episode. Jaq could hear the giant praying softly: 'Light of my life, Dorn of my being.'

Lex eyed Jaq with composure. Some trauma inside of Lex had been contained. Not to be voiced.

'I'm guided by your knowledge,' he told Jaq.

'I shall be very careful in all we do,' vowed Jaq.

Aye, careful that he did not alienate his companions.

As to prudence... why, a man could stand on a clifftop eyeing a maelstrom down in the sea for hours, calculating every twist of its swirling currents. As soon as he leapt from the cliff he would bid farewell to all solidity and stability.

After a further interval the klaxon sounded again. *Free Enterprise* was safe in the far outskirts of the Sabulorb system.

IN A DREAM, the spectre of Chaos haunted Jaq...

The harem of Lord Egremont of Askandar had occupied a hundred square kilometres at the heart of the vaster metropolis of Askandargrad. Until two days before, the immense harem

had been a walled Forbidden City within the greater city. Half of this Forbidden City was now in ruins. Fires blazed. Smoke billowed into the sullied sky where two suns shone, the larger one orange, the smaller one white and bright.

From north and from west, twin swathes of destruction cleaved through Askandargrad to converge upon the ravaged prize of the harem.

Astride the massive, much-breached wall between harem and metropolis, formerly the only point of entry, Lord Egremont's sprawling palace was an inferno. If he were lucky, the lord-governor of Askandar was dead.

As were so many hundreds of the elite Eunuch Guard. As were thousands of soldiers of the defence force. As were many of the maidens of the harem. If they were lucky.

In the ruin of what had been a splendid bath-house, Jaq crouched with three of the Eunuch Guards. Burly men, the Eunuchs were bare-chested save for scarlet-braided leather waistcoats. Golden bangles adorned their muscular arms. The belts of their baggy candy-striped trousers were home, on one side of the waist, to a holster for a bulky web pistol, and on the other side to a scabbard for a power sword.

Sufficient unto the policing of the usually peaceful harem, these weapons! The web pistol, to entangle any intruder or rebellious resident. The power sword, to decapitate if need be.

Sufficient, until now...

The Eunuchs' uniforms were soiled and torn. One had lost the topknot of hair from his shaved skull to a near-miss by a flamer. His scalp was seared pink. Another nursed an obscenely decorated and contoured boltgun lost by an injured invader.

The ivorywood roof of the bath-house had fallen in upon the perfumed waters of the long white marble pool. Timbers and tiles had crashed upon naked bodies. Some bathers had died instantly. Some had drowned. Once-lovely bodies were broken and submerged. Some victims still whimpered, injured and trapped by wreckage yet able to gasp air.

A stretch of side wall had partially collapsed. Through the resulting gap, from behind a baffler of marble debris, Jaq and the Eunuchs were witnesses to vile revelry in the once-delightful plaza outside where terracotta urns of floral shrubs lay shattered.

Were the screaming tethered female prisoners hallucinating while abominations were perpetrated slowly and perversely

upon their flesh? The Slaaneshi Chaos Marines had certainly used hallucinogenic grenades – as well as boltguns and meltaguns and terrible chainswords, and heavier weaponry too. Were hallucinogens intensifying the already appalling sight, and the implacable cruel touch, of pastel-hued armour exquisitely damascened with debauchery upon the breast plates and the shoulders? Was that which was already monstrous being multiplied far beyond the brink of sanity?

A few tormentors had shed items of armour, exposing grotesquely mutated rampant groins, their organs of pleasure bifurcated and more, with squinting eyes sprouting from them, and with drooling lips.

Others had no need to shed armour. Chaos Spawn had materialized: wolf-sized creatures with legs of spiders and bodies of imps, with questing tentacles and phallic tubes. Jaq himself almost believed that he was hallucinating. A snake-like umbilical cord connected these spawn to the swollen groin-guards of their master – who stood back, roaring and whinnying with delight, as they guided the spawn in the ravishing of their captives, soaking up the sensations of these roving external members.

Corralling other hysterical captives were beastmen slaves armed with serrated axes. A Chaos Tech-Marine monitored these slaves. His armour was studded with spikes. Each shoulder pauldron was in the shape of giant clutching fingers. He wore a nightmare helmet shaped like a horse's head, eyes glowing red.

One of the shaggy beastmen drooled and dropped his axe. The beastman reached out a paw to caress a particularly voluptuous captive.

Immediately the Tech-Marine adjusted a control-box strapped to his forearm.

The disobedient beastman's metal collar exploded, severing his head. The head fell. It bounced and rolled amidst the captives even as the beastman's body was tottering.

Two Eunuch Guards lay maimed. An Apothecary in fancy armour opened up one of them with a long knife and pulled out the writhing wretch's entrails to sort through. The medic snipped a gland loose and deposited it in an iron flask bolted to his thigh. From that gland some drug would be extracted, to induce deranged ecstasy.

This sight was too much for one of Jaq's companions.

'Hasim!' he moaned. 'My friend!'

Before the man could be stopped, he was scaling the barricade of broken marble, web pistol in one hand, power sword in the other.

The energy field of the sword blade shimmered, a blur of blue. The pistol was cumbersome with its cone of a nozzle and its underslung canister of glue. Blundering forward, the Eunuch fired the pistol. His aim wavered. A murky mass of tangled threads flew from the nozzle. The mass expanded in the air. Even so, the cloud of stick threads missed the medic – and wrapped around the Tech-Marine instead, clinging and tightening.

The Apothecary had grabbed up his chainsword from the ground. The sword whirred. It buzzed like furious killer bees. The sharp teeth throbbed into invisibility as they spun around. With seeming delight, and with one hand behind his back, the medic met the Eunuch.

How shrilly the teeth of the chainsword screeched as they met the energy field of the sword. An electric-blue explosion of power ripped teeth loose, spitting them aside. The medic's metal-sheathed arm was vibrating violently as if it might shake apart. No doubt such sensations only pleased the medic. The guard of the chainsword had locked against the power blade.

From behind his back the medic swung his long surgical knife. He drove the blade into the belly of the Eunuch. The sword fell from the Eunuch's hand, suddenly inert. The web pistol tumbled too. That former guardian of the harem staggered backward, clutching at the hilt of the knife.

He tripped. He fell. He squirmed to and fro. The medic roared with satisfaction. Such an injury wouldn't bring quick death – but plentiful opportunity to operate upon the man while life endured.

Of course, other mutated Marines were heeding the place from which the Eunuch had come. Abandoning their pleasures, they were bringing boltguns to bear.

Meanwhile the contracting web had tightened upon the Tech-Marine's armour. Threads cramped one of his gauntlets upon that control box.

Maybe the Tech-Marine sought to activate the frenzy circuit, to goad the beastmen into a killing rage directed at the wrecked bath-house.

A collar exploded. A shaggy head was blown from its neck.
A second collar exploded.
A third. A fourth...

JAQ WOKE FROM the memory-dream, sweating coldly.

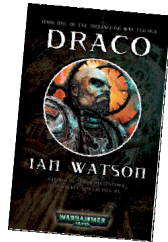
Draco's story
continues in CHAOS CHILD

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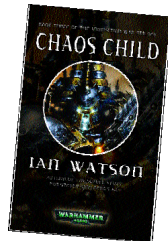
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