



DAN ABNETT

'Dan Abnett is probably the best writer of dark military SF in the world.'

The Guardian

VERMILION LEVEL



A GAUNT'S GHOSTS SHORT STORY

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INTRODUCTION

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, this edition presents the story as it should have originally appeared and presents a tantalising glimpse of how differently the story could have gone.

VERMILION LEVEL

Dan Abnett

'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 warpspace 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 trceries 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 vis-caster 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 velveteed 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!’ growled 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 glass 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 astrophotically 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 laser 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 rune 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.

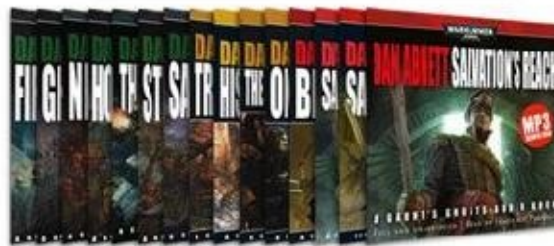
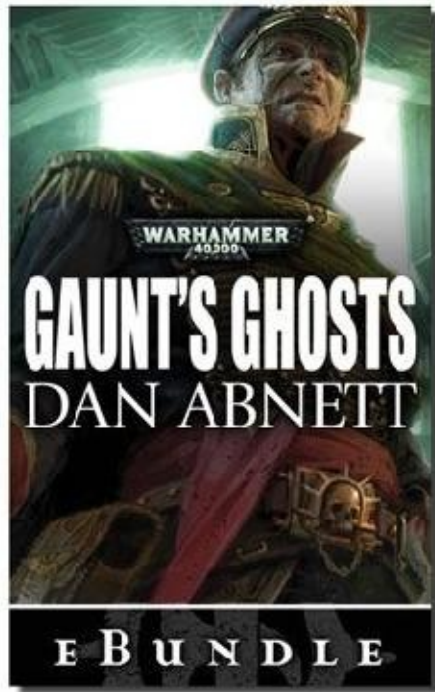
‘Gaunt’s Ghosts,’ said Corbec.

Gaunt smiled softly.

‘Gaunt’s Ghosts.’

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DAN ABNETT is a multiple *New York Times* bestselling author and an award-winning comic book writer. He has written over forty novels, including the acclaimed Gaunt's Ghosts series, and the Eisenhower and Ravenor trilogies. His Horus Heresy novel *Prospero Burns* topped the SF charts in the UK and the US. In addition to writing for Black Library, Dan scripts audio dramas, movies, games, comics and bestselling novels for major publishers in Britain and America. He lives and works in Maidstone, Kent.



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