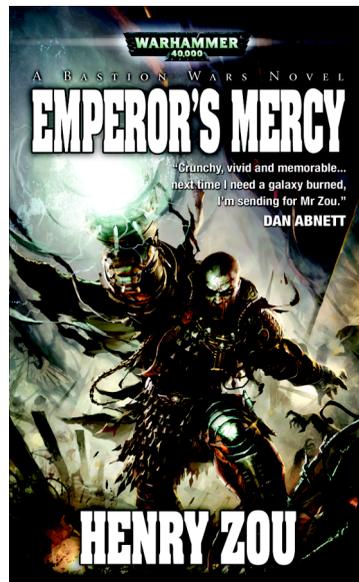


EMPEROR'S MERCY

A Bastion Wars novel

By Henry Zou

Inquisitor Roth and his henchman Silverstein are sent to the worlds of the Medina Corridor to uncover the location of a set of ancient artefacts. Meanwhile, the Ironclads, a force of Chaos traitors, invades the world and who are also in search of their artefacts for their own nefarious ends. With the Ironclads' indomitable army crushing all before it, will Roth be able to find the artefacts in time and prevent a terrible cataclysm engulfing the Medina worlds?



About the Author

H.T.R Zou lives in Sydney, Australia. He joined the Army to hone his skills in case of a zombie outbreak and has been there ever since. Despite this, he would much rather be working in a bookstore, or basking in the quiet comforts of some other book related occupation. One day he hopes to retire and live in a remote lighthouse with his lady and her many cats, completely zombie-free.

• **INQUISITORS** •

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(Omnibus containing XENOS,
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RETURNED and RAVENOR ROGUE)

The following is an excerpt from *Emperor's Mercy* by Henry Zou. Published by the Black Library. Games Workshop, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

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The first projectile thundered into the tenement bazaar. It hit with a percussive blast that could be heard in the terracotta valleys far beyond.

Carving a plume of debris, the vessel ploughed into a picket of tea stalls and spice carts, its fifty-tonne bulk skipping with momentum. Finally it penetrated one of the tenements that flanked the commercial district, demolishing the entire bottom tier.

Jolted by the seismic collision, human congestion in the narrow market lanes sounded a shrill chorus of panic. Streets began to flood with hurried, confused foot traffic, like a sprawling river system. The stacked buildings and overhanging roofs gave them no room to flee or see the commotion. Dust clouds of ochre yellow, the powdered stone of ancient buildings, formed a solid wall around the crash site.

Vinimus Dahlo had been toiling at his tea cart when it happened. He had been nursing urns of sweet black tea over an iron griddle with expert hands, and had not seen the collision at all. Rather he had felt it, a sonic tremor that shot up his spine and rocked the base of his skull. When Dahlo looked up, the locals perched or squatting on the stools around him were all pointing in one direction and exclaiming in shrill agitation.

They were pointing down the narrow avenue. Down past the canvas awnings and the rafts of grain sacks, silk fillets of various hues, porcelain and dried fruits. Down

to where the mezzanine avenue had been ruptured by some colossal cartridge from the skies.

Dahlo left his tea cart unattended, an uncharacteristic act for a man of his sensibilities. Suddenly seized by fear, he pushed and prodded his way into the crowd, craning to catch a glimpse of the destruction. Traders, labourers and flocks of women in shawls faltered in their work, gravitating towards the crash site.

When the rolling blossom of dust began to wilt, it revealed a long iron pod nestled within the rubble. It resembled some beached ocean submersible, its metal hide flaking with rust and oxidised scorching.

No one knew what to make of it. Naga was a frontier world of the Medina Corridor, and the only aeronautical vessels that frequented these ports were the Imperial ships that claimed their tithes of textiles, ceramics and spices. Perhaps because of this, when the belly of the vessel popped free with a hydraulic hiss, the throng only edged closer.

Dahlo, however, began to back-pedal against the tide. He was not one to be swept up by an inquisitive herd. Something, whether it was the hot prickling in the nape of his neck or the coiling sensation his stomach, warned him that all was not right.

An armoured figure clawed out of the hatch, like the birth of some ghastly newborn. Its head emerged first, humanoid in shape yet wholly bound with bars of some ferrous alloy. It then dragged its armoured torso over the lip of the hatch, a cuirass of chainmail and iron petals. Simultaneously, turret hatches began to peel away on both sides of the beached vessel. Armoured silhouettes began to surface. That was when the killing started. It began with a solitary shot that echoed in the awkward stillness of the bazaar. A las-round crumpled a young

girl. She slumped lifelessly against the press of bodies behind her as panic began to ripple outwards like capillary waves. Screams of outrage and confusion interspersed with the whickering snaps of rifles broke the calm that had existed mere seconds before.

High above the tenement bazaar, more vessels pierced the clouds. Against the ochre sky a dozen vessels turned into hundreds, the hundreds turned into thousands.

Less than two kilometres from the bazaar, high up on the garrison walls, the 22nd Naga Air Defence Squadron stood sentry. Even at extreme optical zoom with their sentry scopes, they could not see the killing in the markets. But the soldiers could see the pulsating lights of pink and purple las throbbing in the distance, and it made their palms sweaty and their jaws tense. Around them, like autumnal shedding, craft similar to the speck which had plummeted into the commercial district, were falling in thick sleets.

The monstrous rigs of their quad-linked autocannons nosed out over the haphazard tiers of terraces and tenements. Like most military hardware on Naga, it was obsolete and had been harboured behind an abandoned chariot shed almost as an afterthought. The weapons themselves were Onager-pattern anti-aircraft platforms. A primitive yet reliable indigenous design, each 50mm barrel was pneumatically driven. The combined rate of fire was typically six thousand rounds per minute of low-altitude air deterrence. Mounted on the flat-tiled roofs and minarets of most Nagaan cities, it was a workhorse of the Naga Militia Combine squadrons against both ground and air targets.

Major Meas Chanta of the 22nd Naga Air Defence Squadron wanted nothing more than to unleash those six

thousand rounds as he watched strange foreign objects fall from the sky. Standing on the disc platform high above the cityscape, the major squinted through his magnoculars as the distant specks plummeted with an eerie grace.

‘What orders from the division HQ?’ asked Chanta. ‘Stand by until further direction, sir,’ replied his vox operator. It had been the same answer for the past forty minutes, and in truth Chanta had not expected anything different. A curtain of vessels were dropping down, bruising the amber cloud bars an ominous black, but still they waited.

The squadron company were arrayed in an overlapping fire pattern, batteries of Onager anti-air platforms anchored on the highest points across the city. They were one hundred and twenty men in all, clad in quilted gambesons of khaki twill – the uniform of the Naga Combine. The padded flak coats had high collar guards that shielded the lower face from the biting perennial dust storms. These part-time citizen soldiers had been summoned to their ready stations less than forty minutes ago, when the first vessels had entered the atmosphere. But the mobilisation had faltered there, milling into the disordered confusion of a hesitant defence strategy. Chanta chewed on his lower lip, a habit of anxiety that he had not indulged in since childhood. This time he drew blood. He was a ledger clerk by trade, and his commission had been passed down from his father on account of his high education and public standing. But Chanta was not a soldier; his hands were uncalled and inked from years of wielding the quill. This was no place for him. Around Chanta, the 22nd squadron were braced in tense silence, some looking up vacantly at the sky, others looking to him for direction.

He had none to give them. Naga was a tiny rimward world in the Lusitan Sub on the Eastern Fringe, and military prowess was not a defining feature. The military seniors were in disarray and unable to provide decisive leadership to the soldiers that manned Naga's increasingly obsolete military arsenal.

For most of his men it was the first time the klaxons had summoned them to their stations for anything other than a drill. They were looking to him and he had nothing to give them. Still the vessels continued to fall.

'Tell me again in exact words why we are to hold fire,' Chanta asked his vox operator. He had asked him before, but he needed to hear it again.

'Sir, long-range signal instruments have failed to identify the incoming objects. Although they appear to be landers, preliminary defensive measures cannot commence until proper identification can be ascertained, sir,' came the reply.

Chanta wasn't really listening any more. To describe Naga's signal instruments as archaic would be a generous assessment. The corroded array of listening stations strung up across the dune spires of the western Naga continents would be hard-pressed to pick up a ship's presence let alone its source signature.

He looked up into the sky as if searching for some divine guidance. Whether he found it or not, the galaxy of landers swarming across his field of vision made him resolute.

'Corporal, commence vox orders to fire,' Major Chanta ordered.

'Sir?' asked the squadron vox operator, his features creased with confusion.

'Commence firing orders. Please, corporal, do hurry,' Chanta said as he cinched the padded khaki of his collar

guard tight across his lower face. He did not want his men to see his bloodied lower lip, already clouding his ivory uniform a vivid pink. Major Chanta had never been so wracked with fear in his entire life. If he was wrong there would be hell to pay, but if he was right, then it would not matter either way.

In the subterranean depths, the repository trembled. Tunnels and vaults, networked beneath the continents like coiled intestinal tracts, were not spared the cataclysm, despite their deep insulation. Grit shook from the rafters as multiple impacts from the surface continued the rhythmic pounding. The aftershocks travelled through the catacomb libraries and were felt even in the archives. The script silos too were trembling violently. It seemed that Naga would collapse from the inside out.

Elhem Meteadas, senior archivist, was beginning to fear the worst. A buttress of books three hundred metres high began to shiver precariously, rocking on wooden supports so old they were ashen. A volume of *The Movement of Stars*, a nine-hundred-year-old almanac, was dislodged from its shelving seventy metres up the northern vault face. It came whistling past Meteadas and exploded on the tiling next to him in a fluttering swirl of parchment.

‘Meteadas! Meteadas! What is happening?’ shrieked Scholar Amado.

‘I–’ he began. But the senior archivist did not know how to finish the answer. Meteadas was well into his one fifties and had been a keeper of the texts for almost all of those years. Some would consider him a polymath, a man with encyclopaedic depth of knowledge. If anyone on Naga understood the catastrophe that was occurring

on the surface above, he would likely be one of them.

Yet Meteadas did not want to incite panic.

‘Earthquake of course,’ he lied.

‘That cannot be! This section of the repository does not lie under any planar fractures or subduction zones,’ yelled the scholar as he gripped the sleeves of Meteadas’s linen shift.

‘Are you familiar with the works of Aloysius Spur?’

‘No...’

‘Excellent. Then you have absolutely nothing to worry about,’ Meteadas quipped as he shrugged off Amado.

‘But Meteadas, some of the others say it is fighting! Are they fighting? Why would there be fighting?’

Elhem Meteadas sighed deeply. Perhaps the others already knew, or perhaps they had already read the same texts he had. The labyrinthine libraries tightly woven beneath the surface of Naga served as the central repository of the Medina Worlds. Although they archived everything from the war poetry of pre-Heresy to subsector trade outputs of last month, it was a possibility. The writings of Aloysius Spur may have been a lesser-known work, but all archivists were at heart hoarders of obscure knowledge.

‘Why would anyone bother fighting for the Medina Worlds but for the Old Kings of Medina?’ Meteadas admitted solemnly.

At this Amado threw back his head and laughed. ‘The Old Kings of Medina are one of the great mythical tales.’

‘Then for what reason, Amado? You are a learned man, a polymath. Have you learned nothing? Naga is a minuscule planet of a frontier sector. It has neither strategic relevance nor resources of note.’

It was the elder’s turn to seize the younger man’s cotton chemise. ‘Aloysius Spur warned us about the Old Kings

of Medina. He foretold that they would bring war from the stars. Why do you laugh about it?’

‘Because, Elhem, they are a child’s stories! Relics from the Age of Apostasy, buried and lost on one of the Medina Worlds? There is not even a plausible account of what or where they may be! Pure fabrication!’

‘Aloysius Spur did not fabricate; he observed the laws of inevitability. If the Old Kings were lost in the Medina Worlds, it is inevitable that someone will try to claim them, now or in a hundred thousand years’ time.’

‘Who was Aloysius Spur? A prophet?’

‘No. A military tactician. A lord general during the Age of Apostasy.’

‘Ah,’ nodded Amado, suddenly taken aback.

Meteadas released the man from his fervent clutch. His postulating was interrupted as more archivists spilled into the northern vaults from the myriad catacomb entrances. Some were shouting, some were crying, others still were petrified with glassy-eyed shock.

‘They are here! Naga is at war!’ Through the confusion, that much was clear.

Before Meteadas could discern any more, a rumbling tremor from the surface punctuated the cacophony.

Three buttresses of texts collapsed, two on the northern vault face and one adjoining the western silos, as the tortured wooden supports could hold no longer. The hundred-metre stacks swayed preposterously before they liquefied into a rolling tidal press. The avalanche of prose, poetry and epic history came down and decimated the repository chamber.

Mercifully, Elhem Meteadas blacked out. He did not have to hear the dying screams of his colleagues or the deathly quiet that followed.

In the slamming, teetering crush of people, Vinimus Dahlo had lost his abacus. His tea cart had been upturned too, but that could be repaired. The abacus was precious to him. It had been carved out of a fragrant red wood and bought for him by his wife. His wife, who had scraped together two years' worth of her own savings in a dented tin hidden in his daughter's bassinet.

He foraged on his hands and knees, covered in a sienna dust kicked up by the stampede. Bodies surged around him, trampling down the picket stalls, pushing and falling. A merchant balancing decorative bird cages on a carry-pole trod on Dahlo's heel. Close by, a potter wailed piteously as her raft of earthenware was stomped into fragments. And through all of this, the steady snap of gunfire remained a constant.

Dahlo's scouring led him against the human current until he finally glimpsed a wink of carved wood in the chalky ground ahead. Staying low and shielding his head with his forearms, Dahlo drove himself against the crowd. He stumbled through the remains of someone's rouge stall; the little pots of colours – red for the lips, purple for the eyes, cream for the cheeks – were all crushed underfoot. At one point the swell of the stampede was so great that he was lifted bodily off his feet and dragged backwards for several metres.

Forcing a wedge into the stampede, Dahlo spied his abacus on the ground. The varnish had scuffed but it was otherwise intact. He lunged for it, seizing the prize against his chest. Then, as he turned to run, a rough hand seized the beaded collar of his jacket and snapped him flat onto his back.

He landed hard on his spine. Dazed, it took Dahlo's vision several seconds to swim into focus. What he saw

next almost froze his heart with sheer terror. Standing over Dahlo was one of the armoured killers. Its frame was tall and raw, swathed in weighty layers of chainmail, scrap and gunmetal plating. It was a monster, wild and savage. Across its chest were slung multiple bandoleers of ammunition and grenades. But it was the head that terrified Dahlo the most. Its head was bandaged in iron. Strips of metal enclosed it from skull to jaw, with a slight gap for the mouth and narrow slits for vision. Up close, Dahlo could see the pus that wept between the gaps of each iron slat. Slowly and deliberately, the Ironclad killer raised a gauntleted fist. A thirty-centimetre spike was welded to the backplate, and the Ironclad traced a slow arc with it. Dahlo was certain that behind the metal bindings, it was smiling at him. 'Shoot me instead, please,' Dahlo gasped and immediately wished he hadn't. He had always fancied that his last words would be profound and measured.

Tracer fire hammered into the stratosphere, scuds of flak darkening the sky like ashy condensation. Despite the florid resistance, the vessels continued their bombardment. Dozens were snared by screens of shrapnel, disintegrating in their burning, tumbling descent. Dozens more continued to scream through the orange twilight and land in great mushrooming clouds on the surface below.

Major Chanta crouched behind the mantlet of an Onager. He traversed the iron-sights, hosing up quadruple streams of firepower. His primary gunner had been shot. They had been receiving enemy fire from positions on the ground for some time now. The invaders had advanced into Central Naga, overrunning the Militia

Combine ground units. The vox-links were dead. Much of the city was burning.

As far as Major Chanta could tell, he was the highest-ranking officer in the region by default. His air defence squadron had done all they could, but it would not have been enough, even if they had acted earlier. The seething aerial deployment was absolutely overwhelming. The PDF training manuals had never prepared him for anything like it. Against the horizon of the cityscape, enemy formations were amassing.

It was so loud, so brutal. The clatter of guns had reduced his hearing to a constant ringing. Across his field of vision the searing flashes burned afterimages into his retinas. It was little wonder then, that Major Chanta never saw the flanking force that swept across the rooftops and engaged his heavy guns in hand-to-hand. He didn't even notice the Onager platforms being picked off, one after another. To his immediate left, thirty metres away, an Onager of Delta Squadron was overwhelmed by Archenemy soldiers, the gunners and loaders being thrown off the platform onto the rooftops below.

'Corporal, vox to all units and report back the ammunition levels. Are they depleted?' Major Chanta ordered as he continued firing.

There was no answer from his vox operator.

'Corporal. Affirmative?' he repeated. Still there was no answer.

The hairs on his neck prickled with chills. Major Chanta slowly turned to look behind him. What he saw was singularly the most terror-inducing thing he had ever experienced.

Corporal Anan was dead. His corpse was being cradled by one of the Archenemy. The Ironclad rocked back on

its haunches, humming tunelessly. He was playing: tracing geometric patterns on the ground with the corporal's blood.

'What do you think you are doing?' bellowed Major Chanta with a bravery he did not truly feel.

The Ironclad looked at Chanta. His metal-bound skull was featureless and betrayed no emotion. The Archenemy raider tilted his head, almost quizzically, and rose to his feet. From the bandoleers festooning his chest, this one unsheathed a hooked machete.

The major leapt off the Onager's bucket seat and seized the closest weapon. It was a discipline rod. A fifty-centimetre truncheon of polished hardwood, issued to all officers of the Naga Combine. It was not really a weapon but he hoped it would suffice.

Breathing hard, Chanta lashed out with the rod. The Ironclad parried with his machete and stepped inside Chanta's guard. The enemy revealed an embedded razor running the length of his forearm. Pressing hard with the machete, the Ironclad ran his bladed forearm across Chanta's abdomen.

The paper-thin blade scissored into the twill gambeson, eliciting a bloom of blood against the ivory fabric.

Chanta gurgled. He took a step back and his knees buckled underneath him. It was all over. The Archenemy soldier pounced and straddled him, hacking down with the machete again and again.

It could have been the rubberised crump of combat boots that woke him. Or it might have been the harsh voices shouting orders in a clipped military tempo. Either way, Elhem Meteadas slowly regained his consciousness to the sounds of intruders in the repository.

He could not move. His spine was bent in such a way that, with every laboured breath, his shoulder blades spiked his lungs with agony. Books, thousands of them, had buried him. The Horticulture of the Western Naga Archipelago nudged into his kidney. He knew it was that book because the elaborate copper curling on the tome's edges was unnecessarily pointy. A good archivist remembered such things.

Around him voices barked back and forth in a language he did not understand. It was a human tongue, but nothing he had ever encountered in his studies. Meteadas could only assume, through tone and inflection, that it was the tongue of Chaos.

The thought that Chaos was ransacking his duty region of the labyrinths plagued his mind with impending dread. He did not fear for himself – his old arthritic bones were well past their prime and he had come to accept his fate with a mellow reluctance. Instead, his rational mind began to fear for Medina.

War, at least on an absolute scale, had not scarred the star cluster for four thousand years. Yet the earth-shaking ferocity of this assault bespoke of more than a cursory raid. This was war.

Meteadas knew wars were not fought on miniature rimward worlds such as Naga without pretence. No, wars were ghastly affairs only waged when the prize exceeded the costs. The Medina Corridor was not a strategic route in the subsector. It did not collate in Meteadas's rational mind.

Within seconds, Meteadas's brilliant intellect had reached a conclusion. Whatever the machinations behind the conquest of Naga, it would only be a means to an end. That notion pumped more dread through his veins than anything else.

He knew what he had to do. Deny the enemy their prize, whatever that may be. ‘Scorch the land and leave no seed or fruit in passing,’ was a quote from one of Meteadas’s favourite military philosophers. He had no choice.

With laboured gasps of pain, Elhem Meteadas wormed a hand through the debris of the book avalanche until his fingers brushed his belt. Immobilised as he was, it took Meteadas’s fingers some time to hook onto the shuttered lamp at his waist. Easing it free, Meteadas slid open the hinge plate and sparked the gas condenser. A tiny flame fluttered into being.

At first nothing happened. But then, the naked flame began to catch on the sheaves of brittle manuscript that pressed down upon it. After the combustion, it did not take long at all for the lapping flames to erupt into a whirling pyre, sixty metres high.

Old Elhem Meteadas, senior archivist, died without much pain. He had burnt ten thousand years of Imperial history and literature, some irreplaceable and lost forever. But in doing so, he had struck a body-blow against the invasion. Naga would die, but perhaps Medina could live to write the histories again.

EMPEROR'S MERCY can be purchased in all better bookstores, Games Workshop and other hobby stores, or direct from this website and GW mail order.

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