

TALES FROM THE ARCHIVE

HAMMER AND BOLTER EDITION



THE STRANGE DEMISE OF TITUS ENDOR

DAN ABNETT

AN EISENHORN SHORT STORY



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THE STRANGE DEMISE OF TITUS ENDOR

Dan Abnett

The city was a hollow, failing place that was trying to turn its fortunes around, so it was apt that Titus Endor should wash up there. He'd long since lost the lustre that had made him one of the ordo's rising stars. Like a counterfeit coin, his value had been exposed as short weight. None of it had been his fault, just circumstances.

Titus Endor took another drink, and reflected that life could be worse.

It had seemed to have been winter for two or three years. Snow fell all the time, but the city streets were so warm and busy, nothing lay for long. Slush filled the gutters, and the edges of the kerbs were crusted with polished deposits of old grey ice. Tiny snowflakes freighted the air, caught in the streetlights. They drifted like random thoughts, or disconnected clues.

The city's name was Marisberg. Or perhaps it was Chericoberg, or Zsammstadd? They were all alike, the brute towns clinging to the oily edge of Karoscura's western continent. The drifting clues had dragged him from one conurbation to the next, from one drab residentiary to another, and they all blurred into one: the same streets, the same sallow faces in the street lights, the same bars and dining halls, the same smell of wet rockcrete, the same snow. He walked alone, after hours, ate alone in eating rooms where the other tables were stacked with chairs, made calls and asked questions, and reviewed the notes he'd scribbled in his copy books.

There were a lot of copy books. He disliked dataslates, and never threw his papers away. They formed the bulk of his luggage. He always made sure he had a spare crown or two to tip the next poor concierge confronted with the task of lugging his possessions from the street to a newly rented room.

Gonrad Maliko had been a professor of ethnic diversity at Sarum, specialising

in taboos and stratified eating. Endor had a potted biography of him written out in one of the copy books. In another, a green-covered book marked 435, were the case notes of Maliko's crime, a shameless affront on Eustis Majoris involving eleven sub-adult males.

Endor had almost snared Maliko in the arctic city of Cazzad, but the timing had been out, and the tip-off too vague. None of it had been his fault, just circumstances.

Titus Endor had inherited the fondness for symphonic music from his first master, the late Hapshant. Hapshant had been a real character. Installed at a bar, in the late evening, a glass in his hand, Endor would riff tirelessly about Hapshant. 'Believe you me, a real character,' he would say to his conversation partner, usually the barman, or any solitary drinker with a spare seat beside him. 'Mad as a fiddle, in the end,' Endor always added, tapping his brow, 'worms in the head, you see.'

Endor remembered the days, a long time ago, when he would patiently wind up the old voxcordian Hapshant took with him wherever he went, to play some old wax disc of crackling symphonic music to help his master think. Endor had been Hapshant's pupil, Hapshant's brightest pupil. As an interrogator, he had served Hapshant right up to the end of the great man's life. There had been two of them, actually, two interrogators, Titus and his friend Gregor. Tight, they'd been, best friends in service and out. Titus, though, had always been the one with a luminous future, because Gregor was too serious and charmless. They had both become inquisitors, and stayed friends. Until, that is, an unfortunate business some years before, a misunderstanding that Gregor had not seen fit to overlook. None of it had been Endor's fault, just circumstances.

His fondness for the classical repertoire had come from Hapshant. Attending the performances at Marisberg's Theatricala was therefore not a drudge for Titus Endor. He would arrive at the great, gilded palace, its high windows lit by a thousand yellow globes, brush the snow off his shoulders and take a drink in the bar before the start of the performance. The grandees would come and go, in their frock coats and silk scarves, their gowns and tires, and he'd watch them professionally. Sometimes his copy book would come out of his coat pocket, and he'd scribble a note or two.

The auditorium was painted crimson, with scarlet upholstery and gold woodwork. When the house lights came down, it was like being seated in the ventricle of a heart, a red cavity pumping with sound. He sat in the stalls, never

in the same seat. His folded programme and his rented opera glasses lay in his lap.

Maliko's contact had the use of a private box, to the left of the stage. Endor watched it, night after night, seeing through his glasses the faint brass gleam of the inhabitant's own opera glasses in the dark balcony as they caught the stage light.

He identified the box: number 435. No matter how early he rose from his seat and went to the street door, he never managed to catch the occupants of 435 leaving the Theatricala. This rankled with him, though it was never his fault, just circumstances.

Liebstrum, his interrogator, had been missing for several days. Endor had sent Liebstrum to the palace of records in Zsammstadd to collate material on Maliko and his associates. The man was overdue, probably padding out his task so that he could waste time in the stews of Zsammstadd, on expenses. Endor had thought Liebstrum a promising candidate when he'd first met him, but lately he'd begun to fancy that Liebstrum was an idler, with no appetite for the hard work the ordo demanded. He wondered if he'd ever find himself signing the paperwork approving Liebstrum's advancement to full rosette. He doubted it.

The orchestra began the overture, a great swirl of busy strings and strident horns. Zoramers' *Oration*, one of Hapshant's favourite works. Endor settled back, and glanced from time to time at the private box, noting the occasional flash and glimmer of raised opera glasses, the only hint of habitation.

His head ached. The volume of the music didn't help. His head had ached a lot recently, and Endor put that down to the damnable climate he had been forced to endure in the prosecution of the Maliko case.

The stage was bathed in a limed light from directional lamps. As the red curtains spurred back, the dancers came out, performing in front of a hololithic drop of mountains and coppiced woods, in which dwelt a ruined temple or two, halcyon and timeless.

The woodwind section woke up with vigour, and the gauzy dancers swirled, soft and white as snow flakes. One took his attention immediately. Slender, she soared, faultless in her footwork, her arms expressive and immaculate. Her hair was drawn back tightly in a bun, and her face was as implacable as a death mask, powdered white like ivory, with cheek bones that aspired to the perfection of mathematical symmetry.

Endor moved his glasses away from her powerful, springing thighs, and watched the private box. Light on brass. Other eyes were watching her too.

After the performance, he took himself to a bar on Zeik Street, a bright, sparkling hall of mirrors and crystal chandeliers. It was bustling with patrons from the Theatricala.

‘Your pleasure, master?’ asked the uniformed barman.

‘Grain joiliq, with shaved ice, and a sliver of citrus,’ Endor requested. It had been his favourite tipple since the early days, since that place off Zansiple Street where he and Gregor had gone to wash away the day’s efforts. The Thirsty Eagle. Yes, that was it, The Thirsty Eagle. Ah, how the memories eroded.

His drink arrived, served on a paper mat. The joiliq was substandard, and too warm. The ice had melted prematurely, and left the citrus wind adrift in a disappointing floe.

He drank it anyway and ordered another. His headache had eased.

The room was full of loud voices and busy discussion. He thought about calling Liebstrum, but didn’t want to endure the impotence of another recorded message.

He ordered a third drink, and sat back on his stool to survey the room. Almost everyone was male, dressed in dapper evening wear. There was something rambunctious and fraternal about the gathering, like a coterie of men drawn together in some exclusive club. They roared at one another’s jokes, and slapped one another’s backs. The few women present were wives or courtesans, and acted like magnets, pulling crowds of attentive males in around them.

Karoscuro needs women, he had noted in his copy book. He had underlined it, and given the note two exclamation points. Like many colony worlds building their economies on mineral wealth, Karoscuro had advertised for specialist workers, promising to pay travel costs and set up expenses, in order to attract a professional labour force. Men had flooded in from all parts of the sector, drawn by the attractive salary dividends. The womenfolk of Karoscuro had been eclipsed. It was reckoned that males now outnumbered females ten to one in the cities of the oily coast.

Endor missed female company. He’d never had any trouble in that department. In the past, his charisma, his looks and his professional status had all combined to win him the attention of any woman that took his eye. Karoscuro was like a siege. There weren’t enough supplies to go around.

He went back to his lodgings. Liebstrum was not there, and hadn’t called. It seemed to Endor that his piles of copy books had been disturbed, and rearranged. He started to sort through them. Had someone been in his room?

He woke late, bathed and shaved. He saw his reflection in the mirror. We all grow older, he told himself. His face seemed drawn and lined, and there was a sickly pallor to it. Too much winter light, Titus Endor told himself.

His hair had been grey for a while now. He tied it back, out of convenience. There were distinguished scars on his face, the footnotes of a lifetime of battles. The biggest scar was on his leg, out of sight. Endor still wore the jagged saurapt tooth on a black cord around his neck. Gregor had dug it out of him, just after Endor had driven the beast off. Brontotaph, that had been the place, Brontotaph. How long ago now?

They'd been good friends, the best, close like brothers, until the unfortunate business some years before, a misunderstanding that Gregor had not seen fit to overlook. None of it had been Endor's fault, just circumstances.

It was sad. Endor missed his old friend. He wondered what had become of Gregor. Nothing much, he doubted, Gregor had never promised to anything.

Looking in the mirror, Endor toyed with the tooth. According to the lore on Brontotaph, he was damned. Even after death, a saurapt continued to stalk its prey, so the legend went, especially a prey item that had escaped or evaded its jaws. The spirit of the saurapt was out there, tracking him. One day it would find him at last, and strike, and balance the books.

Titus Endor laughed out loud. He saw himself laughing back at him. Plenty of ghosts stalked him, and a bestial reptilian predator was the least of them.

An inquisitor had to be rational about such things.

He wondered where Liebstrum was.

The tooth hung around his neck like a penance.

Titus Endor paid a man to let him into the Theatricala during the day. He prowled the upper galleries, looking for the door to box 435. There was no box 435. The gallery halls were dressed in red velvet carpet and scarlet wallpaper, like aortal tubes. The air smelled of stale lho-sticks. There was a 434 and a 436. His lingering fingers traced the soft red wall, hunting for a secret or concealed door.

Liebstrum had not returned. Annoyed, his mood made worse by a nagging headache, Endor sent a damning report via courier to the ordos. In his lodgings, a glass of joiliq in his hand, he leafed back through his copy books, trying to build some kind of pattern.

435. Gonrad Maliko. The reflected flash of opera glasses in the shadows. The

girl. The girl, the slender dancer.

He thought about Gregor from time to time. Endor had always been the bright one, handsome, cunning, bound for glory. Gregor had been a dutiful type, a hard worker, stolid and solid.

‘I wonder where you are now, my old friend?’ Endor asked the empty room. ‘I was always Hapshant’s favourite, and look at the career I’ve built. What have you ever done?’

The unfortunate business still nagged at him. Endor had been put in a tough position, a damn tough position. Several of his prior cases had been placed in review. Details had been distorted and accusations trumped up, all of it so petty-minded and political. He’d had no choice, in the end. When the Ordo Malleus had suggested his transfer, he’d taken it. They’d told him Gregor had been up to no good, and that if Endor helped to set his old friend back on the straight and narrow, the case reviews would be dropped. Endor hadn’t been spying. He had just been keeping an eye on his old friend. None of it had been his fault, just circumstances.

He went to the next show at the Theatricala, and then to a club, and then became mixed up in a group of Navy noncoms on shore leave. He’d followed them to the next bar, an off-street den, a dance parlour. There were women there, in an abundance at odds with the global statistics, women a man could dance with.

The dance was called the *zendov*, and it was as erotic as it was formal. The dance had evolved, Endor was told, because of the imbalance of men and women, a street dance of the lower classes originally popular in bordellos. *Zendov* allowed a man the opportunity of spending five or ten minutes with a woman, intimately. *Zendov* clubs were the most popular dives on Karoscura.

He took another few drinks, and then he saw her, the girl, the slender dancer. She was standing at the mirror-plated bar, smoking a lho-stick and contemplating her dance card. He hadn’t recognised her at first, because she was wearing a leopardskin cloche and cape, and a gold dress, and had changed her makeup from the fierce white of the ballet. But her posture took his eye, the balance of her legs, the confidence in the set of her head, and he realised who he was looking at.

He introduced himself, and offered to buy her a drink. She regarded him distantly, and then asked his name. Her accent was thick.

‘Titus,’ he replied.

She marked it on her card. ‘The fifth tune from now, Master Titus,’ she said, adding, ‘amasec on ice.’ Then she walked away, and took the embrace of a noncom for the next dance.

He was perplexed, until he saw the way of it. Most of the women in the bar were dancers from the Theatricala. They supplemented their wages by partner-dancing at the zendov bars, efficiently exploiting Karoscura’s paucity of female companionship. No wonder the clubs were popular. No wonder the clubs paid the girls well for after-hours dancing. They brought the men in, men so hungry for a five-minute intimacy with a woman while the music played, they’d stay all night, waiting their turn, and drink well in the meantime.

When his turn came, she found him at the bar.

‘Master Titus?’

‘What’s your name?’ he asked as she led him onto the dance floor.

She seemed surprised that he should care. ‘Mira,’ she replied.

The music began. Endor had watched the dancers closely, and had learned the steps. His mind worked that way. He took her in a close hold, and turned her about the floor, between other dancing couples. Glittering glow-globes rotated above them, casting down a blizzard of light like snowflakes.

She was close to him, taut, radiating heat. He felt how hard and sinewy her body was, how rigid. She was tiny, but all muscle. She smelled of cologne, but it did not mask the heat of her, or the residue of old ballet makeup, hastily removed, or the slight odour of sweat. She had come straight from the Theatricala, probably changing in a backroom in a hurry.

Sweat, hard limbs, the stale aroma of lho-sticks. He found it intoxicating. Pulled close to her, he noticed she had an old scar along the nape of her neck, just below the hairline.

The tune ended.

‘Thank you, Mira,’ he bowed. ‘Your amasec awaits at the bar.’

‘My card is full. I will come over later.’

He looked disappointed.

‘Where did you learn to dance?’ she asked.

‘Tonight. Here.’

She scowled. ‘I don’t like liars. No one learns to zendov in an evening.’

‘I’m not lying. I watched and learned.’

She narrowed her eyes. They were hard eyes, in a hard face. ‘You’re not very good,’ she said, ‘but you know the steps. Perfectly, in fact. You’re too rigid, though. Your shoulders are too tight.’

He bowed again. 'I'll remember that. Perhaps you might educate me in the finer points of the dance?'

'Sorry, my card is full.'

'No room, not even at the end of the night?'

The music had begun again. A Navy officer was waiting for her, impatient anger in his face.

'Amasec,' she said. 'Perhaps, at the end of the night.'

In the zendov clubs, the end of the night meant dawn. The queues of men danced the girls into exhaustion. Heading from the bar to find the washroom, Endor saw three or four shoeless girls in a back hall, smoking lho-sticks and dabbing at bleeding heels and swollen toes.

He went out into the snow, and searched for a public vox-station. He called Liebstrum's number, and got the message service.

'Where are you?' he shouted. 'Where are you?'

Two glasses sat on the bar. Joiliq in one, diluted with slowly melting ice, and amasec in the other. It was four-thirty.

'Master Titan?'

'Titus,' he corrected, looking around. What he saw made him forget the throbbing in his temples. 'My name is Titus.'

The girl nodded. 'Sorry. This for me?'

He smiled. She took up the amasec and sipped.

'A last dance, then, yes?' she asked.

'I've been waiting.'

There was a look in her eyes that told him how much she despised the men who waited to dance with her.

She led him to the floor. Her body was as hard as before, but now she was cold. There was no heat in her. The fragrance of lho-smoke and sweat had dulled into a thin, unhealthy smell.

'Loosen your shoulders,' she said, as the music began. 'Turn your head. No, too much. Turn it like this. And swing out. Yes. And back and back.'

'Am I getting it?' he asked. He felt like he was dancing with a corpse.

'Your footwork is fine. Excellent, actually. Your back is still a little stiff. Turn out, turn out, that's it.'

'You're a good teacher.'

'I do what I'm paid to do, sir.'

‘You’re tired.’

‘Every day is a long day,’ she whispered, her head against his chest. She looked up at him sharply. ‘Please don’t tell the bosses I said that. They’ll dock my pay.’

‘I won’t,’ he smiled, rotating her neatly. ‘I know how long your day’s been. I was at the Theatricala. You are a fine dancer.’

‘This pays better than the classical shit,’ she said. She stared up at him as they spun and re-addressed. ‘Have you been following me?’

‘No,’ he said. ‘I just came here and saw you.’

‘And learned the zendov.’

He chuckled. ‘Something like that. Men must follow women all the time on this world. There are so few of you.’

‘It does become a problem,’ she admitted.

‘So they follow you? Watch you?’

‘I suppose they do,’ said Mira.

‘Who watches you?’ he asked.

‘You do,’ she said, ‘and everyone else.’

They swung and re-addressed, then promenaded again.

‘How did you get the scar?’ he asked.

She flinched. ‘I hate it when men notice that.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘It doesn’t matter.’

‘Will you tell me how you got it?’

‘I got it years ago. That’s all I want to say about it.’

He nodded, spinning her. ‘I’m sorry I asked. We all have our scars.’

‘Isn’t that the truth?’ she agreed.

The number ended. He stepped back and looked at her.

‘Please, please don’t ask me for another,’ she said quietly.

‘A last drink, then?’

‘I’m dead on my feet, Master Titus.’

‘Might I be first on your card tomorrow, then?’

‘It doesn’t work that way. Come along tomorrow, and we’ll dance again.’

She walked away. The band was packing up. Endor went to the bar, where the barman was washing the last of the glasses.

‘Grain joiliq, with shaved ice, and a sliver of citrus,’ Endor requested.

The barman sighed, and fixed the drink. When Endor looked around, the girl had vanished.

It was light when he got back to his residentiary. Snow was fluttering down out of a sky that was white and opaque. He tossed his copy book onto the desk, took off his jacket and fell down on his bed.

He dreamt of Hapshant. There were worms coming out of his tear ducts. Endor tried to wipe them away. Gregor shouted at him, telling him he was a fool. Hapshant went into spasms, his heels kicking on the hardwood floor.

The knocking persisted. It was suddenly late in the afternoon. Endor sat up, fully clothed. The knocking came again, not Hapshant's heels at all.

He went to the door and opened it.

Liebstrum stared at him.

'Why?' he asked.

'Well, hello to you too,' replied Endor.

Liebstrum pushed past him into the room. 'Throne of Terra, Titus. Why? Why do you keep doing this?'

'Doing what, exactly?'

'Calling me. Calling me with these messages and—'

'Where have you been?' Endor asked.

Liebstrum turned and looked at him. 'You've forgotten again, haven't you?'

'Forgotten what? Interrogator, I believe you have been singularly derelict in your duties these last few weeks. I'm afraid I've been forced to send a report of admonition to the ordos and—'

'Not again. Again with this,' Liebstrum sighed.

'Again with what, interrogator?'

Liebstrum pulled out his rosette. 'It's Inquisitor, Titus. *Inquisitor*.'

'Since when?'

'Four years ago, on Hesperus. You elected me yourself. Don't you remember?'

Endor frowned. 'No, I don't.'

Liebstrum sat down on the bed. 'Throne, Titus, you have to stop doing this to me.'

'I don't follow.'

Liebstrum looked up at him sadly. 'What are you doing here?'

'Hunting Gonrad Maliko. You know that. Keep up.'

'We captured Gonrad Maliko five years ago. He's serving life in the penal colony on Izzakos. Don't you remember?'

Endor paused. He wandered over to his desk and poured the last dregs of a

bottle of joiliq into a dirty glass. ‘No, no, I don’t remember that. Not at all.’

‘Oh, Titus,’ Liebstrum muttered.

‘Maliko is loose. He’s here, and he’s loose. I have a lead, a girl in the Theatricala, and box 435–’

‘Stop it! Stop it now!’

‘Liebstrum?’

Liebstrum rose from the bed and approached Endor. ‘Show me your rosette,’ he said.

Endor took a swig of his drink and pulled his wallet out of his pocket.

‘Look. Do you see, Titus?’ Liebstrum asked, opening the leather wallet. ‘There’s no rosette in there. You were disavowed, three years ago. They took your warrant away. You’re not an inquisitor any more.’

‘Of course I am,’ said Titus Endor, ignoring the bald patch in the wallet where his rosette had once been sewn in. ‘I’m operating under Special Circumstances.’

Liebstrum shook his head sadly. ‘Titus, I’ve tried to help you, Throne knows, but you’ve got to stop calling me. You’ve got to stop pretending.’

‘Pretending? How dare you!’

Liebstrum walked towards the door. ‘This is the last time I come running, you understand? The very last time.’

‘No, I don’t understand. I am affronted by your manner, interrogator. Maliko is still out there.’

Liebstrum turned to look back one last time. ‘No, Titus, he really isn’t.’

Endor went to the park in the last of the afternoon. Black trees and blacker ironwork benches stood up out of a skim of wet snow. He wondered how Maliko had got to Liebstrum. What did he have on him? He sat on a bench, and began to draft a report in his copy book, a report exposing Liebstrum’s connections to the criminal, and recommending his immediate censure and suspension. But the bench was cold and damp, and it soaked his clothes and gave him a headache, so he walked to a local cafe and ordered a pot of chocolate and a thimble of amasec.

The light was going out of the sky. As the snow fell, it almost seemed as if the pale sky was shedding in little white flakes, leaving a dark undercoat behind.

Endor went back to the zendov club early, before the Theatricala turned out, and waited for the girl, but she never showed. He hung around until it was quite late, and then started asking questions. The other dancers, the girls, were reticent.

They'd learned that you didn't give out personal details to men who loitered at the clubs.

Finally, Endor snagged a junior barman who, for rather too many crowns, said he was prepared to slip into the manager's office and take a look at the girl's contact address in the club ledger.

Endor met him out the back of the dance club just after one in the morning, and exchanged the cash for a slip of paper.

Mira Zaleed, 870 Arbogan.

He considered leaving it until the morning, but he was restless, so he bought a quart of amasec at a tavern on Oroshbyli Street, and rode the maglev to Corso Saint Helk in the north of the city. From the station, it was a long walk up the rockcrete walkways to the hab blocks: Solingen, Zarbos, Arbogan.

The stairwells were unlit, and choked with trash. A domestic quarrel was raging on the fifth floor, and the residents of other habs were yelling out protests at the noise. Just before he located 870, it occurred to him that 870 was twice 435.

Titus Endor stood in the gloomy hallway, listening to the racket of someone else's private life disintegrating, and wondered if the numbers were significant. Numbers could be dangerous. A life of study and an eventful career had shown him that. Certain numbers, usually abstract mathematical constructs, possessed power. He'd heard of several cases where cogitators had been corrupted by warped numbers, and he'd been party to another case, years ago, when some old fool had mistakenly believed he'd uncovered the Number of Ruin. He and Gregor had handled it, and it had come to nothing, but they'd taken it seriously. He couldn't remember the old fool's name now, some dusty scribe, but he remembered the case. They'd been interrogators then, him and Gregor, just starting out. They'd been friends.

An age ago, in another life.

His mind had wandered. He blinked, and wondered how long he had been standing in the dim passageway outside 870 Arbogan. The domestic had ended, and the night was still. From somewhere, he heard the frail sound of zendov music, playing on an old voxcordian.

He decided to steady his nerves with a sip of the quart of amasec, and discovered that the bottle was half-empty already.

He knocked on the door.

There was no answer. Someone in a neighbouring flat cried out, the half-awake mew of the nightmared.

He knocked again.

‘Mira Zaleed?’ he called.

The door was baffled shempwood in an iron frame, with double dead bolts and a triple-tumbler, Blaum et Cie safety lock. The lock had been retrofitted into the door, an expensive piece of kit for such a low-rent hab. He rummaged in his trouser pocket, and found his anykey. The slim blade extended from the grip, slipped into the lock and muttered as it explored the permutations.

He waited. One murmur more, and the anykey turned. The lock sprung with a clatter of rotating drums, and the deadbolts unlatched.

He put the anykey back in his pocket and pushed the door open with his toe.

‘Mira?’

The squalid apartment was cold and dark. The windows of the main room, overlooking the hab block’s cinderblock courtyard, had been left open, and snow damp had blown in like wet breath. The drapes were lank and partly stiff with frost. He snapped on a pair of latex gloves and clicked the light switch. An overhead light bar woke up, lazy and slow. Frizzy purple mould had colonised the cups and plates left on the little dining table. A chair had been overturned on the bare floor. On the wall, faded picts of laughing friends and solemn family gatherings jostled with playbills and programmes from Theatricalas from a half-dozen worlds like Gudrun, Eustis Majoris, Brontotaph and Ligeria.

The bedroom was vacant. A single bed, crumpled with use, had been pushed against the wall, and yellow markings, made in chalk, had been scribed on the exposed floor space. The marks were arrows, circling and crossing, and numbers. 4, 3, 5 and then an 8, a 7, a 0. To the left, 87, the digits stacked as a column. 5, Endor thought, went into 435 87 times.

He stepped over the marks, and took out his little chrome picter. He took four or five shots of the markings.

He felt cold on his back, a shiver. In the little closet, packed tight, were dozens of dance costumes, all gauze and lace. They smelled, very faintly, of sweat and lho-smoke. He reached in and rifled through shoes and hats at the back of the closet space. His hand closed on something: a book.

He drew it out.

It was an unauthorised edition of *Stratified Eating Customs In The Halo Star Sub-Races*, by Soloman Tarsh. Tarsh was a pen name Maliko had used to publish his most scandalous theories. Endor smiled. Like the tumbling mechanism of a Blaum et Cie safety lock, things were falling into place. He bagged the book in a plastek evidence sheath, and put it in his pocket. Then, he rootled some more,

and found a string of cultured pearls, a small jewellery box and a fetish made of bent wire and feathers.

He bagged them all.

The kitchen was a dank mess of grime and grease, stacked with culture-bearing crockery. He went to the bathroom.

Violent death marked the small, tiled room. Blood had extravagantly stippled the walls and dried into black scabs, and it had pooled in the enamel tub, separating into dark sediment and glassy surface plasma. From the spray travel and the splash vectors, Endor approximated a frenzied attack, multiple stabs with a short, double-edged blade. There was no shower curtain, and the rings on the rail were broken and buckled. *The perp wrapped the body in the curtain*, he deduced.

‘Are you dead, Mira?’ he asked out loud. It was unlikely. The kill scene was a week old, and he’d danced with her just the night before.

‘Who’s in there?’ a voice called. Endor stiffened.

‘Come on out, unless it’s you, Mira.’

The voice was sixty years old, and carrying twenty or thirty kilos too much weight. Endor unclipped his shoulder holster so his weapon was in grab range, and came out of the bathroom. A torch beam shone in his face.

‘This had better be good,’ said the sixty-year-old, overweight voice.

‘Get the light out of my eyes, please,’ said Endor.

The beam swung away, revealing a fat old man aiming a combat shotgun. The barrels of the weapon were pointing directly at Endor. The old man was wearing pyjama bottoms and unlaced, scuffed army boots. His belly stretched his stained vest. Old Guard insignia, the stitching worn, decorated his fatigue jacket.

‘Who are you?’ Endor asked.

‘This says I get to ask the questions,’ the old man replied, settling his shotgun. ‘Who are you?’

‘A friend of Mira’s.’

The old man snorted. ‘That’s what they all say. They don’t all get in, though.’

‘She gave me a key.’

‘Why would she do that?’ the old man asked.

‘We’re friends,’ said Endor.

‘Round and round we go,’ said the old man. ‘Give me a good reason not to blast your lungs out through your spine.’

Endor nodded. ‘I’m going to reach into my jacket, all right? I’m going to show you my credentials.’

‘Slow as you like,’ the old man replied.

Endor reached into his coat, forced himself to ignore the invitation of his gun, and flipped out his wallet.

‘Titus Endor, Ordo Malleus. I’m an inquisitor operating under Special Circumstances.’

The old man’s eyes widened. He lifted the shotgun away from Endor.

‘I beg your forgiveness, sir!’ he stammered.

Endor flipped the wallet away.

‘It’s no trouble. You are?’

‘Nute Jerimo, from 868, just down the hall. I...’ the old man cleared his throat, ‘... I’m kind of the unofficial super on this floor. The residents like me to keep an eye on things, keep the place safe, you understand?’

‘You’re ex-mil?’

‘Karoscura Seventh, and proud of it. Mustered out eighteen years ago.’

‘You got a licence for that riot gun, Jerimo?’ Endor asked.

The old man shrugged. ‘It kind of followed me home from the wars, sir,’ he replied.

‘You keep the peace here, and watch over your neighbours. I’m not going to report you,’ said Endor.

‘Thank you, sir.’

‘Tell me about Mira.’

Jerimo shook his head. ‘Lovely girl, she is. A dancer. Moved in nine months back, keeps herself to herself. Always polite. Last spring, on my wife’s birthday, she gave us tickets to a performance at the Theatricala. A present, you see? What a night! I’d never have been able to treat my wife so well, not on my pension.’

‘She’s a good girl.’

‘She is that. Is she in trouble, sir? Is Mira in some sort of trouble?’

‘That’s what I’m trying to find out,’ Endor replied. ‘When did you last see her?’

The old man thought about that. ‘A week ago, maybe nine days. It was early. She was just coming in when I was going out to tend the boiler. It won’t fire the heating for this block unless someone cranks it, and so me, being me, goes downstairs and—’

‘She was just coming in?’

‘She always comes in late, sometimes with gentleman callers. Dawn or after.’

‘That was the last time you saw her?’

‘Yes, sir,’ Jerimo replied.

‘Go home, go to bed,’ said Endor. ‘I’ll lock up here.’

The old man shuffled off, taking his shotgun with him.

Endor took a last look around the apartment and switched off the light.

He could smell Maliko.

Back in his room in the residentiary, in the small hours, Endor poured himself the last of the amasec. Sipping, he took the items he’d retrieved from Mira’s hab and laid them out on his desk. The book, the fetish, the jewellery box, the pearls.

He unbagged the jewellery box and opened it with his anykey. The trays inside were dusty and empty. The only thing in it was a pendant, a gold chain fastened to a small, curved tooth. Titus Endor fingered the jagged tooth that hung around his neck.

Then he printed out the pics he’d taken of the markings on the floor, and studied them.

When he woke up, the prints were scattered across his chest.

He had slept badly. A recurring dream of death had stalked him. A supple ballet dancer with worms coming out of her eyes. A lizard carnivore, snuffling through the dark.

‘Wake up,’ he told himself.

He felt vile. He washed and dressed, and went to a dining house that was fifteen minutes away from the end of breakfast service. He ordered caffeine, poached eggs, black bread and a slice of the local sausage. He took the book out of his pocket and flipped through it as he waited for his order to arrive.

Stratified Eating Customs In The Halo Star Sub-Races, by Soloman Tarsh. It had been vanity-printed on low-quality paper. Someone had annotated the well-thumbed pages. Passages were underlined, and notes dotted the margins. Why would a dancer like Mira Zaleed own a copy of a specialist tract like this?

One section of the book had been especially heavily annotated. It was titled ‘The Eaters and the Eaten’ and it dealt with primitive customs relating to human communities and their local predators. Some hunter clans in the wilderness worlds of the Halo Stars ritually ate the flesh of apex predators in the belief that this would both proof them against predation and invest them with the traits of the killer creatures. On Salique, tribesmen drank the blood of local crocodilians so as to share their cunning. On Gudrun, in ages past, the powdered teeth and genitals of the giant carnodon were believed to imbue the ingester with feral potency. It was a recurring theme. Wherever man inhabited a world where he

was in competition with a significant apex predator, rituals of devouring evolved. Eat what would otherwise eat you, and you would be magically protected. Hunt and consume what you fear will hunt and consume you, and you would be proofed against its fanged jaws.

This was nothing new to Titus Endor. His painful experiences on Brontotaph as an interrogator had taught him much about these curious beliefs. After his clash with the saurapt, an encounter he'd never care to repeat, the local tribes had treated him with the utmost respect. He had been 'in the jaws' and he had survived. This made him special in their eyes, as if some curious supernatural relationship had been forged between man and predator. They were bound together, both eaters, both eaten. The tribesmen had urged Endor to hunt down the saurapt, kill it and ingest its flesh, so as to become master of the compact.

Endor had laughed this off and refused. The old superstitions were ridiculous. 'But the saurapt will now stalk you forever,' the tribesmen had warned, 'to the end of your days, when it will claim you at last and finish its bite.'

Finish its bite. Quite a phrase. It had made Hapshant laugh. Endor had relished the notion of a predator's bite that took years, decades perhaps, to close entirely.

Many notes, most of them hard to decipher, appended the passages dealing with such traditions. Brontotaph was mentioned. Certain charms and prophylactic rituals were described, whereby sacrifices could be made to ward off the stalking killer. Fresh blood and surrogate victims could be offered up to stall the attentions of invisible beasts.

Endor wondered about the tooth he'd found in Mira Zaleed's jewellery box.

'Are you Endor?'

Titus looked up from his eggs. It took him a moment to recognise the barman from the zendov club.

'What can I do for you?' he asked.

'May I?' the barman asked, indicating the other chair.

'Please.'

The barman sat down. He was in casual clothes, a white shirt under a striped coat. Endor imagined the man's formal wear was being pressed somewhere in a backstreet laundry.

'Master Endor,' the barman began, 'Mira wants you to know that—'

Endor held up his fork. 'I don't talk to men unless I know their names. Especially over breakfast.'

The barman cleared his throat and looked uncomfortable. 'My name is Jeg Stannis, sir,' he said.

‘And I’m Titus Endor. See, that wasn’t so hard. You were saying?’

‘Mira wants you to know that you can’t follow her any more.’

‘Does she?’

‘You went to her hab last night.’

‘Maybe I did.’

‘She knows you were there.’

‘And where is she?’

Stannis shrugged. ‘She wants to stay well away from you. She asked me to come and deliver this message, as a favour to her.’

‘I’ll go where I like, Master Stannis.’

‘The club has rules, sir,’ Stannis said. ‘The girls have to be protected from—’

‘From what?’

‘Predators,’ said Stannis.

Endor bit the corner off a slice of black bread. ‘I’m no predator, I assure you.’

‘You went to her home, uninvited, and let yourself in.’

Endor sighed.

‘The club has rules,’ the barman repeated. ‘Fraternisation with guests is strictly—’

‘It happens all the time, Master Stannis,’ said Endor. ‘Please, we’re both adults. Most of the dancers at your club are already supplementing their income from day jobs and Theatricala work. Let’s not be naive. They add to their wages in other ways too. Women are a rare commodity on Karoscura.’

The barman’s face darkened. ‘Leave her alone.’

‘Or what?’ Endor smiled.

‘Or things will go badly for you.’

Endor nodded. ‘We’ll see. Tell me this, Master Stannis...’ He pulled a print from his coat and set it on the white cloth. ‘What does this mean?’

Stannis looked down at the print. It was a shot of the yellow chalk marks on the floor of Mira Zaleed’s bedroom.

‘They’re practice marks,’ he said. ‘Dance steps. The girls often draw out the turns and steps.’

Endor picked up the print and looked at it. ‘Are they really? I’m not convinced. The numbers—’

‘Beat counts.’

‘Who did she kill in her bathroom, Master Stannis?’

The barman got up. ‘Kill? I think there must be something wrong with your head, mister. You leave her alone, you hear me?’

‘I hear what you’re saying,’ Endor nodded.

After breakfast, Endor stopped at a street bar on Kalyope and took an amasec against the cold. Sleet was coming down, brittle and wet. He read some more of the book. Maliko, Throne damn him, had a way with words.

Endor looked up. Across the street, through the veil of sleet, he saw a man watching him, a tall, thin man, dressed in sober black, with a high black hat.

Endor looked away to pay the bill. When he got up, the thin man in the tall black hat had vanished.

‘How much?’ Endor asked.

‘Four crowns,’ the adept replied.

‘To turn it round by tonight?’

‘Twenty crowns,’ the adept replied.

Endor showed him his rosette, but the adept didn’t seem all that impressed.

‘Twenty crowns,’ he repeated.

Endor paid him the money, and handed him Mira’s tooth. ‘Typed, by tonight, no excuses.’

The adept nodded.

Endor left the backstreet alchemist’s, and trudged up into the cold. The sleet had stiffened into snow, and it was belting along the thoroughfare in waves. He pulled up the collar of his coat, and walked into it, head down.

His route took him back past the Theatricala, unlit and drab in the daylight. He went in. Cleaners were mopping the marble floors, and turning out the waste bins.

‘We’re closed,’ a man said, coming forwards to meet Endor. ‘The box office opens at six.’

Endor looked the man up and down. ‘My name is Endor, and I’m an inquisitor of the holy ordos,’ he said. He didn’t bother with his badge this time. It seemed to have lost its impact.

‘My pardon, sir,’ the man said.

‘Do I know you?’ asked Endor.

‘I don’t think so, sir.’

The man was tall and skinny. ‘Do you own a very tall black hat?’ Endor asked.

‘No, I don’t, sir.’

‘You have a dancer here, by the name of Mira Zaleed. I would like to inspect her dressing room.’

‘We don’t do that, sir,’ said the man.

‘Oh, I’m sorry,’ smiled Endor. ‘I thought I’d explained that I was an inquisitor.’

‘This is where they all change,’ the man said. Endor stepped into the room and turned on the light. The man waited by the door.

The room was long and low, flanked with grubby mirrors. Piles of dirty laundry heaped the baskets behind the door. Floaty white dresses hung on a rail. On the work surfaces, pins and reels of thread and thimbles lay beside pots of greasepaint and waxy sticks of rouge and base white. The room stank of greasy makeup, sweat and smoke.

‘Her station?’ asked Endor.

‘I have no idea, inquisitor,’ the man said.

‘None at all?’

‘Maybe to the left there, third mirror along. It’s very busy in here at night.’

Endor sat down in the seat indicated and looked at himself in the smeared mirror. He was overpowered by the smell of stale perfume. Spent lho-sticks choked a glass near his left hand. The words ‘Good luck Mira XXX Lilo’ were written in lip rouge in the lower right-hand corner of the mirror.

Endor opened the small drawer under the mirror. It was full of blood. He shut it again, hastily, trying not to slosh anything out onto his lap.

‘Could I have a moment?’ he asked.

‘I’m not really allowed—’ the man began.

‘Inquisitor, inquisitor,’ Endor snarled.

‘I’ll be outside,’ the man said, and closed the door behind him.

Gently, Endor slid the drawer open again. It wasn’t full of blood at all. It was full of dark rose petals. He laughed at himself. The rose petals were as black and red as the halls of the Theatricala. He dipped his hand in and slid it around. The petals were as soft and cold as snow flakes or random clues.

He took out the knife. It was double-sided and stained. He sniffed it. Blood. From the bathroom in 870 Arbogan, no doubt. He leant back into the seat, and took out the pict. Dance steps? Practice marks? Surely nothing so innocent.

Endor decided he had to get Liebstrum working on the Number of Ruin. He needed proper information. The Number of Ruin wasn’t something one took lightly. There had been a case, years back, an old fool...

Endor wondered where Liebstrum was. He hadn't seen his interrogator in days.

He put his hand back into the petals and found a card, a business card. On one side, it read 'Cloten and Sons, Funerary Needs and Final Rituals'. There was a vox number and a street address.

On the other side, handwritten, was 'Master Titus, you need to conclude your business with these men. Order number 87.' 435, Endor thought, was divisible by 87 5 times.

'Hello?' Endor called out.

The man poked his head around the dressing room door. 'Sir?'

'What are the chances of a man getting a drink?' Endor asked.

Cloten and Sons occupied a grim ouslite building at the end of Linnal Street. Polished long-bodied hearses sat in the snowy yard. A brass bell tinkled as Endor went in.

'Can I be of assistance to you, sir?' asked a young, pudgy man in mourning weeds.

'No, you can't,' Endor replied, 'but he can.' He pointed at the tall, slender man at the back of the musty little shop, a place of dark velvet drapes and samphorwood.

'Master Cloten?' the young man called. 'For you, sir.'

Master Cloten walked over the Endor. He was no longer wearing the tall back hat, but he was unmistakable. His face was hard and pale and sinewy, the face a man wore when he had spent his life dealing with grief.

'How may I help you, sir?' he asked.

'Order number 87,' Endor replied.

The man went to his heavy ledger, and heaved it open, but Endor knew he already knew the details.

'Ah, indeed. Already fully paid. A nalwood coffin, and a confirmed site in the municipal yard. Headstone already inscribed. Eighteen paid mourners. We have two of our most saddest-faced boys ready, sir, a horse-drawn carriage. Full wreaths. Two hymns already chosen and applied. The choir of the Theatricala will attend and sing them. Well, everything looks in order.'

'Good,' said Endor, 'and it's all paid for?'

'Yes sir.'

'I saw you in the street this morning,' said Endor.

'Quite probably, sir,' the slender man agreed. 'Death visits all the time. It

stalks us, so to say.'

'I've heard that,' Endor smiled.

'And it's never subtle,' the slender man said. 'It strikes where it wants. Such is the way of the cosmos.'

'Indeed. Well, the ceremony seems well catered, and I am thankful for that. I knew him well.' Endor looked at the slender man for a reaction. None came. 'A splendid send-off. These are the hymns?'

'They are.'

Endor studied the sheets. 'I had wanted to make a contribution towards costs,' he said. 'As I told you, I knew him well.'

'Mistress Zaleed has already paid for everything,' the slender man said.

'Has she? Has she?' Endor murmured. 'May I see the inscription?'

The slender man passed him a pict of the headstone.

'Such a lamentable loss,' the slender man said. 'To be killed by a monster like that. Throne, I didn't know there were any predators left on Karoscura, not like that. Imagine.'

'Indeed,' said Endor.

He looked at the pict. His own name was on the headstone.

The backstreet alchemist's had shut up for the night. In the swirling snow, he hammered on the door until the adept unlocked it.

'Tonight!' Endor spat. 'Tonight, you said!'

'You're late,' the adept replied.

'Just tell me what you found,' Endor snapped. He felt peculiar, and in no mood for nonsense.

'I ground it down. It's a saurapt tooth, just as you thought, from Brontotaph.'

Endor joined the queue at the doors of the Theatricala. The overture was pumping out already, the windows glowing with gold light.

'Anywhere in the circle,' he told the girl in the box office, pushing crowns at her as he waited for his ticket.

'Are you all right, sir?' she asked.

'I'm fine,' he replied.

He hired glasses, bought a programme and a glass of joiliq, and hurried to his seat.

The ruddy auditorium pulsed like a box of flesh, red and dark, pumping with movement. He took his seat after a few thank you's and excuse me's.

He swung his glasses up. Yes, there in 435, the glint of other opera glasses. I have you now, Maliko, he thought.

The overture ended. The curtains drew back and the dancers mounted the stage. There she was, perfect and poised. Where had she been hiding?

Endor's body started to twist and turn, dancing the zendov in his seat.

'Will you stop that?' complained the woman beside him.

'Sorry,' said Endor, sitting still and sipping his drink.

He looked up at the box, and saw the glint of brass and glass again. 435. 435.

Of course, there was no box 435.

Liebstrum sat down beside him.

'Ah, there you are,' Endor smiled. 'Just in time.'

Liebstrum looked at him strangely.

'I've been calling you, you know?' said Endor.

'I know,' Liebstrum sighed.

'Where have you been?'

'Busy. Look, sir—'

'Oh, hush! You can't talk through this. It's beautiful. Watch them dance. Watch her.'

'Sir, I... sir... the ordos sent me, sir,' said Liebstrum. 'I was concerned, sir. Your calls, and everything. I had them run some tests on your last routine clinical. They wanted you to know. I'm so sorry, I would never wish this on you, sir.'

'Wish what? For Throne's sake, watch her!' Endor craned forwards and looked through his opera glasses. They caught the light.

'Sir?'

'What?'

'Sir, the worms, sir, the cerebral worms. They think you may have been infected years ago, perhaps by Hapshant.'

'He was a real character.'

'Sir, your mind is being eaten up. Dementia, sir.'

'Don't be silly, Liebstrum. By the way, where the hell have you been?'

'Sir, I think it would be best if you came with me now. I have summoned doctors. They can make your last weeks comfortable.'

Endor lowered his opera glasses. 'Is this some kind of trick?' he asked.

'No, sir,' replied Liebstrum.

'Listen to me, Liebstrum, she's got me. It was very canny of her. There's a saurapt stalking her too.'

‘A what, sir?’

‘A saurapt. She fended it off, made the rituals. She transplanted her curse onto me, you see?’

‘No, not really, sir.’

‘Oh yes, you do!’ cried Endor. He reached for his glass, but it was empty. ‘I smelt the same, don’t you see? I was *already* a target. She performed the rituals and switched her predator after me. I’m her blood sacrifice. I suppose it was easy, given that I’d already got the curse on me.’

‘Sir, the doctors are waiting. They will look after you.’

‘Liebstrum? Liebstrum?’ Endor called. He dropped his opera glasses. Liebstrum had vanished. Below him, the performance was continuing. He was in a box. He turned around, and saw the number on the door.

435.

But there was no box 435.

He felt peculiar. His head ached worse than ever. He wanted a drink, something to dull the pain. Grain joiliq, with shaved ice, and a sliver of citrus. His hands were numb. Where was Liebstrum? Hadn’t he just been talking to Liebstrum?

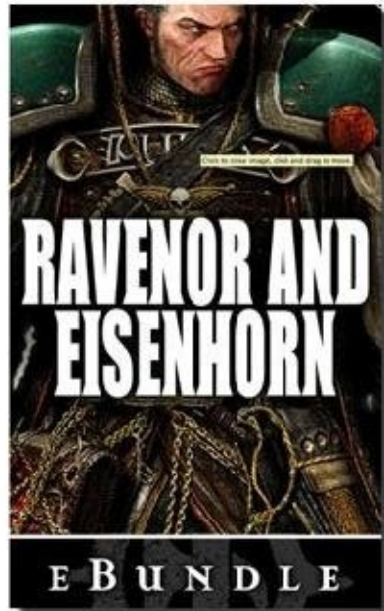
The performance ended with a flourish, and the Theatricala exploded with applause.

It was all over now. Endor smiled. He realised it wasn’t his fault. Just circumstances.

Out of the red darkness behind him, something loomed and finished its bite.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DAN ABNETT is a multiple New York Times bestselling author and an award-winning comic book writer. He has written over forty novels, including the acclaimed Gaunt's Ghosts series, and the Eisenhower and Ravenor trilogies. His Horus Heresy novel *Prospero Burns* topped the SF charts in the UK and the US. In addition to writing for Black Library, Dan scripts audio dramas, movies, games, comics and bestselling novels for major publishers in Britain and America. He lives and works in Maidstone, Kent.



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