

WARHAMMER
40,000



DAN ABNETT

KILLBOX

A GAUNT'S GHOSTS STORY

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Killbox – Dan Abnett

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KILLBOX

Dan Abnett

It was coming for him. It was coming to finish him.

‘You do not stand a chance,’ the warrior had told him. ‘I mean, you are skilled. For a human. But in this, you do not stand a chance in hell.’

The warrior had laughed to punctuate this statement. It wasn’t a very human laugh, and it wasn’t pleasant to hear.

Mkoll didn’t take kindly to being told what his chances were. He listened to orders, he accepted tactical advice, but when it came to outcome assessments, he tended to switch off. He’d been a scout and a soldier for a long time. That fact alone demonstrated his ability to beat the odds. A soldier who had survived for a decent career had either been lucky, or had learned how to look risk right in the eyes and spit in its face.

If Mkoll had listened – if he’d *ever* listened – to outcome assessments and risk evaluation, the back-of-the-briefing-packet crap that the Tactical Division always supplied, then he would have been dead long ago. At Fortis Binary, at Vervunhive, at Cirenholm, on Gereon... feth, right at the *start* on Tanith. He certainly would never have made it through the shit-storm of Salvation’s Reach. Outcome assessments sapped the will and they punctured confidence. They told you, matter of fact, in the pale blue type that chattered out of the Tactical Division’s cogitators, that you were going to fail. Sometimes they even told you when, where and how *badly* you were going to fail.

That kind of crap cut a man’s heart out before he’d even begun. If a soldier went into a fight believing he was going to lose because some rear echelon expert fether had told him so, then he was already dead.

So Mkoll never listened. He never read that part of the packet. He zoned out when the Tactical Division adjuncts stood up in briefings and began to drone on.

There was *always* a chance.

There was a long chamber behind Engine House Two – some kind of machine shop – which he'd labelled 'Killbox one'. There were two routes from there to a relay room aft. He'd named that relay room 'Killbox two'. Below that, a ladder-well led down two deck levels to a venting station: a large, ducted compartment with an oddly sloping roof. The venting station was 'Killbox three'. Near to that, along a transit tunnel, was a slender walk-bridge spanning the chasm of the ship's main heat sink, a canyon of machined steel cliffs that dropped away so far that you couldn't see the bottom. The walk-bridge, that was 'Last Fething Chance.'

Mkoll hadn't made a map. Not a paper one anybody could see, at least. The map was in his head. They'd been on the *Highness Ser Armaduke* for weeks, first for the long haul out to Salvation's Reach, and now for the slow drag back to Imperial territory. The bloody raid was three weeks behind them. To stay fit, to stay sharp, Mkoll had taken to patrolling the massive old warship, measuring it out, learning its nooks and crannies.

Where possible, he did that with every location he found himself-stationed in. He made time to learn the lie of the land, to know it front and back, to navigate it in his mind, and in his sleep, and with his eyes closed. He found out every secret place, every hidden corner, every rat-run, every air-shaft, every crawlway, every concealed hatch. That kind of information could keep you alive, no matter your chances.

The *Armaduke* was a strange place. Mkoll had come to know it better than any other ship he'd ever made shift on. The populated areas of the crew decks and company spaces were busy, well-lit and relatively clean. To most souls aboard, those areas were the whole ship. That was where people lived and worked.

But the populated areas were just a small fraction of the ship's mass, like the peak of a sea-mount rising above sea level. The dark bulk lay beneath. Vast areas of machine space, engine housing, vent systems and vacant compartments. There were bilges, junk stores, decommissioned chambers, abandoned holds... rusty, decaying sections that had been closed down following damage, or places that simply hadn't been visited in centuries.

Mkoll estimated that four-fifths of the ship were ‘subdeck’ like that: gloomy, backstage hull-spaces visited only by servitors, the odd maintenance sweep and people who got lost.

During his patrols, Mkoll had seen a lot down there. The furnace-heat of the main Engine Rooms, where the air swirled with sparks and soot. The water-load reservoirs where the air smelled of stagnant filth, where there was a constant sound of dripping. The waste plants. The chambers where the massive Ogryn stokers crashed after their long shifts, dark caverns of dirty bedding and sweat-stink where they drank and played dice and snored. He’d sat amongst them in the firelight, like a child visiting the ritual lair of giants, and they hadn’t even known he was there.

He’d seen the machine shop chambers where the servitors gathered in silent clusters, and hummed binaric pulses to each other as spider-servitors crawled over them, repairing their manipulators and servicing perished joint-seals. Those chambers smelled of oil and ozone, and made his throat dry. He’d entered holds that hadn’t been opened in a lifetime, and found crates of forgotten supplies: boxes of perishables that had become caskets of dust where it was impossible to tell what they had once contained, or rooms filled with stacks of self-heating meal cans, the faded labels stencilled with Munitorum issue dates that were three centuries old.

Edible still. He’d found *that* out too.

He’d found a compartment on what had once been a berth deck that had belonged to a senior officer at some point in the ship’s past. It had been closed off, but the contents remained. A bed, a desk, some books, dress uniforms hanging on a rail, a framed pict of a long-dead family, all thickly layered in dust. He hadn’t stayed there long. He had felt like he was intruding.

Patiently, he had learned the *Armaduke*’s inner secrets. Every corner, every by-way.

There was always a chance.

Mkoll knew it was coming for him when he heard the tins.

There would be no warning that the game had begun in earnest, so he had set some for himself. Simple motion alarms made of mono-filament wire stretched taut across thresholds and hatchways, and tied off to rusty, battered mess tins he had rescued from one of the low-deck junk heaps.

He was in Sub Three Six. He'd just done a twenty kilometre run around the upper circuit of holds, stow-spaces and reservoir bays. Long routes on shift transport had taught him that you had to keep fit, or you'd end up arriving at the next fight zone flabby from ship rations, and with muscle tone lost to shipboard grav levels.

He heard the tins, distant. A clatter. He paused, took a sip of water from the flask in his hand, then tied up his kit and pulled his jacket back on. All the while he listened for more noise, knowing there would be none.

He assessed direction. The clatter of tins had seemed to come from his left, but he knew the way sound travelled in Sub Three Six. It was more likely an acoustic bounce, and therefore had actually come from his right. Mkoll's painstaking close reading of the ship had grown to include all the thousands of different sounds it made, the creaks and groans and throbs and ambient hums, and the ways sound travelled in every location.

The right. Probably the alarm line he'd tied at Sub Three Eight.

It would be closing fast. It would be coming for him.

Mkoll put on his camo-cloak, picked up his las-rifle, and began to move. He ran without making a sound, each bootfall expertly placed, knowing when to duck under low pipes or step over trunking.

'Killbox one' was out, for the time being at least. He didn't want to double-back and run into what was hunting him. He took a service tunnel to starboard, crossed an empty transit hall and—

He pulled up, stepped back out into the long transit hall, and listened. The fore-aft transits provided great acoustics. He screened out the pulsing rumble of the drive rooms and waited. That creak. Just there, at the edge of hearing. A heavy weight shifting on the loose deck plates of Sub Three Seven?

Whatever was coming after him had speed – more speed than he could hope to muster. Inhuman speed. But that speed came with a price, especially given the mass involved. It was inhumanly quiet, but it simply couldn't be as quiet as him.

Mkoll continued on. He left the transit hall, followed the slow incline of a service tunnel down to Sub Eight, and then took the narrow corridor left in a loop to 'Last Fething Chance'. Ceiling lights above him swayed slowly on their chains, nudged by the vibration of the ship; the constant, bucking push-pull of the Warp.

He heard another creak, and froze. No, not a footfall this time. Just the fabric of the *Armaduke* flexing under stress somewhere.

He reached the walk-bridge. The canyon of the heat sink dropped away below him and rose above him into the roof of the hull. A warm breeze was coming from the lightless depths, murmuring in the chasm.

Mkoll strapped his rifle across his back, and pulled himself up onto the narrow rail of the slender footbridge. Like an acrobat at a carnival show, he walked the rail, heel to toe, arms outstretched, until he reached the middle of the arc. There, he lowered into a crouch, gripping the rail on either side of his feet with both hands.

Acoustics in the transit hallway were good. In the canyon of the heat sink, they were miraculous, like a gift sent by the Saint herself. Sounds moved along the canyon from all parts of the ship. He could even hear the faint chatter of cogitators on the secondary bridge far above him. The heat sink conducted vibration too, and he could feel that through his palms on the rail.

He sorted the sounds carefully; the sounds and the tiny shudders of the rail.

It was *definitely* to his left now. On the port side of the ship. One or perhaps two decks up, less than two hundred metres away, closing fast.

Coming for him. Coming to finish him.

It probably had a heat-lock already, or was reading his scent. No visual yet, though. No line-of-sight.

Mkoll had about sixty seconds if it played it stealthy, or less than thirty if it decided to be brazen.

He slid down from the rail onto the walk-bridge, and crossed it to the far side. There, he activated the shutter release and closed the hatch to the bridge, but stayed on the bridge side of it.

He swung back over the rail and climbed down, until he was clinging to the underside of the walk-bridge. He didn't look down. He was veiled in the shadow of the bridge's underside, clinging to the greasy pneumatic struts with his hands and heels.

He heard something above him.

It was on the bridge. It had arrived from the same direction he had come. He couldn't see it, but he could feel each silent but immense footstep as its mass made the narrow walk-bridge tremble.

No sound. It was making no sound. It had tracked him, by heat and scent, to the chasm. Now it had his scent more keenly, leading across the bridge to the closed hatch.

The warm breeze gusting up from the heat sink far below was masking his body temperature.

He hung on. He felt like he was starting to steam and broil. Sweat began to trickle down his spine. His hands were damp on the warm, oily struts. Much more sweat, and his scent track would become fresh and obvious.

Much more heat, and his hands would slip off the struts.

It moved directly over him. He heard the faint clink of a metal heel on bridge decking. It paused.

He stopped breathing.

Seconds ticked by. He gently tilted his head to the right. Light from overhead was casting a vague shadow of the bridge against the canyon wall below. It was enough to see the dark bulk on the bridge above him. A huge shadow, powerful and relentless.

It moved again, down to the far end, to the closed hatch.

He heard the shutter open and close.

Had it fallen for his trick? Had it thought he had gone through the hatch and closed it after him?

No. It was far, far smarter than that.

It was still on the bridge. He could feel it. It had done what he had done. It had made a show of opening and closing the shutter as if it had gone through it, but it had remained behind.

Waiting.

We can both wait, Mkoll thought.

He hung, silently. Moments passed. He had to breathe again, but he did so as gently and slowly as he could.

Was it still there, or was his mind playing dirty tricks on him?

He waited.

He felt the walk-bridge wobble slightly as it shifted its weight. Yes, it was still there, waiting, just like him.

A minute. Another minute. Two more.

There was a sigh. The shutter opening. It closed again.

Now it had gone.

Mkoll let out a long, slow breath through lips curled in an 'o'. He started

to move, crawling back along the underside of the walk-bridge. His arms and legs were beginning to tire, and he placed each new hand- or toe-hold with deliberate care.

He reached the far end, the end he had started from. Slowly, he crawled out from under the bridge, and clambered back over the rail.

There was no one there. He had to double-check. It was frighteningly clever and calculating. There had been every chance he would come out of the shadows and find it waiting there, smiling down at him.

The walk-bridge was empty.

Mkoll went back the way he had come, but diverted off towards a through-deck ladder that took him up into a stowage space and then into 'Killbox three'. The venting station. Steam billowed from the grilles in the floor, and verdigris caked the oddly sloping ceiling. It was a well-lit space, but there was no point taking out the light rigs.

It could see in the dark. Close up, it could hear his heartbeat and the pulse of the blood in his veins.

Mkoll was hunting the way he had learned to hunt back in the forests of Tanith. You stalked the prey, but ultimately you let the prey come to you, on your terms. That was the key part. You made the terrain yours, you used yourself as a lure, and you brought the prey into an area you could control. The killboxes. Any one of them would do. The killboxes or 'Last Fething Chance'. Mkoll had chosen four areas that he felt gave him good access and egress, areas he could use to his advantage. If he could draw it into any one of them, he could finish the business.

He'd rigged up a small hide at the end of Killbox three a few days before, just some flakboard and a spare camo-cloak, screened off by a cluster of pipework. He was about to take up position when he heard a rattle of mess tins.

Something wasn't right.

The mono-filament wire had been tripped somewhere to his left, causing the tins to rattle. He was sure about the direction, but that meant that somehow, it had managed to circle around him. How had it done that? How had it moved so far and so fast without him being aware of it? It had re-crossed the heat sink trench and encircled him, moving in from entirely the wrong direction.

Mkoll knew at once that he couldn't control Killbox three any more. The

hide was pointing in the wrong direction.

He knew he had to reconsider quickly. It had tripped more tins, which meant it was moving fast, putting speed above caution. It knew where he was, and it was coming for him with eager confidence.

He hurried to the end of the venting station and entered the ladder-well, clambering up into the relay room he'd designated Killbox two. There were two points of concealment there, one in a parts locker on the right-hand wall, the other further down to the left behind a workbench. As he stood there deciding which one gave him the best options, he heard something move in the venting station below him. It wasn't loud, just a slight impact of metal on metal, but he separated it easily from the ambient noise of the ship around him. It was below him, less than ten metres. It was moving even faster than he had estimated.

He wasn't sure if he'd have enough time to get into either of the concealment positions fast enough. He needed to keep it at arm's length, keep it at bay for as long as possible to give himself maximum edge.

He needed a distraction. Killbox one was going to be the best option, and he had to buy a little time. He scooped up a couple of washers from the grubby workbench and, as he headed for the exit tunnel that led to Killbox one, he turned and tossed them underhand into the ladder-well.

He heard them rattle and ping as they bounced down the shaft. He heard more movement as something moved to investigate.

Then he exited fast, drawing on all the stealth skills he had accumulated in his long career. He left Killbox two making less sound than a couple of washers falling down a ladder well.

Killbox one, the machine shop, was a large and gloomy space with heavy deck plates. Unlike the other zones he had ear-marked, it had too many access points, but that drawback was more than compensated for by the shape and space of the room. Besides, Mkoll knew which direction the threat was coming from, so only the hatch access to the relay room-mattered. He'd pre-constructed a hide in this Killbox too, but there were two other concealment points, and he chose one with a raised angle that had the best line of sight on the hatch.

He hauled himself into position, and lined up his rifle. No time to spare, no time to waste fussing. Just line up and be ready.

He waited. He waited, his finger resting beside the trigger.

Silence.

There was no sign of movement.

It couldn't have lost his scent. Even with the distraction, it had been so close on his heels.

Mkoll froze.

It was in the machine shop. It was right there with him in Killbox one.

But it had come from the opposite direction. Instead of emerging from the hatch that he was sighted on, it had entered the room from the hatch behind him.

He had no idea how it had done that. He had no idea how it had looped around to circle him. He started to pick apart his mental map of the ship to try to figure out how it could have got the drop on him. Maybe a hatch or inspection tube he'd missed. Maybe a—

He shook the ideas away. They were just distractions. It didn't matter how it had got around him. All that mattered was that it *had*. All that mattered was that it was right here, *right now*.

Mkoll didn't breathe. He didn't move. He waited, the hairs on his neck rising. It was so close. It prowled forward, the mass of it a shadow in the gloom. He heard the faint hum of auto-systems and targetters. It was hunting for him. It was going to locate him in another second or two.

But it was in his cross-hairs.

'Bang,' said Mkoll.

The Space Marine froze, and then slowly turned its bulk around. Sar Af, the White Scar, narrowed his inhuman eyes and saw Mkoll hunched amongst the overhead pipework, rifle aimed. Mkoll's las-rifle was set to full auto. No matter how fast Sar Af moved, it wouldn't be faster than the stream of las-shots aimed at his unprotected head.

Sar Af smiled.

'Clever little man,' he said.

Mkoll nodded back, his aim not wavering.

'Game to me,' he said.

Sar Af lowered his boltgun.

'The Tanith Ghosts,' he said, 'they come with a good reputation. Especially for covert action. Good... by human standards. But you have proved something today. It has been an education, sergeant, taking this challenge with you. I would venture to say I have never met a human as

cunning as you.'

'I'll take that, sir,' said Mkoll.

'I assume you prepared? Walked the ground? Chose your locations?'

'Yes.'

Sar Af nodded.

'Wise and diligent,' he said. 'The only way you could hope to even the odds. We of the Adeptus Astartes always prepare too. Prepare for the worst. We prepare for an enemy to be better than us, to have some edge, and adjust accordingly. That is why the Adeptus Astartes always win.'

Mkoll allowed himself a small smile.

'Except this time, sir,' he suggested.

'Mmm,' replied Sar Af, as though amused by something.

Mkoll felt a chill creep up his spine. His attention had been fixed on the White Scar. He realised there was something behind him.

He turned. Holofurnace of the Iron Snakes stood in the doorway, his boltgun trained on Mkoll. Eadwine of the Silver Guard, weapon ready and fixed, slowly emerged from the cover of a lateral hatch.

All three Space Marines had their weapons on him.

Mkoll slowly lowered his aim.

'I asked my battle-brothers to shadow us as we played our game,' said Sar Af.

'Is that really sporting?' asked Mkoll. 'A fair contest?'

Eadwine snorted.

'Not at all, sergeant,' said Sar Af, 'but then when is war ever sporting? This contest was never fair to begin with. War is about victory. That is all that matters. And that is why the Adeptus Astartes prevails. When the odds stack against us, we revise the rules and change the odds.'

Mkoll shrugged. He dropped down from the pipework onto the deck in front of the towering Sar Af.

'Well then, sir,' Mkoll said, 'I will admit defeat. I'll cherish the fact that, according to the original rules of this contest, I bested you. Me, a lone human. But I will concede that I don't stand a chance against all three of you. If this had been real, you would have ended me.'

'You did well, Mkoll,' said Holofurnace. 'Savour the fact that you got the drop on our finest hunter.'

Mkoll nodded.

‘Except I did more than that,’ he said. He looked down at the deck beneath them. The three Space Marines slowly looked down too.

‘I knew from the start I didn’t really stand a chance against Brother Sar Af,’ said Mkoll. ‘Not a fething chance in hell, even if I out-stealthed him and lured him into a killbox. So I set a trap, just to be sure. And look at that. My trap has caught three Space Marines.’

The deck of the machine shop was rigged. The three Space Marines could see the soft packs of explosives wedged under the deck plates they were standing on, the detonators wired and set.

‘Boom,’ said Mkoll.

Eadwine and Holofurnace stared at Mkoll in disbelief.

‘But... but if you trigger this trap,’ said Eadwine, ‘you will perish with us.’

‘Of course I will,’ said Mkoll casually. ‘But that’s why the poor bloody Guard always win. We’re expendable. One trooper for three over-powered, post-human adversaries? That’s a victory.’

There was a moment of silence, then Sar Af began to laugh. It was a loud, long and delighted laugh.

‘Well played, sergeant,’ he said. ‘He has us, brothers. He has us cold.’

Holofurnace hissed a curse. Eadwine nodded, his face grim.

‘I will concede stalemate,’ Eadwine said.

‘Thank you, sir,’ said Mkoll. ‘I appreciate the opportunity to test myself against you.’

He knelt down, and began to rip the packets of explosives from the edges of the deck plate.

‘Throne!’ exclaimed Holofurnace. ‘Be careful with those!’

‘These?’ asked Mkoll, holding up one of the packs. ‘They’re just bags of powdered caffeine mix.’

Sar Af began to laugh all over again.

‘That’s the other thing about the Guard,’ said Mkoll. ‘We bluff like bastards too.’

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, and *I am Slaughter*, the first book in The Beast Arises series. 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.

Returning to the front lines after a dangerous mission, Gaunt and his Ghosts find that the Crusade has changed, and are thrown into new conflicts and new roles.



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