

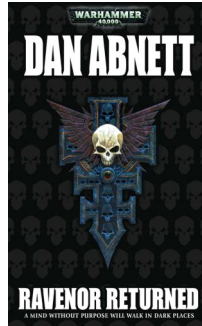
RAVENOR RETURNED

The second Ravenor novel

By Dan Abnett

Inquisitor Gideon Ravenor and his retinue are believed dead and, with shadowy forces moving against them, they'd like to keep it that way. Returning back to the planet Eustis Majoris, they go undercover, investigating a brutal ring of smugglers moving stolen arcane technology within the Imperium.

As they descend deeper into the organisation, it becomes clear that a terrible plot is unravelling. The ancient machines contain the unthinkable, and Ravenor must summon all of his wits to thwart the conspirators before the ultimate secrets of Chaos itself are laid bare!



About the Author

Dan Abnett lives and works in Maidstone, Kent, in England. Well known for his comic work, he has written everything from the Mr Men to the X-Men in the last decade. His work for the Black Library includes the popular strips Lone Wolves, Titan and Darkblade, the best-selling Gaunt's Ghosts novels, and the acclaimed Inquisitor Eisenhorn trilogy.

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SO, LATE IN THE year 402.M41, we returned to Eustis Majoris to finish the work.

It had been well over twelve months since we had last stood together upon that dark, overpopulated planet, and we returned now incognito. Our enemies believed us to be long dead. So much the better. Secrecy was the only real weapon we had left. From the moment of our return onwards, everything would be secrets and lies, until death rendered all things equal and void.

On the last night of our journey back, I visited my comrades, one by one. It was a courtesy I paid out of respect. I was about to ask a lot from each one of them.

I FOUND HARLON NAYL hunting game on a shelf of evergreen forest below a pearl-white glacier. The air was cold and thin. Will Tallowhand was with him, and they were walking together with their long rifles leaning across their shoulders.

I approached through the long grass, spreading my hands to ruffle the stalks that swished around me. Will saw me first. He turned and smiled at me, then tapped Harlon on the shoulder.

Will Tallowhand had been dead a long while. He called something out to me that I couldn't catch. By the time I'd reached them, he had faded away like smoke.

Harlon Nayl looked me up and down. 'Been a long time since you've done this, Gideon,' he said.

'I know,' I replied.

'Looking good,' he said.

‘Looking whole,’ I answered.

He nodded. He was a big man, tall and corded with muscle. His bullet head was shaved but for a tuft of beard on his chin.

‘Is it that bad?’ he asked.

‘That bad?’

He shrugged. ‘Been a long time, like I said. It must be bad for you to come to me like this. I think I know what you’re here to ask.’

‘Do you now?’

Harlon nodded again. ‘Think I do. You want to know if I want to go on.’

‘And do you?’

‘I always thought I’d be in it for the long haul...’ He looked away as his voice trailed off wistfully. The ghost shapes of prong-horn game were melting into the tree-line.

‘Where is this?’ I asked him.

He shrugged. ‘I forget. Durer, maybe, or Gudrun. Sleep often brings me here. Although last time, the glacier was over there.’

We reached the edge of mountain lake lying like a glass spearhead amongst the evergreens. It was so still and glassy it mirrored the trees, the glacier and the sky.

And there we were too, side by side. Harlon, broad-shouldered, thick-armed, his physique as tough and flexible and well-worn as the leather bodyglove he wore. And me, as I had been at the age of thirty-four, an eternity before. A little shorter than Harlon, rather lighter in build, long black hair tied back from a high cheek-boned face that I’d once seen regularly in other mirrors.

‘What are you in your dreams?’ Harlon asked.

‘Am I like this, do you mean?’

‘Yeah.’

I shook my head. ‘No, not for years now. I dream like I live, confined and yet unlimited, in the darkness. But I thought I’d look like this for a change tonight.’

‘Because it’s that bad? I hope this isn’t a psychological game. You wearing your old face to remind us how we met you and who we first swore allegiance to? Hard to say “no” to someone’s face.’

‘Do you want to say no?’

‘Boss, we’ve been through plenty together. Plenty of bad things. Molotoch. That business on Dolsene. Stuff I don’t want to remember. Is this really that much worse?’

I paused. ‘It could be.’

‘What about the others?’

‘I haven’t asked them yet. I’m asking you.’

‘And I’m saying yes. You’re going to the others now?’

‘Yes.’

‘Can I come?’

I SAID YES. We broke the mirror lake into shards and blurred into a stone cell in a tower on Sameter where Patience Kys was singing a lullaby to her long-lost sisters. Prudence and Providence were snuggled up in their cots, ten years old. Outside, an electrical storm split the night.

‘Who are those men?’ Prudence asked, pointing.

Kys turned sharply. The two silver kineblades pinning her long black hair plucked themselves free and circled towards us in the candlelight.

I brushed them aside carefully. Even in dreams, such weapons can wound.

‘What are you two doing here?’ Kys spat. She was a tall, slender woman in her mid-twenties, agile and quick. Unloosed, her straight black hair framed her pale, high-cheek bones and her fierce green eyes.

‘I’m sorry to intrude, Patience,’ I began.

‘He’s come to ask the question, Kys,’ Harlon Nayl said beside me.

‘Yeah?’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘If you want to step off, I’ll understand. Do it now before it’s too late.’

‘You staying?’ Kys asked Nayl.

‘Of course,’ he replied.

‘I’m staying too,’ she told me, fixing me with those terrible green eyes. ‘It’s an honour thing.’

‘Because you want revenge?’ I asked.

‘No, because I’m sworn to you, and this is what we do.’

We left Kys to finish her song. Carl Thonius was harder to locate. The boundaries of his dreams were thick and clotted, and when we entered them, we found ourselves lost in a forest of clothing racks hung with thousands of beautiful garments.

The air was colder than Nayl’s alpine dream.

‘Carl? Carl?’

At the heart of the forest of hanging clothes, Carl Thonius sat naked in a clearing, surrounded by framed mirrors. He rose as we dragged our way in through the jackets and pantaloons and waistcoats. He put on a robe.

The innermost rings around the clearing were bare metal racks rattling with empty clothes hangers.

‘This is an intrusion,’ he said. Carl Thonius was a very mannered person: slender and spare, elegant, his hair a blond, coiffured fringe. His voice trailed away as he saw the guise I’d come in.

‘He wants to ask you the question,’ Nayl said, grinning at Thonius’s discomfort. ‘You know, the question.’

‘The inquisitor knows the answer,’ Carl replied tersely. ‘I am his interrogator. I go where he goes, in the Emperor’s name, worlds without end.’

‘Thank you. But I had to ask, Carl,’ I said.

‘I know you did, sir,’ he answered, pulling his robe tight. ‘Our status is Special Condition?’

‘Yes. When we arrive at Eustis Majoris,’ I said, ‘our first problem will be establishing and maintaining cover identity. False documents won’t get us very far and I’ll be damned if we’re going to lose our only advantage.’

‘We’ll all be damned,’ smiled Carl.

‘Then we need something else. Something clever.’

‘I’ll give it a little thought, sir,’ he said.

Two pale, wan suns were setting over us as we crunched down a stretch of foreshore together. There was a figure ahead of us in the twilight, scooping and searching along the beach.

The shoreline was littered with billions of left hands, each one real and flesh and blood. All the same, each one was impossibly fitted with a chrome bracket at the wrist.

Zeph Mathuin was moving along the shoreline, picking up each hand in turn and trying it against the socket of his left arm. Each mis-fitting hand he tossed aside.

Mathuin was a tall, dark-skinned man of enormous physical strength. His black hair was braided in rows. In this, his dream, his eyes weren't the red-coal augmented flicker of life. They were soft and brown.

He looked round as we approached, discarding another clenching hand.

'Shit,' said Nayl, gazing at the long, wide beach of twitching hands. 'Zeph's dreams are so much freakier than mine.'

'Zeph?' I called out.

'I can't find it. Can't find it. Can't.'

'Zeph,' I said again.

'What?' he barked, turning to glare at me.

'I wanted to ask—'

'The answer's yes,' he said, and turned back to his sorting along the shoreline of wriggling fingers.

WE FINALLY LOCATED Kara Swole in a dressing room behind a thunderous wooden carnival hall in the backwoods of Bonaventure. Outside, barkers with brass voice-trumpets shouted the odds, and the crowd was roaring. Kara sat before the harshly-lit make-up mirror, her red hair pulled back in a lace strap as she white-powdered her face.

Short, supple, voluptuous, she turned in her camp chair as we came in.

'Is it time already?' she asked.

'Yes,' I said.

'Time to go on?'

‘Yes.’

She came over to me and stroked my arms, tugging at my cuffs.

‘You were such a handsome man, Gideon.’

‘Thank you.’

‘Sometimes I forget... I forget what you looked like, back then.

You haven’t come to me this way in a long time.’

‘That’s just what I said,’ said Nayl.

Kara’s face changed. ‘I’m dreaming, aren’t I?’

‘Yes, you are.’

‘We’re starting tomorrow, aren’t we?’

‘Yes.’

‘This is the dream where you come and ask me if I want to go on, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, it is.’

‘Even to the death?’

‘Even that.’

‘What about the others?’

‘Patience, Zeph and Carl are all with me,’ I said.

‘Me too,’ said Nayl.

‘Frauka and Zael?’

‘I couldn’t get into Frauka’s dreams if I tried... and I won’t get into the boy’s. It’s just us, the band. I needed to know you were still with me.’

‘Of course!’

‘Kara... Now’s the time, the last time. If you want out, say now.’

‘Are you kidding?’ she said. ‘The show must go on.’

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, ship-time, the *Arethusa* translated back into material space on the edge of the Eustis System. The old freighter had been so often repaired and rebuilt during its lifetime, that all clues to its original class and designation had long since vanished in the patchwork mess of its hull. Unwerth liked to think of it (and, by extension, himself too) as a rogue trader, but it was little more than a tinker ship, scraping a living in cheap trinkets and surplus perishables up and down the trade lanes.

From retranslation, we joined the busy in-system route, and finally picked up the services of a pilot boat which led us in through the overcrowded rafts of the high anchor harbours to a vacant dock. Berthing fees were twenty crowns a day, and we reserved the anchorage for a calendar month.

The stained globe of Eustis Majoris revolved slowly beneath us. The orbital harbours were superstructures of brass and steel, resembling in their structure and their glittering lights giant circus calliopes the size of continents, linked together in a loose string. More than ten thousand vessels alone clung at anchor to the scaffold-wharves around us. Some of the ships were private merchantmen, hauliers, trade-runners; others vast mass conveyance vessels from the noble chartered companies and the franchised lines. Rows of dull, grey Munitorum freighters suckled against raft-edges. Gold and crimson mission-ships of the Ecclesiarchy, splendid as ceremonial sceptres, dragged at the titanic chains that moored them to private, consecrated docking areas. In the distance, threat-black warships skulked in armoured pens separate from the main harbours. Near-space bustled with traffic: shuttles, service ships, mobile derricks, tankers, lighters, lift ships bound for the surface, taking the traders' merchandise down to the markets of Eustis Majoris's cities.

Apart from cursory identification, pilot ship dues and berthing registration, no one really noticed the *Arethusa*. Just another mangy, nondescript tramp limping in with ice on its pitted hull, trailing skeins of fuel vapour from where the pressures of the Empyrean had flexed and deformed its fabric.

Carl had come to me early, and described the plan that had evolved in his mind. I valued Carl most for his technical brilliance, but this scheme impressed me as much for its daring and audacity. As an operative, he was maturing.

'There are risks,' I said.

'Of course. But as you said, we need to be able to operate freely without fear of detection. Even the best forged documents will show up as false if subjected to thorough Informium inspection. And we have every reason to believe that the people we're dealing with will have access to such resources.'

‘So the perfect solution is to get the Informium itself to forge documents for us?’

He smiled. It was the smile he used when he was insufferably pleased with himself. ‘In a manner of speaking.’

‘You’ve planned this operation thoroughly?’

‘In all particulars. Timings, distances, codes. All the minutiae. Sir... I’d like to run the operation personally. I would regard it as an honour if you’d allow that.’

‘I see. Why, Carl?’

He fiddled nervously with a garnet ring on his right pinkie. ‘Three reasons. First, it’s my idea. Second... how can I put this delicately? Physically, you are our weakest link. The rest of us can disguise our appearances, but you do rather stand out. And your form is known to our enemies.’

It was something I’d been thinking about since we’d begun our journey back to Eustis Majoris. Because of the secrecy, I was going to have to rely entirely on my agents during this mission. I could not allow myself to be seen. It was a frustrating prospect. We were here, undertaking an extremely hazardous endeavour, and all because I insisted it should be so. Yet I was going to have to sit back and watch as they took all the real risks for me.

‘Very well,’ I told him. ‘I’m going to have to get used to being the least visible player in this game. You can run this.’

‘Thank you, sir.’

‘I will be watching, and helping, if I can.’

‘Of course. But there will be no need.’

He got up to leave my cabin. ‘What was the third reason, Carl?’ I asked.

He turned and faced my support chair squarely, as if he were looking me in the eyes. ‘Last year, I fouled up. On Flint, and later, when the ship was taken. I was the weak link then. I want an opportunity to redeem myself.’

WE ASSEMBLED IN the main hold. Nayl had a lifter whining up to power. Kara, Kys and my blunter, Wystan Frauka, were loading the last of the equipment packs into the lifter’s cargo pod. Carl was

nearby, talking quietly to the boy, Zael. Carl and I had agreed that Zael could play a part in this initial operation, and the boy was clearly excited by the role Carl was explaining to him.

I still had some doubts about Zael. He was very young and inexperienced, and displayed the beginnings of a potent psychic gift that he as yet did not understand. That rare quality of a mirror psychic, not active but passively reflective. I kept him with me to watch over that growing talent, to nurture it. But he was growing restless being on the sidelines all the time. Giving him a responsibility would boost his confidence and make him feel part of the group.

Mathuin arrived, escorting our prisoner. Feaver Skoh had been a game agent, a player in the Contract Thirteen cartel, and one of the men trying to kill us at Bonner's Reach the year before. We'd captured him there, and much of what we knew was based upon things he had given up under interrogation. Both Nayl and Thonius believed there was nothing more we could get from him, and considered it a waste of effort keeping him with us. But he was our only resource, and I wasn't about to give that up yet.

Incarceration and misery had shrunk him down. He was a shadow of the bruiser who had gunned for us in Lucky Space. His sandy blond hair had grown paler and thin, and a straggly beard covered his once jutting chin. He shuffled along in his manacles as Zeph led him to the lander. He was pitiful but, I sensed, not yet broken. He ignored everyone and said nothing, but he turned and fixed me with one brief stare before Zeph led him up the ramp.

The squat figure of Sholto Unwerth hurried over to me.

'Are you all in the readiness, sir? Are you concupiscent for the rigours that may prevail?'

'Yes, Master Unwerth.'

'And you wish upon me to have myself stay positioned here?'

'Yes, Master Unwerth. The berthing fees are paid in advance. Remain here with your ship. If we have not returned, or made contact with you by the time the prepayment runs out, you may leave and continue with your own business. With my thanks.'

‘Well, then, I bid you all formaldehyde and gross misadventure. Just the one singularly thing...’

‘Yes?’

‘In all these copious months, you still haven’t pertained to me what your business is.’

‘You’re right, Master Unwerth,’ I said. ‘I haven’t. And I won’t. For the good of your health.’

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