

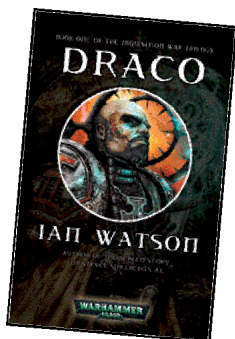
DRACO

BOOK ONE OF THE INQUISITION WAR TRILOGY • BY IAN WATSON

THAT ONLY LEFT Jaq one alternative – an ultimate alternative which no one could reasonably expect him to invoke, let alone soon...

The name of that alternative was *exterminatus*.

'In an Imperium of a million worlds,' he repeated to himself, 'what does the death of one world matter in the cause of purity?'



FORTY THOUSAND YEARS in the future, the human Imperium struggles for survival against its relentless enemies. Inquisitor Jaq Draco uncovers a plot that threatens the psychic future of Mankind.

Can he unravel the trail of conspiracy before he himself is destroyed by its deadly clutches?

Dazzling and frenetic, Ian Watson's Inquisition War presents a unique vision of the Warhammer 40,000 universe.

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from
DRACO

AN HOUR EARLIER in the Emerald Suite, Jaq's comm-unit had bleeped. In jumblespeech Meh'Lindi had reported, 'I've just seen the Harlequin man. I'm following.'

Jaq promptly consulted the eye-screen. Several spy-flies were tailing Meh'Lindi.

She was on a balcony level of an arcade which must specialise in manufacturing small components, and was still doing so. Baggy women and runty, raggy children slaved alongside their menfolk in a veritable honeycomb of family workshops, tier upon tier of plasteel caves linked by ladders and gantries. Swarf from lathes lay thick on the floor below. Wading through this, apace: a man taller than any of the artisans.

He wore a pastel-hued cloak and cockaded purple hat quite out of keeping with his surroundings. He attracted whistles and jeers and minor missiles, such as nuts and bolts.

Meh'Lindi's rented, streetwise duo guaranteed her much more anonymity; as to her motives, they exhibited no interest whatever.

Jaq had willed a spy-fly to home on the man, whose face he recognized from the Tarot card. Thus, while Meh'Lindi padded in pursuit with her mute chaperones, Jaq was also tracking the Harlequin man. At the Kefalov station the dandified fellow had boarded the transjungle transport, while Meh'Lindi stayed. The accompanying spy-fly clung to the ceiling of the carriage, surveying the Harlequin man until the train carried the spy-fly

beyond its transmitting range. Until then, its quarry sat twiddling his thumbs and not quite smirking.

Jaq knew that he must give chase; he was virtually being challenged to do so. The Harlequin man had invaded Jaq's Imperial Tarot with the slickness of a lashworm snatching some flesh from a passer-by, and now that damned individual was contemptuously trailing his cloak for Jaq to follow. This, Jaq did not care for one little bit. Yet to ignore such provocation would surely be a greater folly than heeding it.

Leaving Googol to safeguard their equipment, he had hurried with Grimm to the station to meet up with Meh'Lindi.

THE BAR WAS heady with attar of jungle parasite-blooms and other alien aromas that tweaked at Jaq's senses, causing mild wobblings of perception and confusions of taste and smell. Some of the odours were hallucinogenic and patrons wore a glazed look.

Perhaps those individuals were still shell-shocked by the ravaging of their city – of which Jaq and the squat had seen, and smelled, evidence aplenty en route to this rendezvous. Equally, the customers of the odour bar might be adopting a glassy-eyed demeanour so as to avoid seeming to scrutinise Meh'Lindi in what might be construed as an impertinent fashion.

'Sir Draco!' one of the guards greeted Jaq.

The bodyguard eyed Grimm as though the squat was some pet monkey of this merchant and ought to be on a lead. The mood-shifting scents were allowing sentiments to slip out.

'Huh! You can scoot off now,' cried the little man. 'Scram and skedaddle.'

Darting Grimm a cautioning glance, Jaq paid off the hired guards in local voronovs, plus a retainer so that they would continue on call if need be.

As soon as the two men had departed, in the direction of a food vendor, Jaq said to Meh'Lindi: 'Of course, he *let* you see him. He put himself in your way deliberately.'

She nodded. 'Question is, Jaq, dare you ignore this bait?'

'Probably not. I hardly think the aim can be to lure us somewhere to murder us.'

'Still,' Meh'Lindi said wistfully, 'the Harlequin man has the look of an assassin. Maybe even... a renegade assassin? Surely there can be no such animal!'

'Who employs him, eh?' asked Grimm. 'Or does he employ himself?'

She shrugged.

'And don't you fancy him just a jot?'

To which mischievous gambit, Meh'Lindi glared. 'Perhaps Obispal left him behind,' she suggested. 'Maybe the intention is to humiliate you somehow, Jaq? I did betray our presence to Obispal.'

'And splendidly so indeed!' agreed the squat.

'Be quiet,' said Jaq. 'If Obispal decided that a secret inquisitor was watching him, surely he'd be a fool to seek vengeance – especially when he hardly put a foot wrong. I think the idea has to be to show me something, in case I miss it.'

'Yeah, what is the hydra?' said Grimm.

'I find this somewhat galling, don't you?' Jaq asked his pretend-mistress. 'To be manipulated!'

Really, they had no other option but to board the next train bound for Kefalov.

AS THE PASSENGER capsule whisked through the crystalline tube above the blurred green hell of jungle, Jaq scrutinised his personal Tarot card and recalled his trip to Terra as a boy aboard the Black Ship.

Only en route had he understood the true implications.

To his keen senses, that cavernous crowded ship had been awash with psychic turmoil – despite the dampening field projected by a suppressor adept linked in to arcane machinery. This deadening field was subtly nauseating, a psychic equivalent of the stale, rebreathed air. In spite of it, Jaq easily read raw talent, hope, muted dread; and on the part of some of the officers boredom mixed with disgust, on the part of others fierce dedication, occasionally mixed with regret.

The suppressor field seemed to work perversely on Jaq, who already knew how to hide his own light. He hadn't read moods before, but now almost everyone on board appeared to broadcast sludgy feelings.

Stray whispers in a hundred distant-cousin tongues twittered through the ship, as if voices were trying to inform him of his fate, the ghost echoes from a million previous passengers, ten million down the centuries that this ship had been in service.

Of course, the ship was rife with ordinary gossip too, in various versions of Imperial Gothic, some halting, some fluent, in a waveband of accents from mellow to harsh, sibilant to guttural.

‘A great fleet of ships like this tours the galaxy—’

‘They trawl for promising psykers—’

‘Wayward, twisted psykers are hunted down ruthlessly on a host of worlds. They’re preached against and purged. The Inquisition scourges them. Planetary governors destroy them—’

‘At the very same time fresh, uncorrupted psykers are being harvested. They’re sent to Earth in Black Ships such as this—’

Psychic talent was the floodgate by which the malevolent lunacy of powers in the warp could invade and ravage worlds, could corrupt the human race into polluted slaves of evil.

Yet psychic talent was also the hope of the future, of a galaxy in which the human race, free and strong, could defend itself mentally.

Meanwhile, the God-Emperor must defend all his scattered multi-billions of subjects by ruthless sacrificial force. For a terrible equation prevailed: that which would ultimately save the human race – the evolution of a higher consciousness – was, in its long and vulnerable gestation, exactly what could so easily destroy humanity by letting it be corrupted, polluted, warped and ruined. Only the utter ruthlessness of one ravaged, machine-sustained tyrant and the overstretched forces of his fierce yet fragile Imperium kept the human race tottering along its fraying tightrope.

‘Sacrifice—’

Sacrifice on his own part, yes indeed. Was not the Emperor tormented and exhausted by his own ceaseless vigilance?

‘Sacrifice—’

But also by the sacrificing of his own subjects...

Of the gathered talents on board the Black Ship, a fraction – the brightest and the best – were destined to be recruited as

psykers in the service of the Imperium. Most of this fraction would be soul-bound to the Emperor for their own protection.

‘Soul-binding is agony–’

The ghastly mental ritual would burn out optic nerves and leave those chosen psykers blind forever.

‘Sacrifice–’

Many of those on board who were of merely ordinary calibre would serve by yielding up their vital force to feed the Emperor’s insatiable soul, so that he could continue to be a watchful beacon and protector. After suitable lengthy training for the sacrifice, these psykers would be consumed within a few scant weeks or months, drained of their spirits until they died.

‘SACRIFICE!’

Which did not please the Emperor. Oh no. Each soul he devoured lanced him with anguish, torment, it was rumoured. Such was the cruel equation by which humanity survived in a hostile universe.

‘SACRIFICE!’

No passenger on board the Black Ship was older than twenty standard years. Many were as junior as Jaq. One girl in particular... he refused to think of her right now. As the ship’s officers administered tests and counselled their human cargo, it became evident that almost all were going to their deaths.

Worthy deaths, necessary deaths; but still, deaths.

In what manner – other than its worthiness – was this fate different than being slaughtered on one’s home world?

The difference was...

‘SACRIFICE! TO THE GOD AND TO HUMANITY!’

Some young psykers wept. Some prayed. Some raged. Those who raged were restrained. In later life, Jaq understood that this particular Black Ship had been carrying a higher percentage of individualists hailing from less longstandingly pious worlds, than most such shipments. Yet many of the young passengers adopted an air of cool nobility, even of passionate complicity in their own fate; these were praised. Devout dedication was the desideratum for soul-sacrifice.

Death laid a numbing hand on Jaq’s heart. He bargained in his soul with fate, promising to dedicate his life to

Imperial service without scruple – if only a life was left to him to dedicate.

Jaq still clearly remembered his reprieve and how annoyed he had been not to have foreseen it.

‘You can blank out your light, boy,’ the goitrous officer had told him, almost respectfully. ‘Without training, that’s rare. You’ll certainly be recruited. I suspect you won’t need soul-binding. I may well be addressing a future inquisitor–’

To hunt down those who resembled him, yet who had gone astray? To purge his – cousins – who had been twisted askew? To destroy his diseased psychic kin without a qualm?

Yes.

Jaq had spent the remainder of the voyage feeling exalted, yet pitiful. Sad for the bulk of his travelling companions; glad that his own destiny was different. His fellow travellers saw him praying to the Emperor, as he had been schooled to. They presumed that Jaq was honing his soul serenely in expectation of sacrifice. His example had a calming effect on others. Already he was mentally a secret agent, privy to hidden knowledge.

‘YET SEEMINGLY THE Harlequin man can pierce my cover,’ Jaq murmured under his breath. ‘What manner of man must he be?’ He tucked his Tarot card away.

Presently the city of Kefalov loomed ahead. From a distance Kefalov was a grey brain bereft of a skull, ten kilometres high at least. Its tiers of convoluted ridges would be harder than any bone. As the train neared, great windows, air-vents and portals became visible. Seeming to be merely speckles and punctures at first, actually they were as tall as the highest trees.

A stream of military ram-jets flew from one such vent, into a sky the hue of bruised blood in a badly beaten body. Dirty clouds glowered and snake-tongues of lightning flickered. Soon bombs would rip the surging vegetation somewhere, punching holes which would rot and quicken with parasitic blooms.

The petrified brain smoked and steamed lazily, venting effluvia. Kefalov leaked effluent into the jungle, poisoning the vicinity, forming a deep sickly vaporous swamp over which the train raced, insulated in its tube.

SCARCELY HAD THEY left the station concourse than 'Rogue Trader Draco' was voxed to a public comm-screen.

From the viewplate in the open booth *that face* looked out at Jaq, eyes twinkling like ice in chartreuse, a playful and predatory smile puckering the lips.

'Zephro Carnelian at your service!' announced the Harlequin man.

This call just had to be an act of purest derision, a flaunting of how well this enemy had foretold Jaq's actions – or even was psychically alert to Jaq's whereabouts.

Enemy?

Most likely. Stalinvast couldn't very well be hosting a second secret inquisitor, could it? Surely Proctor Firenze would have advised Jaq of the presence of another Malleus man? If Baal Firenze *knew*; if he knew!

This mysterious man had penetrated Jaq's Tarot. He was dangerous, dangerous. He was playing with Jaq, as though Jaq was a card in his own paw.

'Do you imagine you have some business with me?' Jaq asked the image non-committally. Meanwhile, his mind raced.

With a giggle, Carnelian tipped his foolish foppish cockaded hat to Jaq.

'Business? Oh yes: *hydra* business. A terrible menace, hmm? Thought I'd draw your attention to it. Good specimen here in the undercity. Fancy a spot of big game hunting with me?' The man spoke Imperial Gothic with no trace of the local husky accent, but rather with a kind of spooky affectation – almost, thought Jaq, an alien affectation.

At Jaq's back, Meh'Lindi and Grimm warily eyed loitering beggars, pedlars, riff-raff. Naturally, passers-by eyed Meh'Lindi. In particular two small groups of vigilantes wearing diversely blazoned combat fatigues seemed to be sizing up Jaq's trio, either with a view to offering their services or with less savoury intent. One group, decorated with motifs of gaping, dagger-toothed mouths, had tattooed their shaved skulls with leering lips and a view of the brain tissue below. The other, adorned with green toad-badges, wore steel skullcaps piled with simulated excrement. Or perhaps their own hair, waxed solid and stained, coiled through a hole in the cap.

Tension brooded in the air. Décor was at once oppressive and lurid. Brown entrails seemed to bulge from the walls, sprayed with pious mottos. Dingy pillars were subtly phallic. It wasn't so much that Kefalov appeared already to be a more sordid city than the capital, as that this particular city hadn't been devastated at all. Thus aggressions and desires bubbled and brooded, as yet unpurged.

If the brain was letting off steam and smoke into the sky while filth flowed down its flanks, it remained a pressure vessel of packed humanity, a vat of frustrations, oppressions and twisted longings.

'Do you fancy potting a fine trophy, sir inquisitor? Oops! My apologies, honourable *trader*.' Carnelian chortled hectically.

Jaq peered at the face in the screen – especially at the eyes – for signs of a daemon rooted within the man's psyche. Those eyes seemed rational and unhaunted. Was this clownish farrago all a pretence?

'Whereabouts in the undercity?' asked Jaq.

'Why, everywhereabouts. That's the nature of the beast.'

Jaq made a guess. 'And I suppose the death of so many millions – the psychic shockwave – conjured up this new abomination, whatever it is?'

'You're catching on, Sir Jaq.'

'Why should you tell me? And what do you have to do with this hydra? Well?'

'Ah, tetchy, tetchy... *You're* the adept investigator! Must I dot every eye and cross every tee?'

'Damn you, Carnelian, what's your game?'

'Do call me Zephro! Please! Shall I show you some of the pieces and let you try to guess the rules? Pray to visit sub-level five in the Kropotnik district of this fair burg.'

Meh'Lindi hissed. The hesitancy of the vigilantes seemed only due now to mutual dislike, which would soon resolve itself one way or another. Jaq quickly cut the connection.

POXED, DISFIGURED SCAVENGERS scuttled across hillocks of debris which rained into this underworld from a low steel sky by way of chutes and grilles.

Once upon a time this plasteel cavern with its ranks of mighty support pillars must have seemed spacious, voluminous,

gargantuan. Now it was merely extensive horizontally, connecting to other such caverns through vast arches in its barrier walls a couple of kilometres distant. In places the dross almost brushed the roof. Feeble illumination came from phosphorescent lichens mottling the ceiling and from the furnaces of the many tribes of recyclers whose smelting activities and whose upward export-trade in reusable elements to higher zones of the city alone prevented their home-space from filling as full as a constipated bowel.

Perhaps these inhabitants of the underworld were slowly losing the struggle. On the other hand, nourished on the synthdiet they must exchange for their impure ingots, maybe the tribes were breeding fast enough to fend off being buried alive in swarf and shavings and other detritus.

Just as a queen bee unwittingly hosts tiny mites that have specialised to graze on her mouth parts, so at the bottommost end of the city did Kefalov house its recycler and scavenger tribes. Nay, they were useful – some might say vital – to the economy of the city.

They weren't such people as would, or could, send reports to the administration high above, not even of anything monstrously peculiar. Given their foreshortened horizons, and their own abnormality, how could they really think in terms of something as being significantly abnormal?

They scuttled like crabs. They burrowed like worms. They rolled balls of wire about like dung-beetles. Jaq suspected that their recycling and export trade had practically become instinctive. What did these know of the rest of the city, let alone of planet or galaxy? As much as the mite on the bee's mouth parts knew about the rest of her body, or about the throbbing hive.

'How must it seem,' Jaq asked, 'to live one's whole life down here?'

He already knew the answer. Blessed are the ignorant; cursed are those who know too much.

'At least it's warm enough down here,' remarked Grimm.

From the catwalk they surveyed this choked cavern which lay beneath even the underbelly of the city. Furnaces winked like fireflies. Holding a lens to one eye, Jaq scanned tunnel mouths that were almost buried.

Sprawling out from one tunnel, glassy branching tentacles pulsed as if they were huge muscles dissected out of the body of a leviathan.

As soon as Jaq noticed those translucent, almost immaterial shapes, their extent appalled him. They wove across the metallic dunes, submerging themselves like roots, surfacing again, twitching, throbbing sluggishly. Tendrils coiled and uncoiled, seeming to exist one moment yet not the next.

What did the scavengers think of this intrusion into their domain by a rubbery multi-octopus? The human crabs scuttled clear of its feelers.

Or should that be: *their* feelers? Jaq couldn't tell whether the hydra was single or plural, connected or disconnected. Or how much more of it existed out of sight, packed within the tunnel complexes.

Those tentacles did not appear interested in trapping the denizens of this underzone. Rather, the hydra seemed to be waiting. Meanwhile, it signalled a menace that alarmed Jaq's psychic sense.

'Yuck,' said Grimm, as he too became aware of it. 'It's like those pesky jelly strings in eggs that stick between your teeth – really monstrous ones from an egg the size of a mountain! It's like umbilical cords and nothing but. Yuck, yuck.'

'Shall we see how it reacts to laser and plasma?' suggested Jaq.

'Oh yes, let's slice it and fry it.'

Meh'Lindi sniffed the stale, hot, ferrous air like a fretful horse.

The three headed along the catwalk, descended a rusty ladder on to the dunes of debris. They waded across until they reached a vantage point fifty metres short of the closest tentacle.

Jaq aimed his ormolu-inlaid laspistol and squeezed. Hot light leapt out from the damascened chromium steel nozzle in a dazzling silver thread. He drew the sliver of light across that limb of the hydra as if slicing cheese. He sliced and resliced. Severed portions writhed. Gobbets seemed to wink in and out of existence. Though chopped every which way, the whole tentacle squirmed towards where they stood as if still joined together, glued by some adhesive force from outside the normal universe.

'Plasma,' Jaq said to himself and switched weapons. The frontal hood of the plasma gun was gilded with safety runes. Ventilator holes in that hood doubled as the hollow pupils of slanting crimson eyes that focused faithfully on the chosen target, since a single discharge of super-heated plasma would completely exhaust the capacitor. A couple of minutes must pass before the accumulator vanes behind the hood re-energised the conductors and insulators. This target, though, was large and various.

The gun bounced in his grasp as incandescent energy leapt to evaporate a stretch of that many-times-severed, yet still tenacious limb. Its boiling substance sprayed across the dune beyond, lacquering the metallic hillock. A backwash of heated air caressed Jaq's face. He smelled the bitter fragrance of ablated chromium steel. And he sensed... eagerness.

Of a sudden, the Harlequin man sprang up from behind the dune beyond.

'Yes, yes!' he shrieked, capering and applauding. 'Shoot it to smithereens!'

Jaq jammed the discharged plasma gun away and was about to aim his laser.

Blessed are the ignorant.

But not if they are inquisitors!

'Meh'Lindi...'

'Yes, Jaq, I'll take him for you.'

'Unharméd,' he called after her.

She had already started down the scree of debris in pursuit.

'Or reasonably unharméd!'

He need not have bothered.

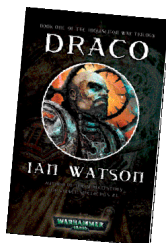
The story of Draco's hunt
for the hidden enemies of mankind
continues in HARLEQUIN,
and is concluded in CHAOS CHILD.

THE INQUISITION WAR TRILOGY

by Ian Watson

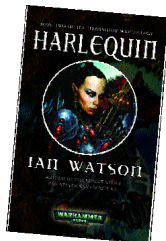
DRACO

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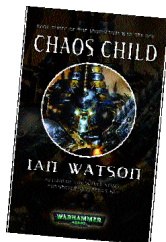
HARLEQUIN

IN THE GRIM darkness of the 41st millennium, the *Inquisition* protects mankind from its many enemies, whether foul daemons or the inscrutable, alien eldar. But who will protect humanity if even the *Inquisition* becomes corrupted? Renegade Inquisitor Jaq Draco and his motley companions find themselves caught in a war that no one can win... unless he can somehow access the ancient secrets hidden in the legendary *Black Library*.



CHAOS CHILD

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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