

THE INQUISITION WAR

A Warhammer 40,000 story by Ian Watson

Draco • Harlequin • Chaos Child

THE INQUISITION WAR is the classic story of Inquisitor Jaq Draco and his desperate mission to uncover a plot that will bring mankind to its knees before the Dark Powers.

Written by award-winning author, Ian Watson, *The Inquisition War* explores areas of the Warhammer 40,000 mythology that few other authors have dared to tackle!

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Ian Watson's prestigious career has included winning a slew of awards and several of his stories have been finalists in the Hugo awards. Ian Watson's other work has included credit for the Screen Story of Steven Spielberg's movie *A.I.*, on which he worked with Stanley Kubrick.

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from *THE INQUISITION WAR*

BRANDISHING A BOLTGUN in one hand and a power sword in the other, the burly inquisitor strode along a broad boulevard, glaring to right and left.

Obispal's ginger beard forked three ways as if hairy tentacles sprouted from his chin. His eyebrows were bushes of rusty wire. His belted black robe was appliquéd with glaring white death's heads. His swamp-hunter boots could have been a pachyderm's great feet lopped off and hollowed out. Weapons and other devices hung within his blood-red, high-collared cloak; and a communicator dangled from one earlobe.

The inquisitor was advancing in the vanguard of a squad of armoured Imperial Guardsmen. Guardsmen from the local garrison, rather than Space Marines from off-world. Obispal believed in the force of will, in his own ruthless aura; and indeed, except for the evidence of lurid, puckered scar tissue across one cheek, he might have seemed invulnerable.

Presumably he didn't rate the Stalinvast operation as requiring really major surgery – even though thirty hive cities had been devastated to date and several totally destroyed. Casualties? Twenty million civilians and combatants? Out of a thousand cities, housing billions...

Wistfully, Jaq quoted to himself the words of an ancient leader of the middle kingdom on bygone Terra: 'In the land of a thousand million people, what does the death of one million of these count in the cause of purity?'

Still, suppressing such a plague wasn't the same as purging it totally. Only one fertile genestealer needed to remain alive in

hiding to undo all the good work within a few decades. Highly trained Space Marines would have been utterly thorough, and would never yield to the malaise of combat, that battle-weary yearning to be done with a ghastly campaign, to rate it a *probably* total triumph, a *practically* unqualified success.

Wrecked ground cars and tanks smouldered along the boulevard under a leaden ceiling so high that utility tubes and power cables seemed to be but a delicate tracery.

Many glow-globes had been shot out or had failed, so shadows lurked like intangible behemoths. Baleful fumes drifted from slumped ducts; corrosives dripped. Gloomy tunnels led aside into blitzed factories.

Jaq allowed sound to invade his awareness.

Obispal was howling execrations that echoed, multiplying as if his voice was that of many men.

'Death to the alien scum that steal our humanity! Death to polluters! Death to the polluted! With joy may we burn and cleanse!'

The inquisitor's voice, as picked up by the spy-fly, almost drowned the crackle of gunfire. Obispal whirled his sword around so that his right arm resembled a circular saw. He threw the deadly, humming weapon into the air and caught it deftly by the shaft. He could have been leading a parade, twirling the baton.

Yes: a parade... of extermination.

Obispal had certainly taken his time over the cleansing, even protracting the process. Backed by his men and by the many planetary defence troopers who were unpolluted and loyal to the governor, he had commenced his activities around a ring of other cities than the capital, moving from one to the next, destroying. His actions had triggered full-scale rebellion by the hybrids and by the vaster genestealer brood of true-seeming humans. For decades these latter had been infiltrating the administration and even the troopers.

If Obispal had started by cleansing the capital the genestealer broods might have dispersed, escaping through transit tunnels or even overland through the jungle to more distant cities. So his strategy made sense at the same time as it seemed wantonly ruinous.

It was as if game birds had been flushed by beaters and driven towards a central point, forced to attack the heart of power and authority in a desperate bid to secure this for themselves and seal the planet.

Bees flying into a bonfire.

Troopers fought troopers. Administrators murdered their superiors and released stocks of weapons to the rebels. For the first time the ordinary workers and managers glimpsed the true faces of the hybrids who had lurked in their midst, cloaked and hooded, or masked.

Jaq scanned another swarm of these hybrids, on the rampage with guns and blades. Their stooping posture was of a person melting down, slumping into the stance of a vicious carnivore. Amidst the swarm, handsome if eerie human beings orchestrated the pandemonium.

'One has always heard whispers,' remarked Googol, 'yet to behold with one's own eyes is quite an experience.'

It was on the tip of Jaq's tongue to point out that the Navigator was only beholding courtesy of the eye-screen. He refrained, not wishing to goad Googol into some display of bravado which might rob Jaq of such an excellent warp pilot.

'Whispers?' Jaq enquired instead. '*Loud* whispers? You were giving Grimm the benefit of your theories about genestealers. Do Navigators gossip much? Might *you* gossip?'

'Navigators travel to many places, hear many things. Some true, some half-true, some concoctions. Stories alter in the telling, Jaq.' A half-pleading, half-impertinent tone had entered Googol's voice.

The Navigator was remembering that Jaq might be attired right now as one kind of person, whereas actually he was someone else entirely... and Googol needed to be reminded of this.

Masquerading as a rogue trader of reasonable success, Jaq wore a pleated frock coat with silver epaulettes and baggy crimson breeches tucked into short white calf boots. The coat was capacious, a home to guns, and the boots were home to knives. Quite in line with any ordinary trader.

Googol licked his upper lip nervously. 'A true story that crosses the galaxy becomes a lie, Jaq.'

'So, can a lie similarly become the truth?'

'That's too sophisticated for me, Jaq.'

It wasn't, of course. No one who had stared into the insanity of the warp, no one whose living was to do so, could be unsophisticated and survive. In a sense the warp was the ultimate lie, since it continually strove to betray those who traversed it. Yet at the same time the warp was the ultimate background to existence.

Vitali Googol actively cultivated an air of sophistication, aided in this by the premature age lines wrought in his visage due to long immersion in deep space and in the warp. These lent a world-weary cast to a face that might otherwise have been babyish.

Within, the Navigator was still young and vulnerable – liable to foolish enthusiasms such as his attraction to Meh'Lindi. Knowing this, Googol tried to be wry about his own feelings and eschewed any dandified garb such as Jaq now sported. Vitali wore a black tunic stitched with purple runes which were hardly visible. Black was the void. Black was sophisticated. (Black was the colour of Meh'Lindi in her war paint.)

Jaq tried to imagine how Googol viewed him. The trader costume suggested a certain piratical business acumen, though not without honour, and in the service of a deeper sensuality. Which was all a pretence. Jaq's sensual lips were definitely at odds with his sceptical ice-blue eyes. On the one hand, Jaq must seem capable of irony and flexible tolerance – perhaps only so as to spring a trap. On the other hand, he had to be as hard as granite inside, harder even than a brutally flamboyant exhibitionist such as Obispal – since Jaq was a guardian of those who guarded humanity, an investigator of the investigators.

Am I really hard enough, Jaq wondered? Or am I vulnerable too?

'Let Navigators gossip among themselves like fishwives,' he said sharply. 'The genestealers must remain a secret from our multitude of worlds, save for leaders who need to know, lest confusion spreads.'

'If people in general knew—'

'That, Vitali, is what inquisitors are for. To find out, and to root out. Confusion is the cousin to Chaos. Knowledge causes confusion. Ignorance can be the strongest shield of the innocent.' The ghost of a smile twitched Jaq's lips. Did Jaq Draco really believe these maxims?

Quarter-facet... Meh'Lindi had quit a transit capsule, had ridden an elevator down and was sprinting effortlessly along empty north-bound mobile pavements.

The south-bound pavements were crowded with refugees fleeing from the fighting. A river of people surged, fighting to gain the central express strip where that panic-stricken river raced fastest. Some citizens were injured, bleeding; others bore bundles of possessions. Often a would-be escapee, whose one foot was on the express path and whose other was still on the slower acceleration strip, was whirled aside in an eddy and sucked underfoot.

Drizzle fell from malfunctioning fire-control nozzles. Lightning crackled overhead as cables shorted.

Quarter-facet... Mounted on a stolen power-trike, Grimm roared up the north-bound speedstrip.

Meh'Lindi glanced once over her shoulder then ran on, taking huge strides.

The abhuman stood up on the foot rests, throttling back.

'You want a lift somewhere?' he bellowed.

Meh'Lindi merely increased her pace. Impulsively, the squat swung the trike to pull alongside, so that one wheel dragged on the slower strip. The manoeuvre failed. The trike skidded and tumbled, throwing Grimm over the handlebars. Tucking himself into a ball of boots and flak jacket, the squat bounced and rolled half a dozen times. Briefly, Meh'Lindi broke step.

However, Grimm was already picking himself up, swearing, dusting himself off, retrieving his cap.

Meh'Lindi jerked one hand – in salute, or as a warning to stay away from her? – then she surged ahead.

Casting a disgusted glance at the buckled trike and at the throng pouring past him, south-bound, Grimm trotted northwards after the assassin.

Jaq surprised Googol – and himself – by chuckling, sympathetically, almost affectionately.

Meh'Lindi was soon way out of sight of the squat around a wide bend. There she quit the thoroughway, to race along feeder lanes, dodging through refugees who shrank from the fleeting, faceless, coaly-skinned woman.

The spy-fly zipped along in her wake, down narrower, abandoned, grim alleys. Noise of battle grew audible. Shocks jerked at the fabric of the city, rupturing ancient sewage pipes.

Quarter-facet... and Jaq uttered a malediction. 'There's one of the fathers of evil.'

A middle-aged man and woman were escorting a pure-strain genestealer through aisles lined with crates in some ill-lit and claustrophobic warehouse.

How commonplace the human couple looked in their workers' overalls. Apart from the laspistols both held, awkwardly if purposefully. And apart from the glazed, dotting madness in their eyes.

For these two were emotionally fixated on that monster, bonded to it by sentiments which were the cruellest parody of love and of family attachment.

The puissant alien walked crouched over in a permanent posture of attack so that the horns along its spine projected highest. Its long cranium jutting forward, fangs dripping gluey saliva. Its upper set of arms ended in claws which could tear armour open; and its carapace was as tough as armour. Fibrous ligaments corded its limbs. A horny tube of a tongue flicked out: that tongue which could kiss its own gene material into a host.

Momentarily, Jaq flinched at the creature's hypnotic gaze, even seen through the medium of the screen, and although he was psychically immune.

'Father of evil,' he intoned as if in a travesty of prayer, 'and grandfather too...'

Yes indeed. The human mother who gave birth to a deformed, bestial hybrid would dote on it blindly, as protective as a tiger of her cub, and as cunning. Offspring of hybrids would seem less alien in appearance. By the fourth generation, save for the charismatic light in their eyes, the spawn would appear human.

Yet the firstborn of such a semblance would be purestrain stealer again. With appalling, instinctive inevitability the cycle would recommence.

By then a whole family coven numbering thousands of warped persons would be infesting society secretly, a brood keenly alert to each other's alien needs. Somewhere, in deepest luxurious hiding, the overgrown patriarch which first began the pollution of a world would relish empathetically all the doings of its kin...

Quarter-facet... A genestealer tore a planetary defence trooper's chest open before darting back into concealment...

FOR A WHILE, Jaq let all hundred spy-fly images be present at once in mosaic on the eye-screen. Extending his psychic sense of presence, he felt how the battle inside Vasilariov was congealing, slowing and centring desperately about fifteen kilometres north of the hotel. That was where the surviving purestrains and minions were concentrating. Maybe the patriarch was already dead. That was where Obispal was heading from one direction. And Meh'Lindi from another.

Quarter-facet once more... A darkened, elevated observation booth overlooked what seemed to be a laboratory. Under flickering emergency lighting, arcane apparatus fumed and sparked, abandoned by its operators. The strobing of the light froze monsters in mid-motion, gathering for some assault.

Jaq willed the spy-fly to see in infra-red.

Inside the booth above that scene, black in syn-skin, Meh'Lindi crouched. She had dogged the plasteel door shut. The observation window was doubtless of armoured glass. And she was crouching over. Hiding? Had she locked herself in a place of comparative safety?

The assassin was stowing her jokaero weapons away inside her sash. She sprayed solvent onto a tiny patch of her arm then stuck a needle through the little gap in her syn-skin, injecting herself. She hunched even lower, rabbit-legged as if about to hop.

Presently, bumps arose from her spine. Her head began to elongate. Her fingers were fusing into claws.

'What's happening to her?' cried Googol. 'Has she been infected?'

Jaq shuddered. 'I must say she does believe in challenging herself!'

'What's happening to her, man?' Googol clutched Jaq's arm, appalled, for Meh'Lindi was becoming a monster.

'She injected polymorphine.'

'Polymorphine... Sounds like a painkiller, doesn't it?'

'It isn't.'

Assassins were proofed against pain, but surely Meh'Lindi must be aware of some agonies as her body strained to adopt a new shape in obedience to her will.

Googol cackled hysterically. 'Assassins' drug, right? They use it to assume a new appearance. To disguise themselves. Masquerade as someone else. Someone *human*, Jaq! I've heard of polymorphine. It can't possibly change someone's body as much as that!' His finger jerked towards the screen. 'Nor as quickly, neither!'

'She's in propinquity to other stealers,' muttered Jaq. 'She's concentrating on their body forms, feeling them with her senses...'

'That can't account for it!'

'Well, the syn-skin helps speed the reaction. It's galvanising her whole metabolism, accelerating her vitality. It's designed to do that as well as protect her.'

'You're lying, Jaq!'

'Control yourself. There is another reason... But you have no right to know, do you understand?'

Googol flinched, and gnawed at the ball of his thumb as if to stifle anguish or panic. But still he persisted, anxiously. 'I've heard how assassins are trained to dislocate their own limbs and even break their own bones so that they can writhe like snakes through narrow tubes—'

'You have no right to ask whatever! *Quieta esto, nefanda curiositas, esto quieta!*' The resonant hieratic words acted as a slap in the face.

True enough, Jaq had known the secret essence of the matter ever since his application to the Officio Assassinorum was fulfilled – his request for an assassin with previous experience

of a genestealer-infested world, and one who could pose as a sophisticated mistress.

Meh'Lindi had formerly undergone experimental surgery to implant extrudable, shape-remembering plastiflesh reinforced with carbon fibre and flexicartilage which could toughen hard as horn. Thus she could pose as a stealer hybrid, could behave as one; and afterwards could suck those implants back into herself, softening, shrinking, reabsorbing them.

Extra glands had been grafted into her to store and synthesise at speed the somatotrophin growth hormone that ordinarily promoted growth of long bones and protein synthesis in a child... and glands to reverse the process. Her artificial implants were a living organic part of her. By the same token her body of flesh and blood and bone was partly artifice and artefact.

This, coupled with the polymorphine and her own apparently chameleonic talent – perhaps potentiated by the syn-skin, though of this aspect Jaq was truly unsure – enabled her to undergo a wilder, faster transformation than fellow assassins: a radical transmutation of her body into, at least, stealer semblance.

Jaq knew that she was an initiate of the Callidus Shrine of the Assassins – speciality: cunning – and the experiment in the Callidus medical laboratory perhaps marked a perilous, agonising zenith of dissimulation. This much had been confided to him; and he had deemed it discreet to pry no further, had been persuaded of the wisdom of discretion.

Presumably Meh'Lindi's previous mission had succeeded and the Director of the Callidus Temple was inclined to field-test her again... Or maybe the mission had failed but she had survived. Maybe the extreme and somewhat specialised experiment had been abandoned? Maybe Meh'Lindi was the lone surviving product of it. Jaq knew not to enquire too deeply into the secrets of the *Officio Assassinorum* when such particulars were not within his brief.

Jaq had known... intellectually. Yet even so, the rapidity and utterness of her transformation shocked him.

'She's becoming a genestealer!' babbled Googol. 'Well, isn't she? Isn't she? She can't possibly be attempting a perfect copy...'

Indeed she wasn't. Meh'Lindi did not develop the lower set of arms nor the bony, sinuous tail. Too much to expect a new pair of arms to grow out of her ribs, or her coccyx to elongate so enormously. Nor could Jaq imagine that she could attain the full strength of a purestrain stealer – though her own strength was formidable, even when unenhanced.

Yet in dark silhouette she seemed almost a genestealer. She was at least the image of an injured stealer, blackened and fused by fire, one which had lost some appendages, perhaps lasered off, perhaps in an explosion; a stealer which still remained very much alive and able to use its deadly main claws. Syn-skin still wrapped her, having stretched to accommodate her new shape. The syn-skin sealed her toothy snout shut. Her face, her jaw had been implanted too in the Callidus laboratory...

Injured stealer... or hybrid shape. One or the other... Hybrids comprised a whole gamut of deformities. If taken for a hybrid, could she really fool a stealer brood, or their patriarch, over a period of time? Maybe, thought Jaq, that was where the Callidus experiment had come unstuck... if indeed it had come unstuck.

'That's... the woman we share quarters with?' Googol's voice was filled with black wonder, with a fearful admiration, a certain desolation of the heart, and yes, a horror that nevertheless coursed thrillingly through his nerves. Jaq too felt deeply perturbed.

Already, Meh'Lindi's own skin seemed to be stiffening under that black second skin. It was forming a tough bony carapace as stimulated cells altered their nature, hardening to horn.

'Can any assassin ever have tried this trick before?' exclaimed the Navigator. 'Wrenching her organs, distorting herself so utterly? And tried it in the midst of a combat zone?'
'*Curiositas, esto quieta!*'

'She did say she needed exercise.' If Googol hoped to sound supercilious, he failed.

The black creature which had been Meh'Lindi unlatched the door and darted into a wide corridor, misty with smoke. Several armed hybrids roamed, seeming lost. Was Meh'Lindi thinking any of the alien thoughts of a genestealer?

Understanding how it would react? Perhaps even radiating some protective aroma of brood empathy around herself? She bore down on the hybrids and, with her claws, she killed them almost before they realised.

A cloaked man who accompanied them gaped. His mouth opened in mute protest at this perversion of the proper order of affairs. Meh'Lindi ripped his head off.

No one seeing her on the move, rushing headlong through drear fuming tunnels, would really note the missing arms and absent tail, the sealed face, the scarlet sash. Or at least not note those betraying absences until far too late. She was keeping to the more furtive by-ways of the city and away from loyal troops.

Quarter-facet... Grimm arrived, puffing, at a narrow archway leading into a domed plaza. Three great avenues radiated away, choked with fighting, reeking with smoke. Explosions flared like novas inside a dust nebula. Shockwaves rippled downward from some higher level of the city which boomed with devastation. Walls and braced ceiling groaned. Drums of architecture were being beaten until they burst.

A smoky miasma masked glow-globes, reddening the scene as if here was the lurid sunset of the heart of this city before final night consumed and extinguished it. A massive detonation shook the plasteel heights. Had a munitions factory exploded? The roofs of the avenues sagged, pillars buckling. Abruptly the dome collapsed, shattering like an eggshell. Whole buildings, vehicles, and machinery came tumbling from above, wearing necklaces of fire.

Grimm scuttled away up a ramp, pursued by debris and clouds of dust.

Half-facet... Obispal spotted a lone purestrain genestealer lurking some way down a dismal arcade lined by shuttered clothing stores. The stealer loped slowly away as though injured, dodging from one steel column to the next.

Swinging his power sword and shouting to guardsmen, the inquisitor pounded after the fugitive alien. Was it sheer bravado on Obispal's part that he disdained to fire explosive bolts at that creature which itself could not manipulate a gun? Or was it blood lust? He intended to cut it apart personally with his power sword – sword against claw – and be seen to do so.

The arcade proved to be a cul-de-sac. Twisted steel blocked the far end. As the inquisitor realised this, he grinned hugely. Though only briefly.

Activated by some unseen hand, a disaster-shutter of woven steel crashed down behind him, cutting him off from his guardsmen.

Obispal whirled.

'Carve through with a power axe, and quickly!' he bellowed.

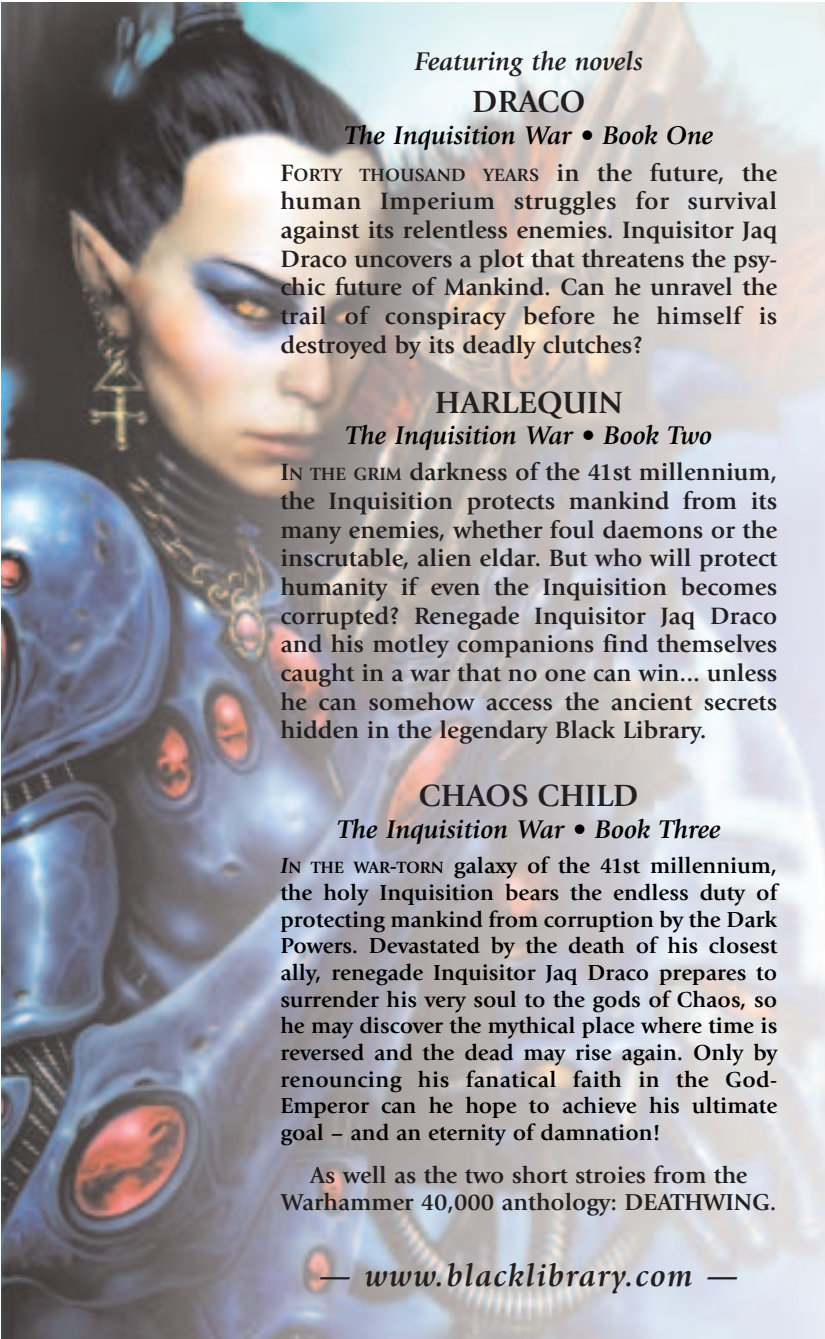
The genestealer was no longer fleeing but racing towards the inquisitor, claws outstretched. Swiftly, Obispal confronted it; and now bolts from his hand-tooled, burnished-steel gun hammered at the alien. Many of the explosive-tipped shells missed entirely. Some caromed off its carapace. One, however, detonated successfully, making instant *purée* within the creature's armoured head.

Yet already hatches in the ceiling were springing free. A dozen hybrids and another purestrain dropped down into the arcade. Still more hybrids followed. A whole rabid pack was rushing at Obispal, firing a medley of weapons inaccurately, hatred written on all their twisted faces.

Las-fire, goutts of flame, and ordinary bullets ripped and charred his clothes but were deflected by the ornate armour he wore beneath. His head was unprotected. With a juggler's dexterity he switched the boltgun swishingly to full automatic. Ejected cartridges sprayed like grain at harvest time on some granary world. Firing the bolter with one hand he waved the sizzling power sword frantically in front of his face as if fanning wasps away. The explosive clatter in the arcade was ear-splitting. Obispal's cloak caught fire.

As Obispal backed against the front of a store the grille that sheathed it tore open from within. A genestealer claw reached and plucked the inquisitor through the gap.

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