

EISENHORN

A Warhammer 40,000 story by Dan Abnett

Xenos • Malleus • Hereticus

IN THE GRIM far future, the Inquisition moves amongst mankind like an avenging shadow, striking down daemons, aliens and heretics with uncompromising ruthlessness.

Written by Gaunt's Ghosts creator, Dan Abnett, this volume charts the career of Inquisitor Gregor Eisenhorn as he changes from being a zealous upholder of the truth to collaborating with the very powers he once swore to destroy!

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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* and *Superman*. His work for the Black Library includes the popular strips *Lone Wolves*, *Titan* and *Darkblade*, the best-selling Gaunt's Ghosts novels. He was voted 'Best Writer Now' at the National Comic Awards 2003.



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from EISENHORN

I CLUNG TO the shadows, moving through the great tomb as silently as I knew how. A terrible sound rolled through the thawing vaults of Processional Two-Twelve. Fists and palms beating at coffin hoods. Wailing. Gurgling.

The sleepers were waking, their frigid bodies, sore with hibernation sickness, trapped in their caskets. No honour guard of trained cryogeneers waited to unlock them, to sluice their organs with warming bio-fluids or inject stimulants or massage paralysed extremities.

Thanks to Eyclone's efforts, twelve thousand one hundred and forty-two members of the planet's ruling class were being roused early into the bitter season of Dormant, and roused without the necessary medical supervision.

I had no doubt that they would all suffocate in minutes.

My mind scrolled back through the details my savant had prepared for me. There was a central control room, where I could disengage the ice-berth locks and at least free them all. But to what good? Without the resuscitation teams, they would fail and perish.

And if I hunted out the control room, Eyclone would have time to escape.

In Glossia code, I communicated this quandary to Betancore, and told him to alert the custodians. He informed me, after a pause, that crash-teams and relief crews were on their way.

But why? The question was still there. Why was Eyclone doing this?

A massed killing was nothing unusual for a follower of Chaos. But there had to be a point, above and beyond the deaths themselves.

I was pondering this as I crossed a hallway deep in the west wing of the Processional. Frantic beating sounds came from the berths all around, and a pungent mix of ice-water and bio-fluid spurted from the drain-taps and cascaded over the floor.

A shot rang out. A las-shot. It missed me by less than a hand's breadth and exploded through the headboard of an ice berth behind me. Immediately, the frantic hammering in that berth stopped, and the waters running out of its ducts were stained pink.

I fired the Scipio down the vault, startled by the noise it made.

Two more las-shots flicked down at me.

Taking cover behind a stone bulkhead, I emptied a clip down the length of the gallery, the spent shell cases smoking in the air as the pumping slide ejected them. A hot vapour of cordite blew back at me.

I swung back into cover, exchanging clips.

A few more spits of laser drizzled past me, then a voice.

'Eisenhorn? Gregor, is that you?'

Eyclone. I knew his thin voice at once. I didn't answer.

'You're dead, you know, Gregor. Dead like they all are. Dead, dead, dead. Step out and make it quick.'

He was good, I'll give him that. My legs actually twitched, actually started to walk me clear of cover into the open. Eyclone was infamous across a dozen settled systems for his mind powers and mesmeric tone. How else had he managed to get these dark-eyed fools to do his bidding?

But I have similar skills. And I have honed them well.

There is a time to use mind or voice tricks gently to draw out your target. And there are times to use them like a stub-gun at point blank range.

It was time for the latter.

I pitched my voice, balanced my mind and yelled: 'Show yourself first!'

Eyclone didn't succumb. I didn't expect him to. Like me, he had years of resilience training. But his two gunmen were easy meat.

The first strode directly out into the middle of the gallery hallway, dropping his lasgun with a clatter. The Scipio made a hole in the middle of his forehead and blew his brains out behind him in a grotesque pink mist. The other stumbled out on his heels, realised his mistake, and began firing.

One of his las-bolts scorched the sleeve of my jacket. I squeezed the pistol's trigger and the Scipio bucked and snarled in my tight grip.

The round penetrated his head under his nose, splintered on his upper teeth and blew the sides of his skull out. He staggered and fell, dead fingers firing his lasrifle again and again, blowing the fascias out of the hibernation stalls around him. Putrid water, bio-fluid and plastic fragments poured out, and some screams became louder.

I could hear footsteps above the screams. Eyclone was running.

I ran too, across the vaults, passing gallery after gallery.

The screaming, the pounding... God-Emperor help me I will never forget that. Thousands of frantic souls waking up to face an agonising death.

Damn Eyclone. Damn him to hell and back.

Crossing the third gallery, I saw him, running parallel to me. He saw me too. He wheeled, and fired.

I ducked back as the blasts of his laspistol shrieked past.

A glimpse was all I'd had: a short, wiry man, dressed in brown heat-robos, his goatee neatly trimmed, his eyes twinkling with malice.

I fired back, but he was running again.

I ran on, glimpsed him down the next gallery and fired again.

At the next gallery, nothing. I waited, and pulled off my outer robe. It was getting hot and damp in Processional Two-Twelve.

When another minute passed and there was still no sign, I began to edge down the gallery towards his last position, gun raised. I'd got ten paces when he swung out of hiding and blazed away at me.

I would have died right there, had not the joker-gods of fate and chance played their hand.

At the moment Eyclone fired, several cryo-tubes finally gave way and yowling, naked, blistered humans staggered out into the corridor, clawing with ice-webbed hands, mewling, vomiting, blind and ice-burned. Eyclone's shots tore three of them apart and hideously wounded a fourth. Had it not been for them, those las-shots would have finished me.

Footsteps, hurried. He was running again.

I pushed on down the gallery, stepping over the blasted ruins of the sleepers who had inadvertently spared me. The wounded one, a middle-aged female, compromised and naked as she lay in the melt-water, clutched at my leg, begging for salvation. Eyclone's gunfire had all but disembowelled her.

I hesitated. A merciful headshot now would spare her everything. But I could not. Once they were awake, the hierarchy of Hubris would not understand a mercy killing. I would be trapped here for years, fighting my case through every court in their legislature.

I shook off her desperate grip and moved on.

Do you think me weak, flawed? Do you hate me for setting my inquisitorial role above the needs of one agonised being?

If you do, I commend you. I think of that woman still, and hate the fact I left her to die slowly. But if you hate me, I know this about you... you are no inquisitor. You don't have the moral strength.

I could have finished her, and my soul might have been relieved. But that would have been an end to my work. And I always think of the thousands... millions perhaps... who would die worse deaths but for my actions.

Is that arrogance?

Perhaps... and perhaps arrogance is therefore a virtue of the Inquisition. I would gladly ignore one life in agony if I could save a hundred, a thousand, more...

Mankind must suffer so that mankind can survive. It's that simple. Ask Aemos. He knows.

Still, I dream of her and her bloody anguish. Pity me for that, at least.

I PRESSED ON through the tomb-vaults, and after another gallery or two, progress became slow. Hundreds of sleepers had now

freed themselves, the hallways were jostling with their frantic, blind pain. I skirted those I could, staying out of the way of grasping hands, stepping over some who lay twitching and helpless on the floor. The collective sounds of their braying and whimpering were almost intolerable. There was a hot, fetid stench of decay and bio-waste. Several times I had to break free of hands that seized me.

Grotesquely, the horror made it easier to track Eyclone. Every few paces, another sleeper lay dead or dying, callously gunned down by murderers in desperate flight.

I found a service door forced open at the end of the next file, and entered a deep stairwell that wound up through the edifice. Chemical globes suspended in wall brackets lit the way. From far above, I heard shots, and I ascended, my pistol raised and braced, covering each turn of the staircase as Vibben had taught me.

I came up to what a wall-plaque told me was level eight. I could hear machine noise, industrial and heavy. Through another forced service door lay the walkways to the next galleries and a side access hatch of brushed grey adamite, which stencilled runes identified as the entrance to the main cryogenic generators. Smoke coughed and noise rolled from the hatch.

The cryogenerator chamber was vast, its roof reaching up into the pyramidal summit of Processional Two-Twelve. The rumbling equipment it contained was ancient and vast. The data-slate given to me in the ice-car had said that the cryogenerators that ran the hibernation tombs of Hubris had originally been constructed to equip the ark-fleet that carried the first colonists to the world. They had been cut and salvaged from the giant arks on arrival, and the stone tombs raised around them. A technomagos brotherhood, descended from the ark-fleet engineers, had kept the cryogenerators operating for thousands of years.

This cryogenerator was sixty metres tall and constructed from cast-iron and copper painted in matt-red lead paint. As it rose, it sprouted branches in the form of conduits and heat-exchangers that intertwined with the roof-vents. The hot air of the room vibrated with the noise of its operation. Smoke

and steam wreathed the atmosphere and sweat broke out on my brow and back the moment I stepped through the hatchway.

I looked around and quickly noted where several inspection hatches had been levered away. The red paint was scored and scraped along each frame where a crow-bar had been forced in, and hundreds of years of sacred unguents and lexmechanical sigil-seals applied and tended by the technomagi had been broken.

I peered in through the open covers and saw rows of copper-wound cells, vibrating rack-frames wet with black lubricant, sooty ganglions of insulated electrical routing and dripping, lagged iron pipes. Sprung-jawed clips with biting metal teeth had been attached to some of the cells, and wiring from these clips trailed back to a small and obviously new ceramite module box taped inside the hatch frame. A digital runic display on the module flashed amber.

This was where Eyclone's men had artificially triggered the revival process. That meant he had either turned and recruited local technomagi or brought in experts from off-world. Either way, this signified considerable resources.

I moved on, and clambered up a ladder frame onto a raised platform of metal grille. There was something else here, a rectangular casket measuring about a metre and a half along its longest edge. It rested on four claw-like feet and had carrying handles built into its sides. The lid was open, and dozens of cables and leads snaked out, linking it to the cryogenerator's electromechanical guts, exposed by another prised-off hatch.

I looked into the casket, but could make little sense of what I saw there: circuit boards and complex mechanical elements linked by sheaves of cable. And there was a space, a padded recess in the heart of the casket's innards, clearly waiting to receive something the size of a clenched fist. Loose cable ends and plugs were taped in place, ready to be connected. But a key component of this mysterious device was evidently missing.

My vox-link chimed in my ear. It was Betancore. I could barely hear him over the noise of the cryogenerator as he made a quick report in Glossia.

'Aegis, heavens uplift, thrice-sevenfold, a crown with stars. Infamous angel without title, to Thorn by eight. Pattern?'

I considered. I was in no mood to take any more chances. 'Thorn, pattern hawk.'

'Pattern hawk acknowledged,' he said with relish.

I SAW MOVEMENT from the corner of my eye about a half-second after I broke the link with Betancore: another of Eyclone's black-eyed men, running in through the main hatch with an old-model laspistol raised in his hand.

His first shot, a twinkling ball of pink light, snapped the metal handrail of the platform I stood on with an explosive ping. His second and third passed over me as I dived down, and ricocheted off the cast-iron side of the cryogenerator with scorching crackles.

I returned fire, prone, but the angle was bad. Two more lasshots came my way, one cutting sideways into the edge of the platform deck and cutting a gouge through the grille. The gunman was nearly at the foot of the ladder-frame.

Now a second gunman entered the chamber, calling out after the first, a powerful autorifle in his hands. He saw me, and began to raise the weapon, but I had a cleaner angle on him, and dropped him quickly with two rounds through the upper torso.

The other was almost below me now, and fired a shot that punched clean through the grille just next to my right foot.

I didn't hesitate. I went up and over the rail and directly down onto him. We crashed onto the chamber floor, the powerful impact throwing the Scipio out of my grasp despite my efforts to hold onto it. The man was jabbering some insane nonsense into my face and had a good grip on the front of my tunic. I had him by the throat and by the wrist of his gun-hand, forcing the laspistol away. He fired it twice into the ceiling space above.

'Enough!' I commanded, modulating my tone to emphasise my will as I drove it into his mind. 'Drop it!'

He did, meekly, as if surprised. Psyker tricks of will often baffle those who find themselves compelled by them. As he faltered, I threw a punch that connected well and left him unconscious on the floor.

As I bent to recover the Scipio, Betancore voxed me again. 'Aegis, pattern hawk, infamous angel cast down.'

'Thorn acknowledged. Resume pattern crucible.'

I pushed on after my quarry.

EYCLONE MADE IT into the upper vaults and out onto a landing platform built into the sloping side of Processional Two-Twelve. The wind was fierce. Eyclone had eight of his cult with him and they were expecting an orbital pinnacle that would carry them away to safety.

They had no way of knowing that, thanks to Betancore, their means of escape was now burning in a deep impact gouge in the permafrost about eight kilometres north.

What rose above the landing platform out of the blizzard night, its down thrusters wailing, was my gun-cutter. Four hundred and fifty tonnes of armoured alloy, eighty metres from barbed nose to raked stern, landing gear still lowered like spider-legs, it rose on the blue-hot downwash of angled jets. Banks of floodlights under its beak-nose cut on and bathed the deck and the cultists in fierce white light.

Panicking, some of them fired up at it.

That was all the cue Betancore needed. His temper was hot, his mind void of anything except the fact that Vibben was dead.

The gun-turrets in the ends of the stubby wings rotated and washed the platform with withering heavy fire. Stone splintered. Bodies were reduced to sprays of liquid.

Eyclone, more intelligent than his men, had sprinted off the platform to the hatch as the gun-cutter rose into view.

And that's where he ran into me.

He opened his mouth in shock and I pushed the muzzle of Vibben's gun into it. I'm sure he wanted to say something important. I didn't care what it was.

I punched the gun so hard into his mouth the trigger guard broke his lower teeth. He tried to reach for something on his belt.

I fired.

Having emptied his brain-case and shattered it into the bargain, the round still had so much force it crossed the deck and

pinked off the armoured nose of the hovering gun-cutter, just below the cockpit window.

'Sorry,' I said.

'Don't worry about it,' Betancore crackled back over the vox-link.

'MOST PERTURBATORY,' SAID Aemos. It was his most frequent expression. He was hunched over, peering down into the casket on the cryogenerator chamber platform. Occasionally, he reached in to tinker with something, or leaned down for a closer look. Gestures such as these made the heavy augmetic eye glasses clamped to his hooked nose make a soft dialling click as they auto-focused.

I stood at his shoulder, waiting, looking down at the back of his old, bald head. The skin was liver-spotted and thin, and a narrow crescent of white hair edged the back of his skull.

Uber Aemos was my savant, and my longest serving companion. He had come into my service in the first month of my career in the Inquisition, bequeathed to me by Inquisitor Hapshant, who was by then dying of cerebral worms. Aemos was two hundred and seventy-eight standard years old, and had provided his services as a savant to three inquisitors before me. He was alive only thanks to significant bionic augmentation to his digestive tract, liver, urinary system, hips and left leg.

In Hapshant's service he had been injured by a stub-round. Tending him, surgeons had found a chronically advanced and previously undiagnosed cancer rampant in his abdomen. Had he not been shot, he would have died within weeks. Thanks to the wound, the disease was found, excised and his body repaired with plastic, ceramite and steel prosthetics.

Aemos referred to the whole ordeal as his 'lucky suffering' and still wore the twisted plug of the stub round that had almost taken and certainly saved his life on a chain around his straggly neck.

'Aemos?'

He rose stiffly with a whine of bionics and turned to face me, shaking out the floor length green folds of his embroidered robe. His augmetic eye-wear dominated his ancient face.

He sometimes reminded me of a curious insect with bulbous eyes and narrow, pinched mouth parts.

'A codifier of unique design. A series processor, similar in layout to the mind-impulse units used by the hallowed Adeptus Mechanicus to govern the linkage between human brain and god-machine.'

'You've seen such things?' I asked, a little taken aback.

'Once, in my travels. In passing. I do not pretend to have more than a cursory knowledge. I am certain, however, that the Adeptus Mechanicus would be interested in this device. It may be illicit technology or something derived from apparatus stolen from them. Either way, they would impound it.'

'Either way, they're not going to know about it. This is inquisitional evidence.'

'Quite so,' he agreed.

There were distracting noises from below us. Tomb custodians and technomagi from the cryogenerator brotherhood milled about in the chamber, supervising the mammoth and, in my opinion, futile operation to save the sleepers of Processional Two-Twelve. The whole tomb seethed with activity, and the awful screams had not yet died down.

I saw how Aemos watched the work with keen interest, making notes to himself on a data-slate strapped to his wrist. At the age of forty-two, he had contracted a meme-virus that altered his brain function for ever, driving him to collect information – any sort of information – whenever he got the chance. He was pathologically compelled to acquire knowledge, a data-addict. That made him an aggravating, easily side-tracked companion, and a perfect savant, as four inquisitors had discovered.

'Cold-bolted steel cylinders,' he mused, looking up at the heat exchangers. 'Is that to provide stress-durability in temperature change, or was it fabrication expedient? Also, what is the range of temperature change, given-'

'Aemos, please.'

'Hmm?' He looked back at me, remembering I was there.

'The casket?'

'Indeed. My apologies. A series processor... did I say that?'

'Yes. Processing what? Data?'

'I thought that at first, then I considered some mental or mental-transference process. But I doubt either now I've studied it.'

I pointed down into the casket. 'What's missing?'

'Oh, you noticed that too? This is most perturbatory. I'm still not certain, of course, but it's something angular, non-standard in shape and with its own power source.'

'You're sure?'

'There are no power inlets designed to couple to it, only power outlets. And there's something curious about the plugs. Non-standard mating. It's all non-standard.'

'Xenos?'

'No... human, just non-standard, custom made.'

'Yeah, but what for?' asked Betancore, climbing up the ladder frame to join us. He looked sour, his unruly black curls framing a dark-skinned, slender face that was usually alive with genial mischief.

'I need to make further evaluations, Midas,' said Aemos, hunching back over the casket.

Betancore stared my way. He was as tall as me, but lighter in build. His boots, breeches and tunic were made of soft black leather with red piping, the old uniform of a Glavian pilot-hunter, and over that he wore, as always, a short jacket of cerise silk with iridescent embroidery panels.

His hands were gloved in light black-hide, and seemed to wait ominously near the curved grips of the needle pistols holstered on his hips.

'You took a long time getting here,' I began.

'They made me take the cutter back to the landing cross at Tomb Point. Said they need the platform here for emergency flights. I had to walk back. Then I saw to Lores.'

'She died well, Betancore.'

'Maybe. Is that possible?' he added.

I made no reply. I knew how deep his foul moods could be. I knew he had been in love with Lores Vibben, or at least had decided he was in love with her. I knew things would get difficult with Betancore before they got better.

'Where is this off-worlder? This Eisenhorn?'

The demanding voice rolled up from the chamber below us. I looked down. A man had entered the cryogenerator chamber

escorted by four custodians in heat-gowns, carrying light-poles aloft. He was tall, with pallid skin and greying hair, though his haughty bearing spoke of self-possession and arrogance. He wore a decorative ceremonial heat-gown of bold yellow. I didn't know who he was, but he looked like trouble to me.

Aemos and Betancore were watching him too.

'Any ideas as to who this is?' I asked Aemos.

'Well, you see, the yellow robes, like the light poles carried by the custodians, symbolises the return of the sun and thus heat and light. It denotes a high-ranking official of the Dormant Custodial Committee.'

'I got that much myself,' I muttered.

'Oh, well his name is Nissemay Carpel, and he's High Custodian, so you should address him as such. He was born here, on Vital 235, fifty standard years ago, the son of a—'

'Enough! I knew we'd get there eventually.'

I walked to the rail and looked down. 'I am Eisenhorn.'

He stared up at me, barely contained wrath bulging the veins in his neck.

'Place him under arrest,' he told his men.

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