



In Remembrance

A Gaunt's Ghosts Story
by

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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 joiliq 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, off 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 rolling 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 gasking 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 augmetic 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 fates 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 Helds. 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 Iho 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 Darden 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 resuscitrex 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 out.

'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?'

Corhec 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. Habbers, 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 ogreish 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 Doyl 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.

Doyle 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 augmentics 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 outbays. 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 railhead 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 outhabs 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. This 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?' Feygur said.

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

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

'Leave him alone' said Baffela.

'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,' Feygur commented.

'They would!' said Domon

'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, unclasping 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 noise, 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 finger 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.

S 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 outhabs 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 las·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.

I HAD 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 - Mkoll, 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 if 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.