

WARHAMMER
40,000

DAN ABNETT

'Dan Abnett is
brilliant...'
Enigma

FIRST AND ONLY



A GAUNT'S GHOSTS NOVEL

Gaunt's Ghosts

FIRST AND ONLY

By Dan Abnett



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IT IS THE 41st millennium. For more than a hundred centuries the Emperor has sat immobile on the Golden Throne of Earth. He is the master of mankind by the will of the gods, and master of a million worlds by the might of his inexhaustible armies. He is a rotting carcass writhing invisibly with power from the Dark Age of Technology. He is the Carrion Lord of the Imperium for whom a thousand souls are sacrificed every day, so that he may never truly die.

YET EVEN IN his deathless state, the Emperor continues his eternal vigilance. Mighty battlefleets cross the daemon-infested miasma of the warp, the only route between distant stars, their way lit by the Astronomican, the psychic manifestation of the Emperor's will. Vast armies give battle in his name on uncounted worlds. Greatest amongst his soldiers are the Adeptus Astartes, the Space Marines, bio-engineered super-warriors. Their comrades in arms are legion: the Imperial Guard and countless planetary defence forces, the ever-vigilant Inquisition and the tech-priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus to name only a few. But for all their multitudes, they are barely enough to hold off the ever-present threat from aliens, heretics, mutants and worse.

TO BE A man in such times is to be one amongst untold billions. It is to live in the cruellest and most bloody regime imaginable. These are the tales of those times. Forget the power of technology and science, for so much has been forgotten, never to be re-learned. Forget the promise of progress and understanding, for in the grim dark future there is only war. There is no peace amongst the stars, only an eternity of carnage and slaughter, and the laughter of thirsting gods.

THE HIGH LORDS of Terra, lauding the great Warmaster Slaydo's efforts on Khulen, tasked him with raising a crusade force to liberate the Sabbat Worlds, a cluster of nearly one hundred inhabited systems along the edge of the Segmentum Pacificus. From a massive fleet deployment, nearly a billion Imperial Guard advanced into the Sabbat Worlds, supported by forces of the Adeptus Astartes and the Adeptus Mechanicus, with whom Slaydo had formed co-operative pacts.

'After ten hard-fought years of dogged advance, Slaydo's great victory came at Balhaut, where he opened the way to drive a wedge into the heart of the Sabbat Worlds.

'But there Slaydo fell. Bickering and rivalry then beset his officers as they vied to take his place. Lord High Militant General Dravere was an obvious successor, but Slaydo himself had chosen the younger commander, Macaroth.

'With Macaroth as warmaster, the Crusade force pushed on, into its second decade, and deeper into the Sabbat Worlds, facing theatres of war that began to make Balhaut seem like a mere opening skirmish...'

— from *A History of the Later Imperial Crusades*



PART ONE

NUBILA REACH

THE TWO FAUSTUS-CLASS Interceptors swept in low over a thousand slowly spinning tonnes of jade asteroid and decelerated to coasting velocity. Striated blurs of shift-speed light flickered off their gunmetal hulls. The saffron haze of the nebula called the Nubila Reach hung as a spread backdrop for them, a thousand light years wide, a hazy curtain which enfolded the edges of the Sabbat Worlds.

Each of these patrol Interceptors was an elegant barb about one hundred paces from jutting nose to raked tail. The Faustus were lean, powerful warships that looked like serrated cathedral spires with splayed flying buttresses at the rear to house the main thrusters. Their armoured flanks bore the Imperial eagle, together with the green markings and insignia of the Segmentum Pacificus Fleet.

Locked in the hydraulic arrestor struts of the command seat in the lead ship, Wing Captain Torter LaHain forced down his heart rate as the ship decelerated. Synchronous mind-impulse links bequeathed by the Adeptus Mechanicus hooked his metabolism to the ship's ancient systems, and he lived and breathed every nuance of its motion, power-output and response.

LaHain was a twenty-year veteran. He'd piloted Faustus Interceptors for so long, they seemed an extension of his body. He glanced down into the flight annex directly below and behind the command seat, where his observation officer was at work at the navigation station.

'Well?' he asked over the intercom.

The observer checked off his calculations against several glowing runes on the board. 'Steer five points starboard. The astropath's instructions are to sweep down the edge of the gas clouds for a final look, and then it's back to the fleet.'

Behind him, there was a murmur. The astropath, hunched in his small throne-cradle, stirred. Hundreds of filament leads linked the astropath's socket-encrusted skull to the massive sensory apparatus in the Faustus's belly. Each one was marked with a small, yellowing parchment label, inscribed with words LaHain didn't want to have to read. There was the cloying smell of incense and unguents.

'What did he say?' LaHain asked.

The observer shrugged. 'Who knows? Who wants to?' he said.

The astropath's brain was constantly surveying and processing the vast wave of astronomical data which the ship's sensors pumped into it, and psychically probing the warp beyond. Small patrol ships like this, with their astropathic cargo, were the early warning arm of the fleet. The work was hard on the psyker's mind, and the odd moan or grimace was commonplace. There had been worse. They'd gone through a nickel-rich asteroid field the previous week and the psyker had gone into spasms.

'Flight check,' LaHain said into the intercom.

'Tail turret, aye!' crackled back the servitor at the rear of the ship.

'Flight engineer ready, by the Emperor!' fuzzed the voice of the engine chamber.

LaHain signalled his wingman. 'Moselle... you run forward and begin the sweep. We'll lag a way

behind you as a double-check. Then we'll pull for home.'

'Mark that,' the pilot of the other ship replied and his craft gunned forward, a sudden blur that left twinkling pearls in its wake.

LaHain was about to kick in behind when the voice of the astropath came over the link. It was rare for the man to speak to the rest of the crew.

'Captain... move to the following co-ordinates and hold. I am receiving a signal. A message... source unknown.'

LaHain did as he was instructed and the ship banked around, motors flaring in quick, white bursts. The observer swung all the sensor arrays to bear.

'What is this?' LaHain asked, impatient. Unscheduled manoeuvres off a carefully set patrol sweep did not sit comfortably with him.

The astropath took a moment to respond, clearing his throat. 'It is an astropathic communiqué, struggling to get through the warp. It is coming from extreme long range. I must gather it and relay it to Fleet Command.'

'Why?' LaHain asked. This was all too irregular.

'I sense it is secret. It is primary level intelligence. It is Vermilion level.'

There was a long pause, a silence aboard the small, slim craft broken only by the hum of the drive, the chatter of the displays and the whirr of the air-scrubbers.

'Vermilion...' LaHain breathed.

Vermilion was the highest clearance level used by the Crusade's cryptographers. It was unheard of, mythical. Even main battle schemes usually only warranted a Magenta. He felt an icy tightness in his wrists, a tremor in his heart.

Sympathetically, the Interceptor's reactor fibrillated. LaHain swallowed.

A routine day had just become very un-routine. He knew he had to commit everything to the correct and efficient recovery of this data.

'How long do you need?' he asked over the link.

Another pause. 'The ritual will take a few moments. Do not disturb me as I concentrate. I need as long as possible,' the astropath said. There was a phlegmy, strained edge to his voice. In a moment, that voice was murmuring a prayer. The air temperature in the cabin dropped perceptibly. Something somewhere, sighed.

LaHain flexed his grip on the rudder stick, his skin turning to gooseflesh. He hated the witchcraft of the psykers. He could taste it in his mouth, bitter, sharp. Cold sweat beaded under his flight-mask. Hurry up! he thought... It was taking too long, they were idling and vulnerable. And he wanted his skin to stop crawling.

The astropath's murmured prayer continued. LaHain looked out of the canopy at the swathe of pinkish mist that folded away from him into the heart of the nebula a billion kilometres away. The cold, stabbing light of ancient suns slanted and shafted through it like dawn light on gossamer. Dark-bellied clouds swirled in slow, silent blossoms.

'Contacts!' the observer yelled suddenly. 'Three! No, four! Fast as hell and coming straight in!'

LaHain snapped to attention. 'Angle and lead time?'

The observer rattled out a set of co-ordinates and LaHain steered the nose towards them. 'They're coming in fast!' the observer repeated. 'Throne of Earth, but they're moving!'

LaHain looked across his over-sweep board and saw the runic cursors flashing as they edged into the tactical grid.

‘Defence system activated! Weapons to ready!’ he barked. Drum autoloaders chattered in the chin turret forward of him as he armed the auto-cannons, and energy reservoirs whined as they powered up the main forward-firing plasma guns.

‘Wing Two to Wing One!’ Moselle’s voice rasped over the long-range vox-caster. ‘They’re all over me! Break and run! Break and run in the name of the Emperor!’

The other Interceptor was coming at him at close to full thrust. LaHain’s enhanced optics, amplified and linked via the canopy’s systems, saw Moselle’s ship while it was still a thousand kilometres away. Behind it, lazy and slow, came the vampiric shapes, the predatory ships of Chaos. Fire patterns winked in the russet darkness. Yellow trceries of venomous death.

Moselle’s scream, abruptly ended, tore through the vox-cast.

The racing Interceptor disappeared in a rapidly expanding, superheated fireball. The three attackers thundered on through the fire wash.

‘They’re coming for us! Bring her about!’ LaHain yelled and threw the Faustus round, gunning the engines. ‘How much longer?’ he bellowed at the astropath.

‘The communiqué is received. I am now... relaying...’ the astropath gasped, at the edge of his limits.

‘Fast as you can! We have no time!’ LaHain said.

The sleek fighting ship blinked forward, thrust-drive roaring blue heat. LaHain rejoiced at the singing of the engine in his blood. He was pushing the threshold tolerances of the ship. Amber alert sigils were lighting his display. LaHain was slowly being crushed into the cracked, ancient leather of his command chair.

In the tail turret, the gunner servitor traversed the twin auto-cannons, hunting for a target. He didn’t see the attackers, but he saw their absence: the flickering darkness against the stars.

The turret guns screamed into life, blitzing out a scarlettinged, boiling stream of hypervelocity fire.

Indicators screamed shrill warnings in the cockpit. The enemy had obtained multiple target lock. Down below, the observer was bawling up at LaHain, demanding evasion procedures. Over the link, Flight Engineer Manus was yelling something about a stress-injection leak.

LaHain was serene. ‘Is it done?’ he asked the astropath calmly.

There was another long pause. The astropath was lolling weakly in his cradle. Near to death, his brain ruined by the trauma of the act, he murmured, ‘It is finished.’

LaHain wrenched the Interceptor in a savage loop and presented himself to the pursuers with the massive forward plasma array and the nose guns blasting. He couldn’t outrun them or outfight them, but by the Emperor he’d take at least one with him before he went.

The chin turret spat a thousand heavy bolter rounds a second. The plasma-guns howled phosphorescent death into the void. One of the shadow-shapes exploded in a bright blister of flame, its shredded fuselage and mainframe splitting out, carried along by the burning, incandescent bow-wave of igniting propellant.

LaHain scored a second kill too. He ripped open the belly of another attacker, spilling its pressurised guts into the void. It burst like a swollen balloon, spinning round under the shuddering

impact and spewing its contents in a fire trail behind itself.

A second later, a rain of toxic and corrosive warheads, each a sliver of metal like a dirty needle, raked the Faustus end to end. They detonated the astropath's head and explosively atomised the observer out through the punctured hull. Another killed the flight engineer outright and destroyed the reactor interlock.

Two billiseconds after that, stress fractures shattered the Faustus class Interceptor like a glass bottle. A super-dense explosion boiled out from the core, vaporising the ship and LaHain with it.

The corona of the blast rippled out for eighty kilometres until it vanished in the nebula's haze.



A MEMORY

DARENDARA,

TWENTY YEARS EARLIER

THE WINTER PALACE was besieged. In the woods on the north shore of the frozen lake, the field guns of the Imperial Guard thumped and rumbled. Snow fluttered down on them, and each shuddering retort brought heavier falls slumping down from the tree limbs. Brass shell-cases clanked as they spun out the returning breeches and fell, smoking, into snow cover that was quickly becoming trampled slush.

Over the lake, the palace crumbled. One wing was now ablaze, and shell holes were appearing in the high walls or impacting in the vast arches of the steep roofs beyond them. Each blast threw up tiles and fragments of beams, and puffs of snow like icing sugar. Some shots fell short, bursting the ice skin of the lake and sending up cold geysers of water, mud and sharp chunks that looked like broken glass.

Commissar-General Delane Otkar, chief political officer of the Hyrkan Regiments, stood in the back of his winter-camouflage painted half-track and watched the demolition through his field scope. When Fleet Command had sent the Hyrkans in to quell the uprising on Darendara, he had known it would come to this. A bloody, bitter end. How many opportunities had they given the Secessionists to surrender?

Too many, according to that rat-turd Colonel Dravere, who commanded the armoured brigades in support of the Hyrkan infantry. That would be a matter Dravere would gleefully report in his despatches, Otkar knew. Dravere was a career soldier with the pedigree of noble blood who was gripping the ladder of advancement so tightly with both hands that his feet were free to kick out at those on lower rungs.

Otkar didn't care. The victory mattered, not the glory. As a commissar-general, his authority was well liked, and no one doubted his loyalty to the Imperium, his resolute adherence to the primary dictates, or the rousing fury of his speeches to the men. But he believed war was a simple thing, where caution and restraint could win far more for less cost.

He had seen the reverse too many times before. The command echelons generally believed in the theory of attrition when it came to the Imperial Guard. Any foe could be ground into pulp if you threw enough at them, and the Guard was, to them, a limitless supply of cannon fodder for just such a purpose.

That was not Otkar's way. He had schooled the officer cadre of the Hyrkans to believe it too. He had taught General Caernavar and his staff to value every man, and knew the majority of the six thousand Hyrkans, many by name. Otkar had been with them from the start, from the First Founding on the high plateaux of Hyrkan, those vast, gale-wracked industrial deserts of granite and grassland. Six regiments they had founded there, six proud regiments, and just the first of what Otkar hoped would be a long line of Hyrkan soldiers, who would set the name of their planet high on the honour roll of the Imperial Guard, from Founding to Founding.

They were brave boys. He would not waste them, and he would not have the officers waste them. He glanced down from his half-track into the tree-lines where the gun teams serviced their thumping limbers. The Hyrkan were a strong breed, drawn and pale, with almost colourless hair which they preferred to wear short and severe. They wore dark grey battledress with beige webbing and short-billed forage caps of the same pale hue. In this cold theatre, they also had woven gloves and long greatcoats. Those labouring at the guns, though, were stripped down to their beige undershirts, their webbing hanging loosely around their hips as they bent and carried shells, and braced for firing in the close heat of the concussions. It looked odd, in these snowy wastes, with breath steaming the air, to see men moving through gunsmoke in thin shirts, hot and ruddy with sweat.

He knew their strengths and weaknesses to a man, knew exactly who best to send forward to reconnoitre, to snipe, to lead a charge offensive, to scout for mines, to cut wire, to interrogate prisoners. He valued each and every man for his abilities in the field of war. He would not waste them. He and General Caernavar would use them, each one in his particular way, and they would win and win and win again, a hundred times more than any who used his regiments like bullet-soaks in the bloody frontline.

Men like Dravere. Oktar dreaded to think what that beast might do when finally given field command of an action like this. Let the little piping runt in his starched collar sound off to the high brass about him. Let him make a fool of himself. This wasn't his victory to win.

Oktar jumped down from the vehicle's flatbed and handed his scope to his sergeant. 'Where's the Boy?' he asked, in his soft, penetrating tones.

The sergeant smiled to himself, knowing the Boy hated to be known as 'The Boy'.

'Supervising the batteries on the rise, commissar-general,' he said in a faultless Low Gothic, flavoured with the clipped, guttural intonations of the Hyrkan homeworld accent.

'Send him to me,' Oktar said, rubbing his hands gently to encourage circulation. 'I think it's time he got a chance to advance himself.'

The sergeant turned to go, then paused. 'Advance himself, commissar – or advance, himself?'

Oktar grinned like a wolf. 'Both, naturally.'

THE HYRKAN SERGEANT bounded up the ridge to the field guns at the top, where the trees had been stripped a week before by a Secessionist airstrike. The splintered trunks were denuded back to their pale bark, and the ground under the snow was thick with wood pulp, twigs and uncountable fragrant needles.

There would be no more airstrikes, of course. Not now. The Secessionist airforce had been operating out of two airstrips south of the winter palace which had been rendered useless by Colonel Dravere's armoured units. Not that they'd had much to begin with – maybe sixty ancient-pattern slamjets with cycling cannons in the armpits of the wings and struts on the wingtips for the few bombs they could muster.

The sergeant had cherished a sneaking admiration for the Secessionist fliers, though. They'd tried damn hard, taking huge risks to drop their payloads where it counted, and without the advantage of good air-to-ground instrumentation. He would never forget the slamjet which took out their communication bunker in the snow lines of the mountain a fortnight before. It had passed low twice to get a fix, bouncing through the frag-bursts which the anti-air batteries threw up all around it. He could still see the faces of the pilot and the gunner as they passed, plainly visible because the canopy was

hauled back so they could get a target by sight alone.

Brave... desperate. Not a whole lot of difference in the sergeant's book. Determined, too – that was the commissar-general's view. They knew they were going to lose this war before it even started but still they tried to break loose from the Imperium. The sergeant knew that Oktar admired them. And, in turn, he admired the way Oktar had urged the chief of staff to give the rebels every chance to surrender. What was the point of killing for no purpose?

Still, the sergeant had shuddered when the three thousand pounder had fishtailed down into the communications bunker and flattened it. Just as he had cheered when the thumping, traversing quad-barrels of the Hydra anti-air batteries had pegged the slamjet as it pulled away. It looked like it had been kicked from behind, jerking up at the tail and then tumbling, end over end, as it exploded and burned in a long, dying fall into the distant trees.

The sergeant reached the hilltop and caught sight of the Boy. He was standing amidst the batteries hefting fresh shells into the arms of the gunners from the stockpiles half-buried under blast curtains. Tall, pale, lean and powerful, the Boy intimidated the sergeant. Unless death claimed him first, the Boy would one day become a commissar in his own right. Until then, he enjoyed the rank of cadet commissar, and served his tutor Oktar with enthusiasm and boundless energy. Like the commissar-general, the Boy wasn't Hyrkan. The sergeant thought then, for the first time, that he didn't even know where the Boy was from – and the Boy probably didn't know either.

'The commissar-general wants you,' he told the Boy as he reached him.

The Boy grabbed another shell from the pile and swung it round to the waiting gunner.

'Did you hear me?' the sergeant asked.

'I heard,' said Cadet Commissar Ibram Gaunt.

HE KNEW HE was being tested. He knew that this was responsibility and that he'd better not mess it up. Gaunt also knew that it was his moment to prove to his mentor Oktar that he had the makings of a commissar.

There was no set duration for the training of a cadet. After education at the Schola Progenium and Guard basic training, a cadet received the rest of his training in the field, and the promotion to full commissarial level was a judgement matter for his commanding officer. Oktar, and Oktar alone, could make him or break him. His career as an Imperial commissar, to dispense discipline, inspiration and the love of the God-Emperor of Terra to the greatest fighting force in creation, hinged upon his performance.

Gaunt was an intense, quiet young man, and a commissarial post had been his dearest ambition since his earliest days in the Schola Progenium. But he trusted Oktar to be fair. The commissar-general had personally selected him for service from the cadet honour class, and had become in the last eighteen months almost a father to Gaunt. A stern, ruthless father, perhaps. The father he had never really known.

'See that burning wing?' Oktar had said. 'That's a way in. The Secessionists must be falling back into their inner chambers by now. General Caernavar and I propose putting a few squads in through that hole and cutting out their centre. Are you up to it?'

Gaunt had paused, his heart in his throat. 'Sir... you want me to...'

'Lead them in. Yes. Don't look so shocked, Ibram. You're always asking me for a chance to prove your leadership. Who do you want?'

‘My choice?’

‘Your choice.’

‘Men from the fourth brigade. Tanhause is a good squad leader and his men are specialists in room to room fighting. Give me them, and Rychlind’s heavy weapons team.’

‘Good choices, Ibram. Prove me right.’

THEY MOVED PAST the fire and into long halls decorated with tapestries where the wind moaned and light fell slantwise from the high windows. Cadet Gaunt led the men personally, as Oktar would have done, the lasgun held tightly in his hands, his blue-trimmed cadet commissar uniform perfectly turned out.

In the fifth hallway, the Secessionists began their last-ditch counter-attack.

Lasfire cracked and blasted at them. Cadet Gaunt ducked behind an antique sofa that swiftly became a pile of antique matchwood. Tanhause moved up behind him.

‘What now?’ the lean, corded Hyrkan major asked.

‘Give me grenades,’ Gaunt said.

They were provided. Gaunt took the webbing belt and set the timers on all twenty grenades. ‘Call up Walthem,’ he told Tanhause.

Trooper Walthem moved up. Gaunt knew he was famous in the regiment for the power of his throw. He’d been a javelin champion back home on Hyrkan.

‘Put this where it counts,’ Gaunt said.

Walthem hefted the belt of grenades with a tiny grunt. Sixty paces down, the corridor disintegrated.

They moved in, through the drifting smoke and masonry dust. The spirit had left the Secessionist defence. They found Degredd, the rebel leader, lying dead with his mouth fused around the barrel of his lasgun.

Gaunt signalled to General Caernavar and Commissar-General Oktar that the fight was over. He marshalled the prisoners out with their hands on their heads as Hyrkan troops set about disabling gun emplacements and munitions stores.

‘WHAT DO WE do with her?’ Tanhause asked him.

Gaunt turned from the assault cannon he had been stripping of its firing pin.

The girl was lovely, white-skinned and black haired, as was the pedigree of the Darendarans. She clawed at the clenching hands of the Hyrkan troops hustling her and other prisoners down the draught hallway.

When she saw Gaunt, she stopped dead. He expected vitriol, anger, the verbal abuse so common in the defeated and imprisoned whose beliefs and cause had been crushed. But what he saw in her face froze him in surprise. Her eyes were glassy, deep, like polished marble. There was a look in her face as she stared back at him. Gaunt shivered when he realised the look was recognition.

‘There will be seven,’ she said suddenly, speaking surprisingly perfect High Gothic with no trace of the local accent. The voice didn’t seem to be her own. It was guttural, and its words did not match the movement of her lips. ‘Seven stones of power. Cut them and you will be free. Do not kill them.’

But first you must find your ghosts.'

'Enough of your madness!' Tanhause snapped, then ordered the men to take her away. The girl was vacant-eyed by now and froth dribbled down her chin. She was plainly sliding into the throes of a trance. The men were wary of her, and pushed her along at arm's length, scared of her magic. The temperature in the hallway itself seemed to drop. At once, the breaths of all of the men steamed the air. It smelled heavy, burnt and metallic, the way it did before a storm. Gaunt felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise. He could not take his eyes off the murmuring girl as the men hustled her away gingerly.

'The Inquisition will deal with her,' Tanhause shivered. 'Another untrained psyker witch working for the enemy.'

'Wait!' Gaunt said and strode over to her. He tensed, scared of the supernaturally-touched being he confronted. 'What do you mean? "Seven stones"? "Ghosts"?''

Her eyes rolled back, pupilless. The cracked old voice bubbled out of her quivering lips. 'The war knows you, Ibram.'

He stepped back as if he had been stung. 'How did you know my name?'

She didn't answer. Not coherently, anyway. She began to thrash and gibber and spit. Nonsense words and animal sounds issued from her shuddering throat.

'Take her away!' Tanhause barked.

One man stepped in, then span to his knees, flailing, blood streaming from his nose. She had done nothing but glance at him. Snarling oaths and protective charms, the others laid in with the butts of their lasguns.

Gaunt watched the corridor for five full minutes after the girl had been dragged away. The air remained cold long after she had disappeared. He looked around at the drawn, anxious face of Tanhause.

'Pay it no heed,' the Hyrkan veteran said, trying to sound confident. He could see the cadet was spooked. Just inexperience, he was sure. Once the Boy had seen a few years, a few campaigns, he'd learn to shut out the mad ravings of the foe and their tainted, insane rants. It was the only way to sleep at night.

Gaunt was still tense. 'What was that about?' he said, as if he hoped that Tanhause could explain the girl's words.

'Rubbish is what. Forget it, sir.'

'Right. Forget it. Right.'

But Gaunt never did.



PART TWO

FORTIS BINARY FORGE WORLD

One

THE NIGHT SKY was matt and dark, like the material of the fatigues they wore, day after day. The dawn stabbed in, as silent and sudden as a knife-wound, welling up a dull redness through the black cloth of the sky.

Eventually the sun rose, casting raw amber light down over the trench lines. The star was big, heavy and red, like a rotten, roasted fruit. Dawn lightning crackled a thousand kilometres away.

Colm Corbec woke, acknowledged briefly the thousand aches and snarls in his limbs and frame, and rolled out of his billet in the trench dugout. His great, booted feet kissed into the grey slime of the trench floor where the duckboards didn't meet.

Corbec was a large man on the wrong side of forty, built like an ox and going to fat. His broad and hairy forearms were decorated with blue spiral tattoos and his beard was thick and shaggy. He wore the black webbing and fatigues of the Tanith and also the ubiquitous camo-cloak which had become their trademark. He also shared the pale complexion, black hair and blue eyes of his people. He was the colonel of the Tanith First-and-Only, the so-called Gaunt's Ghosts.

He yawned. Down the trench, under the frag-sack and gabion breastwork and the spools of rusting razor wire, the Ghosts awoke too. There were coughs, gasps, soft yelps as nightmares became real in the light of waking. Matches struck under the low bevel of the parapet; firearms were un-swaddled and the damp cleaned off. Firing mechanisms were slammed in and out. Food parcels were unhooked from their vermin-proof positions up on the billet roofs.

Shuffling in the ooze, Corbec stretched and cast an eye down the long, zigzag traverses of the trench to see where the picket sentries were returning, pale and weary, asleep on their feet. The twinkling lights of the vast communication up-link masts flashed eleven kilometres behind them, rising between the rusting, shell-pocked roofs of the gargantuan shipyard silos and the vast Titan fabrication bunkers and foundry sheds of the Adeptus Mechanicus tech-priesthood.

The dark stealth capes of the picket sentries, the distinctive uniform of the Tanith First and Only, were lank and stiff with dried mud. Their replacements at the picket, bleary eyed and puffy, slapped them on the arms as they passed, exchanging jokes and cigarettes. The night sentries, though, were too weary to be forthcoming.

They were ghosts, returning to their graves, Corbec thought. As are we all.

In a hollow under the trench wall, Mad Larkin, the first squad's wiry sniper, was cooking up something that approximated caffeine in a battered tin tray over a fusion burner. The acrid stink hooked Corbec by the nostrils.

'Give me some of that, Larks,' the colonel said, squelching across the trench.

Larkin was a skinny, stringy, unhealthily pale man in his fifties with three silver hoops through his left ear and a purple-blue spiral-wyrm tattoo on his sunken right cheek. He offered up a misshapen

metal cup. There was a fragile look, of fatigue and fear, in his wrinkled eyes. ‘This morning, do you reckon? This morning?’

Corbec pursed his lips, enjoying the warmth of the cup in his hefty paw. ‘Who knows...’ His voice trailed off.

High in the orange troposphere, a matched pair of Imperial fighters shrieked over, curved around the lines and plumed away north. Fire smoke lifted from Adeptus Mechanicus work-temples on the horizon, great cathedrals of industry, now burning from within. A second later, the dry wind brought the crump of detonations.

Corbec watched the fighters go and sipped his drink. It was almost unbearably disgusting. ‘Good stuff,’ he muttered to Larkin.

A KILOMETRE OFF, down the etched zigzag of the trench line, Trooper Fulke was busily going crazy. Major Rawne, the regiment’s second officer, was woken by the sound of a lasgun firing at close range, the phosphorescent impacts ringing into frag-sacks and mud.

Rawne spun out of his cramped billet as his adjutant, Feygor, stumbled up nearby. There were shouts and oaths from the men around them. Fulke had seen vermin, the ever-present vermin, attacking his rations, chewing into the plastic seals with their snapping lizard mouths. As Rawne blundered down the trench, the animals skittered away past him, lopping on their big, rabbit-legs, the lice-ridden pelts smeared flat with ooze. Fulke was firing his lasgun on full auto into his sleeping cavity under the bulwark, screaming obscenities at the top of his fractured voice.

Feygor got there first, wrestling the weapon from the bawling trooper. Fulke turned his fists on the adjutant, mashing his nose, splashing up grey mud-water with his scrambling boots.

Rawne slid in past Feygor, and put Fulke out with a hook to the jaw.

There was a crack of bone and the trooper went down, whimpering, in the drainage gully.

‘Assemble a firing squad detail,’ Rawne spat at the bloody Feygor unceremoniously and stalked back to his dugout.

TROOPER BRAGG WOVE back to his bunk. A huge man, unarguably the largest of the Ghosts, he was a peaceable, simple soul. They called him ‘Try Again’ Bragg because of his terrible aim. He’d been on picket all night and now his bed was singing a lullaby he couldn’t resist. He slammed into young Trooper Caffran at a turn in the dugout and almost knocked the smaller man flat. Bragg hauled him up, his weariness clamming his apologies in his mouth.

‘No harm done, Try,’ Caffran said. ‘Get to your billet.’

Bragg blundered on. Two paces more and he’d even forgotten what he’d done. He simply had an afterimage memory of an apology he should have made to a good friend. Fatigue was total.

Caffran ducked down into the crevice of the command dugout, just off the third communication trench. There was a thick polyfibre shield over the door, and layers of anti-gas curtaining. He knocked twice and then pulled back the heavy drapes and dropped into the deep cavity.

Two

THE OFFICER’S DUGOUT was deep, accessed only by an aluminium ladder lashed to the wall. Inside, the light was a frosty white from the sodium burners. The floor was well-made of duckboards and there

were even such marks of civilisation as shelves, books, charts and an aroma of decent caffeine.

Sliding down into the command burrow, Caffran noticed first Brin Milo, the sixteen year-old mascot the Ghosts had acquired at their Founding. Word was, Milo had been rescued personally from the fires of their homeworld by the commissar himself, and this bond had led him to his status of regimental musician and adjutant to their senior officer. Caffran didn't like to be around the boy much. There was something about his youth and his brightness of eye that reminded him of the world they had lost. It was ironic: back on Tanith with only a year or two between them, they like as not would have been friends.

Milo was setting out breakfast on a small camp table. The smell was delicious: cooking eggs and ham and some toasted bread. Caffran envied the commissar, his position and his luxuries.

'Has the commissar slept well?' Caffran asked.

'He hasn't slept at all,' Milo replied. 'He's been up through the night reviewing reconnaissance transmissions from the orbital watch.'

Caffran hesitated in the entranceway to the burrow, clutching his sealed purse of communiqués. He was a small man, for a Tanith, and young, with shaved black hair and a blue dragon tattoo on his temple.

'Come in, sit yourself down.' At first, Caffran thought Milo had spoken, but it was the commissar himself. Ibram Gaunt emerged from the rear chamber of the dugout looking pale and drawn. He was dressed in his uniform trousers and a white singlet with regimental braces strapped tight in place. He gestured Caffran to the seat opposite him at the small camp table and then swung down onto the other stool.

Caffran hesitated again and then sat at the place indicated.

Gaunt was a tall, hard man in his forties, and his lean face utterly matched his name. Trooper Caffran admired the commissar enormously and had studied his previous actions at Balhaut, at Form Prime, his service with the Hyrkan Eighth, even his majestic command of the disaster that was Tanith.

Gaunt seemed more tired than Caffran had ever seen, but he trusted this man to bring them through. If anyone could redeem the Ghosts it would be Ibram Gaunt. He was a rare beast, a political officer who had been granted full regimental command and the brevet rank of colonel.

'I'm sorry to interrupt your breakfast, commissar,' Caffran said, sitting uneasily at the camp table fussing with the purse of communiqués.

'Not at all, Caffran. In fact, you're just in time to join me.' Caffran hesitated once more, not knowing if this was a joke.

'I'm serious,' Gaunt said. 'You look as hungry as I feel. And I'm sure Brin has cooked up more than enough for two.'

As if on cue, the boy produced two ceramic plates of food – mashed eggs and grilled ham with tough, toasted chunks of wheatbread. Caffran looked at the plate in front of him for a moment as Gaunt tucked into his with relish.

'Go on, eat up. It's not every day you get a chance to taste officers' rations,' Gaunt said, wolfing down a forkful of eggs.

Caffran nervously picked up his own fork and began to eat. It was the best meal he'd had in sixty days. It reminded him of his days as an apprentice engineer in the wood mills of lost Tanith, back before the Founding and the Loss, of the wholesome suppers served on the long tables of the refector

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