

INFERNO!



GAUNT'S GHOSTS
SPECIAL!

FOR XANTH - FOR THE EMPEROR



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Tales of Fantasy & Adventure

INFERNO!

A CORNY BUT apt first line for this editorial might be 'unaccustomed as I am to public speaking...' You see, I'm not used to the sound of my own voice.

Oh, the irony! I'm lost for words. I'm a writer whose output of comics, novels, short fiction and reviews is bountiful, nay, shameless. A guy condemned by his own Black Library bio with the line 'there is, it seems, no stopping him'. An author who is just completing his tenth book for GW. Ten novels. Just about a million words.

So professionally, I use a lot of words. Heck, I make up a feth of a lot of them. But I'm always putting them in other people's mouths. Gilead of Lothain. Princeps Erwin Hekate. Interrogator Gravier. Malus Darkblade. Aric of White Company. Priad of the Iron Snakes. Gregor Eisenhorn. Colonel-Commissar Ibram Gaunt.

I very seldom get to speak for myself.

CHRISTIAN rang me up. His calls usually go something like this: 'Where in Sigmar's name is the next

Darkblade script, you snivelling laggard?' (I paraphrase, naturally. He's much tougher than that. Imagine a Lord Militant Commander with a blue pencil.)

On this occasion, he was all sweetness. 'I was wondering if you'd like to write the "guest" editorial for the next issue of Inferno!'

'Sorry?' I said. It's often difficult to make out what he's saying because of the tortured screams and the staccato chatter of bolt-guns in the background. A day in the Black Library office is like a day on the farm.

'Will you write the "guest" editorial?' he repeated.

'Guest editorial? That's very flattering. Should I be worried about the inverted commas you put around "guest"?'

'No!' he snapped. 'Why?'

'Well when you say "guest" like that, it sounds as if "guest" doesn't actually mean guest.'

'Of course it means "guest"!'

'There! You just did it again!'

'Did not. It's just your "imagination".'

'Ooh! And again!'

'Bah! Look, do you want this "honour" or not? It's not every day you get a "chance" to write the intro for a special issue dedicated to your most "popular" characters. Well?'

SO HERE I sit. Lost for words. Expected for the first time in my 'career' to write as me. It's weird not to have anyone to hide behind.

So I'll keep it simple. Black Library has dedicated this issue to Gaunt and the Tanith First-and-Only. I've written five novels about them. There are more to come. I love writing them and... well, thanks for reading them, really.

All that remains for me to do is to declare this Gaunt's Ghosts special officially open.

There, that wasn't too hard, was it?



Dan Abnett
Maidstone
March 2002

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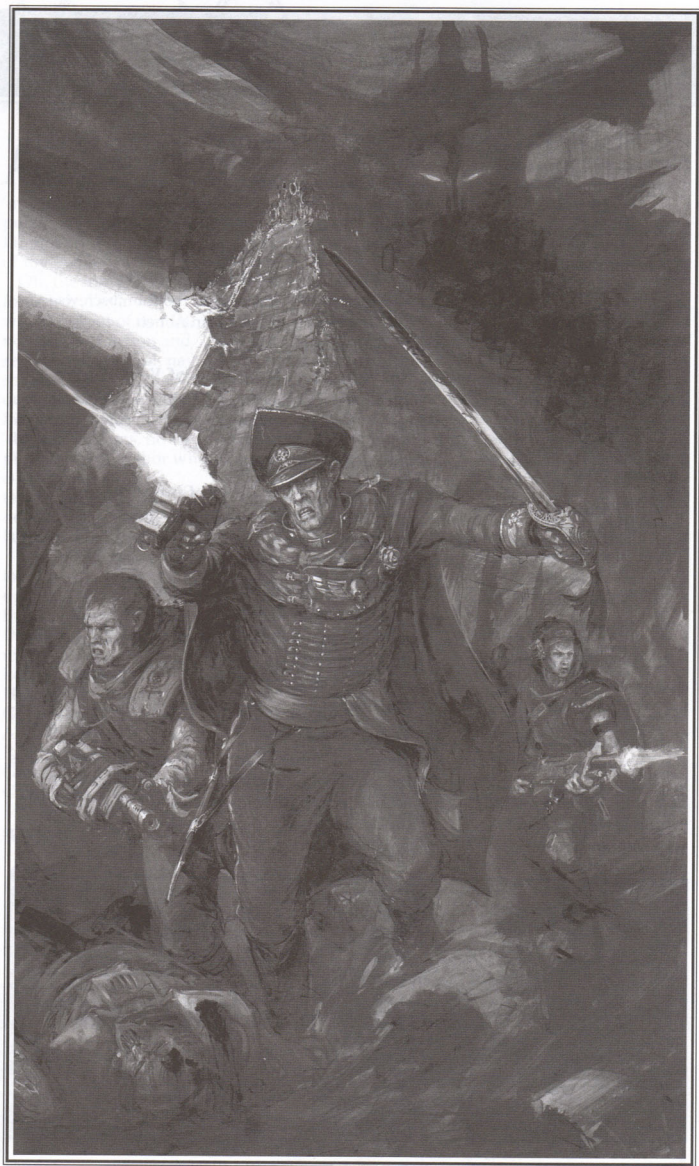
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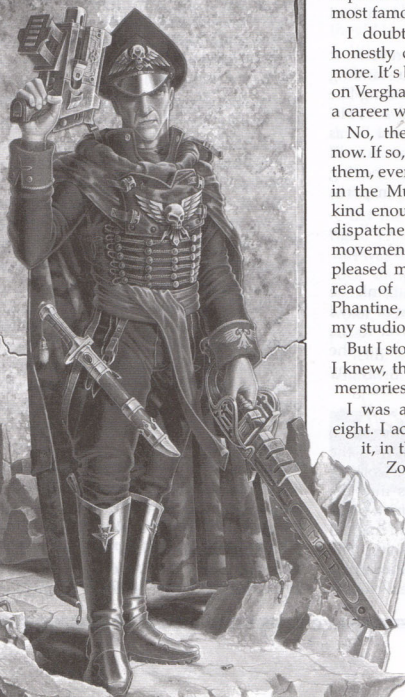
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IN REMEMBRANCE

A GAUNT'S GHOSTS STORY
BY DAN ABNETT



The Gaunt's Ghosts novel *Necropolis* put Commissar Gaunt and the Tanith First in the front line of the desperate defence of the hive-city Vervunhive against their Chaos-infested rival Ferrozoica. It proved a momentous conflict for the Tanith. As well as testing them to their limits it introduced a slew of new Verghastite characters who would quickly become veteran regulars of the unit. There was tragedy as well: by the end many Tanith would never leave while Gaunt himself was critically wounded, felled at the moment of his triumph over the evil warlord Heritor Asphodel. But even while their commissar lies at the brink of death, the Tanith First soldier on through the dead city of Vervunhive.

TO TELL YOU the truth, it was a long time ago and I didn't really spend much time with them. It's pushing it to say I knew them at all, really. It was just a job, you see. A well paid commission between my more serious works. I never expected it to become... well, the thing I am most famous for.

I doubt any of them remember me. I honestly doubt any of them are alive any more. It's been sixty years since the hive war on Verghast, and Imperial Guardsman is not a career with long-term prospects.

No, they're probably all long dead by now. If so, may the Emperor of Mankind rest them, every one. I had a friend who worked in the Munitorium at NorthCol who was kind enough to pass me copies of Imperial dispatches so I could follow their movements and fortunes. For a few years, it pleased me to keep track of them. When I read of their successes on Hagia and Phantine, I poured a glass of joiq and sat in my studio, toasting their name.

But I stopped after a while. Sooner or later, I knew, the news would be bad. I have my memories, and they're enough.

I was a young man then. Just twenty-eight. I actually trained, would you believe it, in the Scholam Lapidae in Ferrozoica.

Zoica, of all places! But by the time of the war I had been living and working in NorthCol for about seven years. I'd visited Vervunhive half a dozen times, usually in regard of a commission, twice to consult

with a fine toolmaker whose tungsten-nosed chisels I favoured. He died during the siege. A loss to my profession.

I well remember arriving in Vervunhive in the first days after the conflict. I barely recognised the place. War had smashed the majesty out of it and left it crumpled and deformed. It reminded me of nothing so much as a toppled statue; brought down, shattered, its scattered debris hinting at its former grace. You could trace what it had been from the wreckage but you could never put it back together again.

And they never did.

I remember getting off the transport in the gusting smoke and thinking that it didn't much look like a victory.

No matter where you went, there was smoke. Ash caked every surface, inside and out. Sooty flakes of it billowed in the air. The great bulk of the Main Spine was miserably buckled and punctured, and wept smoke from more holes than I could count. The sky was black. So very black. They said the smoke-storms roiling from Vervunhive could be seen from space.

I was utterly lost for a second. It had expected it to be bad, but this...

A voice started me out of my reverie. It said something like, 'What are you standing there for, you galking fool?' Something like that, only more colourful. I found a VPHC officer glowering at me and realised I was standing in the middle of the transit concourse with floods of people moving around me, along with loaders, transports, troop trucks. I was pretty much in the way, gawping there like that, though to tell the truth only the VPHC staffer seemed to care. I showed him my papers.

He seemed contemptuous. I think he actually laughed at my explanation of why I was there. Then he pointed me over to the far side of the concourse, through the crowds, to where men were loading a grimy truck under a shrapnel-puckered awning.

'They're the one's you want,' he said.

I picked up my bag and walked across to them. My throat was already dry with the omnipresent smoke. Six men were working as a human chain to sling crates into the flatbed. They were all dressed in matt-black fatigues which were patched and ragged and in desperate need of boil washing. The men were uniformly black haired and pale skinned. Most had tattoos on their cheeks,

brows or forearms, and silver studs in their ears. The biggest of them was a hairy brute with a fabulously tangled beard and huge arms like tree limbs. Blue spirals wound up through the black hair on those massive forearms. He was whistling a jaunty tune, but his lips were so dry and cracked, the noise was more like the whine of a weary dog.

His name was Colm Corbec, and he was, incredibly, the colonel.

'Who're you?' he said, hardly pausing in his work.

'Thoru. Jeshua Thoru. The... uh... artist.' 'Never heard of you.'

'Well,' I began, 'I'm not famous, as such... I never supposed you would have...'

He stopped his work suddenly and looked at me. The men behind him thumped to a halt, straining with boxes. 'I'm sure you're very good,' he said kindly, 'I meant no offence. Me and fine art, we're not, you know, close. I wouldn't know an oil painting if it came and bit me on the arse. You a painter?'

'No, I'm a sculptor.'

'A sculptor, eh?' he nodded at that, as if impressed, and resumed his labour, catching a carton and humping it off onto the truck. 'A sculptor. Fancy. You do statues, then?'

'Uh, yes. Actually, I specialise in bas-relief friezes and installations, but I...' I realised I was losing him fast. 'Yes, I do statues.'

'Good for you.'

'I've been commissioned,' I said.

'Me too, lad. I'm a colonel.'

'No, I...' I paused. The other men were looking at me like I was a madman. One of them, a good-looking, sharp-eyed man younger and smaller than his commander, flexed an augmetic shoulder and eyed me cautiously.

'I think he means artistically commissioned, chief,' he said.

'Does he now?' said Corbec.

'Yes,' I said. 'House Chass has paid me to produce a monument in honour of this... event.'

'What event?'

'The victory of Vervunhive,' I said.

'Ah,' said Corbec. He looked around, as if seeing for the first time the mutilated, burning city. 'So that's what this is.'

'My papers are official and up to date,' I said, producing them. He wasn't interested in looking. 'I've been granted permission to

interview the Tanith First in order to... uhm... plan my work.'

'Us?' said the younger man with the augmented shoulder.

'Yes,' I replied. 'Lady Chass was most specific. She wanted the Tanith First especially to be commemorated.'

'I've never been commemorated before,' said the younger man, a sergeant as it seemed from what was left of his rank pins.

'Keep working at that pace, Varl,' said Corbec, 'and I'll commemorate you myself. With the toe of me boot.'

They finished loading the truck and climbed aboard. I hesitated, not sure what to do. Corbec looked down from the cab at me. 'Well, lad,' he said. 'You'd better come with us, hadn't you?'



THE GUARD transport truck had clearly been wounded in the suspension during the fighting. We rattled down one street and the next, bone-shaken. I rode in the cab, squeezed in between Corbec and the sergeant. After a few minutes, the latter sniffed.

'Funny smell,' he said. 'Sweet, scenty.'

'Yeah,' said Corbec, also sniffing. I couldn't smell anything except the rank odour of unwashed bodies, old sweat and smoke. 'Have you had a bath today?' he asked me.

'Yes!' I said indignantly.

'That'd be it, then,' said Corbec.

'Lucky bastard,' said the other, Varl.

We joined a main arterial, slowing to skirt around burnt-out vehicles and sags of shelled rubble where building fronts had collapsed out over the roadway. Ahead, habbers were queuing for food and basic humanitarian supplies at a relief station set up in an old assembly plant. The arterial was almost a kilometre long, and the ragged queue lined it from end to end.

Corbec stared at them from the truck's filthy window as we drove by. The homeless, the bereaved, the hungry, the sick. Thin people with hollow faces and broken hopes, their eyes blank and sunken. Their skin was uniformly white, their clothing grey with ash and black with dirt. It was as if the world had become monochrome. He seemed fascinated.

'What is it?' I asked.

'They... they look like the old photopicts of me grandparents and kin,' he replied with surprising honesty. There was a terrible sadness in his tone. 'We had this great nalwood mantle over the kitchen hearth back home in County Pryze. Me mam stood the photopicts there, each one in a little frame. Uncles, aunts, distant cousins, weddings, baptisms. I always thought they looked so stiff and awkward, so soulless, you know? Black and white faces, like those out there.'

His words were mournful, and quite unlike anything I had ever expected to hear coming from such a hairy brute of a warrior. Lady Chass had asked me to try and capture the soul of the Tanith, and here, unexpectedly and without much searching, I seemed to have glimpsed it.

'Sometimes,' Corbec added, clearing his throat, 'and now would be one of those times, I wished I'd stuffed a few of those ragged old picts into me kitbag the morning I left home for the Founding Fields. They'd meant much to me, just relatives I'd barely met. Never met. Folks whose lives I knew nothing about. But now, if only I had them, they'd be like lifeline back to Tanith.'

'Where is Tanith?' I made the mistake of asking.

'Nowhere, Mister Artist, sir,' Corbec said, suddenly rousing out of his despond. 'It's dead and it's gone and we're all that's left. That's what makes us ghosts, you see.'

The long line of miserable faces continued to flicker past the cab windows.

'Let me get this straight... we won here, right, chief?' asked Sergeant Varl snidely. Varl was driving the truck, a contraband lho-stick dangling from his lips. The heady fumes filled the cab and made my eyes water, but Corbec seemed content to let it pass.

'Yeah, we won. Behold and marvel, this is what winning looks like.'



VARL PULLED the truck into the loading dock of Medical Hall 67/mv.

'Stay here,' Corbec told him, climbing down from the cab. 'You can come with me, if you like,' he said to me as an

afterthought and strode off towards the front steps of the battered building. I ran to catch up. Almost immediately, we were surrounded by children. Hab-urchins, refugees, all smeared in filth.

I didn't know what to do. Corbec had handed out the last of his dry rations and calorie packs days ago. The children mobbed him, pulling at his hands, tugging at his fatigues, ignoring his repeated murmur of apology.

The truck horn sounded. The kids looked round.

'Hey!' called Varl. 'Hey, over here! C'mon! Cake-bars!' He held up some of the foil-wrapped bars and waggled them.

The flock of children pulled away from us and swarmed around the truck, leaping to catch the cakes as Varl tossed them out from the carton on the seat.

Corbec watched for a moment and smiled. 'Varl and me scored the cake rations from a collapsed Munitorium storehouse. We'd intended them to be a treat for the Ghosts.' I realised he thought Varl had made a good call. This was more important.

We entered the Medical Hall. Inside the doorway was a stack of leaking sacks full of medical waste that lent the entrance a ghastly, pervasive fragrance. Beyond that was a train of linen carts, piled with soiled bedding. Two medics were fast asleep on the stacks of discoloured sheets. Even the roar of the incoming liberation warships hadn't woken them. They had worked until they had dropped. Someone had probably put them there.

Corbec knew the route to the room. He been visiting every day for over two weeks now, he said. He was looking for someone called Dorden.

'Doc? Doc?'

'He's sleeping,' said a woman quietly, coming in behind us.

Her name was Curth, Corbec told me later. He'd met her before a few times, but didn't know her at all well. A Verghastite local, a chief surgeon. Fething pretty, he said, if you liked small, well-made women with heart-shaped faces, and Corbec clearly did. But, he said emphatically, as if I was in any doubt, fancying Curth was like fancying the wife of a Sector Governor. He was a lowly spitball colonel and she was a senior civilian medic. Doc Dorden had the highest respect for her, and that was enough for a simple soul like

Corbec. She'd proved herself here at Vervunhive. Corbec didn't think much of the idea of women in combat zones, but Curth was somebody the Ghosts could really use. He wondered if she'd heard about Warmaster Macaroth's Act of Consolation. Probably she had. There wasn't a chance in feth she'd take it up, in his opinion.

'Act of Consolation?' I had asked.

'A recruitment drive,' he had explained. 'A chance for brave Vervunhivers to become Ghosts like me.'

Anyway, she had appeared behind us, like a ghost herself.

'Is he alright?'

'He's stable, colonel,' said Curth.

'I meant the Doc, actually.'

'Oh.' She smiled. It was a damn fine smile, and I could tell Corbec enjoyed it. 'Yes, he's fine. Tired. He pulled three shifts straight and wasn't going to sleep even then. So I... I spiked his caffeine with aeldramol.'

She looked guilty, particularly with me there. Corbec sniggered.

'You zonked him out?'

'It was... ahm... medically necessary.'

'Excellent work, Surgeon Curth. My compliments. Dorden is a bugger when it comes to taking care of himself. Don't fret, I won't write you up.'

'Thank you, colonel.'

'Seeing as how you're not service, I think you can call me Colm.'

'Okay. You've come to see the patient, I presume?'

'I have. By the way, this is Mister Thoru. He's an artist, so he is.'

'An artist?' she said. 'Wait a minute... Thoru? The sculptor?'

'Yes,' I said, infinitely pleased.

'You did the frieze over the portico of the Imperial Hospice in NorthCol.'

'I did. Last year.'

'It was very good. I have friends on the hospice acquisition committee. They were very pleased with the work.'

'That's gratifying. Thank you.'

Curth pulled back the plastic tent screening the door and led us through into the intensive care room. Guided by some instinct, I held back and let Corbec go in ahead.

The patient lay on a hydraulic cot, tented in clear plastic. His body was laced with bio-feeds and life-support tubes. A chrome respirator puffed and wheezed beside the cot and a resuscitator cart stood ready.

'Give me a minute, Mister Thoru, surgeon.'

'It's Ana, Colm.'

'Is it so?' Corbec smiled. 'Well, Ana. A moment, if you'd be so kind.'

'Of course.'

We backed off out and she slithered the plastic curtain back into place.

'Who is that?' I whispered to Curth.

'Ibram Gaunt. Colonel-commissar of the Tanith First-and-Only.'

The House Chass savants had briefed me about Gaunt. The hero of Vervunhive, they were calling him.

Gaunt had taken his wound destroying the abomination known as Heritor Asphodel. He'd been at the gates of death for three weeks, without regaining consciousness. I peered through the curtain. The sutures of his most recent thoracic surgery stood stark against his pale, tight flesh.

'So why are you here?' Curth asked me.

'I've been commissioned to create a memorial for the war. House Chass has hired me. They want something suitable and noble, and they arranged for me to tour with the Tanith for appropriate inspiration.'

'Good luck,' she said.

'Why? Am I looking in the wrong place?'

Curth shook her head. 'I just don't think there's very much nobility to be found in this misery. What little there is belongs to the Tanith Ghosts, and I doubt very much you could capture that.'

'Why?'

'Because it's very particular,' she said and walked away.

I looked back through the gap in the screen curtain.

'Hey, boss. It's Corbec. Just checking in.' Corbec sat himself down next to the cot.

'What's to tell? Well, it's a mess, basically. The hive is a mess. But you know what victory looks like, huh? The men are holding together. That old Tanith spirit. Varl asked me to ask you, if you die, can he have your coat? Heh! How about that? I think Baffels is shaping up well as a squad leader, but he needs a bit of a boost, confidence wise. Maybe you could take him on one side, when you're up and about again?'

The respirator puffed and sighed.

'The liberation is kicking off. The war-machines went through the outhabs yesterday afternoon, ready to head out into the salt grasslands, hunting the last of the Zoicans. Feth me! Those Titans! They say there's Adeptus Astartes inbound too - Iron Snakes and Imperial Fists. The Warmaster ain't taking no chances.'

The vitals monitor continued to ping.

'They miss you, Ibram. The men. Me too. You gave us this victory and it's only right you share it. Don't go dying on us, you hear me?'

Corbec fell silent for a moment and stared down at the floor.

'You know, it's not fething fair,' he said finally. 'We won, but there are millions of civilians dying out there. Habbbers, outhabbers, spiners. I saw some on my way in. It breaks my fething heart. You know what I thought? Well, I'll tell you, seeing as I have your undivided attention. I thought of Tanith. Yeah, Tanith. I thought of the millions we lost. My kin. My kind. My fething world. I looked at those pinched, fethed-up faces and I thought... Tanith. The folks of Tanith might have looked like this if we'd stayed and fought and won. Driven out the enemy. And you know what?'

The respirator thumped slowly.

'I'm glad. That's what. I'm glad it was all over and done with like that. Your call, Ibram, good call. I never really said it to you before, and I'm only saying it now because, feth knows, you can't hear me. But I'm glad we did what we did. Seeing this. I'd far rather that Tanith died quick and clean than suffer this kind of victory. My people deserved it. Not dying, I mean. But dying cleanly. This... this... crap, they wouldn't have deserved this. Better Tanith died, quick and complete, than...'

Corbec paused.

'You know what I mean. You've put troopers out of their pain too, I know it. It's better when it's quick. Better than this.'

Corbec got to his feet.

'Well, that's me for today. I've said my bit. You come back to us, you hear me? Come back to us.'



WE WENT BACK out to the waiting truck and drove down to the billet where the Ghosts were stowed. Corbec seemed flat and quiet after his visit to the Medical Hall, and told me he was going to catch some rest. He put me into the care of massive trooper called Bragg.

'You detailed, Try?' Corbec asked. I didn't know at that point why Corbec called him 'Try'.

'Yes, chief. Outhab sweep.'

'Take him out for a tour,' he told Bragg, indicating me. 'Show him what it's all about. And look after him, okay?'

I was afraid of Bragg to begin with. He was just so imposing and big. I quickly discovered he had a gentle heart that quite belied his ogriish appearance.

He gave me grey fatigues to wear in place of my rich blue civilian suit, and carefully strapped a spare ballistic vest around my torso. 'It should be quite enough, Mister Thoru,' he said. 'But you can never be too careful.' He had made a special effort to learn my name when we were introduced, and now used it respectfully. I felt I had been taken under his wing.

The men of his patrol assembled in the dusty air of the manufactory shed.

Bragg wasn't in charge. Lead fell to an older, bearded man called Baffels. Baffels was terribly serious about everything, like he had something to prove. I learned later he had only recently been promoted. There were eight others: a sniper called Larkin, a flame-trooper called Brostin, a scout called Doyle and five troopers called Domor, Milo, Feygor, Yael and Mktag.

They were an odd bunch, though they worked well together with the fluid ease that comes with shared experience. They all seemed to defer slightly to Larkin, the marksman, although he seemed to me a skinny, twitchy wretch liable to snap at the slightest provocation. They called him 'Larks' or 'Mad Larkin', neither of which gave me any reassurance. They seemed to respect him, however. Bragg told me that Larkin had given the unit its name, dubbing them all Gaunt's Ghosts early on. I tried to talk to Larkin about that, but he said little. Just being close to him made me edgy. He radiated nervous energy and was forever fiddling with his weapon. After a while, I left him alone for the sake of my own sanity.

Doyl was a handsome man in his mid-twenties, the perfect subject for an uplifting statue. But he was even less forthcoming than Larkin.

'He's a scout,' Bragg told me, as if that explained everything. Brostin, stinking of promethium, was a rough-hewn oaf with a bad line in inappropriate jokes. Domor was a sound type, thoughtful and reserved. He sported augmented eyes and the men called him 'Shoggy', though they never told me why. His face and arms were pink with freshly healing burn tissue and this was his first patrol since he had been injured. I asked him how he had been hurt. Apparently a lasgun had exploded in his hands during close combat with Heritor Asphodel. I desperately wanted him to tell me more about that, but he wouldn't be drawn.

Mktag and Feygor were both in their thirties. Mktag was a cheery sort with a blue spiral tat around his left eye. Feygor was something else entirely. He had been wounded in the throat during the siege, and fresh augmetics has rebuilt his voice box. He was lean and surly, and, as it seemed to me, by far the most dangerous member of the unit.

Milo was the youngest, just a boy, really. Bragg told me Milo had only recently been awarded the rank of trooper. Before that he had been the only non-com to escape Tanith, saved by the colonel-commissar personally.

Yael wasn't much older. His lean adolescent body was just beginning to fill out with adult bulk. But there was a look in his eyes that showed he had grown up a long time since.



WE WENT OUT into the southern outhabs. The purpose of the patrol, Bragg told me, was to smoke out the last vestiges of the Zoican host. They were lying low in the rubble mass, he said, dug in like splinters.

It all seemed alarmingly casual to me, but Bragg carried the sort of heavy autocannon that normally required a turret to mount it on, so I stuck close to him.

We left the city via what remained of the Hieronymo Sondar Gate. Several of the war's key battles had been fought here, and a few kilometres east along the vast, pock-marked curtain wall was Veyveyr Gate, the railroad that had seen the most savage engagement of the entire conflict.

The scale of the war was apparent to me now. Behind me stood the massive, spired bulk of Vervunhive, ringed by what remained of the great defensive curtain wall. In front, stretching out southwards as far as I could see, lay the outer habitats, the mining districts, the collieries, the manufactories, the great belt of urban structure that skirted the main hive itself. This was where the longest phase of the war had been fought, a relentless, invasive attrition, street to street, as the hosts of Zoica advanced towards the curtain wall and the inner hive. We passed beside the wreckage of some of the Zoican war machines: not just tanks and AFVs, but massive things shaped like spiders or crustaceans. Their colossal hulls were seared black from the fires that had consumed them.

It was a bright, sunny day, but the veils of smoke had stained the light almost green and settled a skein of haze across the middle distance like mist. A light wind from the southern grasslands lifted dust in little flurries and eddies. Speeders, drop-ships and shrieking Imperial interceptors crossed the sky back and forth, and the horizon to the south was flickering with flashes and tremors of light. Out in the grasslands, the fleeing remnants of the Zoican army were being hunted down to extinction.

For a while, there was activity everywhere. Columns of refugees, limping towards the city, laden with handcarts and baby carriages full of salvaged belongings. Foot patrols of Imperial Guardsmen. Trains of injured and, far worse, caravans of dead being shipped away for mass burial. Munitorium work crews and pioneer regiments engaged in the hopeless task of restoring some order to the carnage. I jumped with fright when a loud explosion roared through the manufactory block just west of us, but Bragg reassured me it was just an engineering detail blowing up some structure that was too dangerous to leave standing.

Narmenian tanks with dozer blades were clearing rubble and human debris from the main arterials, allowing light military

convoys to speed more freely through the ruins. The Ghosts I was with had nothing but praise for the Narmenians, and saluted each tank that passed with waves and raised fists. From the reports I had read, Grizmund's Narmenian Armour had made a vital contribution to the victory, as had the Roane Deepers, the Vervun Primary and the 'scratch companies' of Vervunhive guerrillas. But Lady Chass had been quite specific. Gaunt's Ghosts were the ones she wished to celebrate. I wondered why her affections lay specifically with them. I supposed it was because of Gaunt himself. He had taken overall command at the crucial time, and secured the eventual victory almost personally.

I wished then I could have met him, rather than seeing his near-dead body in an infirmary bed.

The outbaths were terribly desolated. They had been pulverised by artillery so hard that barely a building was left standing. The ground was a tangle mass of shattered rockcrete and twisted metal spars. The air was thick with oily smoke, and where it wasn't, it was heavy with dust sifted off the rubble. There were fragments of human bone in the litter underfoot, white and burned clean. At first I thought they were shards of broken porcelain, until I saw one with an eye socket.

The piteous ruin that had befallen these worker habs was evident in every metre of the soil.

I began to feel unwell. This was upsetting, overwhelming. The genial Colonel Corbec had sent me on this trip deliberately. He obviously thought I could do with some sort of wake up call.

I resented that. I was fully awake to Vervunhive's misery. I didn't need to be shown it like this.

And there was no end to it. We crossed a sub-street that was littered with bodies. The air was noxious with corruption and full of flies. Corbec was a bastard, I decided. Whatever he thought of me and my commission, I wasn't looking for this kind of inspiration.

I realised Larkin was crying. It shook me to see it. And, though I know what you're thinking, it didn't diminish him in any way. I'd known from the first moment I saw him he was an emotionally vulnerable man. He didn't falter in his duty for a moment. He

kept up the pace, covered all the angles he was asked to. He didn't even seem to be aware that he was crying. But he wept.

I have seen women weep. I have seen children weep. I have seen weak men sob.

I have never, in the sixty years since then, seen a soldier weep. That is the most aching sadness of all. Larkin's tears washed his filthy cheeks clean in long runnels. He kept about his business. To see a man trained and ready to kill cry for the fallen is to see true tragedy.

'Larkin... won't you shut the feth up?' Feygor said.

'I've... I've got something in my eye,' Larkin said. I wanted to step forward and speak up in his defence, but Feygor looked meaner than ever. Besides, he had a lasrifle.

'Just shut up with the fething sobbing,' Feygor said, his voice flat and toneless because of the augmetic larynx sewn into his throat.

'Leave him alone,' said Baffels.

'Yeah,' said Mktag. 'We'll all be crying if Gaunt dies.'

Feygor spat. 'He's dead already.'

'He is not!' Domor said. 'He's hurt bad, but he's not dead.'

'Like they'd tell us if he was,' Feygor commented.

'They would!' said Domor.

'Those eyes make you blind, Shoggy?' asked Brostin. 'We're just the poor, simple dog-soldiers. They wouldn't tell us until it mattered. Bad for morale.'

'Think what you want,' said Yael. 'I reckon they'd tell us.'

'Gaunt's not dead,' said Milo.

'How so?' asked Feygor.

'I visit him every day. He wasn't dead this morning.'

'Yeah,' said Brostin, 'but was he alive?'

Milo didn't reply.

'He was an hour ago,' I ventured.

'Who asked you?' Feygor spat.

'His name is Mister Thuro,' said Bragg. 'Be respectful.'

'Feth to respect,' said Feygor.

'Shut up, all of you!' Doyl hissed.

We took cover in an old bakery, the side of which had been blown out. Doyl, with Feygor, scouted forward. I began to be convinced that I shouldn't have come.

'This Act of Consolation thing,' Mktag said as we hunkered low. 'Do you think anybody will take it?'

'They'd be mad to,' said Yael.

'I think some will,' Domor disagreed.

'Yeah, some... the crazies...' said Brostin.

'Keep it down, will you?' Baffels called.

Brostin dropped his voice. 'You'd have to be mad to sign up. And these hivers, I don't know about them. Do we want their kind in our ranks?'

'I've seen them fight,' said Domor. 'The scratch companies. They're good. I'd be proud to have them with us.'

'They're not Tanith!' Brostin growled.

'No, they're not,' said Bragg. 'But I've seen them too. They fight like bastards.'

'Maybe, but would you be happy for them to take the Tanith colours? Eh?' Brostin asked. 'They're not Tanith! Feth this Act of Consolation... let them found their own regiment. They're not fething Tanith!'

'I was with Gaunt on the Spike raid, with a bunch of Verghast scratchers,' said Larkin suddenly. 'You were there too, Bragg. And you, Shoggy. The scratch company gave everything. That leader of theirs - what was his name?'

'Kolea,' said Bragg.

'Yeah... he was a piece of work. Totally driven.'

'Whatever.' Brostin said, unconvinced.

Doyl and Feygor returned to us. The way ahead was clear. We trawled forward through the landscape.

I think it was about then that I saved several lives. I had been looking at the devastation with a sculptor's eye for engineering. I said to Bragg: 'That way ahead. The slump of rockcrete looks like it's been disturbed.'

'How can you tell?' he asked.

I shrugged. 'I don't know. I just know from the feel of things how they should lie. That's not true. It's been drilled.'

Bragg called a halt. He tossed a rock onto the slumped slab and the resultant blast took out the ground and flung masonry debris through the air.

'Good call, Mister Thuro,' said Feygor.

'If you can't be anything except sarcastic, Feygor, shut the feth up!' Domor said.

'I'm not being sarcastic,' Feygor said, sarcastically.

'Shut the feth up!' several of them chorused.

'It's this thing! This thing!' Feygor insisted, rapping at the aug-unit in his throat with a dirty finger. 'It makes me sound fething sarcastic even when I'm not!'

It was perfectly true. The raspy monotone of the implant rendered every word he uttered in a deadpan flatness. He was going to be sarcastic for the rest of his life.

'Be fair, you're sarcastic most of the time anyway,' said Brostin.

'Not always.'

'How can we tell when you're not being sarcastic?' asked Yael.

'Maybe he could hold up a hand when he's actually being sarcastic for real,' Mktag suggested. 'Like a signal.'

'Oh, that's a good idea,' said Feygor.

Everyone looked at him. Slowly, reluctantly, he raised a hand.

I think we were all about to explode out laughing, even Feygor, but Doyl suddenly raised a hand himself, and the gesture had nothing to do with sarcasm.

We were all huddled low, and the dust from the booby-trap blast was still falling and settling. Wordlessly, Doyl pointed at two sites in the ruins ahead that seemed to me to be no different from the rest of the place. Then he made a couple of swift, deft hand signals.

Baffels nodded, and made a few gestures of his own. At once, Domor, Yael and Doyl slid to the left, crawling through the jumbled wasteland, and Feygor, Brostin and Milo went to the right.

'Keep low,' Bragg mouthed at me and I needed no encouragement. Damn House Chass should have paid me danger money for this. Bragg extended the bipod stand of his heavy weapon and nested it in pile of rubble. Mktag crouched beside him, unclasp ing ammo drums from his pack and feeding them to the munition port in the side of Bragg's support gun. Then he spread out the camouflage capes both he and Bragg were carrying and draped them out over their shoulders. Baffels was laying on his belly a few metres to the right, using a spotter periscope to survey out over the shattered brickwork. I realised I couldn't see Larkin. Then I realised he was immediately to my left, prone, with his sniper rifle raised in a firing position. Like the support

gunners, he was draped in his camo-cape and though he was almost close enough for me to reach out and touch him, I had to look hard to see him. His concealment was extraordinary. I understand that is a trademark skill of the Tanith Ghosts.

I felt exposed, and entirely in the wrong place. I tried to curl up tighter against a cleft in the wall, but my feet dislodged loose stones and I got a dirty look from Larkin.

I could hear my own heart. I could smell brick dust and sweat, my own included. The sunlight seemed unpleasantly hot. There was the barest whisper of close-link vox exchanges.

Time seemed to slow down and stretch out, like a quiet, slow passage in a piece of music. It occurred to me then that I could never be a soldier. The waiting would kill me. It's ironic, I know. I can spend months on a work, whole weeks minutely carving some tiny part of it. I am obsessive with detail, and never care how long it takes to get something perfect, because the success of the whole might depend on one small part.

And this was the same, the same sort of meticulous craft. But here it was applied to war. The Guardsmen were singularly mindful to get this small preparation right, to have the patience to succeed. If a victory in war and a statue can be compared, and you'll forgive me but I'm not entirely sure they can, then achieving them, creating them, depends on detail and effort and patience. Curled up there in that outhab ruin, cursing the wait and the intolerable delay, I was about to live through the worst ten minutes of my life. And I am utterly convinced that I would not be alive now if the Ghosts had rushed a second of it.

I'd never heard a las-weapon discharge before, not for real. I'd seen plenty of newsreels, of course, displaying our glorious soldiery in acts of staged victory, but I know now that the deep, resonating bangs of those weapons were dubbed on afterwards. Real guns make a sharp, cracking nose, like breaking sticks. It's thin, dry, and it doesn't sound at all important. I heard the cracking noise and wondered what it was. I was about to be educated.

I was about to be educated in all sorts of ways.

Baffels was suddenly whispering urgently into his vox. I knew something was happening, and then there was a very loud crack right next to me. Larkin had fired. He fired again, and I recognised my own stupidity. The cracking sounds I had been hearing was the fight already underway.

There was a strange strobing of the light around me, like the daylight was flickering. Dust kicked up from a half-fallen wall behind our position and several clumps of stone fell out. I realised we were being fired at. The flickering of the daylight was being caused by bright las-rounds passing over us, almost invisible against the hard glare of the sky. Then a shot stung by against the bricks and I saw it clearly. A dart of seething fire, tinged red, the size of a man's middle finger, so bright it hurt my eyes, so fast it was barely there.

Bragg's cannon woke up. It also didn't make the sound I was expecting. It rattled metallically like the rock drills I sometimes use on larger works. It burped out irregular bursts of hard, spitting bangs, strung together very fast and overlaid by the tinny rattle of the mechanism and the feeding ammunition belt. Spent cases rained down underneath the heavy weapon and made a tinkling, pinging sound as they bounced off the rocks.

Milo, Feygor and Brostin suddenly reappeared, running back frantically and throwing themselves down into cover with us. As soon as they were down, Feygor and Milo rose on their knees and started firing indiscriminate shots over the cover wall with their lasrifles.

Brostin was struggling with his flamer unit.

'What the feth's the problem?' Baffels cried.

'We came up on a gang of them. Maybe six or seven, and we had them cold, but Brostin's damn burner jammed!' Feygor rasped out the explanation as he continued with his firing. Heavier shots were falling around us now, each one making a dull, hollow sound as it exploded into the rubble.

'Get it working!' Baffels yelled.

'I'm trying!' Brostin replied. 'The igniter's dead.'

'Feth! They're coming!' Milo called. 'I see them moving!'

'Larkin!' Baffels almost screamed.

'Can't get a clear shot,' Larkin hissed.

'Fething thing!' said Baffels, now unscrewing the blackened cover of the flamer's nozzle. I dared to raise my head.

'Where's Doyl's group?' Milo asked.

'Dug in, under fire. They're pinned,' said Baffels. 'Where the feth is this heat coming from now?'

'To the left! There!' Feygor growled.

Bragg yanked his aim around and twisted the heavy cannon on its stand. Mktag tried to move with him. They were already onto their third drum of ammo.

Bragg fired in the direction Feygor had indicated.

'Try again, Bragg!' Feygor and Mktag cried out in unison. Now I understood the darkly ironic nickname.

Bragg fired another burst and then the belt ran out and Mktag was a few seconds late lining up the next box. Bragg shot a look in my direction. He smiled at me, trying to look reassuring. Try again, Bragg, I thought. Enemy fire was whipping all around him, and he just sat there, grinning a half-arsed grin that was supposed to perk me up and make me feel all right. Colonel Corbec had told him to look after me and he didn't want to let me down.

'It'll be okay,' he said. 'We'll be through this in a minute.'

Even today, sixty years later, I have a lasting memory of Trooper Bragg at that moment. His simplicity and his genuine sense of optimism. Simply his courage. I have no way of knowing what became of Trooper Bragg. I hope fate was kind to him.

'We need that flamer!' Baffels yelled, firing his weapon alongside Milo now. The heavy cannon opened up once more.

Brostin said something incomprehensible and tried to poke a cleaning rod down the mouth of the burner.

I crawled over to him. Though it was much bigger and heavier, the flamer resembled in principle the sort of heat-gun we sometimes used to work metals and ductile plastics. On a commission for House Anko two years before, I had been plagued by a heat-gun that had regularly refused to light.

'It's not the nozzle,' I said.

'It is so the fething nozzle!' spat Brostin. 'It's dust in the fething nozzle! Get the feth out of my face! You shouldn't even be here!'

'It's not the nozzle,' I repeated firmly. 'It's the secondary igniter. The fuel pipe is

twisted or blocked and nothing's getting through to light the pilot.'

'Feth off and away with you!'

Ignoring him, I reached out and yanked the secondary fuel pipe out of its plug. Liquid fuel dribbled out over my hands.

'Get off it! Get him off me!' Brostin yelled. I was sure he was about to hit me.

I grabbed a cleaning rod and inserted it into the pipe, dragging out a fat plug of fuel-soaked matter. 'Now try it!'

Brostin looked murderously at me and reconnected the pipe. He squeezed the burner's heavy trigger bar and a small fireball coughed out of the nozzle. The igniter flame suddenly lit up; a hard, blue fire of heat.

'Feth me!' said Brostin.

'Don't mention it,' I said.

Brostin swung round with the active weapon and fired it over the barricade. Spurts of ferocious yellow fire swished over the rubble. I heard screams.

With the flamer firing, Milo, Feygor and Baffels dropped back into cover and fitted long, silver blades to their weapons.

'Is it going to come to that?' I asked the boy Milo.

'Who knows?' he said.

Baffels called out. Apparently there was now crossfire from Doyl's wing. The flamer had broken the deadlock. For all I could tell, the Emperor himself might just have arrived on a goat. I had no idea how they could read the chaotic situation like that, even with comlinks. It was just madness. Rocks and dust and flying jags of lethal, coherent light.

'Go!' said Baffels. I didn't know what 'go' meant, but suddenly Feygor, Milo, Brostin and Baffels were gone. They leapt up and charged into the smoke. I could hear furious cracking, and the breathy hush of the flamer.

Then Mktag rose from his prone position like he had been jerked up from behind by his webbing. He twisted and fell over. For a moment, I didn't understand what was happening. It seemed as if Mktag was just behaving stupidly, mucking around, kicking with his legs.

But Mktag had been shot. Right there in front of me. He fell at my feet, his heels drumming the ground, his hands spasming. A tiny plume of smoke spiraled up from the little black hole a las-round had made in his forehead. There was no blood. The shot had

cauterised the entry wound and it didn't have enough power to exit his skull. Its heat and force had been expended getting into his cranium and incinerating his brain.

It was quite simply the most awful thing I have ever seen. His body thrashing, trying to live, the brain extinguished. I think if there had been more blood, more obvious physical damage, I could have coped better.

But it was just such a tiny hole.

And then he was utterly still, and that was the worst part of all.

I was still staring at Mktag when the others returned. Bragg had laid his cape over the corpse, and Larkin was crouched beside it, brokenly reading a rite of grace from the back pages of his Imperial Infantryman's Uplifting Primer. The battle was done, the pocket of Zoican resistance wiped out.

I never did see even a glimpse of the enemy.



IT WAS DUSK when we returned to the city. Doyl and Baffels carried Mktag all the way. Bragg and Brostin tried to buck me up, claiming my improvisation with the faulty flamer had saved the day. By the time we reached the curtain wall, their version of events had me as the hero, winning the entire encounter. They were generous souls, these Ghosts. Brostin in particular had no reason to admit I'd been right. They realised, I suppose, that I was a civilian and they'd taken me too far. They felt sorry for me. I'd survived their rite of passage and acquitted myself well.

I suppose I should have been flattered by the inclusion. Honoured to earn the respect of such warriors.

But Mktag's death had unsettled me profoundly. The memory of it had burned into my brain so deeply that I was sure it had left a little, smoking hole in my skull. I was no soldier, despite what Brostin and Bragg cheerfully said. I had no basis of experience with which to deal with this shock, no inoculation, no Fundamental Training brutalisation to take the sting away.

I was an artist, for the God-Emperor's sake! A soft, protected artist from a secure world where death happened behind closed doors

or drawn curtains. For all I tried to make my work contain such eternal concepts as truth and grace, nobility and humanity, they were empty gestures. My work was empty. I despised every thing I had ever done, all the artistic triumphs I had been so pleased with. They were nothing, barren, vapid. Devoid of any real human truth.

Real truth was out there in the shattered outbaths of Vervunhive. Real truth was waiting and silence, courage and stealth. Real truth was the ability to function in extremes. To fire a cannon and miss and try again. To fix a silver blade to the end of a laser-weapon and leap from safety into a shroud of smoke, prepared as you did so to really use that makeshift spear.

Real truth was as real as a tiny hole in a man's forehead.

I had not been scared during the patrol. I had been bored, horrified, perplexed, impatient. But at no point had I actually succumbed to terror. Once we were back, fear consumed me. I shook. I could barely speak.

I sat, swathed in Bragg's camo-cape, in the doorway of the billet. Troopers moved around me, getting on with their work. I wondered why they didn't seem scared. If they were scared, and they were still just getting on with it, that was truly terrifying.

I saw Bragg talking with Corbec and pointing in my direction. Corbec disappeared, but a few moments later the young trooper, Milo, came to find me.

'Colonel Corbec wants me to take you to the Medical Hall.'

'I'm fine.'

'I know. But he wants the medics to check you out. You've had quite a day, Mister Thuro.'



WE WALKED through the battered streets as night fell. The stars came out, fighting to shine through the smoke. High above, moonlight glinted on the hulls of the vast warships in low orbit.

'How do you do it?' I asked the boy.

'Do what, sir?'

'Shut it out? The fear? The trauma? Did they beat it out of you in basic training?'

Milo looked at me strangely. 'Who ever said we shut it out?' he asked.

'But you can't...' I began. 'You can't live like that. Continue to live, I mean, day in, day out, with that kind of stress, that kind of fear. You must cope somehow. Shut it out.'

He shook his head. 'I'm scared every minute of my life.'

'But how do you keep going?'

Milo shrugged. 'I've never thought about it. It's just what we do. What we're asked to do. We're Imperial Guard.'

I have never forgotten those words.



IHAD TO wait an hour or so in the Medical Hall until I was seen. A kindly old doctor, the man Dorden that Corbec had been looking for, got to me eventually and pronounced me fit. He offered me something to calm me, but I turned him down. I asked after Gaunt, and he told me I could go and see for myself.

He led me through the wards of the Medical Hall. We passed the beds of soldiers, many of them Ghosts, wounded in the war. Dorden stopped frequently to check on them. He told me names – Mkol, Bonin, Wheln, so many I forgot – and recounted the circumstances of their injuries.

I wanted to see Gaunt again before he died. I wanted to see him now I had seen the kind of men he had bred.

A group of men and women were waiting in the dim hallway outside his chamber when we arrived. A few Ghosts, but mostly Vervunhivers. Dorden knew them all. There was a big, grim-looking miner that Dorden called Mister Kolea; a one-eyed factory boss in declining years who introduced himself as Agun Soric; a badly wounded Vervun Primary Captain called Daur; a fierce-looking gang-girl called Criid who was accompanied by a young Tanith trooper.

'Why are they here?' I asked Dorden.

'They want to see Gaunt.'

'Why?'

'Because they've all accepted the Act of Consolation, them and hundreds like them,' Dorden whispered. 'They'll be joining our regiment and coming with us, God-Emperor help them.'

'Why have they come here?'

'To be close to Gaunt. He's the reason most of them have signed up. They want to be here of he lives... or if he dies. They've signed their lives to his cause. It matters to them.'

The motley band keeping the vigil outside Gaunt's room seemed content to wait there, but I went forward and slipped into his room. No one stopped me. The plastic drapes were drawn, and I was about to sweep them aside when I realised the beloved colonel-commissar already had company.

I paused in the doorway, peering in through the curtain. A lean, dangerous-looking man in black Tanith fatigues was sitting at Gaunt's bedside in the blue gloom. He was a major. Major Rawne, as I found out later.

I knew I shouldn't be there. I'd felt awkward that morning eavesdropping on Corbec, but this was far more invasive.

Still, I couldn't draw myself away.

I listened.

'You *dare* die,' Rawne was muttering at Gaunt. 'You *dare* die on me, you fething bastard. Die now and I'll never forgive you. It can't be this way. I won't let it.'

I started to back away, realising I had heard too much.

'If you're going to die, it's got to be me that kills you. Me, you hear, you bastard? Me. Otherwise, it isn't fair. I've got to be the one. I need to be the one. Not some Chaos bullet. You live, you bastard. You wake up and live so that I can kill you properly.'

He suddenly looked up and saw I was there. He rose and thundered towards me. 'What the feth are you doing?'

I back off. He'd balled his fists and his face was readably furious despite the half-light. He was going to hurt me.

'Who the feth are you?' he snarled, slamming me against the wall.

'Great God-Emperor!' I stammered. 'Look-'

He turned. He saw what I saw.

Ibram Gaunt's eyes were open.



I NEVER GOT to speak with Gaunt. Once he was well enough, they moved him to a medical frigate. And I barely saw any of the Tanith after that either. My transport back to NorthCol had been arranged, and a message from House Chass urged me to start on my work.

I missed three deadlines, and risked the wrath of Lady Chass. I scrapped five working models, and destroyed two works in the very last stages. They weren't right.

Eventually, the piece was cast in steel. I wasn't much satisfied with that either. To me, it had no truth, no real truth. But House Chass couldn't be denied any longer.

It stands today in the centre of what was once Vervunhive's Commercia. The hive has been levelled, and most of the land turned back to pasture and grassland. Shards of rock, bits of bone and spent shell cases can still be found on the windy slopes amongst the grasses.

It's become my most famous work. There's irony. To say I was really, truly pleased with it, I'd have to raise a hand, like Feygor. I've done so much since that seems to me more important. But you can't chose what you leave behind.

A single Imperial Guardsman, cast in steel rendered down from the broken weapons left in the ruins of the hive. It's not even specifically a Tanith Ghost, and it has no special likeness. One fist is raised, not in victory but in determination, a gesture like the one Baffels made. There is a set to the shoulders that resembles Colonel Corbec's relaxed stance, a set to the head that always reminds me of Trooper Bragg's reassuring backwards glance. There's Milo's honesty in it, I like to think, and Rawne's venom. It has, like all statues, Mktag's awful stillness.

It's called the Chass Memorial, and on the plinth it announces in large chiselled letters that House Chass paid for its construction in memory of the fallen of Vervunhive. In very much smaller letters, it says it is a work by Thuro of NorthCol. It stands on a grassy slope, guarding the necropolis that was once called Vervunhive. It may stand forever.

There's nothing of Gaunt himself in it, because I never knew him. Like I said, I never knew any of them, not really. But his men are in it, so I suppose he is too. ✱

GHOST

An Interview
with Dan Abnett



by Richard
Williams

WRITER

IN THE MIDST of the bitter Sabbat Worlds Crusade, a mysterious emissary of the Black Library appeared to war-correspondent Dan Abnett, currently attached to the Tanith First, and asked him the following questions about his life and times with Commissar Gaunt and the Tanith Ghosts.

So, which came first: Gaunt or the Ghosts?

Gaunt and the egg were a dead tie, with the Ghosts about 0.002 seconds behind the chicken after a stewards' enquiry.

Honestly, it was pretty much simultaneous. It was right when I was starting work for the Black Library, and I'd only done (I think) a 40K strip involving Eldar and a Warhammer text piece that would eventually become the basis for the first Gilead story. I wanted to do something more 40K-ish, and the Imperial Guard appealed, probably because as a GW virgin still studying the codex references, regular humans seemed the most accessible (as opposed to the Adeptus Astartes, for instance, who are so necessarily uniform in nature and personality that they still give me problems – maybe a Space Marine novel, one day). I wanted a strong central character leading a comparatively small bunch of regular dog-troops with irregular personalities – comparatively small so we could get to know a few of them. I think the name, with its catchy alliteration, came before the fleshed-out concept, but I can't be sure. Ghosts was a cool name for a bunch of commandos (which is what they are essentially – commandos, SAS, SEALs, Delta Force – with a twist of natural-born, cultural ability thrown in, of course) and Gaunt was a cool name for their boss, inevitably suggesting oodles about his character

and physical type, of course. Yeah, simultaneous. Like all the best ideas, it just came along, pretty much fully-formed. Sitting here today, I can't for the life of me remember why commando-style troops appealed... as opposed to say, shock-troops or armour. I guess I thought there'd be more heroic and dramatic potential in a squad that won by brains and stealth as opposed to sheer force of arms. And, of course, more chance for their efforts to go unrecognised.

Gaunt's Ghosts first appeared in short stories in Inferno!, how did you find that altered your approach to creating and developing them?

I've always enjoyed writing about group dynamics. The Inferno! format allowed me to set up and flesh out a core of characters... at the start it was Gaunt, Rawne, Corbec, Milo, Larkin and Bragg. What with the walk-ons and secondaries, that was enough. When the format expanded into novels, I found the space to write in or expand lots more primary characters like Caffran, Varl and Mkolll... as well as necessary characters like Dorden who were needed to perform some vital task that we hadn't yet witnessed. That process has continued as the novels have advanced.

First and Only is still pretty much about the original 'core', even though significant characters like Dorden appear for the first time. *Ghostmaker* crystallises

that, because each story is about one of the 'core'. *Necropolis* was the breakthrough for me, character-wise. Suddenly the book is teaming with primary, secondary and tertiary characters. And of course, that's where I added the Verghastites, with a whole slew of new 'core' characters: Kolea, Criid, Soric, Daur etc. Then, in *Honour Guard*, Zweil and Hark and good old Lijah Cuu, and the opportunity for secondary, tertiary and new characters to get some notice, and for the 'core' character to advance, especially Milo.

The cast is getting bigger at every stage, because there's more room to include a mention of extra characters. Try these names: Dremmond, Bonin, Mkvenger, Beltayn, Banda, Nessa, Haller, Brostin, Meryn, Lillo...none of them have had that much page time, but they're all real people with specific traits and roles in my head. And, I hope, the readers.

It led to some significant events such as the fall of Tanith and the initial meeting to be condensed somewhat. Are you ever tempted to go back and flesh them out?

Maybe. I'm not sure what could be learned of any value. It might happen if I felt there was a story there. We've already 'revisited' the fall of Tanith in climax of *Ghostmaker*, if only in illusion, and a lot of character advance in the books is made via reflections and memories of the past.

Why did you destroy Tanith?

Because I could. And because it gave them a unifying origin. What would Batman or the Punisher be without the deaths of their respective families? Tanith died so the Ghosts couldn't ever go back, only move forward, and with a single-minded cause.

Gaunt himself is in rather an odd position as a colonel-commissar. Why did you pick that rather than making him a regular colonel or commissar?

The honest answer is ultimately a misunderstanding of the source material,

but I probably shouldn't ever admit that. Gaunt was a commissar to begin with, before I really reconciled what a commissar was (i.e. a political officer rather than a unit leader). But Gaunt was also special, a favourite of his last commander, so I thought he could occupy an unusual and awkward dual role. He's torn, which makes for good drama. He's in conflict. I think the fact that he's both has added some spice to the stories. And since *Honour Guard*, of course, he's had a commissar too. I'll say nothing, but recommend you read *The Guns of Tanith* to see how I'm exploring that.

Where did the concept of the Sabbat Worlds Crusade come from?

I wanted an ongoing backdrop for their adventures. That, too, has evolved. I think it was in *Honour Guard* that the reader first got a proper insight into what the Crusade was really about, and what it meant to Gaunt, and his old master, Slaydo. It was definitely just 'setting' at first. Now it's of primary importance, as you will see in the seventh book, *Sabbat Martyr*.

Those readers who started with the novels will have noticed a slightly irregular approach in that *First & Only* picked up Gaunt's Ghosts already in the middle of battle, then *Ghostmaker* went back and told the origin story. Why did you do it that way?

When GW asked me to do a Gaunt novel, I'd already written three (I believe) shorts [*Four. See 'Vermilion Level' on p.54 - Ed*], and I felt I wanted to write a completely new novel rather than build one around recycled versions of the stories already penned. Hence *First and Only*, which is really much more an origin of Gaunt than it is the Ghosts. By the time *Ghostmaker* was commissioned, my attitude had changed a little, and I was keen for the 'origin' stories to be made available in novel form. So *Ghostmaker* includes them, and a batch of new, companion tales, presented as Gaunt's pre-battle reflections on the Ghosts, individually and en masse. Plus of course the stonking battle those pre-battle reflections have preceded.

The Gaunt's Ghosts series is notable so far in that each novel has had a markedly different tone. Going through each in turn, how did you approach them and what were you looking to get out of them?

Something different each time, for my sake and the reader's. There's only so much you can do with a lasgun firefight, and I'd hate it to get stale, so I change the setting, the purpose, the scale... *First & Only* has a World War One feel at the start, and ends with something wild and almost Napoleonic. *Ghostmaker* is a chocolate box of different settings. *Necropolis*, which has obvious echoes of Stalingrad, was an effort both to increase the scale and put the Ghosts on the defence for the first time. With tanks. *Honour Guard* is a bit of a road movie with spiritual undertones. With more tanks. *The Guns of Tanith...* well, that sees airborne action and depicts the Ghosts first full-blown specialist operation as 'commandos'.

I like to think 'what haven't we seen before?' and 'where haven't we been before?' And of course, by now, the subplots that build steadily under the action are determining the structure of the novels. Rawne's discontent. Milo's growth as a trooper. Cuu's psychotic urges. Kolea's family. Gaunt's resentment of senior staff incompetence. The Tanith/Verghast rivalry. The male/female sniper rivalry. Hark's ambitions. And Soric's...whoops. Said too much.

Some novels are primarily about the mission, with the characters playing out their roles through it. The next one, number six, with a working title of *Straight Silver* is that, though it won't be without it's fundamental character arcs. The seventh, *Sabbat Martyr*, will be entirely driven by character arcs, most of which were laid down in *Honour Guard*. And the eighth, *Traitor General*, will tie up all sorts of... I'm saying too much, aren't I?

Has how you yourself think about the Ghosts changed over time?

Yes. I care much more about the secondary and tertiary characters now. The names that have been there since the start. It upsets me each time a long term

name, however underdeveloped, bites the dust. I probably need counselling of some sort.

You were kind of hard on the Ghosts early on, losing 2,500 men in the very first story, then another 500 or so in the next one, down to 1,500 at the time of *Monthax* at the beginning of *Ghostmaker*. Now there's an ongoing novel series, do you find yourself being a bit more sparing with the Ghosts' lives?

Well, yes, or I'll run out of them. When I wrote the first one, I imagined there'd be a trilogy tops if people liked it. I've just finished the fifth one. And, like I said just now, I hate losing the support cast. Thankfully, there are lots of Imperial Guard regiments who can join in and take the punishment. My heart goes out to the Pardus, the Narmenians, the Vitrians, The Bluebloods, the Jantine and the Urdeshi... and all those other poor suckers who've bought big with shooty death-kill so that the Ghosts can live.

Obviously at the beginning, introducing so many characters in such a small space of time, you have to rely on archetypes: Rawne, the disaffected malcontent; Bragg, the gentle giant; Corbec, the enlisted man's officer; Milo, young and innocent; Dorden, the old medic, and so on. But as their adventures continue characters have to grow and develop, otherwise they become stale and two-dimensional. How did you tackle this?

The best I can. I hope no one's stale and one-dimensional. Milo's a good example of progression, and some of the 'newer' characters start off with much more complex archetypes than the original 'core'. Criid, Cuu, Kolea, Soric, Zweil, Curth... just as examples. The more I write them, the more they grow in my mind and become people until a) what they do is pretty much down to them and b) I check into therapy because of all the personalities in my head.

True story: two thirds of the way into *Honour Guard*, going well and working from a very solid plot, I lost it all when my computer crashed. Nobody even dare

say 'back up'... we all learn from our mistakes. Anyway, I had to rewrite it from scratch. What was amazing to me was that in version 2.0 (which was much better, I'm happy to admit) there were several new characters *who hadn't been in the first draft*. They just marched in, fully-formed, right into my plan and stayed, deciding their own courses of action. I've seen interviews with major novelists in which they talk about their characters 'writing themselves' and I've always thought that to be complete, pretentious cobblers. Now I know better.

Milo is known as the Boy; Gaunt, when a cadet under Oktar was also known as the Boy. Are there deliberate parallels there?

Oh yes. We're getting to that. Probably.

How did you come up with the look for the Ghosts? The tattoos, etc.

They're very Celtic with their pale skins and black hair (not now with the Vervunhivers, 'course). Tattoos and piercings added to their ethnicity and distinctive flavour. They're woodsmen, warring Celts or Picts. Very (and unashamedly) British, I suppose. You'll have to read the throw-away stuff about Mkvenner in *The Guns of Tanith* to see how deep that may go.

Though the overt foes of each battle are the rebellious cults of the Sabbat Worlds, the principal conflict for the Ghosts has always been with other Imperial Guard regiments.

Yes. I was going to say until *The Guns of Tanith*, but...

Truly, armies make war and the enemy they perceive isn't always the real one. The 40K background is based firmly on the idea that the various Guard regiments are from worlds with wildly differing tech levels, cultural ethos, agendas, beliefs, etc. Rivalry and snobbery are the least of the problems. And no one can account for the scale of ambition present in some Imperial leaders. I think it adds to the fun and to the 'realism'. Read about any major campaign and you'll see the same

sort of thing. And, mea culpa, for every Jantine there's a Pardus. For every Blueblood there's a Vitrian. Moreover, it's usually the bastards in charge that cause the problem: Dravere, Sturm, Lugo, Zhyte, and not the common soldiery.

The eagle-eyed among your readers will notice some small little cameos of characters from other novels and comic strips. Princesps Hekate in *Malleus*, the Iron Snakes in *Necropolis*, Defay in *First & Only* and *Malleus*...

It may not be my universe and I may not be God, but sometimes I like to pretend. See also Dan's First (& Only) Law of Comprehensive Verisimilitude.

Generally you're also fond of slipping little bits of information to set up a revelation many pages later, such as what happened to Dorden's son and the paternity of Tona Criid's adopted kids.

Goes back to what I said about sub-plots, or rather character-based story flow. I like to set up lots of peripheral stuff that may take several books to resolve. Can any one here say 'Cuu'?

Major Rawne is a typical snake-in-the-grass and a good constant reminder that tough decisions can't be made without consequences, but since the loss of Tanith Gaunt and Rawne and have saved each other's lives on various occasions but still the enmity is there. How do you see their relationship progressing?

Badly.

How and when did you start writing?

In the late eighties. I was working as an editor for comics and children's books, and I started doing some freelance stuff on nursery and junior titles... Thundercats, Mr Men, Action Force, Ghostbusters, etc.

And how did it become your profession?

I eventually realised I liked writing more than editing, so I quit the day job and went freelance.

What would you say the big turning points of your career have been?

My first big breaks into the American market...Knights of Pendragon and Death's Head, followed by The Punisher, which Andy Lanning and I wrote for over a year, West Coast Avengers and Iron Man, and then work for DC with Resurrection Man and now Legion of Superheroes. In the UK, I suppose creating Sinister Dexter for 2000AD and seeing it become popular enough to become a regular series.

And, though you'll think I'm just saying this, the novels for GW. Moving from comics to novels was a real turning point. I still get a kick every time I get to work on a character or comic that I'd previously read as a kid or always liked... Conan, Dr Strange, Judge Dredd, Superman, Batman, Star Trek, Dr Who, Planet of the Apes, Rupert the Bear, X-men, Thunderbirds, the Terminator...

It also always means a lot to get recognition. Legion just got nominated for one of this year's Harvey Awards, and I'm just chuffed to bits.

If you could go back and give your younger self any advice about a career as a writer, what would it be?

It's like keeping fit or learning a musical instrument. Just write, as much and as frequently as possible, and build up those writing muscles (metaphorically).

How did you come across Games Workshop and the Black Library?

I heard the distant, keening song of the Astronomican, calling to me across the void. Also, I heard the voice of David Pugh, calling to me from Wales. He was doing *Obvious Tactics* in the early days of BL, and knew they were looking for writers. He'd just seen my work on Conan, so he got in touch. Thanks, Dave.

Did you do any short story or novel work before?

Some short stories, here and there, and I'd written a couple of novels... for

myself, really, to see if I could do it. Never really did try to get either one published. I've been busy, y' see.

Currently, you're writing three to four novels a year, several of our biggest comic series, a slew of work for other publishers and you still have time to drop off the odd Inferno! story – how on earth do you manage it all?

I cloned myself in 1993.

Does it leave you much time to do anything else?

Me and the clones divvy up the work. Five of them do the writing, two do the sleeping, one cooks and one does the laundry. The real me is on a beach in Aruba, last I heard.

We've heard what's happening to the Ghosts. What about the future of other projects that you've got with the Black Library?

I'm just finishing off the Eisenhorn trilogy with *Hereticus*. Gosh, but it's epic stuff, and there may be some more Inquisitor stuff before too long. Not more Eisenhorn, but related. Once *Hereticus* is done, it's more Gaunt, but I'm also going to write a Warhammer novel that's been trying to get out of my head for some time now. It's called *Riders of the Dead*, and I'll have it done by the end of the year. Frontier wars of the Empire, Kislevites, savage horse warriors...it'll be quick a change of setting and mood for me. I'm also planning a novel called *Double Eagle*. It's 40K stuff, set in the Sabbat Worlds Crusade, but it's not about the Tanith. It's something that's happening elsewhere at the same time... though there might be a face or two that will be familiar to long time Ghost readers.

And Dan Abnett's grand ambition?

My own Titan, fully taxed and MOTed.

And the one thing you'd like to say to your fans?

Am I doing it right? ✨

+++REVEALING+++

VERVUNHIVE + NECROPOLIS + TANITH FIRST + HERITOR ASPHODEL +...

NECROPOLIS - THE SIEGE OF VERVUNHIVE

"The distinction between trade and warfare is seen only by those who have no experience of either."
Hleronyma Sondar, House of Sondar.

VERGHAST IS AN IMPORTANT MINING AND ORE PROCESSING PLANET WHOSE RESOURCES ARE EXPLOITED FOR THE EMPEROR BY LONG ESTABLISHED HIVE CITIES. INTENSE COMPETITIVE TRADE RIVALRY HAS LONG EXISTED BETWEEN THESE VAST URBAN CONGLOMERATIONS, RIVALRY WHICH HAS RESULTED IN SEVERAL TRADE WARS BETWEEN THE TWO MIGHTIEST HIVES, VERVUNHIVE AND FERROZOICA. INITIAL PERCEPTIONS WERE OF A SIMILAR CONFRONTATION WHEN THE LATTER ROSE UP ONCE MORE TO ATTACK ITS COMPETITORS. THIS PERCEPTION WAS RUDELY ALTERED WHEN VANNICK HIVE WAS UTTERLY DESTROYED BY AN ATOMIC BLAST DETONATED BY A SUICIDE ATTACK FROM WITHIN ITS VERY WALLS.

"This is not a hive-war... a new "Trade War". Zolca is not massing, arming and rising to conquer and control the hive production of this planet or to subjugate its old rival Vervunhive. They are rising to exterminate it... The poison of the Warp has overrun your noble neighbour and set every man, woman and child in it on a frenzied path to obliterate the rest of this world and everything on it." - *Colonel-Commissar Gaunt, Tanith First.*



WITH ITS DEFENCE SHIELD DOWN, VERVUNHIVE CAME UNDER SUSTAINED BOMBARDMENT.

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+++REVEALING+++ SUBSIDIARY FILE 7.3/BIV
COLONEL-COMMISSAR GAUNT + SALVADORE SONDAR + SWORD OF HIERONYMO

'Corruptio optimi pessima / The corruption of the best is the worst of all'
- Sebastian Thor, *Sermons, vol. XII, ch. LI*

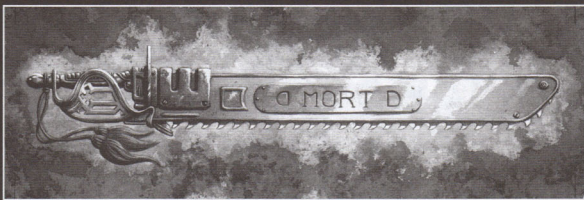
THE DEFENDING FORCES OF VERVUNHIVE NUMBERED ABOUT 500,000 YET WERE BEING ASSAULTED BY NEARLY 13 MILLION THAT HAD FALLEN UNDER THE ABOMINABLE SWAY OF CHAOS. THE NEAREST IMPERIAL FORCES WERE RUSHED TO ASSIST. THESE CONSISTED OF THE TANITH FIRST, SEVERAL NARMENIAN TANK BRIGADES AND THE VOLPONE BLUEBLOODS. DESPITE THE LOSS OF THE OUTER HABITATS THE HIVE'S ENERGY SHIELD PROTECTED THE CURTAIN WALL, AND THUS THE INNER SECTORS, DURING 34 DAYS OF VICIOUS ASSAULT. YET THE HIVE WAS BETRAYED BY THE WEAK MIND OF SALVADORE SONDAR - HIGH MASTER OF VERVUNHIVE - WHO LOWERED THE SHIELDS AFTER THE INSIDIOUS WHISPERINGS OF CHAOS TORNED HIS MIND AND SOUL FROM THE SERVICE OF THE EMPEROR. HIS BETRAYAL ALLOWED THE ENEMY TO BREACH THE CURTAIN WALL AND BOMBARD THE INNER SANCTUOMS OF THE CITY. IT WAS ONLY GAUNT'S PERSONAL INTERVENTION THAT RESTORED THE SHIELD, BUT THE DAMAGE HAD BEEN DONE.



WITH THE COLLAPSE OF THE SHIELD, ZOICAN FORCES Poured INTO THE HIVE.

'Whoever leads Vervunhive to war must carry the sword of Hieronymo. It is a custom and tradition we have no wish to break.' - Major Ofte, Lord Marshal's adjutant, to Colonel-Commissar Gaunt.

THE CASUALTIES INFLICTED BY THE ASSAULT AFTER THE COLLAPSE OF THE SHIELD LEFT GAUNT AS THE HIGHEST RANKING IMPERIAL COMMANDER, AND THUS IN SOLE CONTROL OF THE HIVE'S DEFENCES.



THE INTRICATELY DETAILED SWORD OF HIERONYMO WAS SPECIALLY FORGED FOR VERVUNHIVE'S FIRST HIGH MASTER.

+++REVEALING+++SUBSIDIARY FILE 23.9/DIII
SCRATCH COMPANIES + SMELTERY IRREGULARS + SGT. SORIC + GOL KOLEA +...

'We've been trying to do our bit for the hive ever since the start, and when the shield went down, it was run or fight.' - *Sgt. Soric, Smeltery Irregulars.*

AS THE SIEGE OF VERVUNHIVE PROGRESSED BRUTALLY DAY BY INEXORABLE DAY THE OPPRESSED CITIZENRY BEGAN TO FORM ITSELF UNPROMPTED INTO SMALL FIGHTING FORCES. EMERGING FROM THE DEVASTATED RUINS OF WORKPLACE AND HOME THEY SEIZED CAPTURED GUNS OR IMPROVISED WEAPONRY TO STRIKE BACK AT THE HORDES OF ZOICANS. ONCE



SGT. SORIC LEADS THE SMELTERY IRREGULARS INTO COMBAT AGAINST THE ZOICAN INVADERS.

GAUNT ASSUMED COMMAND HE INSTIGATED A SYSTEM WHICH INCORPORATED THESE UNOFFICIAL UNITS INTO THE HIVE'S DEFENCE. FIELD PROMOTIONS WERE MADE WHEREBY THEIR COMMANDERS BECAME SERGEANTS, AND EVERY TWENTIETH MAN A CORPORAL.

'If we won't fight for our own bloody hive, sir, I don't know who should.' - *Sgt. Soric, Smeltery Irregulars.*

ONE OF THE MOST HEROIC 'SCRATCH COMPANIES' WAS THE SMELTERY IRREGULARS. THEIR ACTIONS CAME TO PROMINENCE WHEN A ZOICAN TANK COLUMN BROKE THROUGH CROE GATE AND INTO THE EASTERN CENTRAL HABS. LACKING ANTI-ARMOUR ORDNANCE THE IRREGULARS' USED MINING CHARGES WITH WHICH THEY RAN UP TO A TANK BEFORE MANUALLY DETONATING IT, KILLING THEMSELVES IN THE PROCESS. AT LEAST TWENTY-FOUR ENEMY TANKS WERE DESTROYED IN SUCH A MANNER. THEIR SELF SACRIFICE IS AN OBJECT LESSON IN LOYALTY AND DEVOTION THAT EVEN THE FINEST IMPERIAL GUARD REGIMENT SHOULD ADMIRE.



GOL KOLEA, LEVEL 32 MINERS'



MARATNA THOROK, 188 MANUFACTORY



THADY TORACIN, MASS QUAYSIDERS'

THERE WERE MANY OTHER NOTABLE 'SCRATCH COMPANY' COMMANDERS. THE MOST GALLANT ARE SHOWN ABOVE.

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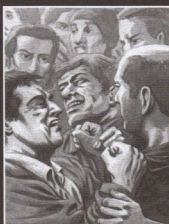
+++REVEALING+++SUBSIDIARY FILE 24.3/GII
REFUGEES + MASS VIADUCT + DOCKS + MASSACRE + ...

'Omniem crede diem tibi diluxisse supremum / Believe each day to have dawned as your last.'
- *Ulick Voe, Enunciations, X. 357.*

WHILST MANY VERVONHIVE CITIZENS CHOSE TO FIGHT FOR THEIR CITY THE BULK OF THE POPULATION PANICKED ONCE THE SHIELD COLLAPSED. ON THE THIRTY-SIXTH DAY TWO, THIRDS OF THE HIVE'S IMMENSE CIVILIAN POPULATION WERE PACKED INTO THE NORTH-EASTERN SECTORS AND DOCKS, MAKING DESPERATE EFFORTS TO FLEE TO THE NORTH BANK.

THE FLOW WAS FAR BEYOND THE ABILITIES OF THE RIVER FERRIES TO MANAGE, AND BRUTAL BATTLES BROKE OUT AS CITIZENS FOUGHT TO WIN PLACES ON THE APPROACHING BOATS. THOUSANDS DIED, ALMOST TWO HUNDRED OF THEM ABOARD A FERRY THAT WAS OVERLOADED AND CAPSIZED. INNUMERABLE MORE WERE TRAMPLED AND CRUSHED IN THE PRESS OF BODIES, OR PUSHED INTO THE RIVER BY THE MOUNTING WEIGHT OF BODIES BEHIND THEM. AN ENTIRE PIER STRETCH COLLAPSED UNDER THE WEIGHT OF THE REFUGEES, SPILLING HUNDREDS INTO THE MASS. SOME, LIKE WOUNDED ANIMALS, PLUNGED INTO THE ICY COLD WATERS OF THE THREE KILOMETRE-WIDE RIVER, ONLY TO BE SWEEP AWAY OR FROZEN BEFORE EVEN REACHING HALFWAY.

STREAMS OF EVACUEES MADE IT UP FROM THE DOCKS ONTO THE GREAT VIADUCT AND ATTEMPTED TO CROSS ON FOOT. THE DENSITY OF FOOT TRAFFIC ON THE RAIL BRIDGE WAS SO GREAT THAT MANY WERE PUSHED OFF TO FALL SCREAMING INTO THE ICY DEPTHS FAR BELOW. JUST AFTER MIDNIGHT ZOICAN ROCKETS BLEW OUT THE CENTRAL SPANS OF THE VIADUCT, TOPPLING THREE OF THE GREAT BRICK PIER SUPPORTS.



SCENES FROM THE REFUGEE EXODOS, INCLUDING THE DESTRUCTION OF THE MASS VIADUCT BY ZOICAN ROCKETS

ULTIMATELY THE REFUGEES' ATTEMPTS AT ESCAPE WERE FUTILE. ZOICAN MOTORIZED BRIGADES SWEEP ALONG THE NORTH BANK FROM BOTH EAST AND WEST, TRAPPING THE CITIZENS ON THE NORTH BANK IN A CRUSHING PINCH MOVE. THE HORDES WHO HAD BEEN LUCKY ENOUGH TO REACH THE NORTH BANK WERE SYSTEMATICALLY SLAUGHTERED EVEN AS THEY THOUGHT THEY HAD ACHIEVED SALVATION. THE ZOICANS CLEARLY INTENDED THAT NONE SHOULD ESCAPE THEIR ONSLAUGHT UPON THE HIVE.

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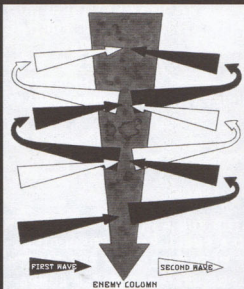


+++REVEALING+++SUBSIDIARY FILE 7/NXII
OPERATION DERCIOUS + GRIZMUND + HARMENIAN + 'SCISSORS' MANOEUVRE

"Target and deny! By our deaths shall they know us!" - General Coron Grizmund, at the start of the Narmenian counterattack.

GENERAL GRIZMUND'S HARMENIAN TANK BRIGADE REPRESENTED THE ARMoured BACKBONE OF VERVONHIVE'S DEFENCES. HE COMMANDED A FORCE OF 127 LEMAN ROSS PATTERN BATTLE TANKS, 27 DEMOLISHERS AND 42 LIGHT-SUPPORT TANKS. WHILST THE INDIGENOUS ARMoured TROOPS WERE GREATER IN NUMBER THEY LACKED THE COMBAT EXPERIENCE AND COMMAND QUALITY WITHIN GRIZMUND'S UNITS.

THUS IT WAS THAT GAUNT DIRECTED THE HARMENIANS ONTO THE OFFENSIVE AGAINST THE ZOICAN ARMoured THRUST WHICH HAD STORMED THROUGH THE AREA AROUND CROB GATE WHEN THE SHIELD WENT DOWN. THE COUNTERATTACK WAS DESIGNATED 'OPERATION DERCIOUS', AND THE HARMENIANS EMBARKED UPON THE MISSION WITH THEIR USUAL DETERMINATION AND CONFIDENCE.

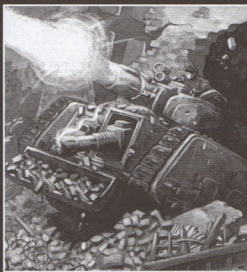


THE SCISSORS MANOEUVRE IN DIAGRAM.

BY NIGHTFALL THE HARMENIANS HAD DRIVEN BACK THE ENEMY TO THE SHATTERED CURTAIN WALL, AND RESCUED THE LIGHTLY ARMED INFANTRY ELEMENTS WHO HAD BEEN OPPRESSED BY THE ZOICAN ARMOUR.

'OPERATION DERCIOUS' PROVED TO BE THE FINEST EXAMPLE OF THIS ARMoured TACTIC. THE FORCES OF CHAOS SUFFERED THE LOSS OF TWO HUNDRED TANKS AND ARMoured BATTLE-WOLKS. THE HARMENIANS HAD LOST ONLY TWO.

COLONEL GRIZMUND EMPLOYED A TACTIC HE DOBBED 'THE SCISSORS' WHICH HE HAD USED PREVIOUSLY, AND HAS BECOME A RECOGNISED IMPERIAL MANOEUVRE. THE ATTACKING FORMATION IS DIVIDED INTO TWO HALVES. THE LEAD GROUP STRIKES THE ENEMY FLANK, BREAKING THROUGH THEIR FORMATION BEFORE WHEELING BACK INTO THE MELÉE AS THE SECOND HALF ATTACKS FROM THE ORIGINAL DIRECTION. IT DISORIENTATES THE ENEMY, BUT REQUIRES CLOSE COORDINATION TO AVOID LOSSES FROM FRIENDLY FIRE.



COL. GRIZMUND IN COMMAND OF THE GRACE OF THE THRONE

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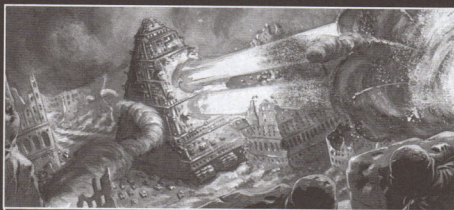
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+++REVEALING+++SUBSIDIARY FILE 9.2/RIX OPERATION HIERONYMO +
'SPIKE' + DESTRUCTION OF HASS WEST

'Just before it fell, Hass West reported seeing a massive mobile structure moving in towards them... We're fairly sure it is their main command vehicle' - *Intendant Banefall, Baptistry Command Centre.*

THE MASSIVE STRUCTURE IDENTIFIED BY VERVONHIVE'S DEFENDERS WAS AN ENORMOUS PYRAMIDAL STRUCTURE WHICH ADVANCED SLOWLY ON CATERPILLAR TRACKS LEAVING A CRUSHED WAKE HALF A KILOMETRE WIDE BEHIND IT. ITS MAIN WEAPONS WERE PLASMA CANNONS CAPABLE OF PULVERISING VAST SWATHES OF THE HIVE'S CURTAIN WALL, AND THE BUILDINGS BEYOND.



THE 'SPIKE' FIRES ITS PLASMA CANNONS AS IT APPROACHES THE WEST WALL.

AN ASTROPATH IDENTIFIED IT AS THE CHAOS FORCE'S COMMAND VEHICLE. ALL OF WHICH COMBINED TO MAKE IT THE MOST IMPORTANT TARGET FOR THE IMPERIAL FORCES. IT WAS ASSIGNED THE

MARKER CODE 'SPIKE', AND GAUNT INITIATED 'OPERATION HIERONYMO' TO DESTROY IT.

'I'm a foot soldier. A warrior, not a warmaster. It's time I did my job, the job I'm best at. And with the grace of the Emperor shining on me, I may take this field yet.' - *Colonel Commissar Gaunt, assuming direct command of 'Operation Hieronymo'.*

REALISING THAT INSUFFICIENT TROOPS EXISTED FOR A DIRECT ASSAULT ON THE 'SPIKE' GAUNT INSTEAD ELECTED TO LEAD A SMALL BAND OF SOLDIERS IN A GUERRILLA ATTACK. THESE CONSISTED OF ELEMENTS FROM THE TANITH FIRST AND VOLPONE BLUBBLOODS LED BY GUIDES FROM A 'SCRATCH COMPANY' OF MINERS. IT APPEARED SUICIDAL, YET IN THE HIGHEST TRADITION OF IMPERIAL COMMANDERS GAUNT CHOSE TO LEAD FROM THE FRONT.



MOST OF THE 'SCRATCH COMPANY' WERE 'SHELL-DEAF' AND HAND SIGNALS DESIGNED FOR SILENT OPERATIONS WERE USED.

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+++REVEALING+++SUBSIDIARY FILE 9.3/RXII
+ HERITOR ASPHODEL + HIERONYMO'S AMULET + DARKWATCH +
FLICKERSHIFT'...

'Always, always lead from the front. Never expect a man under your command to undertake an action you're not prepared to make yourself.' - *Delane Oktor.*

THE ASSAULT ON THE 'SPIKE' STANDS AS ONE OF THE MOST DARING COM-
MANDO RAIDS EVER MADE ON AN ACTIVE FRONT LINE. FINDING A ROUTE
INTO THE VEHICLE REQUIRED A SERIES OF DAREDEVIL ACTIONS. THESE
INVOLVED LEAPING FROM THE UPPER FLOORS OF A COLLAPSING BUILDING,
AS THE 'SPIKE' GROUND ITS WAY THROUGH THE LOWER LEVELS, TO LAND ON
THE SLOPING SIDES. THIS GAVE ACCESS TO THE VAST WEAPON PORTS AND A
CHANCE TO DIVE INTO THE INNER CAVITIES OF THE BEAST WHILST THE
CANNONS WERE RECHARGING.

ONCE INSIDE THE RAIDERS FOUGHT THEIR WAY PAST THE WARP MUTATED
ZOICAN DEFENDERS AND THROUGH THE BLOOD RED PARANOIA-INDUCING
PASSAGEWAYS TO THE HEART OF THE MACHINE. THIS IN ITSELF WAS ONLY
ACHIEVED THROUGH GREAT SKILL, SACRIFICE AND GOOD FORTUNE. FINDING
THEMSELVES IN THE CENTRAL CONTROL ROOM, THE ASSAILANTS WERE FUR-
THER EXPOSED TO THE TRUE HORRORS OF CHAOS WHEN THEY WERE BESET
UPON BY THE LAST LINE OF DEFENDERS.



THE ACCESSWAY WALLS WERE INLAIN WITH LIVING
CHAOS BONES.



A DARKWATCHER FLICKERS DURING COMBAT.

THE 'DARKWATCH' GUARDED THE CRU-
CIAL CONTROL PANELS OF THE LUM-
BERING BEHEMOTH, SHIELDED THEIR
MASTER FROM HARM. FOR THESE
CREATURES ARE SHAPED FROM THE
SICKENING STUFF OF THE VERY WARP
ITSELF, AND WERE GIFTED TO THE
BLASPHEMOUS HERITOR ASPHODEL,
AS HIS ELITE RETINUE OF BODY-
GUARDS, BY THE GODS OF THE DARK.

BEING AS THEY ARE PART OF THE
VERY FABRIC OF THE WARP THESE
DAEMONIC CREATURES APPEAR ABLE
TO SHIFT BETWEEN REALITIES AND
SEAMLESSLY RELOCATE THEM-
SELVES IN SPACE WITHIN A MIL-
LISECOND. THIS 'FLICKERSHIFTING'
ENABLES THESE BEASTS TO OUT-
FLANK AN OPPONENT INSTANTLY.

IT TOOK THE COMBINED MIGHT OF
THE ASSAULT FORCE TO DESTROY
THESE MONSTROSITIES, AND ONLY
THEN WITH MANY LOSSES.

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I

II

III



+++REVEALING+++SUBSIDIARY FILE 9.5/PVIII
+ HIERONYMO'S AMULET + HERITOR ASPHODEL'S DEATH + VICTORY + MORE...

'To dare, still to dare, and ever to dare.' - Danton Vosglan, Reminiscences, Vol.2, Chp.III.

HAVING DESPATCHED THE ACCURSED 'DARKWATCHERS' AND DESPITE BEING SERIOUSLY WOUNDED COLONEL-COMMISSAR GAONT SOUGHT A WAY TO EMPLOY HIS PLAN TO DISABLE THE 'SPIKE'. HIS PLOY CAME TO FRUITION UPON DISCOVERING A UNIVERSAL DATASLATE HUB PRODUCED BY IMPERIAL MANUFACTORIES, AND EMPLOYED BY THE FERROZOICANS IN THEIR CREATION OF THE MAMMOTH COMMAND VESSEL.

INTO THIS HE INSERTED HIERONYMO'S AMULET, A DEVICE CREATED BY VERVONHIVE'S ORIGINAL HIGH LORD TO DISRUPT ANY ATTEMPT AT TYRANNY. IT IS A MASTERPIECE OF CONSTRUCTION CREATED THROUGH AN ALLIANCE OF THE HOUSE OF SONDAR WITH THE TECH-MADES OF THE ADEPTUS MECHANICUS. ITS ACTIVATION WOULD ANNIHILATE ALL OF THE HIVE'S COMMAND AND CONTROL SYSTEMS, ERASE ALL DATA AND FUNCTION PROGRAMS, CORRUPT ALL CODIFIERS AND LOBOTOMISE ALL COBITATORS. FORTUNATELY GAONT'S INSTINCTS WERE CORRECT AS THE AMULET DID EXACTLY THE SAME TO THE 'SPIKE'.



THE HIERONYMO AMULET.

AS THE 'SPIKE' WAS PLUNGED INTO DARKNESS A SPHERICAL FORCESHIELD WITHIN THE COMMAND CENTRE DISSOLVED TO REVEAL THE HIDEOUS FORM OF THE ARCH-TRAITOR HERITOR ASPHODEL. HE ROSE TO HIS FULL SIX METRES HEIGHT, DWARFING THE TROOPERS THAT ARRAYED AROUND HIM, THEN SMOTE THEM WITH A SUCCESSION OF BLOWS. ALL ARMAMENTS BOUNCED OFF HIS POLISHED ARMOUR, SAVE ONE. THE SWORD OF HIERONYMO PLUNGED THROUGH HIS CHEST PLATE DESTROYING THE HERETIC.



THE ARCH-TRAITOR HERITOR ASPHODEL RISES.

WITH THE COMMAND CENTRE DESTROYED THE 'ZOICANS' WILL TO FIGHT FINALLY DISAPPEARED. VERVONHIVE HAD CONQUERED THE DARK FORCES ARRAYED AGAINST IT, BUT HAD ULTIMATELY BEEN DESTROYED IN THE PROCESS.

FILE ENDS

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I

II

III



THE TANITH FIRST BATTLE COMPENDIUM

COMPILED BY CHRISTIAN DUNN & RICHARD WILLIAMS

1st Afghali Ravagers

One of the regiments involved in the taking of Menazoid Epsilon.

10th Royal Sloka

Imperial Guard regiment present on Blackshard. Slokan troops wear ornate battledress; crested, enamelled scarlet and silver warsuits built by the artisans of Sloka to inspire terror in the enemy.

2nd Roane Deepers

Imperial Guard regiment who shared the transport frigate *Navarre* with the Ghosts. Tall, tanned, long-haired types.

3rd Afghali Ravagers

One of the regiments involved in the taking of Menazoid Epsilon.

5th & 8th Roane Deepers

Imperial Guard regiment who served with distinction at Vervunhive under the command of General Nash.

5th Slamabadden

Imperial Guard regiment who shared the transport frigate *Navarre* with the Ghosts. Sallow skinned, idle-looking compact men.

6th Krassian

Copper and grey-clad Imperial Guard regiment from the agri-world of Krassia in the Rimward Marginals. Fought alongside the Tanith First at Ouranberg.

81st Phantine Skyborne

Imperial Guard regiment who assisted the Ghosts in their assault on Ouranberg.

8th Pardus Armoured

Imperial Guard regiment involved in the liberation of Hagia.

Abfequarn, Lilith

Imperial Inquisitor

A tall woman who dresses in a simple uniform of black: boots, breeches, jacket. Her ash-fair hair is worn pinned up tight around her skull and her face is calm, lean, angular and beautiful. The daughter of a planetary governess whose world edged the stamping grounds of the eldar, she returned to Dolthe craftworld with Muon Nol.

Act of Consolation

The act introduced after the battle for Vervunhive that allowed the Vervunhivers to enlist in the Tanith First.

Adare, Lhurn

Sergeant, Tanith First

Sharp, confident and strong, this well liked Tanith is renowned for his carousing and sound advice.

Alaska

One of the camp-girls in the Ghosts' travelling retinue and confidente of Gol Kolea.

Anaximander

Planet in the Cabal system.

Anko

The leader of Noble House Anko, Lord Anko is old, belligerent and particular disliked by the commons. Founded a new hive upriver from Vervunhive, specialising in promethium production.

Anko, Alina

Daughter of the Noble House of Anko in Vervunhive.

Anko, Heskith

General, Vervun Primary

A plump, swarthy brute who approaches war politically rather

than tactically. Was appointed Marshal Croe's Chief of Staff for the Siege of Vervunhive.

Anko, House

Vervunhive Noble House.

Antioch 148

Planet in the Sabbat Cluster.

Aondrift Nova

Planet in the Cabal system.

Ardelean Colonials

Imperial Guard regiment active in the Second Sabbat Worlds Crusade.

Ariadne

Planet in the Cabal system.

Arilla

Trooper, Tanith First

Vervunhiver. Young, skinny girl who is the loader on Seena's heavy stubber team.

Ashek II

One of the first Sabbat worlds to be liberated during the Second crusade.

Asphodel, Heritor

One of Archon Nadzybar's foremost lieutenants, a warlord in his own right, personally commanding a force of over a million. He was one of the chief commanders Nadzybar gathered in his great retinue to form the vast Chaos force which overran the Sabbat Worlds. Despite the notoriety of the other warlords – filth like Sholen Skara, Nokad the Blighted, Anakwanar Sek, Qux of the Eyeless – Heritor Asphodel remains the most notorious. His sworn aim, both before and after Archon Nadzybar co-opted him into the pact, was to

'inherit' Imperium world after Imperium world and return them to what he saw as the 'true state' of Chaos. His ruthlessness is immeasurable, his brutality staggering and the charismatic force of his personality as a leader cannot be underestimated. With the possible exception of Sek, he is probably the most tactically brilliant of all Nadzybar's commanders.

Ayatani

The name given to Hagian priests.

Babbist, Arye

Private first class, 81st Phantine Skyborne

One of the Phantine troops who trained the Ghosts before their final assault on Ouranberg.

Baffels

Sergeant, Tanith First

A bearded man in his early forties with a barrel chest and a blue tattoo claw that lined his cheek. Received a field-promotion to sergeant during the Siege of Vervunhive.

Balhaut

Planet in the Sabbat Cluster, site of a major Imperial Guard offensive and the death of Warmaster Slaydo.

Banda, Jessi

Trooper, Tanith First

Vervunhiver. Ex-loom girl who fought in Kolea's guerilla company during the Vervunhive war. A lively, playful impetuous woman with close-cut curly brown hair and a rounded figure. Specialist sniper in Rawne's platoon.

Behold! The Triumph of Terra

Imperial hymn.

Belshiir Binary

Planet in the Cabal system.

Beltayn

Trooper, Tanith First

Comms operator in Gaunt's squad. Given the role following the promotion of Raglon to sergeant.

Bendace

Corporal, NorthCol

Served under Captain Ban Daur during the Siege of Vervunhive.



Boniface

Highmaster, Schola Progenium Prime of Ignatius

A powerfully set man in his fifties - or at least he was until the loss of his legs, left arm and half of his face. He moves around in a wheeled brass chair supported by a suspension field generated by three field buoys built into the chair's framework.

Bhavnager, Hagia

A large town dominated by a whitewashed temple with a golden stupa to the east and a massive row of brick-built produce barns to the south-west. The main road into Bhavnager enters by the south-eastern corner and runs into the triangular market place which roughly denotes the town centre. Site of a major engagement between combined Tanith and Pardus forces and Infardi cultists.

Blamire

Imperial Tactician

Assigned to Lugo's staff. A towering, stick-thin woman of advancing years who wears the black leather and red braid Imperial Tacticians livery.

Blenner, Vaynom

Commissar, Greygorian Third

Was a classmate of Gaunt's at the Schola Progenium and is his oldest friend. A terrible tale-spinner with a predilection to boasting.

Blood Pact, The

The backbone of the Chaos forces in the Cabal system and the personal retinue of Urlock Gaur. All of them are trained soldiers as opposed to

the disorganised rabble that make up the majority of Chaos cults.

The Blood Pact elements that were present on Phantine were said to be commanded by Sagittar Slaith, one of Gaur's most trusted lieutenants. Many of the Blood Pact troopers have augmetic systems to bolster their strength and all of them are scarred across the palms of their hands, wounds inflicted during the ritual pledge of allegiance to Urlock Gaur.

Bonin, Simen Urvin Macharius

Scout, Tanith First

His mother swore he was born under a lucky star - and the sixteen vertebrae made of composite steel in his back and augmetic socket on his pelvis are testimony to that.

Borkellid Hellhounds

One of the regiments involved in the taking of Menazoid Epsilon.

Bourah, Nessa

Trooper, Tanith First

Vervunhiver. Trainee nurse turned guerilla and like many of the Verghastite volunteers, profoundly deaf from the shelling at Vervunhive so she now takes orders via sign language.

Her fine, elfin features mean she is generally regarded as the most attractive of the female Ghosts. She is a crack shot and one of the Ghost snipers.

Bragg

Trooper, Tanith First

A huge man, the largest in the regiment and strong enough to wield heavy bolters unaided. Nicknamed 'Try Again' Bragg because of his terrible aim.

Brevian Centennials

Imperial Guard regiment involved in the liberation of Hagia.

Brochuss

Major, Jantine Patricians.

Attempted to engage Gaunt in a street brawl at Cracia City in revenge for Gaunt's exposing of the cowardice of the Jantine action on Fortis Binary.

Brostin

Trooper, Tanith First

Flamer trooper. A big man with ursine shoulders and a ragged,

bushy moustache, who always reeks of promethium. He has an affinity with fire and can make it work for him.

According to Sergeant Varl, Brostin's skill with fire comes from his background as a firewatcher in Tanith Magna. According to Larkin though, Brostin is an ex-convict who served a ten-year sentence for arson.

Bucephalon

Planet in the Sabbat cluster the capital of which is the city-state of Bucephalon.

Bucephalon, Angel of

A statue of a beautiful winged woman knelt in the attitude of prayer. Her perfect hands are clasped and her head bowed demurely. The inscription on the statue's plinth extols that she was a symbol of the God-Emperor, a personification of the Golden Throne, who had come to the elders of Bucephalon in the first days of the colony and watched over them as they conquered the land.

Larkin believed that the angel spoke to him while waiting to make his killshot on Nokad the Smiling.

Bulwar

Colonel, NorthCol

A combat veteran who had seen action during the years of rebellion wars in the NorthCol colonies on Verghast's main satellite moon. He is a thickset man who wears the same regular, evergreen flak- armour and fatigues as his men, though the braided cap and the crackling power claw marks him out instantly as a command officer.

Burone

Sergeant, Tanith First

Vervunhivier. Sweeper set operator.

Cabal Salient

Planet in the Cabal system.

Cabal system

System in the Sabbat Worlds, site of strong Chaos fortress-worlds

Cadian Armoured 3rd

One of the regiments involved in the taking of Menazoid Epsilon.

Caill

Trooper, Tanith First.

Bragg's ammo carrier.

Caius Innate

Planet in the Cabal system.

Caligula

Hive world in the Sabbat cluster.

Canemara

Planet in the Sabbat cluster.

Cardinale, Lex

Private first class, 81st Phantine Skyborne

One of the Phantine troops who trained the Ghosts before their final assault on Ouranberg.

Cargin, Letro

Captain, Vervun Primary.

Placed in command of the refugee operation in the first days of the Siege of Vervunhive, then Sondar Gate, then Hass West Fort.

Chanthar

Leader of the Chaos force that laid siege to Voltis Citadel. Turned a Melta on himself rather than face capture when the siege was broken.

Chass, Heymlik

Lord of Noble House Chass of Vervunhive. A liberal with lofty ideals and a generous heart, entrusted with Heironymo's Amulet.

Chass, House

Vervunhive Noble House, one of the most powerful of the nine, but considered the most humanitarian and neutral.

Chass, Merity

Eldest daughter of the Noble House of Chass in Vervunhive. Almost painfully beautiful, with a cunning intelligence and fiercely protective of her father. Founder of a new hive on the grasslands to the south of Vervunhive, specialising in mining and servitor engineering.

Chayker

Trooper, Tanith First

Field medic. Acts as one of Dorden's orderlies.

Chelon

Giant, shell-backed creature native to Hagia. They are herded by the agricultural caste.



Caffran, Dermon

Trooper, Tanith First

Third Platoon. A small man, for a Tanith, and young with shaved black hair and a blue dragon tattoo on his temple. His true love, Laria, died in the flames of Tanith.

Clatch, House

Ruling house of Ferrozoica hive.

Cluggan.

Sergeant, Tanith First.

Big, grey-haired Ghost. Military history buff. Killed by friendly fire during the Voltemand conflict.

Cociaminus

Planet in the Sabbat Cluster, site of a major Imperial Guard offensive.

Corday, Nikolaas Taschen

DeHante

Colonel, Royal Volpone 50th.

Second to General Sturm, a true Blueblood: massive, powerful and square-jawed, with hooded eyes.

Cortona

Ayatani-ayt of the Shrinehold, the last resting place of Saint Sabbat on Hagia.

Cracia City, Pyrites

The largest and oldest city on Pyrites is home to the Imperial Needle, a three thousand metre tall ironwork tower raised to honour the Emperor and celebrate the engineering skills of the Pyriteans. On sunny days the city becomes a giant sundial with the spire acting as the gnomon.

Criid, Tona

Trooper, Tanith First
Vervunhiver. At the time of the Siege of Vervunhive, Tona was eighteen, a bright-eyed, cocky hab-girl with spiky, bleached hair, flashy gang-bands and piercings and a snarling smile. On the first day of the siege, however, she was caught in the destruction of Carriage Station C4/a where she saved the lives of two children – Yoncy and Dalin – and subsequently adopted them. The siege was hard on her until she met Caffran, who gave her food and a weapon.

She joined the Tanith First during the Act of Consolation. She wears a gang ear-stud, buckle and snake tattoo on her shoulder. At the time of the siege she carried a chain-knife: a thick, decorated grip with an extending blade of steel fifteen centimetres long. A flick of the rubberised stud on the index-finger ridge activates an internal power-cell that causes the blade-edge to vibrate so fast it looks still. The knife's handle is decorated with a carefully carved Verve crest: a laughing skull resting in the dip of a gothic V.

Croe, Edric

Marshal, Vervun Primary
Marshal of Vervunhive. Strategic commander of Vervun Primary and chief military officer of Vervunhive, successor to Marshal Gnide, brother to Lord Croe. Previously major-colonel in Vervun Primary. Marshal Croe is a pale, white-haired giant, well over two metres tall. His fierce black eyes and hard gaze are the subject of barrack legend, but he was personally calm, quiet and inspirational, judicious in leadership and popular with the men.

Culcis

Major, Royal Volpone 50th
Commander of a detachment of the elite 10th Brigade, who had won himself a valour medal on Vandamaar. Fought alongside Dorden and a contingent of Ghosts whilst still an ordinary trooper to defend a farmhouse on Nacedon that was temporarily being used as a sick bay.

Young for a member of the Tenth, but his superiors had rightly noticed his command qualities. Lost a hand during the defence of the Sondar Gate at Vervunhive.

Curth, Ana

Surgeon, Tanith First
Vervunhiver. A short, slim, young woman with the knowledge and the nerves to demand what's best for her patients. Joined the Tanith along with the Vervunhive soldier at the Act of Consolation.

Dalin

One of the children 'adopted' by Criid and Caffran.

Darendara

The site of Gaunt's first victory.

Darkwatch

The elite retinue of Chaos champions gifted to certain valued warlords. They employ a monstrous, innate control of the warp to shift their location in combat, and bear slicing blades wreathed in sparking, blood-red fires.

Daur, Ban

Captain, Tanith First
Vervunhiver. Fourth officer of the Tanith First. As a captain he was the highest ranking Vervun Primary officer to join the Tanith, and as a result he was given a place on the regimental chain of command on a par with Major Rawne, as officer in charge of the Verghast contingent, answering only to Corbec and Gaunt.

Defay

Imperial Inquisitor
Inquisitor who led the interrogation of prisoners after Gaunt's first ever victory on Darendara.

Del Mar

Commissar General, Sabbath Worlds Crusade
Overall commander of the assault on Phantine.

Dercius, Aldo

General, Jantine Patricians
Was Gaunt's father's immediate superior. After the death of Gaunt's father it was Dercius who recommended his placement at the Schola Progenium Prime of Ignatius. Father of Draker Flense.

Dewr

Scout, Tanith First
Former hunter in the southern gameland of Tanith Attica.



Corbec, Colm

Colonel, Tanith First.
Second Platoon. First officer of the Tanith First. A large man on the wrong side of forty, built like an ox and going to fat. His broad and hairy forearms are covered in blue spiral tattoos and he wears a thick, shaggy beard. His uniform is the black webbing, fatigues and camo-cloak which is the Tanith standard and he shares the pale complexion, black hair and blue eyes of his people.

The son of a machinist, he had originally plied his trade back on Tanith at the reaper mills in Sotress but had to give it up when his lungs clogged with sawdust and he developed a hacking cough that lingers to this day. After that he joined the militia of Tanith Magna on the back of a dare and a broken heart, and patrolled the Pryze County nalwood for poachers and smugglers. Was the Pryze County Logging Show wrestling champion three years running.

Lost a finger on his left hand to a chainsword on Voltmand.

Diemos

Former hydro-electric industrial heartland of Fortis Binary.

Dolthe

Eldar craftworld. Home of Eon Kull and Muon Nol.

Domor, Dohon

Sergeant, Tanith First
Third Platoon. Sweeper set operator who was an engineer back on Tanith. Lost his eyes on Menazoid

Epsilon and was implanted with a set of cyber-netic implants which resemble truncated binocular scopes. These implants can read heat and movement through stone walls and brick facades.

Nicknamed 'Shoggy' after the bug-eyed amphibian he now resembles.



Cuu, Lijah

Trooper, Tanith First
Vervunhiver. Just under two metres, slim, corded with muscle. Corbec describes him as 'lean with a face like a bad lie'. He is tattooed extensively and a long scar splits his face from top to bottom. He has crude tattoos of a skull and crossbones across the knuckles of both hands.

Dorden, Mikal

Trooper, Tanith First
Comms operator, Hasker's platoon.

Dravere, Hechtor

Lord High Militant General, Jantine Patricians
A squat, bullish man in his sixties, balding yet insists on lacquering the few remaining strands of hair across his scalp as if to prove a point. Fleshy and ruddy, his uniform appears to require an entire regimental ration of starch and whitening to prepare each morning. He wears a row of medals on his chest which stick out on a stiff brass pin.

Drayl

Trooper, Tanith First
A handsome, popular soldier whose songs and good humour kept his platoon in decent spirits. His rough exploits are a matter of regimental legend.

Enothis

Planet in the Cabal system.

Eon Kull

Eldar Farseer.

Ers hul

Zweil's name for the Infardi. Literally translates as a chelon that consumes its own dung or the dung of others.

Esholi

Hagian word for student.

Euan Fairlow's March

A jig popular in the taverns of Tanith Magna.

Fadayhin 5th

Imperial Guard regiment fighting in the Sabbat Crusade. Former regiment of Commissar Kowle.

Farnora, Guild

Vervunhive merchant guild.

Fayk, Guild

Vervunhive merchant guild.

Fazalur

Major, Phantine Skyborne
A weathered man with shaven hair who wears the quilted cream tunic of his regiment.

Feast of Leaves

Traditional feast back on Tanith.

Fereyd

Imperial Spy rescued from traitor forces by Gaunt and his Hyrkan regiment on Pashen.

Ferrozoica

Hive on Verghast corrupted by Heritor Asphodel and forced into action against Verghast and the other hives.

Feth

One of the Tanith tree gods. Also commonly used by the Ghosts as an expletive.

Feygor

Trooper, Tanith First
Third Platoon. Tall, thin Tanith. Rawne's adjutant. Shares the major's bitter hatred of Gaunt.

Worked alongside Rawne in the militia of Tanith Attica before the Founding. The bastard son of a black marketeer, it was his sharp mind and physical ability that had got him into the militia and then the Imperial Guard. He was shot in the throat at Vervunhive and has spoken with the aid of a voice-box ever since.



Dorden, Tolin

Medic, Tanith First
A small man with a grey beard and warm eyes. Back on Tanith he was a doctor who ran an extended practice for thirty years through the farms and settlements of Beldane and County Pryze. His wife died the year before the Founding and he was drafted to fulfill the Administratum's requirements for medical personnel. His son, Mikal, is a trooper in the ninth platoon but his daughter, Clara, and grandchild perished in the flames of Tanith. Because of his medical background Dorden refuses to carry a weapon. Took his oath at the Medical College in Tanith Magna.

Flense, Draker

Field Commander, Jantine Patricians
Son of Aldo Dercius. When Gaunt disgraced his father Draker lost all of his land and titles including his family name and was forced to enlist in the Imperial Guard and work his way up from there.

Formal Prime

Planet in the Sabbat cluster that was liberated during the first few months of the Crusade.

Foskin

Trooper, Tanith First
Field medic. Acts as one of Dorden's orderlies.

Fuehain Falchior

Witchblade of Eon Kull.

Fulch

Trooper, Tanith First
Shot in the backside during Second Storm

Fultingo

Commissar, Admiral Ornof's general staff
Commissar assigned to investigate the murder of a civilian on Phantine.

Furrian

Trooper, Tanith First
Flamer trooper. Grew up in the same town as Brostin and shares his fascination with fire.

Furst

Colonel, 8th Pardus Armoured
Commander of the legendary Shadow Sword *Castigatus*.

Gabel

Imperial Inquisitor.
Inquisitor operating on Phantine during its retaking. A cadaverous monster who wears matt-rose powered plate armour.

Gavunda

The leader of the noble house Gavunda. He speaks through a silver-inlaid, wire-box augmentor that covers his mouth like an ornate, crouching spider.

Gavunda, House

Vervunhive noble house.

General order 145.f.

The order by which a commissar may relieve a commanding officer of duty.

Ghasthive

Hive on Verghast; absorbed population elements from Vervunhive.

Gherran

Trooper, Tanith First
Field medic. One of only three qualified Tanith medics before the Founding.

Gigar

Promethium mining planet in the Cabal system.

Gilbear, Gizhaum Danver De

Banzi Haight

Major, Royal Volpone 50th
The second son of the Haight Gilbears of Solenhofen, the royal house of Volpone. Nearly two and a half metres tall and arrogantly powerful with the big, blunt, bland features and languid, hooded eyes of the aristocracy. Was a former heavyweight boxing champion back on Volpone.

Gorley

Sergeant, Tanith First
Fifth Platoon. A tall, barrel-chested man with a boxer's nose.

Gour, Urlock

Chaos warmaster operating within the Sabbat Worlds cluster.

Gravier

Inquisitorial Apprentice
Inquisitor Defay's young apprentice.

Greer, Denil

Sergeant, Pardus Eighth Mobile Flak Company
A tall, blond, freckled individual.

Grell

Sergeant, Tanith First
Fifth platoon. Was an engineer back on Tanith.

Grizmund

General, Narmenian Armour
A brilliant commander of an elite tank regiment. Self-assured, well-motivated and tactically adept. He insists upon excellence from his men and hates those military bureaucrats that try and impede his ability to fight. His tank, *The Grace of the Throne*, is a long-chassis Leman Russ variant with a 110 centimetre main weapon.

Hagia

For six thousand years Hagia has been the shrineworld of Saint Sabbat, a beloved Imperial saint after whom the entire star cluster – and the current Imperial crusade there – are named. It is a feudal world with every town being ruled by its own king. The closest



Gaunt, Ibram

Commissar-Colonel, Tanith First

Born on Manzipor, his father was second-in-command to Aldo Dercius in the Jantine regiments. Following his father's death he studied at the Schola Progenium on Ignatius Cardinal until joining the Imperial Guard as a commissar-cadet to Delane Oktar. Under Oktar he saw action in many theatres, distinguishing himself at every turn until eventually he was granted a deathbed promotion by Oktar to the rank of commissar. For the next eight years he served as a political officer with the Hyrkan 8th from its founding to its famous victory at Balhaut. His tenure with the Hyrkans had brought Gaunt to the attention of the Sabbat Crusade's Warmaster, Slaydo, and the two quickly gained each other's trust. So much so that, just as Oktar had done years before, Slaydo promoted him to colonel-commissar and granted him command of the Tanith on his deathbed.

Although respected by the majority of his troops, there are certain elements within the Tanith ranks who hold Gaunt responsible for the death of their planet: in an effort to regroup his forces, Gaunt had ordered the retreat of his untrained and under-prepared regiment rather than stay and attempt to repel the invading Chaos army.

Hagia has to a planetary lord is the ruler of the capital city, Doctrinopolis.

Haller

Sergeant, Tanith First
Vervunhiver. A veteran of the Vervun Primary regiment who still wears his spiked Vervun Primary helmet as part of his battledress.

Hancot

Captain, 8th Pardus Armoured
Commander of the Conqueror, *Drum Roll*.

Harjeon

Trooper, Tanith First
Vervunhiver. A small, blond man with a wispy moustache. Believed to have been either a teacher or a tailor before he joined the Tanith.

Hark, Viktor

Commissar, Tanith First
Assigned to the Tanith First at Hagia by Lugo in an attempt to finish Gaunt's career. Stayed on as the Ghosts' political officer after Lugo was disgraced. Carries a plasma pistol.

Hearts and Titans

Tarot game played by Third Platoon.

Hellier

Lieutenant, 8th Pardus Armoured
Commander of the Conqueror, *Steel Storm*.

Herodas, Lucan

Captain, 8th Pardus Armoured
The Pardus's infantry liaison officer.

Hogskull Regiment

Imperial Guard regiment who won settlement rights to Nacedon during the first advance into the Sabbat worlds.

Hyrkans

Gaunt's first posting as a cadet was under the command of Commissar-General Delane Oktar, chief political officer of the Hyrkan regiments. The Hyrkans are a strong breed, drawn and pale, with almost colourless hair that they prefer to wear short and severe. Their uniform is a dark grey battledress with beige webbing and short-billed forage caps of the same colour.

Imperial Commissariat edict

4378b

Imperial Commissariat edict 4378b states that any activity concerning the discipline of Imperial Guardsmen must be conducted by the Imperial Commissariat itself.

Imperial Edict 95674

Imperial Edict 95674, sub-clause 45, states that an Imperial judicial officer, such as a full commissar, may interrupt and foreclose any planetary legal affair without restraint or penalty.

Imperial Fists

Space Marine Chapter, involved in the closing stages of the siege of Vervunhive.

Imperial Infantryman's

Uplifting Primer

Standard text issued to all Imperial guardsmen.

Infardi

The name taken by the Chaos cultists on Hagia. Literally translates as 'pilgrim'. The Infardi wear a green silk uniform, openly mocking the attire of the shrineworld's priests.

Infardus, Infareem

Former king of Doctrinopolis, Hagia.

Iron Snakes

Space Marine Chapter, involved in the closing stages of the siege of Vervunhive.

Jagdea, Bree

Commander, Phantine Fighter Corps
Chief officer of the Phantine Fighter Corps. A small woman with close-cropped black hair. One of the finest pilots ever to graduate from Hessenville Combat School.

Jantine Patricians

Noble soldiers, tall men in deep purple uniforms dressed with chrome. Fought alongside the Tanith First at Fortis Binary.

Jehnik, House

Vervunhive house ordinary.

Jehnik, Master

Leader of House Jehnik, known for being particularly boring and long-winded.

Joliq

Alcoholic beverage manufactured on Verghast.

Kannak

the main lift-port at Kannak in the Northern Collective Hives and landing point of Imperial Guard reinforcements on Verghast.



Heldane, Golesh

Constantine Pheppos

Imperial Inquisitor

Heldane's features have been surgically altered to inspire terror and obedience in those he encounters. His face is high and long like an equine beast with a mouth full of blunt teeth and his eyes are round and dark. Fluid tubes and fibre wires lace his sloped hairless skulllike braids. His neck and throat is covered in matted fur. Heldane was the mastermind behind the plot to recover a data crystal during Gaunt's time on Cracia.

Kaylen Lancers

Imperial Guard regiment involved in the assault on Monthax.

Kersherin, Goseph

Lieutenant, 81st Phantine Skyborne

One of the Phantine troops who trained the Ghosts before their final assault on Uranberg.

Ketzok 17th

Armoured regiment involved in the taking of Menazoid Epsilon. Nicknamed 'The Serpents' because of the gold and turquoise serpent design painted on the barrels of their tanks and armoured vehicles.

Khan V

Planet in the Cabal system.

Khulen

One of the worlds that Gaunt fought on with the Hyrkans before the start of the Second Sabbat Worlds Crusade.

Kith, The

Sub-cult of Khorne who retreated from Balhaut and took shelter on Sapiencia.

Kleopas

Major, 8th Pardus Armoured Squat, plump, ageing second-in-command of the Pardus armoured. His left eye is an augmetic implant. Commander of the Conqueror battle tank, *Heart of Destruction*.

Kolea, Gol

Sergeant, Tanith First Vervunhiver. Ex-miner who fought as part of the 'scratch company' resistance during the Vervunhive war. A powerful, saturnine man who saw his life destroyed and then rose again during the most brutal fighting of the Siege to become one of the most fearsome leaders of the scratch companies.

Kolea, Livy

Vervunhive hab-wife. Married to Gol Kolea and mother to his children. She was killed at Carriage Station C4/a on the first day of the Siege of Vervunhive.

Kowle, Pius

Commissar, Vervun Primary Seconded to the Vervun Primary after his career with the Faday-hin Fifth had foundered. A tall, lean man who looks as if he has been forced to wear the black cap and longcoat of an Imperial commissar. His skin is sallow and taut, and his eyes are a disturbing beige. Gaunt believes he embodies the very worst aspects of the Commissariat. On Balhaut he had a man flogged to death for wearing the wrong cap badge. Gaunt had him transferred away from the front there which began Kowle's career decline and Kowle remained bitter about it up until his death. Cunning enough to manipulate Gaunt into an awkward position over Grizmund. Given the title 'People's Hero' after the rout that was the Battle of the Plains and

held some popularity in Vervunhive before his disgrace over the Grizmund trial.

Kreff

Executive Officer, Navarre A hard-faced, shaven headed man who wears the emerald, tailored uniform of the Segmentum Pacificus fleet.

Lamacia

Planet in the Sabbat Cluster, site of an Imperial victory under Macaroth.

Langana

Commissar, VPHC Attached to the staff of Commissar Kowle. with a habit of parrotting VPHC dogma.

Larisel

Small rodent native to Tanith. Hunted for their valuable pelts.

Lattarii Gundogs

One of the regiments involved in the taking of Menazoid Epsilon.

LeGuin

Captain, 8th Pardus Armoured Commander of the Destroyer, *Grey Venger*. A short, well-made man who wears tan Pardus fatigues and a fleece-lined leather coat.

Lerod

Sergeant, Tanith First Seventh Platoon. Large, shaven-headed sergeant with an Imperial Eagle tattoo on his temple. He formerly commanded the militia unit in Tanith Ultima, the Imperial shrine-city on Tanith, and as a result he, along with the other troopers from Ultima, were the most devoted and resolute Imperial servants in the Tanith First.

Lesp

Trooper, Tanith First Field medic. Acts as one of Dorden's orderlies. A tall, thin man from Tanith Longshore, with cold blue eyes and an adam's apple that looks like a knee in his slender neck. Back on Tanith he and his family were sea fishermen who plied the currents beyond the archipelago. His skill with a sail cloth and net needle and an almost surgical knack with a blade had led Dorden to put those skills to use as a medical orderly.

Leyr

Scout, Tanith First A hard-edged veteran of the Tanith Magna militia.

Lillo, Marco

Trooper, Tanith First Vervunhiver. Career soldier. Spent 21 years in the Vervun Primary.

Loxatl

Xenos mercenaries with a fierce battle lust. These ruthless killers were employed by Saggitar Slaith at Phantine to bolster his Blood Pact troops. The loxatl's dewclaws allow them to climb vertical surfaces while their grey torso is encased in an armature frame of augmetic servo limbs. An odour of rancid milk mixed with mint usually denotes their presence.

Lucius

Forge world in the Sabbat Worlds cluster.

Lugo

Lord General, Sabbat Worlds Crusade A tall, bony man whose chest is burdened by the weight of medals upon it. Warmaster Macaroth



Larkin, Hlaine

Trooper, Tanith First Third Platoon. A skinny, stringy, unhealthy pale man in his fifties with three silver hoops through his left ear and a purple blue spiral-worm tattoo on his sunken right cheek. A slender, whipcord man with a dagger face. Like all Tanith he is pale skinned and black haired. A former Tanith Magna militiaman, Larkin is the best marksman in the whole of the Tanith First – even if he is a little unhinged.

brought him with him when he superseded Slaydo and took command of the Sabbat Worlds Crusade. Desperate to prove himself after a failure at Oscillia IX where an easy victory was turned into a twenty month campaign.

Lyse

Trooper, Tanith First
Vervunhiver. One of the many female veterans of the Vervunhive Civil Defence Cadre who joined the Tanith after the Act of Consolation. Flame trooper.

Macaroth

Warmaster, Sabbat Worlds Crusade
Current commander of the Sabbat Crusade. Hector Dravere was his main rival for Slaydo's succession.

Marchese

Captain, 8th Pardus Armoured.
Commander of the Conqueror, P48J.

Menazoid Clasp

Cluster of planets in the Sabbat Worlds taken by Chaos forces. Menazoid Sigma is the system's capital planet.

Menazoid Epsilon

A remote, dark deathworld at the edge of the Menazoid Clasp. The Ghosts were deployed there during the liberation of the Clasp.

Meroc, Landa

Corbec's mother. During Cor-bee's birth her life was saved by Tolin Dorden.

Merrt

Trooper, Tanith First
Second Platoon. One of Corbec's favoured sharpshooters.

Mirridon

Planet in the Cabal system.

Mkeller

Scout, Tanith First
An older man with greying hair shaved in close to the side of his head.

Mkendrick

Scout, Tanith First
Third Platoon. Raised in the mountains of Tanith Steeple.

Mkoll

Scout-Sergeant, Tanith First

A youthful looking man in his fifties with a wiry frame and a salt-tinge of grey in his hair and beard. His wife, Eiloni, died of canth-fever some years before the Founding and his sons timbered on the river rather than follow their father's profession of woodsman.

Mkvenner

Scout, Tanith First

Has the long, high cheek-boned face that makes everything he says seem chilling and dark. He has a blue half-moon tattoo under his right eye. Trained by Mkoll himself who believes that Mkvenner follows the martial tradition of Cwlwhl, the lost fighting art of the Tanith wood-warriors of old.

Modile

Colonel, Vervun Primary

A combat virgin before being charged with the defence of Veyveyr Gate during Second Storm. His gross mismanagement of that action led to his execution by Gaunt.

Monthax

Sodden jungle world in the Sabbat system. The Ghosts, fighting alongside Eldar, won a famous victory here.

Mtane

Trooper, Tanith First

Field medic. One of only three

qualified Tanith medics before the Founding.

Munnol

Colonel, Tanith Dale Milita

Guise by which Muon Nol appeared to members of the Ghosts during the final assault at Monthax.

Muon Nol

Dire Avenger, master of Eon Kull's bodyguard. He wears a great white helm with a red plume crest and opalescent blue armour flecked with gold. The braided tassels of his cape hang down to his waist, shrouding the weapons cinched tight to his back.

Muril

Trooper, Tanith First

Vervunhiver. Female sniper in Corbec's platoon with a heroic track record from the Zoican War. Corbec claims that the reason he picked her for his platoon was because her dirty laugh and red hair reminded him of a girl he'd left behind on Tanith. The actual reason is that she has a shooter's eye second only to Larkin.

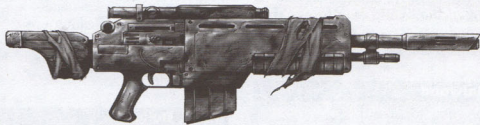
My Love Waits in the

Nalwoods Green

Tanith folk song.

Nacedon

An agricultural world in the Sabbat system that is home to three million Imperial colonists.



Larkin's sniper's rifle

Modified lasgun with an XC 52/3 strengthened barrel which is longer and thinner than the standard issue. The strengthened barrel allows for increased range and tighter accuracy and enables Larkin to use 'hotsots', an overpowered energy clip that allows for bigger, but fewer, hits and is good for about 20 bolts. The rifle has no charge setting slider.

The stock is made of nalwood and it is fitted with a long flash suppresser so that Larkin's position is not given away when sniping. The nightscope on his sniper's rifle is a heat-sensitive spotter he used back on Tanith to poach larvae out in the woods. Larkin's psychosis has led him to believe that whenever he looks through the scope he will always see the truth. As a result, Larkin always calibrates the scope himself.



Milo, Brin

Trooper, Tanith First

A slender, pale youth just now filling out with adult bulk, he had been the only non-soldier saved from the ruins of Tanith. Nicknamed 'The Boy' (a nickname that Gaunt himself had amongst the Hyrkans) he served as Gaunt's adjutant before he was enlisted in the regiment in the battle for Monthax and has a reputation as an avatar of Gaunt. He has a blue fish tattoo over his left eye and often plays the Tanith pipes.

Nachin

Brigadier, Narmenian Armour
Second to Grizmund.

Nalsheen, The

Name given to the Tanith wood-warriors of old. They fought using only spear staves tipped with single edged silver blades. They had united Tanith and overthrown the Huhhlwhc dynasty paving the way for later democratic city states.

Nalwood

See entry for 'Tanith'.

Narmenian Armour

Elite Imperial Guard armoured regiment consisting of one hundred and twenty-seven main battle tanks of the Leman Russ pattern, with twenty-seven Demolishers and forty-two light support tanks. Mustard-brown uniforms, spiked-fist insignia of Narmenia.

Only drivers who could handle thirty-plus tonnes of armour at speed, and gunners and layers who could fire fast, repeatedly and make kills each time were allowed into Grizmund's cadre.

At Vervunhive their famous 'Scissors' manoeuvre on the afternoon of the 35th day accounted for 200 enemy armour losses for only two of their own.

Nash

General, Roane Deepers

An infantryman since he joined the Guard, Nash has seen the very worst dog-soldier work has to offer. His command and leadership at several desperate times during the Siege was unmatched.

Navarre

Frigate, Segmentum Pacificus Fleet

The troop frigate used to transport the Ghosts from Tanith and during their early missions.

Nonimax

Planet in the Sabbat Cluster, site of Imperial victory under Macaroth which included the Pragar regiments.

Northern Foundry Collectives

Settlement on Verghast that absorbed population from Vervunhive. Provided ten regiments of auxiliaries to the defence of Vervunhive under General Xance and Colonel Bulwar. The troopers are named Enforcers and wear wide-brimmed bowl helmets.

Obscura

An addictive narcotic that ultimately destroys the brain and is cheaper, hit for hit, than alcohol. Withdrawal effects appear to be symptoms of gastric fever. Treatment for chronic longterm abusers includes the prescription of ameliorating tranquillisers such as lomitamol.

Oktar, Delane

Commissar-General, Hyrkan Regiments

Chief political officer of the Hyrkan regiments. Died by ork poison on Decimus. Promoted Gaunt from cadet to commissar on his deathbed. Wrote 'Epistles to the Hyrkans'.

Ormon, 'Gak'

Major, Vervun Primary

Commander of the Spoilers, a big, bulky man with bloodshot eyes and a flamer-burned throat.



Nokad (a.k.a Nokad the Blighted, Nokad the Smiling)

Charismatic cult leader whose forces rose to conquer Bucephalon from within. Well over two metres tall, his frame is heavy set and powerful. His arms and torso are pierced with a multitude of loops, rings, chains and spikes which glitter as brightly as his perfect teeth.

Ortiz

Colonel, Ketzok 17th Armoured Regiment

Struck by Gaunt for following an order to open fire on the Ghosts position, killing nearly three hundred Tanith.

Oscillia IX

Hive world in the Sabbat cluster.

Otte

Major, Vervun Primary

Adjutant to the Lord Marshal, presented Gaunt with the powerblade of Hieronymo Sondar.

Pater Sin

Leader of the Chaos forces on Hagia. Well over two metres tall and built of corded muscle. His body is decorated with the filthy tattoos of the Infardi cult and an image of the Emperor tortured and agonised is tattooed across his left cheek and forehead with Sin's bloodshot eye forming the screamin mouth. His teeth are sharpened steel implants.

Pater, Cornelius

Advocate, Administratum Judiciary

A gnarled, elderly man in long, purple robes who wears thick-lensed spectacles. His hair, where it

protrudes from under his high-crested, red, felt cap, is grey and unruly. He carries an ebony cane.

Pauk

Lieutenant, 8th Pardus Armoured
Commander of the Executioner, Strife.

Phantine

Planet in the Cabal system. An industrial world for over fifteen centuries it is now largely inhospitable to humankind. Un-checked resource mining and petrochemical overproduction has ruined the surface and left a blanket of air pollution five kilometres deep. The only remaining settlements are high spires where the occupants can breathe the clean air above the pollution layer.

Plains, Battle of the

Massacre of the First Primary Armoured of Vervunhive by Ferrozoican forces on the first day in the Siege of Vervunhive on the salt grass plains beyond the hive. Only 42 out of 450 tanks survived.

Pollo

Trooper, Tanith First
Vervunhiver. Was a nobleman's bodyguard back on Verghast and is a fully trained warrior of House Anko. His expensive neural implants, paid for by his lord, give him significantly faster reaction times.

Pragar

Contributed Imperial Guard regiments to the Sabbat Crusade, most notably at Nonimax.

Raglon

Sergeant, Tanith First
Originally the comms operator in Corbec's squad. Uses the retort 'We can try fething hard and repeatedly,' whenever the comms channels are particularly bad. Later promoted to Sergeant in Corbec's platoon.

Ramillies 268-43

Deathworld in the Sabbat cluster.

Raymian 13th and 16th

Imperial Guard regiment involved in the retaking of Nero Hive.



Royal Volpone 50th

Imperial Guard who have crossed the Ghosts' path on numerous occasions. Nicknamed the 'Bluebloods' they wear a grey and gold uniform and believe themselves to be the noblest regiment in the Imperial Guard. The elite 10th have carapace armour, matt-black hellguns with a sawn-off pump-gun attached to the bayonet lug under the main barrel and bright indigo eagle studs pinned into their armaplas collar sections. Their battle-pledge is "True to the Throne and hard to kill!"

Ridas

Captain, 8th Pardus Armoured
Commander of the Conqueror, *Pride of Memphis*.

Rilke

Trooper, Tanith First
A superb sniper, second only to Larkin. Carries a long-pattern needle-las.

Rodyin, House

Vervunhive noble house. one of the liberal families in the hive, more humanitarian and forward-thinking than the old noble houses or the guilders. House Rodyin's fortunes were built on food sources and their harvester-machines grazed the great pastoral uplands north of the Hass, gathering grain for the vast granaries in the dock district.

Rydol

Planet in the Cabal system.

Sabbat Worlds, The

The name given to the cluster of one hundred inhabited systems along the edge of Segmentum Pacificus.

Saint Phidolas

The saint who originally led the first settlers to Phantine.

Saint Sabbat Hagio

Saint Sabbat was a low-born daughter of a chelon herdsman in the high pastures of what are now known as the Sacred Hills on Hagia. She rose, despite her background, and led the citizens of the Imperium to conquest and redemption. Six thousand years before the start of the second Sabbat Worlds Crusade she had come from poverty on Hagia to command Imperial forces and achieve victory throughout the cluster, driving the forces of Chaos out.

Images of her traditionally portray her dressed in Emperor armour, decapitating daemons with her glowing sword.

Samothrace 4th, 5th and 15th

Regiments involved in the taking of Menazoid Epsilon.

Sanian

Has the long-boned, strong featured look of native Hagiens, with dark eyes and well defined eyebrows. Her head is shaved except for a bound pony-tail of glossy black hair. She is a student at the Universitariat in Doctrinopolis.

Sapiencia

Ocean world in the Sabbat cluster.

Sarpoy Mechanised Cavalry

One of the regiments involved in the taking of Menazoid Epsilon.

Scratch companies

Regiments informally raised by willing habbers to support the defence of Vervunhive. The members of the scratch company weathered the very worst of the war, creating inseparable loyalties through the circumstances that had brought them together.



Rawne, Elim

Major, Tanith First

Third Platoon. Second officer of the Tanith First. Rawne comes from a select background; his family were merchants, politicians and local lords and he had always had money, stipends from his father's empire of timber mills. But as a third son, he was never going to inherit his father's fortune and the militia became his best option for advancement. A handsome devil with clean, sleek features decorated by a starburst tattoo over one eye. He served previously as a junior officer in the Militia of Tanith Attica. Thoroughly ruthless and openly contemptuous of Gaunt's leadership.

Seena

Trooper, Tanith First

Vervunhiver. Former loom girl who is the gunner in the heavy stubber team she forms with Arilla.

A plump girl who wears a black slouch cap to keep her luxuriant bangs out of her eyes.

Segmentum Pacificus

One of the five Segmentums of Imperial space, located to the galactic west of the Segmentum Solar.

Shoggy

Small amphibean with bulging eyes found in woodland pools on Tanith. Now extinct. Also the nickname given to Domor after he received his optical implants.

Shriven

Chaos forces fighting the Ghosts at Fortis Binary.

Sirus

Captain, 8th Pardus Armoured

A robust man with the characteristic olive skin and beak nose of the Pardus. Commander of the Conqueror, *Wrath of Pardua*.

Skara, Sholen

Leader of the Kith. A tall, shaven-headed man garbed in black robes. Ritually slaughtered almost a million Balhauteans and then led his followers in mass suicide at Oskray Hive.

Captured alive by a force of Tanith and Volpone and Caffran was given the chance to execute him by Gaunt. He refused, claiming that to let Skara live would be a greater punishment than death.

Slaith, Saggitar

Leader of the Blood Pact forces on Phantine. His face is entirely hairless, lacking even eyebrows or lashes. His ears are grossly distended by the weight and number of studs and rings that pierce them. His teeth are chrome triangles, like dagger tips, and both his cheeks are marked with three huge, diagonal scars - symbols of his pact with Urlock Gour.

Slaydo

Former Warmaster of the Sabbat Worlds Crusade

A hunched but powerful man who lived well into his hundred and forties. Died on Balhaut five years before the Siege of Vervunhive. Wrote 'A Treatise on the Nature of Warfare'.

Solon

Former Warmaster of the Sabbat Worlds Crusade.

Sabbat Warmaster prior to Slaydo.

Solypsis

Planet in the Sabbat Cluster used as an Imperial staging area.

Sondar, Heironymo

Former High Master of Vervunhive on the planet Verghast who was poisoned by his successor, Salvador Sondar, fifty years before the Siege of Vervunhive at the age of 120. Revered figure who led Vervunhive to victory against Ferrozoica in the Trade War.

Created Heironymo's Amulet, a powerful and formidable system-slayer; the activation of this amulet

would annihilate the command and control systems, erase all data and function programs, corrupt all codifiers and lobotomise all cogitators. It would cripple Vervunhive and allow the device's wielders to free the hive from would-be conquerors now rendered helpless.

Sondar, Salvador

High Master of Vervunhive at the time of the Siege of Vervunhive. Aged seventy, his frail, naked body floats in the phlogistic fluid of an awareness tank. The metal of the tank is dark and tarnished with startlingly green rust. A single round porthole looks out like a cataract-glazed eye. He communicates exclusively through puppet-like servitors. He poisoned his predecessor Heironymo, and was borderline insane even before the Siege and the corrupting influence of Heritor Asphodel. He has total control of the Shield mechanism hard-wired into his brain, with only an emergency bypass available in case of the direst emergency. Has a macabre fascination with his flesh-engineering, surgical whims and clone-farming.

Soric, Agun

Sergeant, Tanith First

Vervunhiver. A squat, slabby barrel of a man, Agun Soric was an ore smeltery boss on Verghast before becoming a guerilla leader. Though overweight he has massive physical power, a legacy, like his hunched posture, of his hard years at the ore face in his youth. An old man, even older than Dorden, who is the oldest of the Tanith. He has the same avuncular manner as Corbec but is wild and unpredictable, prone to angry outbursts.

He lost an eye at Vervunhive but had refused both augmetic implant or patch and wears his puckered wink of scar tissue proudly.

The seventh son of a seventh son, he believes his great-grandmother was a witch.

Splendid Men of the

Imperium, Stand Up and Fight.

Imperial hymn. The repeated harmonic minor in the refrain is notoriously difficult.

Standard pattern mark III lascarbine

The weapon of choice of the Tanith. Stamped out by the

armourers of Tanith Magna, the stock and sleeve are made of real Tanith nalwood and the metalwork is buffed down to reduce shine. Take size three power cells.

Sturm, Noches

General, Royal Volpone 50th

Decorated victor of Grimoyr, executed by Gaunt for desertion from Vervunhive.

Sym

Gaunt's former adjutant. Died during the fall of Tanith.

Tanith First

Often referred to as the Tanith First-and-Only or Gaunt's Ghosts, the Tanith First are the only surviving regiment of the three that were founded just prior to the fall of Tanith.

The Tanith are excellent scouts and as such are primarily deployed as stealth troops and light infantry. The cape that is part of Tanith First standard kit enhances this stealth ability, camouflaging the trooper wearing it against virtually any surface, be it natural or man-made. The cap-pin is a silver double-headed Imperial eagle with a scroll in its claws inscribed with 'By the Grace of the God-Emperor of Terra'.

Their regiment emblem, which is usually gold, originally consisted of a skull and wreath laid over three daggers to symbolise the three regiments that Tanith were to contribute to the Sabbat crusade. Two of these daggers were later snapped off in honour of the two regiments that didn't make it off Tanith alive.

Their regiment motto is 'For Tanith, for the Emperor'.

Tanith Magna

Capital city of Tanith. Viewed from the air it resembled a complex circle of standing stones raised in a forest clearing.

Tanzina IV

Planet in the Cabal system.

The Gospel of Saint Sabbat

Imperial holy text.

The Spheres of Longing

A book widely considered to be amongst Inquisitor Ravenor's greatest works.



Tanith

Forest world in the Sabbat Worlds cluster. Renowned for its agrarian industry and seasoned timers and wood carvings, the work of the planet's craftsman was renowned throughout the system.

The majority of the planet's surface was covered with forest mainly consisting of nalwood trees, a bizarre species indigenous to Tanith. Nalwood are what are known as motile tree-growth: the trees are able to move, to replant and reposition themselves to follow the sun and the rains. Because of this, native Tanith have an enhanced sense of direction and therefore make excellent trackers and scouts.

The planet was destroyed by Chaos forces shortly after the first founding of its Imperial Guard regiment.

Tread-fethers

Nickname given by the Tanith to foot support missile launchers.

Twenish

Trooper, Tanith First
Vervunhiver. A long-limbed, humourless man who is ex-Vervun Primary. An accomplished sniper, his long-las is newer than Larkin's; a supremely functional weapon with a massive nightscope array, a bipod stand and a ceramic stock individually tailored to fit its user.

Typhon Eight

Ice moon in the Sabbat system.

U90 Assault Cannon

Bulky, Urdeshi manufactured weapon, prone to misfiring, carried by selected Ghosts during the retaking of Ouranberg in an effort

to deal with the Ioxatl alien mercenaries working alongside Chaos forces. Fires .45 calibre rounds at semi and fully automatic from a forty capacity drum clip. Capable of firing both standard and AP shells.

Uliowye, The Kiss of Sharp

Stars

Sword wielded by Eon Kull and gifted by him to Muon Nol.

Unterio, Innis

Corporal, 81st Phantine Skyborne
One of the Phantine troops who trained the Ghosts before their final assault on Ouranberg.

Urdesh

Forge world in the Sabbat Worlds cluster.

Urdeshi 4th Light, 6th & 10th

Imperial Guard regiments involved in the liberation of Urdesh.

Urdeshi 7th Stormtroop

Imperial Guard regiment active in the liberation of Phantine. Their uniform is a black and white puzzle camo pattern.

Vadim, Noa

Trooper, Tanith First
Vervunhiver. Was a roofer back on Vervunhive, repairing the masts and plating on the main spine.

Vamberfeld, Niceg

Trooper, Tanith First
Vervunhiver. Was Guildler Naslquey's personal chamma cleric on Verghast before the Act of Consolation. He lost his fiancée, a seamstress, in the Zoican War.

Vannick Hive

Source of oil pipes infiltrated by the Zoicans, obliterated by massive atomic explosion engineered by Zoican forces.

Varl, Ceglan

Sergeant, Tanith First
Third Platoon. Lost his shoulder on Fortis Binary and was given a cybernetic replacement joint. Close friend of Corbec and Larkin from their days in the Tanith Magna militia. More adept at handling the troopers than most of the officers.



Vitrian Dragoons

Well-drilled regiment who fought alongside the Ghosts at Fortis Binary. The Vitrian's are impressive soldiers dressed in unusual toothed metallic mail which covers them in form-fitting sections. This armour can also be used in a 'stealth' mode where the teeth flip and close, changing the shiny ablatative surface into a dark matt one. Their helmets are full face and grim, with narrow eye slits, glazed with dark glass. Their weapons are always polished and clean.

The Vitrian people operate a caste system and the warrior caste follow the Byhata, the Vitrian art of war which is their codex equivalent.

Verghast

A one moon, industrial hive-world in the Sabbat Cluster. Notable settlements include: Vervunhive, Ferrozoica, Vannick, Ghasthive.

Site of the Siege of Vervunhive which involved the deployment of the Volpone Bluebloods, Roane Deepers, Narmanian Armour and the Tanith 1st against Chaos forces under the command of Heritor Asphodel

Vervun Primary

The standing army of Vervunhive. Standing strength 500,000 infantry, 70,000 auxiliaries and armour crews. When findings were ordered for the Imperial Guard, Vervunhive raised them from its forty billion-plus population. The men of the Vervun Primary were never touched or transferred because it is a life-duty, a career.

Their uniform consists of a double-breasted blue cloth coat, with grey leather webbing and a spiked helmet.

The elite troops of the Vervun Primary wear dress uniforms encrusted with brocade and plumes sprouting from their helmet spikes.

Vervun Primary Hive

Commissariat

The VPHC is the Vervun Primary's disciplinary arm and it is whispered that they operate beyond the reach of the Administratum, in the interests of the ruling houses. VPHC troopers wear black shirts, black, peaked caps, graphite-grey breeches and black boots.

Vervunhive

Hive on the planet Verghast, strategically important to the Crusade, nine noble houses, twenty-one houses ordinary and over 300 guild associations and families. Ruled by Salvador Sondar of the Imperial House of Sondar. Ultimately dissolved by Macaroth.

Vervunhivers

The Tanith Ghosts call them 'scratchers' or 'cannon trash'. They wear a silver, axe-rake badge to differentiate themselves from Tanith troops. The Vervunhivers speak in a gruff drawl and unlike the Tanith who are almost universally pale skinned and dark haired, they are more physically diverse. In contrast to the Tanith lasrifles which have fine nalwood furniture, the Vervunhivers' weapons have folding metal stocks and handplates.

Volpone Tenth Brigade

The elite veteran force of the Royal Volpone 50th. Each member has a bright indigo Imperial Eagle stud pinned to their armaplas collar.

Voltemand

Planet in the Sabbat Cluster.

Waltrab's Wilde

A popular tune that had always inspired the men in the taverns of Tanith to drink and cheer and make merry. Played by Brin Milo at Fortis Binary to inspire the Tanith troops.

Willard

Captain, Roane Deepers.

About twenty-five, tanned and shaggy blond, with penetrating, brown eyes and an earthy sense of humour. His right hand is almost entirely bionic.

Woll, Endre

Captain, 8th Pardus Armoured
Commander of the Conqueror, *Old Strontium*. A tank ace, adored by his regiment.

Worlin, Amchanduste

Guildier of House Worlin during the siege of Vervunhive. Executed by Commissar-Colonel Gaunt in the process of attacking Dorden of the Tanith 1st and Ana Curth then of the Vervun-hive Inner Hab Collective Medical Hall. Subsequent investigation found him guilty of high treason and the prime suspect in over two dozen killings including the Carriage Station C7/d massacre.

Xance

General, NorthCol 2nd Enforcers
Highly literate NorthCol commander who kept a journal during the Siege of Vervunhive.

Yael

Trooper, Tanith First
Seventh Platoon. One of the younger Tanith, barely older than Milo.

Yoncy

One of the children 'adopted' by Criid and Caffran.

Zweil

Hagian ayatani. Zweil is an *imhava ayatani* which means roving priest. The main purpose of the imhava ayatani is to aid pilgrims on their travels which is why he accompanies the Ghosts to Bhavnager.

Stayed on as part of the Ghosts' retinue after the liberation of Hugia.

Sources:

First & Only (1999)
Ghostmaker (2000)
Necropolis (2000)
Honour Guard (2001)
The Guns of Tanith (2002)

All titles published by The Black Library

THE EMPEROR PROTECTS

Script: Dan Abnett • Art: Paul Jeacock • Letters: Fiona Stephenson

FOR TANITH - FOR THE EMPEROR

...PRAISE
BE Q'HELL OF THE
NINE EYES, PRAISE BE
THE RED RAGE OF
SUTHLIRR...

...PRAISE BE
KHORNE, GREAT KHORNE,
EVERLASTING.

...PRAISE
B-WWLK!

PRAISE BE
THE EMPEROR.
THE EMPEROR
PROTECTS.

PRAISE BE
GHORRA-KHORNE, PRAISE BE
Q'HELL OF THE NINE EYES, PRAISE
BE THE RED RAGE OF
SUTHLIRR...



WHAT'S
THE WORD,
MKVENNER?

CLEAR
THIS WAY, SIR. BONIN
AND CAOBER HAVE THE
WEST TOWER
SECURE.

GOOD.
LET'S WAKE
THE FETHERS
UP.

SCOUT
TEAM TO MAIN
FORCE.

READING
YOU, MKOLL.

GATES
OPEN ON A COUNT
OF TEN.



UNDERSTOOD.

MEN OF
TANITH! THE EMPEROR
PROTECTS! READY TO
RISE ON THREE...

THREE... TWO...

WOOOOMFFF!





FOR TANITH!
FOR THE EMPEROR!
FIRST AND
ONLY!



ALARM!
ALARM! THE GATES
HAVE FALLEN! THE
GATES H-



TH-TOW!



"GAK YOU, TANITH!
I HAD HIM COLD!"

SURE
YOU DID, BANDA.
BUT I GOT HIM
FIRST.

SNIPER
TEAM TWO, THE
ROOF IS CLEAR,
CHIEF!

SMARTASS.



NICE WORK,
LARKS. SHAME THE
SAME CAN'T BE SAID
FOR THE INNER
YARD...

THIS IS
COLONEL CORBEC!
WHERE THE **FETH**
ARE THE SUPPORT
WEAPONS?



RIGHT HERE,
CHIEF.

GOOD LAD,
BROSTIN.

SERGEANT VAR! GET
YOUR SQUAD FORWARD
ON THE FLANK!



OH, YEAH
SURE JUST LIKE
THAT...

ETRON!
MKVANI! COVER ME
WHILE I--



UGHN!

GET
YOUR ARSE
SHOT
OFF?



KOLEA!
WHAT THE
FETH!

THE EMPEROR
PROTECTS, TANITH,
BUT IT PAYS TO KEEP
YOUR HEAD DOWN
TOO.

MEDIC!
MEDIC!



MEDIC!

CAPTAIN
DAUR?

HERE!
QUICKLY!



IT'S NOT
GOOD.

I CAN SEE
THAT, CAPTAIN.
GO. I'VE GOT
IT. GO!

REST EASY,
TROOPER. REST
EASY.

THE EMPEROR
PROTECTS.

FORWARD! MOVE
FORWARD!

FEYGOR!
COVER THE
LEFT!

YES, MAJOR!

CRIDI!
CAFFRAN! FOLLOW
ME IN! WE-

--FETH!



COVER!
COVER!
UHN!

SHOKKAK!



HELL TAKE YOU, FILTH!
THIS IS THE POWER
SWORD OF HEIRONYMO
SONDAR, FORGED IN THE
NAME OF THE GOD-
EMPEROR OF
MANKIND...

RAAAARGH!



...AND
YOU KNOW
WHAT...?

SHTANG!



...THE
EMPEROR
PROTECTS!



THH-
CHUKKK!

FORWARD!
FORWARD! FOR THE GLORY
OF THE GOLDEN THRONE...
TAKE THE INNER
CITADEL!

BRAGG! TO
THE RIGHT!

WHAT'S
THAT?

"...WHEN *ME* SAYS IT, IT
ALWAYS SEEMS LIKE HE
PETHING WELL *MEANS* IT."

THANKS,
MILC.

YOU'D HAVE
SEEN THEM, TRY THE
EMPEROR PROTECTS,
AFTER ALL.

OH, I SEE.

BRRRRRRRRP!

SPOSE. YOU KNOW,
MEN SAY THAT ALL
THE TIME, LIKE THEY SAY
'THANK YOU' OR 'AMEN'
OR 'MORNING', LIKE IT'S
JUST A THING TO SAY
THAT DOESN'T *MEAN*
ANYTHING.
EXCEPT THE
COMMISSAR...



"...THE TOWN IS TAKEN, SIR. THE LAST POCKETS OF THE CULT ARE BEING FLAMED OUT."



THERE WAS A SHRINE, LORD GENERAL. WE USED DEMOLITION CHARGES TO DESTROY IT.

FINE.

YES, YES...



PERMISSION TO RETIRE MY MEN TO THE REAR LINES FOR REST AND-

OH NO, NO! RETIRE? I HARDLY THINK SO. I WANT YOUR MOB FORWARD AND ASSAULTING THE BUNKERS IN THE FOREST BY NOON.



WITH RESPECT, LORD GENERAL. THE GHOSTS HAVE JUST SPENT TEN HOURS AT THE FRONT ASSAULTING THAT FORTRESS.

THEY'RE WEARY AND HUNGRY AND THEY NEED-

THEY NEED TO DO WHAT I TELL THEM TO DO. THE BUNKERS, COMMISSAR GANT. THE BUNKERS, IF YOU PLEASE.



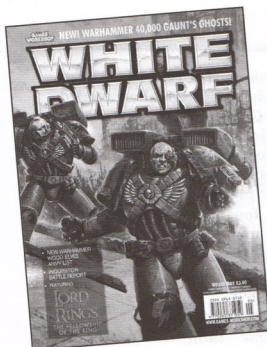
IT'S GAUNT, SIR.

WHATEVER. THAT'S ALL GET ON WITH IT. THE EMPEROR PROTECTS AND SO ON.



I HOPE HE DOES. I TRULY HOPE HE DOES...

END



WHITE DWARF

White Dwarf is Games Workshop's monthly magazine. Each issue showcases all the latest games and miniatures and is packed with exciting articles including tactical advice on how to get the most from your army on the field of battle, tips for painting your miniatures and tense battle reports highlighting the trials and tribulations of commanding an army.

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VERMILION LEVEL

A GAUNT'S GHOSTS STORY
BY DAN ABNETT



Way back in the summer of 1998, Dan Abnett set to work on what was originally intended to be the fourth Gaunt's Ghosts story. Once the story was finished however, Dan was commissioned for the first Gaunt's Ghosts novel and 'Vermilion Level' was integrated into the manuscript for *First & Only*.

Now, almost four years later, *Inferno!* presents the story as it should have originally appeared and presents a tantalising glimpse of how differently the story could have gone.

'After the intense battle to retake the manufacturing hives of Caligula, High Commander Macaroth's crusade force came about and chased the breaking chaos elements into the edges of Canopus and Nubila Reach. It was the start of the twelfth year of the Sabbat Worlds Campaign, the Imperial liberation of a hundred system cluster in the Segmentum Pacificus, and the first major advantage gained since Slaydo's massive victory at Balhaut.

'As the fast fleet components advanced, many regiments of the Imperial Guard, exhausted from the Caligula offensive, took precious shore leave on Pyrites before receiving new battle orders and moving to the next assembly point...'

— from *A History of The Later Imperial Crusades*

DAY TWO NINETY, NUBILA REACH, DEEP SPACE

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 and the mauve haze of the Nubila Reach nebula hung as a backdrop for them, a thousand light years wide.

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, and the green markings and insignia of the Segmentum Pacificus Fleet.

In the command seat of the lead ship, Wing Captain Torten LaHain forced down his heart

rate as the ship decelerated. Synchronous mind-impulse links 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, who'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 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 a smell of incense, and unguents.

'What's up with him?' asked LaHain.

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

The astropath's brain was constantly surveying and processing the vast wave of astronomical data that the ship's sensors pumped into it, and psychically probing warp-space 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,' said LaHain into the intercom.

'Tail turret, ready by the Emperor,' crackled back the servitor at the rear of the ship.

'Flight engineer, ready, aye!' 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,' replied the pilot of the other ship, and it 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 ever speak to the rest of the crew.

'Captain... move to the following coordinates 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?' asked LaHain, 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 at the very edge of its range. I must gather it and relay it to Fleet Command.'

'Why?' asked LaHain. 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...' breathed LaHain. It was a near-mythical clearance level. 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,' said the astropath. 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.

LaHain flexed his grip on the rudder stick. He looked out of the canopy at the swathe of pinkish mist that folded away from him into the heart of the nebula a billion miles away. The cold, stabbing light of older suns slanted and shafted through it like dawnlight on

gossamer. Dark-bellied clouds swirled in slow, silent blossoms.

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

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

The observer rattled out a set of coordinates 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 they armed the autocannons, and power 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 voxcaster. '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 shape of predatory ships of Chaos. Fire patterns winked in the russet darkness. Yellow tracteries of venomous death.

Moselle's scream – abruptly ended – tore through the voxcast.

The racing Interceptor disappeared in a rapidly expanding, superheated fireball.

The three attackers thundered on through the firewash.

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

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

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

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. He was being crushed into his command chair.

In the tail turret, the gunner servitor traversed the twin autocannons, 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 scarlet-tinged, 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, the flight engineer was saying 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, the psyker murmured, 'It is finished...'

LaHain turned 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 bolt 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 and being 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 ripe fruit, spinning round in the shuddering impact and spewing its contents like a firetrail after it.

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 exploded 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 two kilometres until it vanished in the nebula's haze.



DAY THREE TEN, PYRITES

THE IMPERIAL Needle of Cracia was quite a piece of work, Colonel Colm Corbec of the Tanith Ghosts decided. It towered over Cracia, the largest and oldest city on Pyrites, a three thousand metre ironwork tower, raised four hundred years before, partly in honour of the Emperor but mostly in honour of the engineering skill of the Pyriteans. It was taller than the jagged turrets of the Arbites Precinct, and dwarfed even the great twin towers of the Ecclesiarch palace.

On cloudless days, the city became a giant sundial, with the spire as the gnomon. City dwellers could tell precisely the time of day by which streets of the city were in shadow.

Today was not a cloudless day. It was winter season in Cracia and the sky was a dull, unreflective white like an untuned viscaster screen. Snow fluttered down out of the leaden sky and iced the gothic rooftops and towers of the old, grey city, edging the ornate decorations, the wrought guttering and brass eaves, the skeletal iron fire escapes and the sills of lancet windows.

But it was warm down here on the streets. Under the stained glass, ironwork awnings that edged every thoroughfare, the walkways and concourses were heated. Kilometres below the city, ancient turbines pumped warm air up to the hypercaust beneath the pavements and circulated under the awning levels. A low-power energy sheath broadcast at first floor height stopped rain or snow from ever reaching the pedestrian levels.

At a terrace cafe, Corbec, first sergeant of the Tanith First-and-Only, a big man with unruly black hair and a smile in his eyes, sipped his beer and rocked back on his black, ironwork chair. They liked black ironwork here on Pyrites. They made everything out of it. Even the beer, by the taste of it.

A shadow apparently bigger than the Imperial Needle blotted out the daylight. 'Are we set?' asked Trooper Bragg.

Corbec squinted up at the huge, placid-faced trooper, the biggest man in the regiment. 'It's still early. They say this town has quite a nightlife, but it won't get going until after dark.'

'Seems dead. No fun,' said Bragg drearily.

'Hey, lucky we got Pyrites rather than Guspedin. By all accounts that's just dust and slag and endless hives.'

The lighting standards down each thoroughfare and under the awnings were beginning to glow into life as the automated cycle took over. But it was still daylight.

'We've been talking—' Bragg began.

'Who's "we"?' asked Corbec.

'Uh, Larks and me... and Varl. And Suth.' Bragg shuffled a little. 'We heard about this little wagering joint. It might be fun.'

'Fine.'

'Cept it's, uh—'

'What?' asked Corbec, knowing full well what the 'uh' would be.

'It's in a cold zone,' said Bragg.

Corbec got up and dropped a few coins of the local currency on the glass-topped table next to his empty beer. 'Trooper, you know the cold zones are off-limits,' he said smoothly. 'The regiments have been given four days' recreation in this city, but that recreation is contingent on several things: reasonable levels of behaviour, so as not to offend or disrupt the citizens of this most ancient and civilised burg; restrictions to the use of prescribed bars, clubs, wager-halls and brothels; and a total ban on Guard personnel leaving the heated areas of the city. The cold zones are lawless.'

Bragg nodded. 'Yeah... but there are five hundred thousand Imperial Guardsmen on leave in Cracia, clogging up the starports and the tram depots. Each one has been to fething hell and back in the last few weeks. Do you honestly think they're going to behave themselves?'

Corbec pursed his lips and sighed. 'No, Bragg. I do not. Tell me where this place you're talking about is. I've an errand or two to run. I'll meet you there later.'



IN THE mirror-walled, smoky bar of the Polar Imperial, one of the better hotels in uptown Cracia, right by the Administratum complex, Commissar Vaynom Blenner was describing the destruction of the battleship *Eradicus*. It was a complex, colourful evocation, and involved the skilled use of a lit cigar, smoke rings, expressive gestures and throaty sound effects.

Around the table, there were appreciative hoots and laughs.

Ibram Gaunt watched and said nothing. Tall, powerful, lean with close-cropped hair, fierce eyes and a face as slender as his name, he was often silent. It disarmed people.

Blenner had always been a showman, even back in their days at the Commissariat. Gaunt always looked forward to their reunions: Blenner was about as close as he came to having an old friend, and it strangely reassured him to see Blenner's face, constant through the years when so many faces perished and disappeared.

But Blenner was also a terrible boast, and he'd become weak and complacent, enjoying a little too much of the good life. For the last decade, he'd served with the Greygorian Third. The Greys were efficient, hard working, and few regiments were as unswervingly loyal to the Emperor, it was said. They'd spoiled Blenner.

Blenner hailed the waiter and ordered another tray of drinks for the officers at his table. Gaunt's eyes wandered across the crowded salon, where the officer classes of the Imperial Guard relaxed and mixed.

On the far side of the room, under a vast, gilt-framed oil painting of Imperial Titans striding to war, he caught sight of officers in the grey and gold uniform of the Royal Volpone 50th, the so-called Bluebloods.

One of them was a big, arrogant aristocrat that Gaunt knew all too well – Major Gizhaum Danver de Banzi Haight Gilbear, the Bluebloods' second in command.

Their gaze met for a few seconds. The exchange was as warm and friendly as a pair of automated range finders getting a mutual target lock.

'Commissar Gaunt?'

Gaunt looked up. A uniformed hotel porter stood by his armchair, his head tilted to a position that was both obsequious and superior. Snooty ass, thought Gaunt. Loves the Guard all the while we're saving the

universe for him, but let us in his precious hotel bar to relax and he's afraid we'll scuff the furniture.

'There is a *boy*, sir,' said the porter disdainfully. 'A boy in reception who wishes to see you.'

'Boy?' asked Gaunt.

'He said to give you this,' continued the porter. He held out a silver Tanith ear hoop suspectly between velvety finger and thumb.

Gaunt got to his feet and followed him out.

Across the room, Gilbear watched him go. He beckoned over his aide with a surly finger. 'Go and find Sergeant Tomas and some of his clique. I think there will be games tonight.'

Gaunt followed the strutting porter out into the marble foyer. His distaste for the place grew with each second. Pyrites was soft, pampered, so far away from the harsh warfronts. They pay their tithes to the Emperor and in return ignore completely the darker truths of life beyond their civilised domain. Even the Imperial troops stationed here as a permanent garrison seemed to have gone soft.

Gaunt broke from his reverie and saw Brin Milo hunched under a potted ourorobos tree. The boy was wearing his Ghost uniform and looked most unhappy.

'Milo? I thought you were going with the others. Corbec said he'd take you with the Tanith. What are you doing in a stuffy place like this?'

Milo fetched a small data-slate out of his thigh pocket and presented it. 'This came through the voxcaster after you'd gone, sir. Executive Officer Kreff thought it best it was brought straight to you. And, as I'm supposed to be your adjutant, they gave the job to me.'

Gaunt almost grinned at the boy's weary tone. He took the slate and keyed it open. 'What is it?' he asked.

'All I know, sir, is it's a personal communiqué delivered on an encrypted channel for your attention forty-' he paused and consulted his timepiece. 'Forty-seven and a half minutes ago.'

Gaunt studied the gibberish on the slate. Only an identifying touch of his thumbprint on the decoding icon unscrambled it. For his eyes only indeed.

It read: 'Have need of your services sooner than anticipated. You only friend in area close enough to assist. Go to 1034 Needleshadow Boulevard. Use our old identifier. Treasure to be had. Vermilion treasure. Rael.'

Gaunt snapped the slate shut as if caught red-handed. His heart pounded for a second. Throne, how many years had it been since his heart had pounded with that feeling... was it really fear?

He saw Milo looking at him in curiosity.

'Trouble?' asked the boy innocuously.

'A task to perform...' murmured Gaunt. He opened the data-slate again and pressed the 'wipe' rune to expunge the message.

'Can you drive?' he asked Milo.

'Can I?' said the boy excitedly.

Gaunt calmed his bright-eyed enthusiasm with a wave of his hand. 'Go down to the motorpool and scare us up some transport. A staff car. Tell them I sent you.'

Milo hurried off. Gaunt stood for a moment in silence. He took two deep breaths... and then a hearty slap on the back almost felled him.

'Ibram! You dog! You're missing the party!' groused Blenner.

'Vey, I've got a bit of business to take care of...'

'No no no!' said the tipsy, red-faced commissar, smoothing the creases in his leather greatcoat. 'How many times do we get together to talk of old times, eh? How many? Once every damn decade it seems like! I'm not letting you out of my sight! You'll never come back, I know you!'

'Vey... really, it's just tedious regimental stuff...'

'I'll come with you then! Get it done in half the time! Two commissars, eh? Put the fear of the Throne Itself into them, I tell you!'

'Really, you'd be bored... it's a very boring task...'

'All the more reason I come! To make it less boring! Eh? Eh?' exclaimed Blenner. He edged the vintage brandy bottle that he had commandeered out of his coat pocket so that Gaunt could see it. So could everyone else in the foyer.

Any more of this, thought Gaunt, and I might as well announce my activities over the tannoy. He grabbed Blenner by the arm and led him down to the garage entrance.

'You can come,' he hissed, 'Just... behave! And be quiet!'



THE GIRL gyrating on the apron stage to the sounds of the tambour band was quite lovely and almost completely undressed, but Major Rawne was not looking at her.

He stared across the table in the low, smoky light as Vandross Geel poured two shot glasses full of oily, clear liquor.

Even as a skeleton, Geel would have been a huge man. But upholstered as he was in three hundred kilos of chunky flesh, he made even Bragg look undernourished. Major Rawne knew full well it would take over three times his own body mass to match the opulently dressed racketeer. He was also totally unafraid.

'We drink, soldier boy,' said Geel in his thick Pyritean accent and lifted one shot class with a gargantuan hand.

'We drink,' agreed Rawne, picking up his own glass. 'Though I would prefer you address me as Major Rawne. Racketeer boy.'

There was a dead pause. The crowded cold zone bar stilled. The girl stopped gyrating.

Geel laughed.

'Good! Good! Very strong! Ha ha ha!' He chuckled and knocked his drink back in one. The bar resumed talk and motion, relieved.

Rawne slowly and extravagantly gulped his drink. Then he lifted the decanter and drained the other litre of drink without even blinking. He knew that it was a rye-based alcohol with a chemical structure similar to that used in troop transport anti-freeze. He also knew he'd taken four counter-intoxicant tabs before coming in. Four tabs that had cost fortune on the black market trade, but it was worth it. It was like drinking spring water.

Geel forgot to close his mouth for a moment and then recovered his composure.

'Major Rawne can drink like Pyritean!' he said with a complimentary tone.

'So the Pyriteans would like to think...' said Rawne. 'Now let's to business.'

'Come this way,' said Geel and got to his feet. Rawne fell into step behind him and Geel's four huge bodyguards fell in behind him.

Everyone in the bar watched them leave by the back door.

On stage, the girl had just shed her final, tiny garment and was in the process of spinning it around one finger prior to hurling it into the crowd. When she realised no one was watching, she stomped off in a huff.



IN A SNOWY alley behind the club, a grey, beetle-nosed, six-wheeler truck was waiting. 'Liquor. Smokes. Text slates with dirty books. Everything you asked for,' said Geel expansively.

'You're a man of your word,' said Rawne.

'Now, the money. Two thousand Imperial credits. Don't waste my time with local rubbish. Two thousand Imperial.'

Rawne nodded and clicked his fingers.

Trooper Feygor stepped out of the shadows carrying a bulging rucksack.

'My associate, Mister Feygor,' said Rawne. 'Show him the stuff, Feygor.'

Feygor stood the rucksack down in the snow and opened it. He reached in.

And pulled out a laspistol.

The first two shots hit Geel and smashed him back down the alley.

With practised ease, Feygor grinned as he put an explosive blast through the skulls of the outraged bodyguards.

Rawne dashed over to the truck and climbed up into the cab.

'Let's go!' he roared to Feygor who scrambled up onto the side even as Rawne threw it into gear and roared it out of the alleyway.

As they screamed away under the archway at the head of the alley, a big dark shape dropped down into the truck, landing on the tarp-wrapped contraband in the flatbed.

Feygor, hanging on tight and monkeying up the restraints onto the cargo bed, saw the stowaway and lashed out at him. A powerful jab brought him down cold and laid him out in the canvas folds of the tarp.

At the wheel, Rawne saw Feygor fall in the rear view scope and panicked as the attacker swung into the cab beside him.

'Major,' said Corbec.

'Corbec!?' Rawne exploded. 'You! Here?'

'I'd keep your eyes on the road if I were you,' said Corbec glancing back. 'I think Geel's men are after a word with you.'

The truck raced on down the snowy street. Behind it came four angry limousines.

'Oh, feth!' said Major Rawne.



THE BIG, black staff-track roared down the boulevard under the glowing lamps in their ironwork frames. Smoothly and deftly it slipped around the light evening traffic, changing lanes. Drivers seemed willing to give way to the big, sinister machine with its throaty engine note and its gleaming double-headed eagle crest.

Behind armoured glass in the tracked passenger section, Gaunt leaned forward in the studded leather seats and pressed the speaker switch. Beside him, Blenner poured two large snifters of brandy and chuckled.

'Milo,' said Gaunt into the speaker. 'Not so fast. I'd like to draw as little attention to ourselves as possible, and it doesn't help with you going for some new speed record.'

'Understood, sir,' said Milo over the speaker.

Sat forward astride the powerful nose section, Milo flexed his his hands on the handlebar grips and grinned. The speed dropped. A little.

Gaunt ignored the glass Blenner was offering him and flipped open a data-slate map of the city's streetplan.

Then he thumbed the speaker again. 'Next left, Milo, then follow the underpass to Zorn Square.'

'That... that takes us into the cold zones, commissar,' replied Milo over the link.

'You have your orders, adjutant,' Gaunt said simply and snapped off the intercom switch.

'This isn't Guard business at all, is it, old man?' asked Blenner wryly.

'Don't ask questions and you won't have to lie later, Vey. In fact, keep out of sight and pretend you're not here. I'll get you back to the bar in an hour or so.'

I hope, he added under his breath.

RAWNE THREW the truck around a steep bend. The six chunky wheels slid alarming on the wet snow. Behind it, the heavy pursuit vehicles thrashed and slipped.

'This is the wrong way!' said Rawne. 'We're going deeper into the damn cold zone!'

'We didn't have much choice,' replied Corbec. 'They're boxing us in. Didn't you plan your escape route?'

Rawne said nothing and concentrated on his driving. They were flung around another treacherous turn.

'What are you doing here?' he asked Corbec at last.

'Just asking myself the same thing,' Corbec reflected lightly. 'Well, truth is, I thought I'd do what any good regimental colonel does for his men on a shore leave rotation and take a trip into the downtown districts to rustle up a little black market drink and the like. The men always appreciate a colonel who looks after them.'

Rawne scowled, fighting the wheel.

'Then I happened to see you and your sidekick Feygor, and I realised that you were doing what any good sneaking low-life weasel would do on shore leave rotation. To wit, scamming some local out of contraband so he could sell it to his comrades. So I thought to myself... I'll join forces. Rawne's got exactly what I'm after and without my help, he'll be dead and floating down the Cracia River by dawn.'

'Your help?' spat Rawne. The glass at the rear of the cab crazed suddenly as bullets smacked into it.

Both men ducked.

'Yeah...' said Corbec, pulling a laspistol out of his coat. 'I'm a better shot than Feygor.'

Corbec wound his door window down and leaned out, firing back a quick burst of heavy las fire from the speeding truck.

The front screen of one of the black vehicles exploded and it skidded, clipping one of its companions before slamming into a wall and spinning, nose to tail, three times before coming to rest in a spray of glass and debris.

'I rest my case,' said Corbec.

'There's still three of them out there!' said Rawne.

'True,' said Corbec, loading a fresh power cell, 'but canny chap that I am, I thought of bringing spare ammo.'



GAUNT MADE Milo park the staff-track round the corner from Needleshadow Boulevard. He climbed out into the cold night. 'Stay here,' he told Blenner, who waved back jovially from the cabin. 'And you,' Gaunt told Milo.

'Are you armed, sir?' the boy asked.

Gaunt realised he wasn't. He shook his head.

Milo drew his silver Tanith dagger and passed it to the commissar. 'You can never be sure,' he said simply.

Gaunt nodded his thanks and moved off.

The cold zones like this were a grim reminder that society in a vast city like Cracia was deeply stratified. At the heart were the great Palace of the Ecclesiarch, and the Needle itself. Around that, the city centre and the opulent, wealthy residential areas were patrolled, guarded, heated and screened, safe little microcosms of security and comfort. There, every benefit of Imperial citizenship was enjoyed.

But beyond, the bulk of the city was devoid of such luxuries. Kilometre after kilometre of crumbling, decaying city blocks, buildings and tenements a thousand years old, rotted on unlit, unheated, and uncared for streets. Crime was rife here, and there were no Arbites. Their control ran out at the inner city limits. It was a human zoo, an urban wilderness that surrounded civilisation. It reminded Gaunt of the Imperium itself – the opulent, luxurious heart surrounded by a terrible reality it knew very little about.

Light snow, too wet to settle, drifted down. The air was cold and moist.

Gaunt strode down the littered pavement.

1023 Needleshadow Boulevard was a dark, haunted relic. A single, dim light glowed on the sixth floor.

Gaunt crept in. The foyer smelled of damp carpet and mildew. There were no lights, but he found the stairwell lit by hundreds of candles stuck in assorted bottles. The light was yellow and smoky.

By the time he reached the third floor, he could hear the music. Some kind of old dance hall ballad by the sound of it.

The old recording crackled. It sounded like a ghost.

Sixth floor, the top flat. Shattered plaster littered the worn hall carpet. Somewhere in the shadows, vermin squeaked.

The music was louder, murmuring in this room on an old audio-player.

The apartment door was ajar and light, brighter than the hall candles, shone out, the violet glow of a self-powered portable field lamp.

His fingers around the hilt of the knife in his greatcoat pocket, Gaunt entered.

The room was bare to the floorboards and the peeling paper. The audio-player was perched on top of a stack of old books, warbling softly. The lamp was in the corner, casting its spectral violet glow all around the room.

'Is there anyone here?' asked Gaunt, surprised at the sound of his own voice.

A shadow moved in an adjoining bathroom.

'What's the word?' it said.

'What?'

'I haven't got time to humour you. The word.'

'Eagleshard,' said Gaunt, using the code word he and Rael Tagore had shared years before on Estragon Prime.

The figure seemed to relax. A shabby, elderly man in a dirty civilian suit entered the room so that Gaunt could see him. He was lowering a small, snub-nosed pistol of a type Gaunt wasn't familiar with.

'Who are you?' Gaunt asked.

The man arched his eyebrows in reply. 'Names are really quite inappropriate under these circumstances.'

'If you say so,' said Gaunt.

The man crossed to the audio-player and keyed in another track. Another old fashioned tune, a jaunty love song full of promises, started up.

'I am a facilitator, a courier, and also very probably a dead man,' the stranger told Gaunt. 'Have you any idea of the scale and depth of this business?'

Gaunt shrugged.

'I have spoken to one person, the person who sent me here tonight to meet you. I have no illusions as to the seriousness of the

matter, but as to the depth, the complexity...'

The man studied him. 'The Navy's Intelligence Network has established a cobweb of spy systems throughout the Sabbat Worlds to try and ascertain the nature of Macaroth's true agenda.'

'So I have been told.'

'I'm a part of that cobweb. So are you, if you but knew it. The truth we are uncovering is frightening. Warmaster Macaroth has Imperial dreams, my friend.'

Gaunt felt impatience rising in him. He hadn't come all this way to listen to arch speculation. 'Why am I here?' he said.

The man paused. 'Two nights ago, associates of mine in Cracia intercepted a signal sent astrophatically from a scout ship in the Nubila Reach. It was destined for Macaroth's Fleet headquarters. Its clearance level was Vermilion.'

Gaunt blinked. Vermilion.

The man took a small crystal from his coat pocket and held it up so that it winked in the violet light.

'The data is stored on this crystal. It took the lives of two psykers to capture the signal and transfer it to this. Macaroth must not get his hands on it.'

He held it out to Gaunt.

Gaunt shrugged. 'You're giving it to me?'

The man pursed his lips. 'Since my network here on Cracia intercepted this, we've been taken apart. Macaroth's own spy network is after us, desperate to retrieve the data. I have no one left to safeguard this to. I contacted my off-world superior, and he told me to await a trusted ally. Whoever you are, friend, you are held in high regard. You are trusted. In this cold war, that means a lot.'

Gaunt took the crystal from the man's trembling fingers. He didn't quite know what to say. He didn't want this vile, vital thing anywhere near himself, but he was beginning to realise what was at stake.

The older man smiled at Gaunt. He began to say something.

The wall behind him exploded in a firestorm of light and vaporising bricks. Two fierce blue beams of las fire punched into the room and sliced the man into three distinct sections before he could move.

Gaunt dived for cover in the apartment doorway. He drew Milo's blade, for all the good that would do.

He could hear feet thundering up the stairs.

From his vantage point at the door he watched as two armoured troopers swung in through the exploded wall. They were big, clad in black, insignia-less combat armour, carrying compact lascannons. Adhesion clamps on their knees and forearms showed how they had scaled the outside walls to blow their way in with a directional limpet mine.

Lasguns in hand, they surveyed the room, sweeping their green laser tagger beams.

One spotted Gaunt prone in the doorway, and opened fire.

Las-fire punched through the doorframe, kicking up splinters and began stitching along the plasterboard wall.

Gaunt dived headlong. He was dead! Dead, unless—

The old man's pistol lay on the worn carpet under his nose. It must have skittered there when he was cut down.

Gaunt grabbed it, thumbed off the safety and rolled over to fire.

The gun was small, but the odd design clearly marked it as an ancient and priceless specialised weapon. It had a kick like a mule and a roar like a Basilisk.

The first shot surprised Gaunt as much as the two stealth troops and it blew a hatch-sized hole in the wall.

The second shot exploded one of the attackers.

A little rime on the grip of the pistol had changed from '5' to '3'. Gaunt sighed. This thing clearly wasn't over-blessed with a deep magazine.

The footfalls on the stairway got louder and three more stealth troopers stumbled up, wafting the candle flames as they ran.

Gaunt dropped to a kneeling pose and blew the head off the first. But the other two opened fire up the well with their lasguns and then the remaining trooper in the apartment behind him began firing too.

The cross-blast of three lasguns on rapid-burst tore the top hallway to pieces. Gaunt dropped flat so hard he smashed his hand on the boards and the gun pattered away down the top steps.

After a moment or two, the firing stopped, and the attackers began to edge forward to inspect their kill. Dust and smoke drifted in the half-light. Some of the shots had

punched up through the floor and carpet just centimetres from Gaunt's nose, leaving smoky, dimpled holes. But Gaunt was intact.

When the trooper from the apartment poked his head round the door, fifteen centimetres of hard-flung Tanith silver impaled his throat and dropped him to floor, jerking and spasming.

Gaunt leapt up. A second, two seconds, and he would have the fallen man's lasgun in his hands, ready to blast down the stairs....

But the other two from below were in line of sight. There was a flash and he realised their green laser taggers had swept over his face and dotted on his heart.

There was a quick and frantic burst of las-fire and a billow of noxious burning fumes washed up the stairs over Gaunt.

Blenner climbed the stairs into view, carefully over stepping the smouldering bodies, a smoking laspistol in his hand.

'Got tired of waiting,' he sighed. 'Looks like you needed a hand anyway, eh, 'Bram?'



THE GREY truck, with its single remaining pursuer, slammed into high gear as it went over the rise in the snowy road, leaving the ground for a stomach-shaking moment.

'What's that?' said Rawne wildly a moment after they landed again and the thrashing wheels reengaged the slippery roadway.

'It's called a roadblock, I believe,' said Corbec.

Ahead, the cold zone street was closed by a row of oilcan fires, concrete poles and wire. Several armed shapes were waiting for them.

'Get off the road! Get off the road!' bawled Corbec. He leaned over and wrenched at the crescent steering wheel.

The truck slewed sideways in the slush and barrelled beetle-nose first through the sheet-wood doors of an old, abandoned warehouse.

There, in the dripping darkness, it grumbled to a halt, Its firing note choking away to a dull cough.

'Now what?' hissed Rawne.

'Well, there's you, me and Feygor...' Corbec began. Already the trooper was beginning to pull himself groggily up in the back. 'Three of Gaunt's Ghosts, the best damn fighting regiment in the Guard. We excel at stealth work and look! We're here in a dark warehouse.'

Corbec readied his laspistol. Rawne pulled his own and did the same. He grinned.

'Let's do it,' he said.

Years later, in the speakeasies and clubs of the Cracian cold zones, the story of the shoot-out at the old Vinchy Warehouse would do the rounds. Two thousand shots were fired, they say, one thousand, nine hundred and eighty of them by the twenty armed men, Vandross Geel's enforcers, who went in to smoke out the off-world gangsters.

All twenty died, each shot by a single lasblast (which accounts neatly for the other twenty shots).

No one ever saw the off-world gangsters again, or found the truck laden with stolen contraband that had sparked the whole affair off.



THE STAFF-TRACK whipped along down the cold zone street, heading back to the safety of the city core.

In the back, Blenner poured another two snifters of his expensive brandy. This time, Gaunt took the one offered and knocked it back.

'You don't have to tell me what's going on, Bram. Not if you don't want to.'

Gaunt sighed. 'If I had to, would you listen?'

Blenner chuckled. 'I'm loyal to the Emperor, Gaunt, and loyal to my old friends. What else do you need to know?'

Gaunt smiled and held his glass out as Blenner refilled it.

'Nothing, I suppose.'

Blenner leaned forward, earnest for the first time in years. 'Look, Bram... I may seem like an old fogey to you, grown fat on the luxuries of having a damn near perfect Regiment... but I haven't forgotten what the fire feels like. I haven't forgotten the reason I'm here. You can trust me to hell and back and I'll be there for you.'

'And the Emperor,' Gaunt reminded him with a grin.

'And the bloody Emperor,' said Blenner and they clinked glasses.

'I say,' said Blenner a moment later, 'Why is your boy slowing down?'

Milo pulled up, wary. The two staff-tracks blocking the road ahead had their headlamps on full beam, but Milo could see they were painted in the colours of the Volpone Bluebloods.

Large, shaven-headed figures armed with batons and entrenching tools were climbing out to meet them.

Gaunt climbed out of the cabin as Milo brought them to a halt. Snow drifted down. He squinted at the men beyond the lights.

'Gilbear,' he hissed.

'Gaunt,' said Gilbear, stepping forward. He was stripped to his vest and oiled like a prizefighter. The wooden spoke in his hands slapped into a meaty palm.

'A reckoning, I think,' he said.

Gaunt sighed. 'Out here, in the cold zones, where our bodies won't be reported for months. An opportunity for you and your numerous brainless brethren to kick some manners into me and my two friends.'

'Put like that... yes.'

'A moment, please...' said Gaunt holding up a finger. He turned to Milo and whispered, 'Brin... just how fast can you drive this buggy?'

'Fast enough,' whispered Milo, 'and I know exactly where to go...'

Gaunt turned back to the Blueblood heavies in the lamplight and smiled. 'After due consultation with my staff, Gilbear, I can now safely say: burn in hell, you mindless dog!'

He leapt back aboard. Milo had the track gunned and slewed around in a moment, even as the enraged Guardsmen rushed them.

Another three seconds and Gaunt's ride was roaring off down the snowy street at a dangerous velocity, the big engines raging.

Squabbling and cursing, Gilbear and his men leapt into their own machines and gave chase.



TROOPER BRAGG kissed his lucky dice and let all three of them fly. A cheer went up across the wagering room and piles of chips were pushed his way.

'Go on, Bragg!' chuckled Mad Larkin at his side, 'do it again, you fething old drunk!'

Bragg chuckled and scooped up the dice.

This was the life, he thought. Far away from the warzone and the death, here in a smoke filled dome in the cold zone back end of an ancient city, him and his friends, a few pretty girls and wager tables open all night.

Varl was suddenly at his shoulder.

'The game can wait, Bragg... we've got business.'

Bragg and Larkin kissed their painted lady friends goodbye and followed Varl out through the rear exit onto the boarding ramp. Suth was there, Meryn, Caffran, Kalen, Obel, Brostin, Raglon... almost twenty of the Ghosts.

'What's going on?' asked Bragg.

Caffran jerked his thumb down to where Corbec, Rawne and Feygor were unloading booze and smokes from a battered six wheeler.

'Colonel's got us some tasty stuff to share, bless his Tanith heart.'

'Very nice,' said Bragg licking his lips, not entirely sure why Rawne and Feygor looked so annoyed. Corbec smiled up at them all.

'Get everyone out here! Lets have a party, boys! For Tanith! For us!'

There was cheering and clapping. Varl leapt down into the bay and opened a box with his Tanith knife. He threw bottles up to those around.

'Hey!' said Raglon suddenly, pointing out into the snowy darkness beyond the club's bay. 'Incoming!'

The staff track slid into the bay behind Corbec's truck and Gaunt leapt out.

A cheer went up and somebody tossed him a bottle.

Gaunt tore of the stopper, took a deep swing and then pointed out into the darkness.

'Lads! I could do with a hand...' he began.



GILBEAR LEANED forward in the cab of his speeding staff-track, and looked through the screen where the wiper was slapping snow away.

'Now we have him! He's stopped at that place ahead!'

Gilbear flexed his hand and struck it with his baton.

Then he saw the crowds of jeering Ghosts around the drive-in bay. A hundred... two hundred.

'Oh... no,' he managed.



THE BAR WAS almost empty and it was almost dawn. Ibram Gaunt sipped the last of his drink and eyed Veynom Blenner, who was asleep face down on the bar beside him.

Gaunt took out the crystal and tossed it up on his hand once, twice.

Corbec was suddenly beside him.

'A long night, eh, commissar?'

Gaunt looked at him, catching the crystal in a tight fist.

'Maybe the longest so far, Colm. I hear you had some fun.'

'At Rawne's expense, you'll no doubt be pleased to hear. Do you want to tell me what's going on?'

Gaunt smiled. 'I'd rather buy you a drink,' he said, motioning to the weary barkeep. 'And yes, I'd love to tell you. And I will, when the time comes. Are you loyal, Colm Corbec?'

Corbec looked faintly hurt. 'To the Emperor, I'd give my life,' he said without hesitating.

Gaunt nodded. 'And I too. The path ahead is really hard. As long as I can count on you.'

Corbec said nothing but held out his glass. Gaunt touched it with his own. There was a tiny chime.

'Gaunt's Ghosts,' said Corbec.

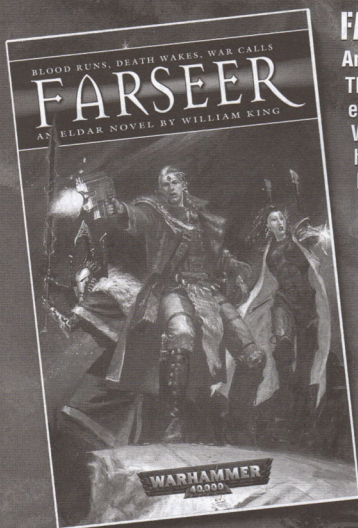
Gaunt smiled softly.

'Gaunt's Ghosts.' ✱

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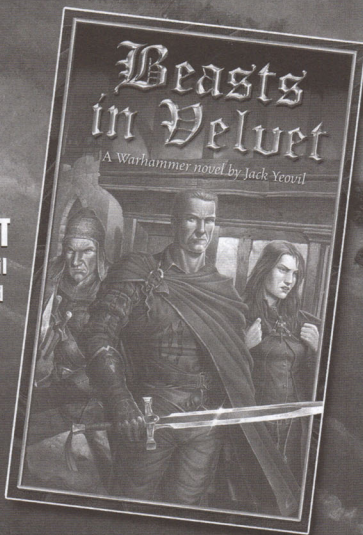
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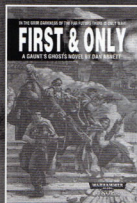
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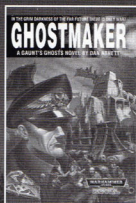


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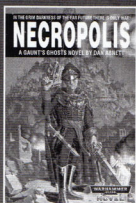
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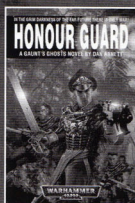
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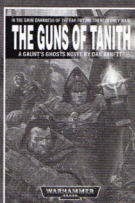
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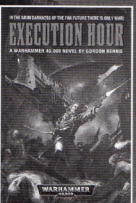
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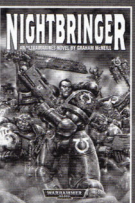
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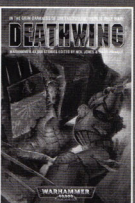
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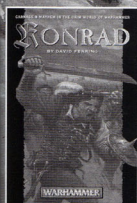
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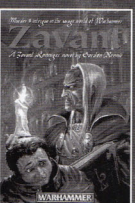
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From his vantage point at the door he watched as two armoured troopers swung in through the exploded wall. They were big, clad in black, insignia-less combat armour, carrying compact lascannons. Adhesion clamps on their knees and forearms showed how they had scaled the outside walls to blow their way in with a directional limpet mine.

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