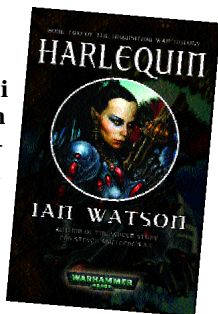


HARLEQUIN

BOOK TWO OF THE INQUISITION
WAR TRILOGY • BY IAN WATSON

BY HIS ORDER Jaq had condemned Meh'lindi to death. If her death were to be the diversion he required, she was accepting this. He distrusted her alien armour. He knew that she wasn't sprayed with an assassin's resistant synskin.

As the captain squeezed his trigger, Jaq threw himself in front of Meh'lindi, howling 'No!'



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.

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from
HARLEQUIN

JAQ RAN ALONG the so-called Lane of Loveliness of Caput City, boltgun in one hand and force rod in the other.

This particular boltgun was plated with iridescent blue titanium inlaid with silver runes. The force rod was virtually unadorned, a solid black flute embedded with a few enigmatic circuits. The force rod was for use against whatever spawn of Chaos he encountered, to augment his psychic attack. The rowdy boltgun was for use right now – against a trio of cultists who darted from cover amongst giant broken potsherds which were the remains of one of the glazed ceramic buildings.

The cultists' eyes were glazed with frenzy. One fired a stub gun inaccurately. Bullets from the slugger pinged off a nearby wall of glazed terracotta. The second cultist was swinging a chainsword two-handed. Obviously he was unfamiliar with the weapon. The sword buzzed furiously as its razor-edged teeth spun round, cutting empty air. The third of the cultists was a burly muscular brute. From a hand flamer gushed a narrow cone of burning fuel. Heat scorched Jaq's face, but none of the fiery droplets had touched him.

Such a flamer was too compact a weapon to be worth firing from a distance, nor could its reservoir hold much pressurized fuel. Each blazing aerosol jet was spectacular but it extinguished quickly. You had to be close to your target.

Jaq's bolter yakkered. Several bolts erupted in the body of the flamer wielder. It was as though the man had been booby-trapped internally with packets of explosive. These now detonated. For a moment the cultist quivered like jelly.

The muscle-bound envelope of his body actually seemed to contain the shock waves. Abruptly he burst apart, gutted thoroughly and bloodily.

A bolt from Jaq's gun caromed off a great glazed potsherd, winging skyward into the haze of smoke which drifted across the city front fires. Subsequent bolts tore the gunman apart, then the swordsman too.

Jaq sniffed the sharp nitric aftermath of propellant which had ignited after each bolt flew from the muzzle.

'Noisy,' said Meh'lindi.

Yes, noisy. Yet with hardly any recoil. *RAAARK*, the gun would utter with each squeeze of the trigger. It hardly bucked at all in one's hand. With a plosive pop it would ejaculate a bolt. With a flaring swish, that bolt would ignite and accelerate away. Then there would come the thud of impact, followed by the blast of detonation.

RAARK-pop-SWOOSH-thud-CRUMP: this was the lingo of a boltgun. When it uttered several such statements, what a cacophony! The name of this particular boltgun, inscribed on the trigger guard, was *Emperor's Mercy*.

Meh'lindi held a laspistol in one hand and a toxic needle pistol in the other. Both weapons were delicately damascened. She had sprayed herself with black synthetic skin and wore her red assassin's sash twisted around her loins, various secrets concealed therein. The sash and her golden eyes were the only colours visible. Otherwise, she was a deadly black effigy of herself – supple and lithe. Even her eyelids were black as night. She had eschewed the digital weaponry which sometimes adorned her fingers like baroque thimbles.

Jaq wore lightweight mesh armour under his black habit, but Meh'lindi needed none. Her syn-skin would resist flame and flash and poison gas as well as honing her vitality. She breathed and spoke through a throat plug. She heard – acutely – through ear plugs.

She favoured the needle pistol. The bursts of energy from the laspistol tended to disperse over distance, especially if the air was hazy, as now. It appealed to her assassin's instincts to speed tiny toxic dartlets by laser pulse into some distant target.

Abruptly Meh'lindi pivoted. Without seeming to take aim she fired at a rooftop, twice. Two cultists convulsed as neurotoxins ravaged their nervous systems.

For Jaq, with his psychic sense, a vast shape seemed to brood in the smoke over the city. The shadow-figure wore a carnivorous, bullish head. How balefully its eyes gloated at all the killing which was in progress. Two mighty arms ended in serrated crab claws. A single female breast bulged obscenely. The presence came and went, a phenomenon of the smoke.

Could many other people than Jaq perceive that manifestation? 'Do you see it, Meh'lindi?' Jaq demanded, gesturing. 'It's up there again!'

She shook her head. Yet she believed him. She hissed assassin's curses – as if those curses might injure an aerial apparition which gallingly did not even register upon her senses.

Somewhere in the city a corrupted Cult Magus must be invoking and conjuring and sacrificing victims while praying to the cards of a Chaos Tarot.

Jaq pointed his force rod at the sky.

'Don't listen to me,' he ordered Meh'lindi. Yet how should an assassin fail to register every diagnostic sound in her vicinity? 'At least try not to understand me. Try to hear just noise.'

She began to chant some primitive outlandish barbarisms from her erstwhile jungle-world home which she would never see again, nor wished to.

'Avaunt, daemon,' yelled Jaq. '*Apage, O'tlahsi'isso'akshami! Begone, Slave of Lust! In nomine Imperatoris ego te exorcizo!*'

He discharged his weapon, and his psychic rebuttal, skyward. A pastel-orange glow ballooned. The phantom was gone. For the moment.

This was not the first occasion on this violent day that Jaq had used his force rod. Earlier, though through no fault of his own, he had used it too late. And Vitali had died in the embrace of a dancing daemonette.

A daemonette present in Chaos-flesh – and in Chaos-chitin!

Plainly this world needed Jaq for its salvation. Yet he must only linger long enough to find a new Navigator and to abduct a first-class astropath.

A higher purpose claimed him. Or was his quest an obsessed and futile one?

Vitali had died in that sweet and lethal embrace... How much better if Meh'lindi had killed the Navigator immediately after they landed at the besieged spaceport.

THE LANE OF Loveliness was a broad boulevard rather than a lane. It was far from lovely now. Its glazed ceramic buildings were cracked or wrecked. Debris and corpses littered the cratered tessellated paving.

A kilometre ahead, weaponry chattered and raved. A robed Judge was leading a team of dark-clad, visored Arbites against a barricade of burned-out vehicles. Upon the barricade was mounted a lascannon. Formidable! However, a lascannon was a poor anti-personnel weapon. It took too long to recharge. It couldn't fan around. That Judge and his zealous warriors would soon seize that particular barricade.

The balance of loyal and rebel forces teetered to and fro, but the rebels appeared to be winning. The governor's Planetary Defence Force had been taken aback by the sheer number of cultists who were rebelling. Some of the governor's troops were insufficiently ruthless. Others mutinied. The forces of the courthouse, while fervently brave, weren't too numerous.

The recently arrived Pontifex Mundi of the Ecclesiarchy should have waited for reinforcement by Imperial Guardsmen before declaring that heresy polluted the planet, and trying to root it out.

Yet an evangelical confessor had egged the pontifex on. This confessor had detected signs of Slaaneshi cultism amongst the population. Under the pretence of a so-called 'Goodlife Movement' people were addicted to the Chaos God of pleasure-pain.

Signs of laxity were everywhere: in the continuing beautification of the cities with mosaics and fountains, in charity towards beggars, in the peace and prosperity of the planet, in regulations for the benevolent conduct of brothels, in the ever-rising standard of cuisine, in the abolition of laws allowing the torture of suspects, even in the pronunciation of the local dialect of Imperial Gothic.

The new pontifex wished to establish his authority firmly. That pontifex was dead now. So was the confessor.

LUXUS WAS A yellow sun, almost saffron: a rich yolk. Its name signified light but also splendour, with a hint of debauchery, and even riot.

Bathed in the light of Luxus, Luxus Prime was primarily a granary-world. Its single huge continent yielded vast

harvests, reaped by giant mechanised harvesters. On surrounding lush islands ranches raised fine beef and lamb – a wealth of realfood. Some of this yield was exported to the hot, airless mining world which orbited closer to the sun and to its factory moon which was as large as Earth's Luna. Some of the produce travelled as far as Terra itself.

In the interior of the fertile continent, a great ring of mountains encircled a region of different grains: endless grains of sand.

Rains from the ocean could never cross the mountain range. In the enclosed desert, where poisonous sand-grubs excreted gems, the glazed glittering ceramic cities of Luxus Prime clustered.

By the standards of the Imperium these cities were idyllic places, elegant and amenable.

To the newly arrived pontifex, Luxus Prime must have seemed almost effeminate and innocuous, ripe for pious chastening, unlikely to offer much resistance to the rod of religion.

The pontifex had misjudged the situation – as had the Imperial Judges in Caput City.

No sooner was pressure applied than poisonous pus burst forth – to the amazement even of the governor. Foppish Lord Lagnost, so it seemed, had maintained his family's rule by default rather than by domination. His Defence Force was equipped with too many stunguns and not enough lethal weapons.

Oh, there were armouries, in case of raids by marauding aliens. No such raid had occurred for a thousand years. The rebels seized two of the main armouries. How many of these rebels there were! If the Goodlife Movement – at least in its higher echelons – had been a mask for worship of Slaanesh, other Chaos cults evidently existed too. Evil joined forces with other breeds of evil in a treacherous alliance.

Oh, but an affronted fop could summon up some savagery. pontifex and confessor died. Yet Lord Lagnost managed to resist, holding onto the spaceport and the sprawling purple and golden faience pleasure domes of his palace.

A SMALL SQUAD of the Defence Force hove into view. Four men. Their mustard-yellow tunics were torn and dusty. Under the film of grime each man's cheek was tattooed with a small purple carnivorous flower resembling a birthmark. This was an

affectation typical of Luxus Prime. These defenders of the state were 'Lord Lagnost's Flowers'. Three were armed with combat shotguns and one with a bolt pistol, the junior relative of *Emperor's Mercy*. The Flowers gaped at the tall black golden-eyed figure of Meh'lindi in her synskin. They whistled lewdly.

'Tall pushy cat!'

'Black pershine pushy cat!'

'Purr for ush!'

'Shurrender! Pull in your clawsh, pushy cat and keeper!'

A cat? What was a cat?

Ah yes: Moma Parsheen, the astropath of Stalinvast, had owned one such creature as a pet. She had stroked and pampered it so as to experience the scratch of its claws. Such a sensuous selfish egotistic animal – as selfish as Moma Parsheen herself, who had transmitted Jaq's message ordering the *exterminatus* of her whole planet even after Jaq had countermanded the message.

'Pershine' must be some kind of cat-animal with particularly glowing fur...

'Pushy cat, pushy cat!'

This aspiration of words was typical of Luxus Prime. People would say 'shunshine' for sunshine. This *aitching* of the ess sound seemed somehow connected with the aspirations – in the ambitious sense – of the Goodlife Movement. The mannerism was soporific, tranquillizing. It served a calming and hushing purpose, reassuring everyone that nothing harmful was happening.

Wasn't it sinister that people should refer to 'shunshine', as if light was to be shunned? As if illumination must not be cast too brightly upon the festering pus beneath the surface, underneath the lovely skin? Upon the filth which nourished the roots of the flower!

'In Lord Lagnosht's name shurrender, pushy cat and her keeper!'

Meh'lindi must seem like some daemon to them, and Jaq in his hooded habit like a Magus.

'Assist us in the Emperor's name!' shouted Jaq. 'Assist us in His Name!'

Even as he called out, suspicion stung him.

Why should these men suppose that Meh'lindi was a daemon or that he was a Magus? Even the bulk of cultists might

be oblivious to the existence of daemons and unacquainted with Magi.

Maybe the men had recently seen something as terrible as the daemonette which it had been Jaq's ghastly privilege to encounter.

If so, wasn't their attitude flippant?

Meh'lindi hissed...

...as two of Lord Lagnost's Flowers trotted forward, smiling and nodding. Without the least betraying signal the soldiers fired their shotguns at Jaq.

Two massive blows impacted in his chest, hurling him backward...

DURING THE INITIAL assault on the environs of the spaceport, cultists had rampaged through the Navigators' quarter, butchering any they could find – as Jaq had learned soon after a dangerous landing.

None of the extensive Navigator families maintained a formal chapterhouse on *Luxus Prime*. Yet numbers of inns catered to interstellar Navigators, as well as to ordinary in-system pilots. The armed mobs had trashed these inns.

Reportedly some Navigators had fought back by tearing off their bandannas to expose the warp-eye in their brows, and darting the *killing gaze* at their attackers. Their assailants were too numerous. Very few Navigators had escaped, fleeing into hiding.

In the Mercantile district adjacent to that ransacked quarter, the mobs had lynched blind astropaths who sent commercial messages for the large food cartels. The cultists had assaulted the temple of the Imperial Ecclesiarchy and killed the astropath of the Adeptus Ministorum. That was when the pontifex and the confessor had also died.

Obviously the aim was to isolate the solar system of *Luxus* from the Imperium.

Embattled Lord Lagnost had warmly welcomed the arrival of an Imperial inquisitor at his palace, when Jaq displayed his electronic tattoo of the outer Inquisition.

Outer Inquisition, ha! In Lord Lagnost's view of the universe there was only one, almost legendary Inquisition. A planetary governor such as he – and many roving inquisitors themselves – knew nothing whatever regarding an *inner* Inquisition, the

daemon-hunting elite of the Ordo Malleus who scrutinized the scrutinizers.

Ordinarily the Inquisition was much to be feared. Who in the whole cosmos did not have some cause to fear vigilant scrutiny? The attentions of the Inquisition were a cause for qualms. In the present extremity those attentions were very welcome.

If only Sir Draco had arrived accompanied by several shiploads of Imperial Guardsmen, or even (whisper it) *Space Marines*! Naturally Sir Draco was welcome to commandeer a unit of the Defence Force in defence of Lord Lagnost's devout and loyal dynasty...

THE OBESE WHEEZING Lagnost had worn robes sequined with the iridescent wingcases of beetles, by turns azure and violet and sapphire. On his head was perched a gem-crusted velvet hat in the shape of a half-size peacock with tail fanned erect. Breathing tubes, studded with jewels, arched from a collar of golden flexi-metal. Like tusks sprouting from his neck, these curved up around his jowls, and plugged his nostrils. His breath whistled in and out through grilles like gills inset into those tusks, assisted by miniature pumps. Below his tusks hung numerous amulets.

His palace was ornate with arabesque tile-work and tessellations. Its thick soft carpets were woven in silk mixed with wool of all the hues of green, as if intricate pathways of grasses and mosses covered all the floors. The ever-shifting sheen seemed constantly to reveal new routes.

Silk-clad boys and girls, young catamites and junior concubines, cowered from the crackle and thump of battle; but Lagnost had been wheezing perceptive orders to officers whenever one hurried into his presence to report.

Jaq had demanded to know the whereabouts of the governor's astropath.

Why, Fennix was calling astrally for military assistance from a safe deep location. So would be his counterpart deep beneath the fortified courthouse.

Assistance from an Arbites ship, if any was in the vicinity of Luxus. Assistance from a ship of the Imperial Guard – or even from a vessel manned by Space Marines.

Could one dream of assistance from Space Marines? Could any of those legendary warriors, bastions against so much more

terrible foes, be spared to help restore order, even if any were within a hundred light-years?

Vast was the galaxy. Myriad the worlds. In any volume of space few were the forces of order. A star system could fall out of touch for decades – even centuries – before any heed was paid. Decades – or centuries – more might elapse before anything was done.

The governor's personal astropath was staying *under seal*. What help could be called upon, beyond what was already being attempted? What help but Sir Draco's own expertise? And that of his lithe, exotic woman companion!

Hardly the help of his Navigator. Googol had not been able to stop eyeing the governor's terrified junior harem. He recited dismayed verses to himself. He muttered copulatory couplets. His ravaged lower lip sported a grotesque displaced moustache of caked blood. Saliva moistened it.

JAQ CRASHED BACK upon a ruptured mosaic. Immediately he was hit, his mesh armour had stiffened. The web of woven thermoplas had become rigid to spread the double impact. Those shotguns had fired solid shells, not scattershot. Two sledgehammer blows at close quarters had knocked him off his feet. He must lie momentarily until the armour relaxed. But his forearm remained unimpeded. Already he was pointing *Emperor's Mercy* at his assailants, even as they swung their weapons to address the matter of Meh'lindi.

They assumed that the robed person on the ground must be dead. His black habit was torn open just where his lungs would be.

Should they pump shells into the tall black 'pushy cat' with the golden gaze? Or simply disarm her? Perhaps literally so! With shotgun and bolt pistol apiece, two Flowers were aiming at Meh'lindi's hands. Lacking hands, she would be much more amenable. They believed her to be more decorative than deadly.

Little did they know that even deprived of hands she could kill with her feet or with almost any other part of her anatomy. She could spit poison from a crushed tooth. Even crippled, she could kill, overriding any agony she felt. Small chance would they have even to discover their error in this regard.

Already neurotoxic darts from her needle pistol were causing two of them to convulse. Their muscles tugged every which way.

Their internal organs waged war on their own liquefying tissue. Their brains were a-crackle with short circuits.

Already bursts of laser energy from her other pistol had melted the leering eyes and features of the other two Flowers—
—even as *Emperor's Mercy* began to utter its lethal opinion:

RAARKpopSWOOSHthudCRUMP

RAARKpopSWOOSHthudCRUMP

RAARKpopSWOOSHthudCRUMP

RAARKpopSWOOSHthudCRUMP...

Its opinion was hardly necessary. Two of its targets were already dead on their feet. The other two might still have some residual life in their scorch-blasted skulls.

Nevertheless, *Emperor's Mercy* blew three of the renegade Defence Force men apart. The stink of blood and guts, toasted flesh, and excrement mingled with the nitric tang of burned propellant.

Jaq's armour had relaxed across his chest. He scrambled erect to examine the rips in his black habit. The thermoplas web showed through, as if his skin was scaly as some reptile's.

This ancient bodyglove of mesh armour had once been worn by an eldar. It had become a souvenir of the Inquisition, memento of that enigmatic species, one of whose females Meh'lindi had once impersonated.

She could never again hope to impersonate an eldar by injecting polymorphine to reshape her body. Not since her terrible experimental surgery at the hands of the Callidus shrine of assassins. Now she could only alter into that abomination, a genestealer hybrid. Compressed implants were within her. If her flesh became pliable the polymorphine drug would expand those implants tyrannically. Her own willpower would have no say in the matter.

A bodyglove of eldar armour – forged by that secretive species, some of whose most exotic members were known as Harlequins...

Wandering warriors and performers...

The *Harlequin Man*, who aped their ways, had led Jaq such a dance on Stalinvast. That crazy cunning human clown had subjected Meh'lindi to his will. He had lured Jaq to become involved in the hydra conspiracy. Zephro Carnelian had worn the garb of those fabled eldar Harlequins, doing his best to mimic the notorious quicksilver speed of an eldar. (He had

almost equalled an eldar in his capers!) What statement had Carnelian been making? That he was fundamentally alien at heart? Alien to the human species? That the human species only deserved to be plied like puppets? Or that he was alien to those conspirators with whom he consorted?

Jaq's head ached with enigma and dismay. His chest was bruised too beneath the mesh armour.

He and Meh'lindi must find one of the surviving Navigators, wherever in this war-torn city one was hiding for his life.

He blew upon the muzzle of the boltgun, adding his spirit to its own, and hummed a quick canticle.

'Hesitation is always fatal,' he told Meh'lindi, reproving himself as much as her. Hesitation had been fatal for the four rene-gades. Hesitation had also been fatal in the case of Vitali.

'And yet,' he continued, 'rashness can be worse.'

Would they find a skulking Navigator by rampaging? She eyed *Emperor's Mercy*.

'Noisy,' she repeated tersely. In this city which had become a jungle she seemed to have reverted to feral tribeswoman in her jargon.

Needn't be quite so noisy, a boltgun. Bolts ignited after being ejected from the muzzle. Arguably the gun could simply say *pop-SWOOSH-thud-CRUMP*. And not roar *RAARK* as well. Noise was part of its impact, part of its message of shock and death.

Jaq had wished to be noisy – ostentatious and flamboyant, like an inquisitor of the stripe of Harq Obispal. Thus he would impress Lord Lagnost. Thus he would cloak his own secret agenda. Maybe he should have armed himself with a fiercely buzzing chainsword which would scream whenever its teeth bit into its objective. There had been neither chainsword nor power sword in the weapons lockers of *Tormentum Malorum*.

Meh'lindi was implying that the clatter of the boltgun must necessarily attract hostile attention. No sooner would one set of opponents be killed than others would hurry to confront the source of the cacophony.

These flowers who now lay converted to cooked manure hadn't been frenzied. They had been sly...

More spontaneity in killing Googol might at least have saved the man's soul!

AFTER HURRYING FROM the governor's palace with two squads of loyalists, Jaq had indeed rampaged along the fringe of the smoldering Navigators' quarter with Meh'lindi, Googol stumbling in tow.

Why would a Navigator flee, to hide himself? With that black betraying bandanna round his brow. Or with brow exposed, betraying the deadly third eye!

Jaq and Meh'lindi killed. Interrogated.

Why were they searching for a Navigator? This was the question which the officer attached to those squads finally nerved himself to ask. Jaq already had a Navigator. Evidently of dubious calibre and mental imbalance! Was Jaq truly here to bring salvation?

'Don't you understand?' Jaq had shouted at the officer. 'Naturally we must rescue any Navigators. Otherwise this world will be isolated from the Imperium!'

Were they searching for a particular relative of Jaq's own Navigator? For some member of Googol's own vast family?

'*Nefanda curiositas!*' Jaq had snarled at the officer. The man must obey an inquisitor without thought – even when their route was taking them away from the strife-torn vicinity of the palace and spaceport.

Then a sniper had shot the officer with a laser-guided toxic dart. Maybe it was as well that the officer was shot and could never report any of his impious misgivings to Lord Lagnost.

'Here dies a heretic!' Jaq had bellowed at the dead officer's men. 'Whoever doubts, dies. *Qui dubitat, morit.*'

How he loathed to use sacred words to reinforce a lie. Yet was not the deeper truth that this staunch officer was indeed a heretic in the vaster perspective? To dispute with any inquisitor was a blasphemy. How much more so when Jaq's vital need impinged upon the very future of the human species. It would be anathema to explain this. And impossible. And incredible.

Then Vitali had begun to spook the soldiers.

That spindly bald figure capered upon the glossy smashed tiles fallen from roofs. He swirled his fluted silks around himself. He sang out:

'Heart-throb, heart-throb,

'Here am I, here am I!

'Oh I wink with my killing eye.

'What a day to die!'

He tore off his bandanna.

Jaq had instantly averted his gaze; and Meh'lindi – she was writhing about on the ground. Was she a casualty?

Googol's warp-gaze ranged over the soldiers. One man's scream strangled as his throat constricted, suffocating him. Another man collapsed as if a hand had squeezed his heart. A third vomited blood. The eyes of a fourth man popped out because of the pressure in his skull.

Meh'lindi was scrabbling about for a piece of glazed tile suitable to use as a mirror – a mirror to mute the terrible reflection of Googol's eye.

That was really the moment when she should have launched herself towards Googol with her eyes closed tight, relying upon her assassin's instinct for location. She should have nerve-blocked the Navigator, killing him. However, Jaq had not given any such order.

Such a presentiment of imminent abomination violated Jaq's psychic sense. He fought to repel immaterial fingers from congealing into existence.

'He's gone gone gone,' chanted Meh'lindi.

Silks flapping, Googol had taken off along a winding lane as if hounds were at his heels or razorwings at his neck. He passed out of sight around a corner. To their ears came a fading halloo of 'Slishy-slishy-slishy!'

A spasming hand caught hold of Jaq's boot as he passed a victim. He wrenched free. He called out to survivors, 'Stay here and kill the injured mercifully!' With Meh'lindi he raced in pursuit of Googol, readying his force rod as he ran.

Too late.

Far too late.

In a court of lustrous pink tiles inset with golden mosaics of dancing girls, Vitali had encountered the terrible object of his tormented longing.

A daemonette had materialized.

One of Slaanesh's she-creatures had actually come into existence – a Chaos-creature of perverse seduction and lethal consequences.

Her single exposed breast was divine. So were her thighs and loins. Yet hers was a malign divinity. Her cascade of blonde hair almost hid green eyes which were unnaturally elongated. Her lips, so lush. She was embracing Vitali. She was cooing, rubbing

against him. No endearments could hide the scaly claws of her feet or the pincers of her hands – yet what did Vitali care?

The Navigator's exposed warp-eye certainly hadn't devastated the daemonette. Why should it, when she was herself such a warped denizen of that other dimension, roost of the Gods of Chaos? Vitali's warp-eye had surely summoned her all the more vigorously into existence. How she writhed against him. How her razor-sharp pincers sliced his silks, denuding him. Exposed skin was being sliced softly and subtly, inscribing upon him a slim calligraphy of blood which might in some arcane script be that daemonette's secret name, signed upon him so as to possess his soul.

An eddy of harrowing lusts rocked Jaq. Such sickening images assaulted him – of Meh'lindi lying naked with him on that single occasion in his sleep-cell aboard *Tormentum Malorum*. In his temporary hallucination all the tattoos on Meh'lindi's body were alive and squirming. The snake which climbed her right leg bared its fangs to bite. The scarabs and other beetles which masked her many scars were much larger, and hungry. The hairy spider which engulfed her midriff waved its legs mesmerically, to trap Jaq and suck him dry.

Meh'lindi wasn't human at all. She was a huge spindly wasp infested with parasites. All of those virulent bites and the suction would enrapture him hideously – until he expired. The delusion sullied all that he had experienced with her, of solace and exorcism. How it blasphemed.

Was Meh'lindi likewise experiencing a monstrous distortion of what occurred between them, once and only once, a negation of any fleeting tenderness and compassion?

If so, let it be! Tenderness was treason to duty, and delusion. Had he not blasphemed by consoling himself? Contrariwise, what ecstasy might yet be his if Meh'lindi strangled him slowly or sliced his flesh a thousand times?

Even as Jaq levelled his force rod, the daemonette parted her legs. A barbed tail slid through the gap. The barb jerked upward impaling Googol. Vitali rose on tiptoes as the razor-thrust penetrated deep within his bowel. In a delirium of agony and rapture Vitali screamed, '*Slisly!*' as Jaq's force rod discharged.

Energies coruscated around the daemonette. Auroras outlined her as if to highlight that she belonged not in this tiled court but elsewhere entirely – right outside of the world, outside of the

natural universe. She shrieked shrilly. Her soprano outcry might have been one of exultation and glee.

Then the energies imploded. And so did she. She became flat instead of solid. She became a single angular line which seemed to stretch far away, distorting geometry itself. Swiftly that line shrank to a nauseous bright point. The point left an aching after-image.

Vitali's ravished corpse sprawled. Torn silk adhered to him like long, thin black leaves.

He was dead. Utterly dead. And surely the daemonette had stolen his spirit away – to continue that vile tormenting tryst elsewhere in immaterial phantom form forever while his ghost-lips gibbered.

Jaq prayed devoutly at the head of the corpse. Meh'lindi stood over the feet, crouched and predatory, in case the Navigator might yet twitch back to life, possessed by some zombie parody of life, to be killed anew.

'Bitter regrets,' she murmured.

'On my part too,' said Jaq.

When they retraced their steps to where dead soldiers and the officer lay, the survivors had fled. One victim still moaned. Meh'lindi mercifully snapped his neck.

SMOKE HAD DESCENDED to veil the Lane of Loveliness. 'Noisy,' repeated Meh'lindi.

No longer was she alluding to the boltgun, but to a throb of engines which became growl and then a roar.

From out of the dirty haze a trio of power-trikes came bouncing over the debris. Twin autoguns were mounted on the front forks of the trikes.

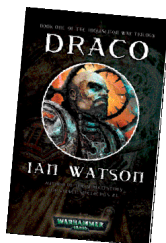
Draco's story
is concluded in CHAOS CHILD.

THE INQUISITION WAR TRILOGY

by Ian Watson

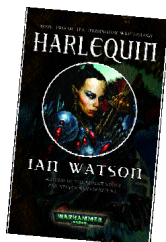
DRACO

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.



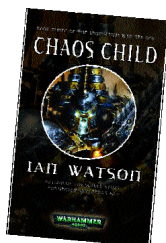
HARLEQUIN

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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