

**WARHAMMER**  
**40,000**

**GALL OF  
CHAOS**

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**MIDNIGHT  
ROTATION**

*by* **DAN ABNETT**

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# MIDNIGHT ROTATION

Dan Abnett

Yeah, I know what I done.

We was on the midnight rotation at the depot last night, and–

Oh. You want the particulars? All formal and correct? A statement? Yeah, suppose you do have to do things by the book. Circumstances like these.

I'll lay it out, then. I am Cawkus, trooper, second class, and it were my honour to enlist for the service of the Throne at the founding of the Fiftieth Urdesh Regular, Astra Militarum, eighteen year gone. May we bless the Throne, above us all, and the light of Terra, for which mankind fights. I am a true man, sir.

I was put upon my watch by my commanding officer, Major Zailman. I believe he is an upstanding man, sir, a fine soldier, for he has many pieces of shiny metal on his chest, and he polishes them every day. I was sent, with my platoon, to the depot in the last hours of the evening. Yes, that is Depot 686, the long building down by Division Arch, in the Munitorum Precinct. Well, it has been quiet there, though there was shelling last fortnight. The roof is caved in, in parts, and there are holes in the courtyard that have become ponds due to the rain. There is vermin, also.

But, in general, quiet. The eternal bastards, by which, sir, I mean the Archenemy, have slackened their assault on this part of the city of late. Because, I believe, of the action of our armour in the fields. The treads have driven them back into the highlands, and they concentrate now on the docks and the Western Gates. The siege stands. That is my understanding of affairs, though I am not privy to strategic overview being, as I am, a trooper second class. The flow of this war is explained to me by my superiors, men like Major Zailman, when they consider it appropriate, and the rest I have learned through gossip.

The depot– yes, Depot 686 – is for food storage. Consumables. The stuff is

packed in there in crates. There's stuff in cans and jars, and dried rations, and also food that is packed and sealed in stasis cartons, so as to preserve it. Food is scarce. From the hollow of your cheek, sir, I see you know that as well as I. The siege has been a long one. What food reaches the city gets stored at the depot, and then distributed by the watchful and diligent officers of the Munitorum, so there is a fair and equal share. Many souls, particularly them citizens what live in the rubble zones, they do fair crave for sustenance, as you might understand, and being desperate, they sometimes try to pillage and raid, for which reason a guard is set day and night.

Midnight rotation was our watch. We come down and assembled in the courtyard, between the rain-ponds. A servant of the Munitorum, all in his robes and whatnot, he come out and explained the wherewithals to our sergeant, who then explained them all to us. I don't know why he could not explain them directly to us, but this, apparently, is not the way the Munitorum do things.

Our sergeant, Pawlak, is a good man. Paws, we call him. Well, because he is a robust sort, with strength in him, and I've seen him take his solid fists to the enemy more than once, when things got close. He keeps to himself a fair bit, but he is a decent sort. He is a sight better than our previous sergeant, Gamberlin, who was lost in the highlands last year, when he had the misfortune to greet one of the eternal bastards' bayonets with his face.

So Paws— yes, by that I mean Sergeant Pawlak — so, Sergeant Pawlak he done listen to the Munitorum officer, and then he done turn right around and explain it all again to us, all waiting there in the yard with nothing but the skitter of the vermin for company. He explained where the access points were, the limits of the fence and the wall, and the location of a few sneak-holes where looters were known to try their luck. They patch them up, as best they can, when they find them, but the looters dig more, you see? Especially in them parts where the shells have fallen and brought in the roof and whatnot. Close one rat-hole up, and another one gets dug out.

Well, because they're hungry.

Paws— yes, Sergeant Pawlak — he sets us to our duties. Sentries on the fence, the walls, the holes and the gates, and patrols to circuit the depot. We'd switch from standing watch to patrol every two hours, so every man could stretch his legs and stay fresh. We was sharp enough. Standing still, sentry at a gate, can get soporific, but you don't doze off when Paws is watching you, for fears he might discover you slacking and lay his paws upon your head.

I were with him, though, in the second two-hour stretch. A moving patrol. Me

and Paws, and Trooper Eron and Trooper Fevurse. We walked up and down the stacks – rows and rows of crates and pallets – checking that all was the way it should be. We had been at it an hour, walking up and down, looking under tarps and making sure the drain covers were secure, and Paws says, ‘I don’t like the smell of that.’

And I says, ‘Smell of what, sarge?’ Because frankly the depot has a smell to it that is quite noticeable at all times. Damp and decay and vermin droppings, and wastewater what comes up through the drains, and spoiled food, of which, I am sad to say, there is a lot. It is a heady mix, and you breathe through your mouth for some time on first arrival.

So I says ‘What smell, sarge?’ And he says, ‘*That* smell,’ and he means a sort of chemical stink, and once he points it out, I notice it. It smells like cleaning fluids, which is strange, because believe you me, sir, there isn’t nothing what has been cleaned in this city for many a month now, excepting perhaps the Warmaster’s chamber pot, which I wouldn’t know anything about, being a trooper second class.

‘It’s coming from over there,’ says Fevurse, and we go and look. And there’s water, and Paws says, ‘I don’t like the look of that water there.’ It’s laying on the ground, on the floor of the depot, seeping out from under a great big stack of crates, eight high, all set on metal shelving. So we figure it’s another sneak-hole – a new one, dug up by some poor soul underneath the crates – and groundwater is running out of it, chemical stuff, polluted and whatnot. So Paws says to move the crates so we can find the hole and plug it. He fishes out an incendiary grenade to roll down the chute when we find it. ‘As a deterrent,’ he says.

We start moving them crates. They’re big and they’re heavy. The Munitorum officer told us not to touch or move anything, because it weren’t our business to do so. Moving crates was Munitorum business and guarding crates was Militarium business, and never the twain should meet. But Paws says we move the crates or we won’t find the hole, so we have to move them. We move them and stack them in the walkway so we can put them back again after. The crates, they are big, as I said, and sealed with Munitorum shipping tags, and they have transit marks writ on them. They are stasis cartons, and they hadn’t been in long. The handling mark says they had been brung in two days previous, from the landing grounds.

We’d cleared a few away, and it was sweaty work, and by the third row we’d leant our rifles against the racks and taken off our jackets and all. ‘Where’s this hole then?’ says Eron, and Paws says, ‘I think the water’s coming out of the

crates. Look at this.’ And some of the crates, they are wet all right, as if there was water inside and it was dribbling out around the seals. Paws wipes his hand in it and sniffs and says, ‘Chemicals,’ like the smell we noticed before. ‘That isn’t right,’ he says to us. ‘Something’s not right. We should open one of the crates.’

So Eron says, ‘Hang on, Paws, we can’t do that. Munitorum property. We shouldn’t even be moving them without permission. Tampering with Munitorum seals, that’s a crime. It’s looting, and that’s a hanging offence.’ Paws says to us he agrees, it would be a hanging offence right enough, but there’s a security issue too. A Militarum issue. This isn’t right and we should check it, hanging offence or no hanging offence, because who do we serve? The God-Emperor of Mankind what watches over us all, that’s who, and not some jumped-up fart from the Munitorum, thank you.

Well, Eron complains again, and Paws tells him, ‘Eron, you run along and fetch the Munitorum fellow, and bring him here, so he can see for himself what we’re about.’ Eron sees the sense in this, and he runs off to locate the gentleman. And Paws looks at us, and says, ‘Get me a crowbar, Cawkus, we’re having these boxes open.’

So I get him a crowbar.

And we push a crate out into the open, one what was particularly leaking water, and Paws says, ‘Yeah, I’m really not having this,’ and gets to work with the crowbar, and he breaks the seals and gets the lid off.

A stasis carton’s meant to be all cold inside, and there’s always a hum of the system keeping it stable. Tech stuff, I don’t know. But this box, it’s swimming in water, chemical water, and there’s no hum or nothing. No what-you-call-it. Stasis field.

So I figure it’s broken, and the field’s failed, and the contents are spoiled and that’s why the water’s coming out. And Paws rolls his sleeve up and sticks his arm in, and pulls.

And there’s a man inside. He’s all curled up, in a plastic bag. And he’s dead.

And we flop him out on the ground, our eyes right wide, and stare at him. And he’s still dead. And Fevurse gets out his combat knife, and he slits the plastic bag, and all this stinky, filthy stuff pours out, like water from the bottom of a trench. Stagnant water. And the dead man flops out with it, and he’s still dead.

We look at this dead man, and we know. He isn’t one of ours. He’s in combats, old combats, but his face is all marked with these scar-patterns, and there are badges on his tunic. Signs. Symbols. Insignia of the eternal bastards.

So I curse out loud, and Paws says, 'Enough of that mouth, Cawkus,' and he fishes around and finds a lasgun and some webbing that were also in the sack with the dead man.

'This isn't food,' says Fervurse, 'unless the Munitorum is so desperate they're hoping to feed us the enemy dead for our suppers.' And I says, 'They wouldn't do that, would they?' And Paws says, 'It depends how desperate the shortage is, what with the siege and all,' but none of us believes they would actually do that, so there has to be another explanation.

About then, Eron comes back with the Munitorum officer and the Munitorum officer is all, 'What the hell do you men think you're about? You shouldn't open that,' and gets quite beside himself until Paws shows him the dead man, and then he gets even more beside himself, but this time it's with fear.

And he starts shouting, and Paws starts shouting back, and we all start shouting, and there's a right barney, which is probably why we didn't notice what was happening right away.

Some of them other boxes were opening. All by themselves.

There was men in the other boxes too. Eternal bastards, all bagged up with their guns and everything. But they weren't dead, sir, because the stasis fields on their crates hadn't failed. They was alive. And they had been waiting until all was clear to come out.

I suppose, sir, it were a scheme, devilish, devised by the Archenemy to sneak pioneer forces into the city and break the long siege. Sneak them in, pretending that they're food, so they could come out and undermine us from within. I don't know how long they'd been in them crates, or how far they'd come, but them stasis fields had kept them alive, suspended, and because we had disturbed them, they was waking up.

They were coming out of boxes all around us, using rusty blades to slash open the plastic sacks containing them, grabbing their guns, shouting obscene things.

Well, Eron, Throne rest him, he dies right away. They shoot him, plain as that, and he shudders and twists and falls on the ground with holes in him. And we back up, in a mad scramble, and grab our rifles, and Paws is yelling orders. And that's when the firefight started.

The Munitorum gentleman, I don't know what he was about. He was running around, yelling and screaming.

I fancy he was in on it. I fancy he knew what was in them crates. The eternal bastards, they must've had a man on the inside to get the shipment into the depot, past all the checks. That is just my notion, sir. I have no proof, and we

can't ask him now, because the eternal bastards, they shot him too. He looked surprised, I know that. He looked disappointed when they turned their guns on him, like it was unfair. But they shot him anyway.

So we was firing at them and they was firing back, and there was a lot more of them than there were of us. Paws tells Fevurse to go and get the men, but Fevurse got clipped in the leg and fell down, and could do no more than sit there and shoot back. So Paws, he tells me to go instead, and that he would cover me.

He's a good shot is Paws. I saw him, dug in between the shelving, knock four of the bastards down with clean shots. Then he yells, 'Run, Cawkus, you idle mug. Run and get the others.'

So I start to run, dodging the fire coming my way, and poor Fevurse is shooting, and Paws pulls out the incendiary grenade that he had kept for later use, and lobs it in amongst them, and there's a bang and half a dozen of them start lumbering around screaming, all alight from head to foot.

Yes sir, I do believe that is when the depot caught fire.

I rallied the men and we came back, and by then Fevurse was dead and the depot was all ablaze, half of it anyway. Paws was still going. He'd littered the place with kills. We laid in beside him, and set up a fusillade, and did the bastards some harm.

But it were the fire that stopped them, sir. There were too many of them. Hundreds, maybe more, all coming out of boxes. My platoon couldn't have held them long. And it would have taken too long for reinforcements to arrive from the garrisons. By the time they'd got there, we'd have been overrun, and the eternal bastards would have been out, into the streets, into the city and, well...

Yes, sir, I understand that food supply is a vital resource and we cannot afford to lose a principal depot. And I also understand that arson in a Munitorum facility is a serious offence. Even in time of war, under extremis. I understand that. But it was the fire that stopped them. But for the fire, the city would be gone.

Did Paws make it out? Sergeant Pawlak? Well, I'm glad of that. I'm sure he can explain the matter better than I can. I'm sure he can make a good account of our midnight rotation and the emergency. You've already spoken to him? Good, then. Good.

No, sir. Nothing else to add, sir. Yeah, I know what I done. I saved your fragging arses is what I done.

What's that? The commissar will see me now? Yeah. Yeah, I bet he will.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Dan Abnett** is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *The Unremembered Empire*, *Know No Fear* and *Prospero Burns*, the last two of which were both *New York Times* bestsellers. He has written almost fifty novels, including the acclaimed Gaunt's Ghosts series, and the *Eisenhorn* and *Ravenor* trilogies. He scripted *Macragge's Honour*, the first Horus Heresy graphic novel, as well as numerous audio dramas and short stories set in the Warhammer 40,000 and Warhammer universes. He lives and works in Maidstone, Kent.

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