

MALLEUS

An Eisenhorn Novel by Dan Abnett

PELLUCID BLUE FLAME, like a searing wall of acid, suddenly washed through the churning mob behind the Gate. Men, women, soldiers, civilians, were caught in it and shuddered, melting, resolving into skeletons that turned to dust and blew away.

I felt the pain in my sinuses, the throb in my spine. I knew what it was. Psyker-evil.

The prisoners were loose.

I drew my power sword and my boltgun, plunging into the milling bodies, crunching over the calcified bones of those slaughtered by the psychic-wave



IN THE 41st MILLENNIUM, the enemies of mankind are legion, omnipresent and utterly deadly. While the warriors of the Imperium fight with firepower and faith, the Holy Inquisition hunts the shadows for the most terrible of foes – rogue psykers, xenos, and daemons. Inquisitor Eisenhorn must track down and defeat the forces who would destroy him or face the wrath of the Ordo Malleus.

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FOR ALL MY condemnations of the overzealous pageantry of the Novena, I will admit that the Great Triumph of the first day filled me with a sense of pride and exhilaration.

Across Hive Primaris, the largest and most powerful hive on Thracian, dawn brought a chorus of klaxons and a cacophony of bells. Ministorum services, relayed live from the Monument of the Ecclesiarch, were broadcast on every crackling pict channel and public vox service. The phlegmy intonations of Cardinal Palatine Anderucias rolled across the street levels of the great hive city, overlapping like some gigantic choral round due to the echoes of doppler distortion.

Civilians and pilgrims flooded into the streets of Hive Primaris in their millions, clogging the arterial routes and feeder tunnels, and blackening the sky with their craft. Many were turned back to surrounding hives to watch the proceedings on vast hololithic screens raised in stadiums and amphitheatres for the event.

The arbites struggled to control the flow of people and keep the route of the Triumph clear.

The day cycle began brightly. In the night, flocks of dirigibles from the Officium Meteorologicus had seeded the smog fields and upper cloud levels with carbon black and other chemical precipitants. Before dawn, sixteen hundred-kilometre wide rainstorms had washed the clouds away and drenched the primary hives, sluicing the dirt and grime away. For the first time in decades, the sky was clear. Not blue exactly, but clear of yellow pollution banks. The sun's light permeated the atmosphere and the steeped ridges and high towers of the hives glowed. I had heard, from informal sources, that this radical act of weather control would have profound ill consequences for the planet's

already brutalised climate for decades to come. Reactive hurricane storms were expected in the southern regions before the week was out, and the drainage system of the primary hives was said to be choked to bursting by the singular rainfall.

It was also said that the seas would die quicker, thanks to the overdose of pollutants hosed into them so suddenly by the rain-clearance.

But the Lord Commander Helican had insisted that the sun shone on his victory parade.

I ARRIVED EARLY to take my place, fearing the great flow of traffic into the hive. I brought Ravenor with me. We were both dressed in our finest garb, emblems proudly displayed, and wore ceremonial weapons.

Medea Betancore flew us in, and landed us at a reserved navy air-station just south of the Imperial armour depot. By the time she'd got us on the ground, the air routes were so thick she had no choice but to stay put there for the day. There was no flying out. She bade us a good day, and strolled away across the pad to chat with the ground crew servicing a Marauder.

A private car, arranged by the Nunciature, took Ravenor and myself to the hive's old Founding Fields at Lempenor Avenue, where the Inquisition was expected to gather to join the march. Outside the windows of the speeding lifter limousine, we saw steam rising from the empty, rain-washed streets. Despite his best efforts, the Lord Commander Helican would have clouds before noon.

I leant forward in the car's passenger bay and straightened Ravenor's interrogator rosette. He looked nervous, a look I didn't associate with him. He also looked the very image of an inquisitor. I realised he didn't look nervous so much as just very young. Like a man hurrying to join his drinking friends in the Thirsty Eagle off Zansiple Street.

'What is it?' he asked, smiling.

I shook my head. 'This will be quite a day, Gideon. Are you ready for it?'

'Absolutely,' he said.

I noticed he had added the tribe badge of clan Esw Sweydyr to the decoration of his uniform.

'An appropriate touch,' I remarked, pointing to it.

'I thought so,' he said.

AT TEN, THE Triumph began. A deafening roar of hooters and sirens blasted across the hive, followed by a mass cheer that quite took my breath away. By then, the streets were packed with close on two billion jubilant citizens.

Two billion voices, raised as one. You cannot imagine it.

IN SUNLIT AIR vibrating with colossal cheering, the Great Triumph moved out from the Armour depot. It was to follow an eighteen kilometre route straight down the kilometre-wide Avenue of the Victor Bellum, right into the heart of the hive and the Monument of the Ecclesiarch. Millions lined the way, cheering, applauding, waving banners and Imperial flags.

At the front rolled eighty tanks of the Thracian Fifth, pennants quivering from their aerial masts. Behind them, the colours band of the Fiftieth Gudrunite Rifles, pumped out the stately March of the Primarchs.

Next, the standard bearers: five hundred men carrying aloft the many regimental guidons and emblems representing the units and regiments that had participated in the Ophidian Suppression. It took an hour for them alone to all pass.

On their heels came the Great Standard of the Emperor, a vast aquila symbol like a clipper's mainsail, so big it took a stocky, lumbering, unbelievably ancient dreadnought of the White Consuls to lift it and stop it being carried away by the wind. The dreadnought was escorted by five Baneblade super-heavy tanks.

Behind that, rolled the dead. Every Imperial corpse recovered from the closing stages of the war, loaded in state into fifteen hundred Rhino carriers painted black for the duty. One hundred mighty Space Marines of the Aurora Chapter marched beside the trundling machines, holding up black-ribboned placards on which the names of the dead were etched in gold leaf.

It was noon by the time the marching ranks of the rest of Aurora Chapter, all in full, polished imperial armour, moved by. The massive cheering had not yet diminished. After the Space Marines came sixty thousand Thracian troops, thirty thousand from Gudrun, eight thousand from Messina, four thousand from Samater. Breastplates and lances glittered in the sun. Then the navy officers from Battlefleet Scarus in neat eche-lons. Then the White Consuls, glittering and terrifying.

Then the endless files of the Munitorium and the Administratum, followed by the slow-moving trains of the Astropathicus. A dull psychic discharge, like corposant, slithered and crackled around their carriages and their heads, and left a metallic taste in the air.

The titans of the Adeptus Mechanicus followed them. Four Warlords, blotting out the sun, eight grinding Warhounds, and a massive Super-Titan called Imperius Volcanus. It was as if significant sections of the hive itself had detached and begun walking. The vast crowds hushed as they thumped past; man-shaped mechanisms as tall as a steeple, taller yet in the case of Volcanus. Their massive legs rose and fell in perfect synchronisation. The ground shook. Unperturbed, six hundred tech-priests and magos of the Adeptus paraded casually between their feet.

The tank brigades of the Narmenians and the Scuterans followed the god-machines. Five thousand armour units, rolling forward under a haze of exhaust, barrels raised in salute. Tractors towed Earthshaker cannons behind them, three abreast, and then a seemingly endless flow of Hydra batteries, traversing their multiple barrels from left to right, like sun-following flowers.

The Ecclesiarchy followed, led by Cardinal Rouchefor, who strode ahead of his two thousand hierarchs barefoot. Cardinal Palatine Anderucias awaited us all for the blessing at the monument.

From its muster point at the old Founding Fields, the Inquisition fell in line behind the priesthood, six hundred strong.

We were the only part of the Triumph not to march in ordered ranks. We simply strode behind the Ecclesiarch in a sombre wedge. We were not uniform. All manner of men and women filled our ranks, all manner of appearances and aspects. Individuals walking, dressed in dark robes or leather capes, some with great entourages holding up the trains of gaudy robes, some on lifter thrones, some alone and dignified, some even hidden by personal void shields. Ravenor and I walked together in the press, behind the extravagant ensemble of Inquisitor Eudora.

Lord Orsini, the grandmaster, led us, his long purple vestments trained out behind him and supported by thirty servitors. At his side strode Lord Rorken of the Ordo Xenos, Lord Bezier

of the Ordo Malleus and Lord Sakarof of the Ordo Hereticus, Orsini's triumvirate.

Sonic booms sounded over the hives as honour escorts of Thunderhawks flashed down above us. Fireworks banged and fizzed, staining the sky with quick blooms of colour and light.

At our backs came the triumphal procession of the Warmaster himself. Honorius rode with Lord Commander Helican, standing in a howdah built upon the humped back of the largest and most venerable aurochothere warbeast. Ten thousand men from their personal retinues marched together. Two hundred grunting, snuffling behemoths from the aurochothere cavalry. Eight hundred Conqueror tanks. Lifter bikes skimmed alongside their line. The frenzied crowd strewed thousands of flowers in their path.

Behind them all came the prisoners.

Like the honoured dead in the funereal Rhinos, the prisoners were an open show of Imperial heroism in general, and the Warmaster's heroism in particular. Honorius delighted in displaying their torment to the adoring populace. The sight of these great, potent creatures cowed and submissive made his own power manifest.

There were several hundred foot soldiers, chained together at the hands and feet, shambling along in two wretched lines. Veterans of the Thracian Guard marched around them, lashing out with force-poles and neural-whips to drive them on. The crowd booed and howled, and pelted the subjugated foe with bottles and rocks.

Six Trojan tank-tractors, painted in the Warmaster's colours and teamed together like horses pulling a state landau, came behind the chained prisoners, towing a vast flatbed trailer designed to transport a super-heavy tank. On the flatbed, shackled in adamite and encased in individual void shield bubbles, were the thirty-three psykers, the greatest trophies of all. They were dim, contorted shapes, barely human, swimming in the milky green cocoons of the imprisoning shields. Along with the White Consuls guarding the tractor-team, two hundred astrotelepaths strode alongside it, mentally reinforcing the void bubbles that were damping the psychic fury of the captives. Frost coated the metal of the flatbed. More psychic ball-lightning drifted overhead.

Twenty thousand men and five hundred armoured machines of the Thracian Interior Guard formed the tail of the Great

Triumph, marching under the dual standard of Thracia and the Warmaster.

After barely fifteen minutes of walking in the immense procession, I was utterly numb. The noise of the crowd alone vibrated me to the very marrow. My diaphragm shook every time the flypast came in low or when the great siege sirens of the titans blasted. The scale of the occasion was overwhelming, the sensory assault bewildering. Seldom have I been so in awe of the power of my species.

Seldom have I been so forcibly reminded of my place as a tiny cog in the workings of the holy Imperium of Mankind.

FOLLOWING THE MIGHTY Avenue of the Victor Bellum, the Triumph passed under the Spatian Gate, a monolithic structure of glossy white aethercite. The memorial gate was so cyclopean, even the Titans passed under it without difficulty.

It had been raised to commemorate Admiral Lorpall Spatian, who had been killed in the early years of the Ophidian Suppression during the magnificent fleet action that had taken Uritule IV.

The inner part of the arch was painted with majestic murals depicting that event, and rose to a dome so high, a microclimate of clouds regularly formed under the apex. I had known Spatian personally, and like several others in the procession, I paused under the giant gate to pay my respects to the eternal flame.

No, that is not true. I had known Spatian, during the Helican Schism, but not at all well. For reasons I could not explain, I felt compelled to stop. I certainly had no great urge to honour him.

'Sir?' Ravor asked as I stepped aside.

'Go on, I'll catch up shortly,' I told him.

Ravor moved on with the procession while I lit a votive candle and set it amongst the thousands of others around Spatian's tomb. The vast tide of the Triumph moved slowly by behind me. Other figures had detached themselves from the procession and stood nearby, paying silent homage to the admiral.

'Eisenhorn?'

I looked round, the voice breaking my reverie. An elderly but powerful navy officer stood before me, splendidly austere in his white dress jacket.

'Madorthene,' I said, recognising him at once.

We shook hands. It had been a few years since I'd seen Olm Madorthene – Lord Procurator Madorthene, as he was now. We'd first met at Gudrun during the Necroteuch affair when he had been a mid-ranking officer in the Battlefleet Disciplinary Detachment, the navy's military police. Now he ran that detachment. He'd been a useful and reliable ally over the years.

'Quite an event,' he said, with a reserved smile. Outside, the horns of the immense Titans blared again and the noise from the crowd swelled.

'I find myself sufficiently humbled,' I said. 'The Warmaster must be loving it.'

He nodded. 'Uplifting, good for public morale.'

I agreed, but in truth my heart was not in it. It wasn't just the overwhelming cacophony of it, or my deep-seated reluctance to be here at all. Since Ravenor and I had stepped out to take our place in the Triumph, I had nursed a sense of foreboding that was growing with each passing minute. Was that what had made me pause here, under the great arch?

'There's a look on your face,' said Madorthene. 'This isn't really your thing, is it?'

'I suppose not.'

'What is it, old friend?'

I paused. Something...

I strode back to the south arch of the Spatian Gate and looked back down the huge river of the Triumph. Madorthene was with me. The Warmaster's retinue was just then beginning to pass under the Gate. Cymbals and horns clashed and blared. The noise of the crowd boomed in like a tidal wave surging down.

There were petals in the air. I remember that clearly. A blizzard of loose petals gusting up from the flowers the crowd was strewing.

A formation of twelve Lightnings was swooping in low from the south, coming down the length of the Triumph parade, following the Avenue of the Victor Bellum. Coming towards the Gate. They were in line abreast, the tips of their forward-swept wings almost touching. A display of perfect formation flying from the Battlefleet's best pilots. Sunlight glinted on their canopies and on the raked double-vanes of their tailplanes.

The sense of foreboding I had felt now became oppressively real. It was like heavy clouds had passed in front of the sun.

'Olm, I—'

'Emperor's mercy! He's in trouble, look!' Madorthene cried.

The fighters were half a kilometre from the Gate, moving at a high cruising speed. The left hand wingman suddenly wobbled, bucked...

...and veered.

The flier directly inside of him pulled hard to avoid a collision, and his starboard wing clipped the wingtip of the next Lightning in line. There was a bright puff of impact debris.

One by one, like pearls coming off a necklace, each aircraft was knocked out of the formation. The once-sleek line broke in utter disarray.

Madorthene hurled me to the ground as the jets shrieked overhead, rattling the world with their afterburners.

The two that I had seen strike each other were spinning in the air, somersaulting like discarded toys, splintering trails of metal scrap behind them. In the confusion, it seemed to me as if several others had also accidentally collided.

One Lightning, over ten tonnes of almost supersonic metal, cartwheeled down and went into the crowd on the west side of the Avenue. It bounced at least once, showering human debris into the air. At its final impact, it became a massive fireball that belched up a blazing mushroom cloud a hundred metres into the air. Shock and berserk panic filled the crowd. The stench of flame and heat and promethium washed over me.

There was a flash and the ground shook as a second stricken Lightning spiralled in under the shadow the Gate. Then, almost simultaneously, a third and louder blast came as a third aircraft, sent lurching out of control, sheared off a wing on the top corner of the Spatian Gate itself, right above us, and began tumbling down, end over end.

In the face of this calamitous accident, the soldiers in the Triumph were scattering in all directions. I dragged Madorthene back in under the arch as shattered chunks of the stricken aircraft avalanched down.

A catastrophe. A terrible, terrible catastrophe.

And it was just beginning.

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