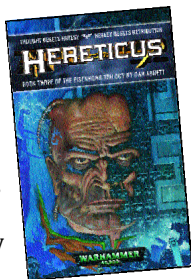


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HERETICUS

BOOK THREE OF THE EISENHORN TRILOGY BY DAN ABNETT

ACROSS COUNTLESS worlds, the Inquisition pursues a secret war against humankind's foulest enemies – the alien, the unclean and the unholy. When a battle with an ancient foe turns deadly, Inquisitor Eisenhorn is forced to take terrible measures to save the lives of himself and his companions. But how much can any man deal with Chaos before turning into the very thing he is sworn to destroy?



Dan Abnett lives and works in Maidstone, Kent, in England. His work for the Black Library includes the popular strips *Lone Wolves* and *Darkblade*, the best-selling Gaunt's Ghosts novels, the acclaimed Inquisitor Eisenhorn trilogy and the fantasy novel *Riders of the Dead*.

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PUBLISHED BY THE BLACKLIBRARY

Games Workshop, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK

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UK ISBN: 1 84154 236 9

US ISBN: 0 7434 4308 X



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published by BL Publishing, 2002.*

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from HERETICUS

IT CAUSED QUITE a stir. What am I saying? Of course it caused quite a stir. Crowds quickly gathered outside the Minster in the bright afternoon sunshine. The archivists and pamphleteers who had been dozing in the public gallery scampered off to promulgate the news. Even the confessors and preachers who had been wandering the streets, lambasting the commonfolk with bilious sermons against heresy, followed the crowds to the Minster square.

‘You can’t just suspend a Court of Examination!’ Menderef raged at me. I shoved him aside and strode on down the long aisle towards the main doors of the Minster. Bequin and Fischig were in step with me, and Aemos scurried to catch up.

‘You say “here”, what do you mean?’ I asked Fischig, dragging off my fur-trimmed cloak and my chain of office and tossing them onto a pew.

‘Miquol,’ he said. ‘It’s an island in the northern polar circle. About two hours’ transit time.’

‘Eisenhorn! Eisenhorn!’ Menderef yelled behind me, a twitter of agitated voices around him.

‘You sure it’s him?’

‘I’ve reviewed Godwin’s findings,’ snapped Bequin. ‘It’s Thuring, all right. I’d put money on it.’

We reached the end of the Minster’s nave and were crossing towards the entrance arch and daylight. A hand caught my sleeve.

I turned. It was Rassi.

‘What are you doing, Gregor? This is holy work you’re abandoning.’

'I'm not abandoning anything, Poul. Didn't you hear me? I'm suspending it. This Examination is all about feeble little recidivists and their ungodly habits. I'm set on a true heretic.'

'Really?'

'Come along if you don't believe me.'

'Very well.'

As I pressed on through the great doorway, Rassi turned and intercepted Koth and Menderef. He shouted down their objections. 'I'm going with him,' I heard him say to them. 'I trust Eisenhower's judgment. If he was wrong to break the court here, I'll testify to that when I return.'

We were out in the daylight. Mobs of civilians gazed at us, some shielding their eyes from the sun's glare where the blossom-heavy trees of the square failed to shade them.

'Medea?' I asked Fischig.

'Already called in. I presumed; I hope that's all right.'

'Does she know?'

Fischig glanced at Bequin and Aemos. 'Yes. I couldn't hide it from her.'

Almost on cue, Medea's voice crackled over my vox-link. 'Aegis descending, the Armour of God, by two,' she reported in Glossia code, her voice hard-edged and bitter.

'Damn it!' I said. 'Clear the square!'

Fischig and Bequin ran forward into the crowd. 'Clear the area!' Bequin yelled. 'Come on, move! Move now!' Fischig bellowed. No one obeyed.

Fischig pulled out his handgun and fired into the air. Shrieking, the crowd surged back and streamed away down the approach streets.

Just in time.

My gun-cutter, all four hundred and fifty tonnes of it, swung in over the roof of the Eriale Municipal Library and descended on wailing thrusters into the Minster square. The downwash blew the blossom off the trees and filled with air with petals like confetti.

I felt the ground shake as the vessel set down hard. Flagstones cracked under the steel pads of the extended landing struts. Casements around the square shattered. The trees in

the square billowed furiously in the outrush of the jets. The nose ramp whined open.

I hurried up the ramp with Aemos and Bequin, pausing to beckon Rassi aboard. Leaning on his cane, he walked more slowly than us.

Fischig waited at the foot of the ramp, sternly ushering in the other members of my retinue who had been stationed in the vicinity of the Minster. Kara Swole, who had been monitoring the crowd from a caffeine house opposite the library. Duclane Haar, whose sniper-variant long-las had been tracking the traffic around the Minster's main door from the roof of the Administratum's tithe barn. Bex Begundi, who had been posing as a homeless mutant begging for alms in the porch of Saint Becwal's Chapel, his pistols concealed under his pauper's bowl.

Fischig pulled them all in and then ran up the ramp, hauling on the lever that slammed the ramp shut.

Almost immediately, the gun-cutter rose again, puffing out a cloud of blossom.

In the entry bay, I took a quick head count.

'Verveuk! What are you doing here?'

'As my Lord Rorken instructed,' he said, 'I go where you go, lord.'

WE GAINED ALTITUDE, climbing into the stratosphere for the transit north. My own people knew their places and tasks, but I pulled Kara Swole aside and told her to make sure Rassi and Verveuk were comfortable. 'Inquisitor Rassi deserves every courtesy, but don't give Verveuk a millimetre. Don't let him get in the way.'

Kara Swole was a well-muscled acrobat-dancer from Bonaventure who had assisted one of my investigations three years before and had enjoyed the experience so much she'd asked to join my retinue permanently. She was small and lithe, with very short red hair, and her muscular frame made her look almost stocky, but she was nimbler and more agile than just about anyone I had ever met and had a genuine flair for surveillance. She'd become a valued member of my team and she'd told me more than once that the employment I

offered her was infinitely preferable to her previous life in the circus arenas of her homeworld.

Kara glanced in Verveuk's direction. 'He looks like a ninker to me,' she murmured. 'Ninker' was her insult of choice, a slang term from the circus creole. I'd never had the heart to ask her what it meant.

'I believe you're right about that,' I whispered back. 'Keep an eye on him... and make sure Rassi's happy. When we get to the destination, I want you and Haar guarding them with your lives.'

'Understood.'

I gathered Fischig, Bequin, Aemos, Haar and Begundi around the chart table for a briefing, and also summoned Dahault, my astropath.

'All right... how did you find him?'

Fischig smiled. He was obviously pleased with himself. 'The audit turned him up. At least, it turned up some appetising clues that made me look harder and find him. He'd been operating in three of the northern seaports, and also in the capital. I couldn't believe it at first. I mean, we thought he was dead. But it's him.'

An audit was part of my standard operating practice, and I'd set one going the moment Lord Rorken prevailed on me to conduct the Examination, four months earlier. Under Fischig's leadership, a large part of my support staff – over thirty specialists – had gone ahead to Durer to carry it out. The purpose of an audit was twofold. First, to review and recheck the cases to be presented for Examination to make sure we weren't wasting our time and that we were in possession of all the relevant data. It wasn't that I didn't trust Lord Rorken's preparation, I just like to be certain about what I'm prosecuting. Secondly, it was to investigate the possible existence of heretical cases that might have been overlooked by the Examination. I was going to be devoting a lot of my time and resources to this clean up of Durer, and I wanted to make sure I was being thorough. If there was other recidivism here, I wanted to root it out at the same time.

Fischig and the audit team had made a virtual fingertip search of the planetary records, cross-checking even minor

anomalies against my database. It proved that Rorken's preparatory work had been excellent, for very little turned up.

Except Fayde Thuring. Fischig had first discovered some off-world financial transactions that flagged because they linked to merchant accounts on Thracian Primaris that Thuring had been associated with twenty years earlier. Fischig had backtracked painstakingly through shipping registers and accommodation listings and had lucked upon some footage recorded by a mercantile company's security pict. The man captured digitally by the pict-recorder bore a striking similarity to Fayde Thuring.

'As far as we can make out,' said Fischig, 'Thuring's been on Durer for about a year. Arrived aboard a free trader last summer and took up residence in Haynstown on an eighteen month merchant's visa. Uses the name Illiam Vowis and claims to be a dealer in aeronautical engineering. Not short of cash or connections. Most of the business seems legit, though he's been buying up a lot of machine parts and tooling units and hiring on a fair number of local tech-adepts. From the outside, it looks like he's setting up a repair and servicing outfit. What he's actually doing is not yet clear.'

'Has he purchased or rented any workspace property?' asked Begundi.

'No. That's one of the discrepancies.' Fischig looked up at me. 'He keeps moving around. Difficult to track. But four days ago, I got a good lead that he was in the northern seaport, Finyard. So I sent Nayl to get a proper look.'

Harlon Nayl, a long serving member of my cadre and an ex-bounty hunter, was one of my finest. 'What did he find?'

'He was too late to catch Thuring. He'd already gone, but Nayl got into the hotel suite he had been using before their housekeeping could clean it up, and got enough hair and tissue fibres to run a gene-scan against the samples we hold on file. Perfect match. Illiam Vowis is Fayde Thuring.'

'And you say he's now on a polar island?'

Fischig nodded. 'Nayl took off after Thuring, found out he had arranged passage to this place Miquol. Used to be a PDF listening station there, years ago, but it's uninhabited now. We don't know what he's doing there, or even if he's been there

before. Nayl should have reached the island himself by now. He hasn't checked in, but the magnetosphere is wild as hell up near the pole, so comms are out. Long-range, anyway.'

'This is excellent work, old friend,' I told Fischig, and he smiled appreciatively. Godwin Fischig, once a chastener in the arbites of Hubris and a law enforcer of considerable ability, was one of my real veterans. He'd served at my side for fifteen decades now, for as long as Alizabeth Bequin. Only Aemos had been with me longer. The three of them were my rock, my foundation, the cornerstones of my entire operation. And they were my friends. Aemos provided wisdom and an unimaginably vast resource of knowledge. Bequin was an untouchable, and ran an academy of similarly gifted individuals called the Distaff. They were my greatest weapon, a corps of psychically blank individuals who could be used to block even the most powerful psykers. Bequin was also my emotional rudder. I confided in her more than the others and looked to her for support when I was troubled.

Fischig was my conscience. He was an imposing man with an age-grizzled face that was now quite jowly. A thin down of grey hair covered his scalp where once he had been blond. The scar under his milky eye had gone pink and glossy over time. Fischig was a formidable warrior and had gone through some of the worst times at my side. But there was none more single-minded than he, none so pure... puritanical, if you will. Good and evil, Law and Chaos, humanity and the warp... they were simple, black and white distinctions for him. I admired that so. Time, experience and incident had greyed my attitudes somewhat. I depended on Fischig to be my moral compass.

It was a role he seemed happy to perform. I think that's why he had stayed with me so long, when by now he could have become a commissioner of arbites, a divisional prefect, maybe even a planetary governor. Being the conscience of one of the sub-sector's most senior inquisitors was a calling that gave him satisfaction.

I wondered sometimes if Fischig regretted the fact that I had never sought higher office in the Inquisition. I suppose, given my track record and reputation, I could have become the lord

of an ordo by now, or at least been well on my way. Lord Rorken, who had become something of a mentor to me, had often expressed his disappointment that I had not taken up the opportunities he had offered to become his heir. He had been grooming me for a while as successor to the control of the Ordo Xenos, Helican sub. But I had never fancied that kind of life. I was happiest in the field, not behind a desk.

Of all of them, Fischig would have benefitted most if I had followed that kind of course. I could well imagine him as the commander-in-chief of the Inquisitorial Guard Helican. But he had never expressed any hint of unhappiness in that regard. Like me, he liked the challenge of field work.

We made a good team, for a long time. I'll never forget that, and despite what fate was to bring, I'll always thank the God-Emperor of mankind for the honour of working alongside him for as long as I did.

'AEMOS,' I SAID, 'perhaps you'd like to review Fischig's data and see if you can make any further deductions. I'm interested in this island. Punch up the data, maps, archives. Tell me what you find.'

'Of course, Gregor,' Aemos said. His voice was very thin and reedy, and he was more hunched and wizened than ever. But knowledge still absorbed him, and I think it nourished him in the way that food or wealth or duty or even love kept other men going way past their prime.

'Fischig will assist you,' I said. 'And perhaps Inquisitor Rassi too. I want a workable plan of operations in-' I checked my chronometer '-sixty minutes. I need to know everything it is possible or pertinent to know before we hit the ground. And I want a positive, uncomplicated plan of what we do when we get there. Alizebeth?'

'Gregor?'

'Get in contact with as many of our specialists here on Durer as you can find and get them moving in to support us. Distaff especially. I don't care how long it takes or what it costs. I want to know we have solid backup following us.'

She nodded graciously. She was a brilliant man-manager. Bequin was still as demure and beautiful as the day I had met

her, a century and a half before, a spectacular testament of the way Imperial science can counter the effects of aging. Only the faintest creases in the corners of her eyes and lips betrayed the fact that she was not a stunning woman in her late thirties. Lately, she had taken to walking rather regally with a shoulder-high ebony cane for support, claiming that her bones were old, but I believed that to be an affectation designed to reinforce her very senior and matriarchal role.

Only when I looked into her eyes could I see the distances of age. Her life had been hard and she had witnessed many terrible things. There was a sort of wistful pain in the depths of her gaze, a profound sadness. I knew she loved me, and I loved her as much as any being I had ever known. But long ago, mutually, we had set that aside. I was a psyker and she was an untouchable. Whatever the sadness we both felt because of our denied love, being together would have been so much more agonising.

‘Dahault...’

‘Sir?’ the astropath answered smartly. He had been with me for twenty years, by far the longest stretch any astropath had managed in my employ. They wear out so quickly, in my experience. Dahault was a vital, burly man with a spectacular waxed moustache that I believe he grew to compensate for his shaved head. He was certainly powerful and able, and had taken to my regime of work well. Only in the past few years had he started to show the signs of psychic exhaustion – the shallow, drawn skin, the hunted look, the aphasia. I dearly hoped I would be able to retire him on a pension before his calling burned out his mind.

‘Check ahead,’ I told him. ‘Fischig says the magnetosphere is blocking vox traffic, but Thuring may be using astropaths. See what you hear.’

He nodded and shuffled away to his compact, screened cabin under the bridge to connect his skull-plugs to the astro-communication network.

I turned last to Bex Begundi and Duclane Haar. Haar was an ex-Imperial Guard marksman from the 50th Gudrunite Rifles, a regiment I had an old association with. Of medium build, he wore a matt anti-flect bodyglove, the cap-pin of his old out-

fit dangling round his neck on a cord. He had lost a leg in action on Wichard, and been invalided out of service. But he was as good a shot with the sniper-variant long-las as Duj Husmaan, now long gone and in a manner I sorely regretted.

Haar was clean shaven and his brown hair was as neatly trimmed as it had been in the days of parade ground drill. He wore an optic target enhancer that clamped around the side of his skull, looping over his ear, and could drop the articulate arm of the foresight down over his right eye for aiming. He preferred the enhancer to a conventional rifle-mounted scope, and with his tally of clean hits, I wasn't about to argue.

Bex Begundi was a rogue, in the strictest sense of the term. A desperado, old Commodus Voke would have called him. An outlaw, scammer, con-artist and low-life, born in the slums of Sameter, a world I had no love for as I'd once left a hand there. He was one of Harlon Nayl's recruits – possibly one of his intended bounties who had been offered a life or death choice – and had joined my team six years before. Begundi was unspeakably cocky and prodigiously skilled with handguns.

Tall, no more than thirty-five years old, he was not exactly handsome but oozed a devastating charisma. He was dark haired, a jet-black goatee perfectly trimmed around his petulant smile, with hard cheekbones, and corpse-white skin dye contrasting with the wipes of black kohl under his dangerously twinkling eyes, as was the gang-custom of the slums. He was dressed in a leather armour body jacket embroidered with rich silk thread and preposterous panels of sequins. But there was nothing remotely comical about the paired Hecuter autopistols holstered under his arms in a custom-made, easy-draw rig.

'We're in for a fight when we get down, make no mistake,' I told them.

'Rockin' good news,' said Begundi with a hungry smile.

'Just point me at the target, sir,' said Haar.

I nodded, pleased. 'No showboating, you hear me? No grandstanding.'

Begundi looked hurt. 'As if!' he complained.

'Actually, I was thinking of you, Haar,' I replied. Haar blushed. He had proved to be extremely... eager. A killer's instinct.

'You can trust me, sir,' he said.

'This is important. I know it's always important, but this is... personal. No screw ups.'

'We're after the guy who popped Dee's dad, right?' asked Begundi.

Dee. That's what they called Medea Betancore, my pilot.

'Yes, we are. For her sake, stay alert.'

I WENT UP into the cockpit. The high-altitude cloudscape was sliding past outside. Medea was flying like a daemon.

She was just over seventy-five years old, just a youngster still. Stunning, volatile, brilliant, sexy, she had inherited her late father's pilot skills as surely as she had inherited his dark Glavian skin and fine looks.

She was wearing Midas's cerise flying jacket.

'You need to stay focused, Medea,' I said.

'I will,' she replied, not looking up from the controls.

'I mean it. This is just a job.'

'I know. I'm fine.'

'If you need to stand down, it can be arranged.'

'Stand down?' She snapped the words and looked round at me sharply, her large, brown eyes wet with angry tears. 'This is my father's killer we're going for! All my life I've waited for this! Literally! I'm not going to stand down, boss!'

She had never known her father. Fayde Thuring had murdered Midas Betancore a month before her birth.

'Fine. I want you with me. I'd like you with me. But I will not allow emotion to cloud this.'

'It won't.'

'I'm glad to hear it.'

There was a long silence. I turned to go.

'Gregor?' she said softly.

'Yes, Medea?'

'Kill the bastard. Please.'

IN MY CABIN, I made my preparations. The soft robes I had been wearing as lord chief examiner went in favour of an armoured bodyglove, steel-reinforced knee boots, a leather jacket and a heavy storm coat with armoured shoulder panels. I pinned my

badges of office on my chest, my Inquisitorial rosette at my throat.

I selected my three primary weapons from the safe: a large calibre bolt pistol, the runestaff handmade for me by Magos Bure of the Adeptus Mechanicus, and the curved, pentagram-engraved force sword that I had commissioned to be forged from the broken half of the Carthaen warblade, Barbarisater.

I blessed each one.

I thought of Midas Betancore, dead nearly a century now. Barbarisater purred in my hands.

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the final novel of the Eisenhorn trilogy.

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