

WARHAMMER  
40,000

**DAN ABNETT**



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TALON**

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A WARHAMMER 40,000 SHORT STORY

# THORN WISHES TALON

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## **Warhammer 40,000**

It is the 41st millennium. For more than a hundred centuries the Emperor has sat immobile on the Golden Throne of Earth. He is the master of mankind by the will of the gods, and master of a million worlds by the might of his inexhaustible armies. He is a rotting carcass writhing invisibly with power from the Dark Age of Technology. He is the Carrion Lord of the Imperium for whom a thousand souls are sacrificed every day, so that he may never truly die.

Yet even in his deathless state, the Emperor continues his eternal vigilance. Mighty battlefleets cross the daemon-infested miasma of the warp, the only route between distant stars, their way lit by the Astronomican, the psychic manifestation of the Emperor's will. Vast armies give battle in his name on uncounted worlds. Greatest amongst His soldiers are the Adeptus Astartes, the Space Marines, bio-engineered super-warriors. Their comrades in arms are legion: the Imperial Guard and countless planetary defence forces, the ever-vigilant Inquisition and the tech-priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus to name only a few. But for all their multitudes, they are barely enough to hold off the ever-

present threat from aliens, heretics, mutants - and worse.

To be a man in such times is to be one amongst untold billions. It is to live in the cruellest and most bloody regime imaginable. These are the tales of those times. Forget the power of technology and science, for so much has been forgotten, never to be re-learned. Forget the promise of progress and understanding, for in the grim dark future there is only war. There is no peace amongst the stars, only an eternity of carnage and slaughter, and the laughter of thirsting gods.



## Thorn Wishes Talon

*The past never lets us go. It is persistent and unalterable.*

*The future, however, is aloof, a stranger. It stands with its back to us, mute and private, refusing to communicate what it knows or what it sees.*

*Except to some. On Nova Durma, deep in the leech-infested forests of the Eastern Telgs, there is a particular grotto into which the light of the rising daystar falls once every thirty-eight days. There, by means of some secret ministry and ritual craft that I have no ready wish to understand, the blistered seers of the Divine Fraternity coax the reluctant future around until they can see its face in their silver mirrors, and hear its hushed, unwilling voice.*

*It is my fervent hope that what it has to say to them is a lie.*

That night, the waste-world called Malinter had six visitors. They left their transport, dark and hook-winged, on a marshy flood plain, slightly bowed over to starboard where the landing claws had sunk into the ooze. They proceeded west, on foot.

A storm was coming, and it was not entirely natural. They walked through streamers of white fog, crossing outcrops of green quartz, lakes of moss and dank watercourses choked with florid lichens. The sky shone like filthy, tinted glass. In the distance, a pustular range of hills began to vanish in the rain-blur of the encroaching elements. Lightning flashed, like sparks off flint, or remote laser fire.

They had been on the surface for an hour, and had just sighted the tower, when the first attempt was made to kill them.

There was a rattle, almost indistinguishable from the doom-roll of the approaching thunder, and bullets whipped up spray from the mud at the feet of

the tallest visitor.

His name was Harlon Nayl. His tall, broad physique was wrapped in a black-mesh bodyglove. His head was shaved apart from a simple goatee. He raised the heavy Hecuter pistol he had been carrying in his right fist, and made a return of fire into the gathering dark.

In answer, several more unseen hostiles opened up. The visitors scattered for cover.

‘Were you expecting this?’ Nayl asked as he crouched behind a quartz boulder and snapped shots off over it.

+I didn’t know what to expect.+

The answer came telepathically from Nayl’s master, and seemed far from reassuring.

‘How many?’ Nayl called out.

Twenty metres away from him, another big man called Zeph Mathuin shouted back from cover. ‘Six!’ echoed his estimation. Mathuin was as imposing as Nayl, but his skin was dark, the colour of varnished hardwood. His black hair was plaited into strands and beaded. Both men had been bounty hunters in their time. Neither followed that profession any longer.

‘Make it seven,’ contradicted Kara Swole as she wriggled up beside Nayl, keeping her head low. She was a short, compact woman with cropped red hair. Her voluptuous figure was currently concealed beneath a long black leather duster with a fringe of larisel fur around the neck.

‘Seven?’ queried Nayl, as whining hard-round smacked into the far side of the rock.

‘Six!’ Mathuin called again.

Kara Swole had been a dancer-acrobat before she’d joined the band, and ordinarily she would defer to the combat experience of the two ex-hunters. But she had an ear for these things. ‘Listen!’ she said. ‘Three autorifles,’ she identified, counting off on her fingers. ‘Two lasguns, a pistol, and that...’ she drew Nayl’s attention to a distinctive *plunk! plunk!* ‘That’s a stubber.’

Nayl nodded and smiled.

‘Six!’ Mathuin insisted.

+Kara is correct. There are seven. Now can we deal with them, please?+

Their master’s mind-voice seemed unusually terse and impatient. Not a good sign. One of several not good signs that had already distinguished this night.

The two other members of the team sheltered against a gravel shelf some distance to Nayl’s left. Their names were Patience Kys and Carl Thonius. A

slight, fussy, well-bred young man, Thonius held the rank of interrogator and was technically the master's second-in-command. He had drawn a compact pistol from inside his beautifully tailored coat, but was too busy complaining about the weather, the mud, and the prospect of death by gunshot wounds to use it.

Patience Kys suggested he might like to shut up. She was a slender, pale woman, dressed in high leather boots of black leather, a bell skirt of grey silk and an embroidered black leather shirt. Her hair was pinned up in a chignon with silver pins.

She scanned the view ahead, and located one of the hostiles firing from the cover of some quartz rocks.

'Ready?' she yelled over at Nayl.

'Pop 'em up!' he replied.

Kys was telekinetic. She focused her trained mind and exerted a little pressure. The quartz rocks scattered apart across the slime, revealing a rather surprised man holding an autorifle.

His surprise lasted about two seconds until a single shot from Nayl hit him in the brow and tumbled him leadenly onto his back.

With a spiteful grin, Kys reached out again and dragged another of the hostiles out into the open with her mind. The man yelled aloud, scared and uncomprehending. His heels churned in the ooze and he flailed his arms, fighting the invisible force that yanked him by the scruff of the neck.

There was a blurt of noise like an industrial hammer-drill, and the man ceased to be, shredded into pieces by heavy fire.

Mathuin had shot him. His left hand was a burnished-chrome augmetic, and he had locked it into the governing socket of the lethal rotator cannon that he was wearing strapped around his torso. The multi-barrels whirred and cycled, venting vapour.

The firing ceased.

+They have fled for now. They will return, I have no doubt.+

The master of the team moved up amongst them. To the uninformed, Inquisitor Gideon Ravenor appeared to be a machine rather than a man. He was a box, a smoothly angled wedge of armoured metal with a glossy, polished finish from which even the approaching lightning seemed unwilling to reflect. This was his force chair, his life-support system, totally enclosed and self-sufficient. The chair's anti-gravity disks spun hypnotically as he advanced.

Inside that enclosing chair, one of the Imperium's most brilliant inquisitors –

and most articulate theorists – lay trapped forever. Years before, at the start of a glittering career in the service of the ordos, Gideon Ravenor had been struck down during a heretical attack, his fair and strong body burned and fused away into a miserable residue of useless flesh. Only his mind had survived

But such a mind! Sharp, incisive, poetic, just... and powerful too. Kys had not met a psi-capable being remotely strong enough to master Gideon Ravenor.

They were sworn to him, the five of them. Nayl, Thonius, Kara, Mathuin and Kys. Sworn and true. They would follow him to the ends of the known stars, if needs be.

Even when he chose not to tell them where they were going.

*The Divine Fraternity practises a barbaric initiation process of voluntary blinding. Sight, as one might expect, is considered their fundamental skill, but not sight as we might understand it. Novices sacrifice one of their eyes as proof of their intent, and have that missing eye replaced by a simple augmetic to maintain everyday function. The one remaining organic eye is then trained and developed, using ritual, alchemic and sorcerous processes.*

*An initiated member of the Fraternity may therefore be identified by his single augmetic eye, and by the patch of purple velvet that covers his remaining real eye at all times except for circumstances of cult ceremony. A novitiate, self-blinded in one socket, must work to fashion his own silver mirror before he is allowed his augmetic, or indeed any medical or sterilising treatment. He must cut and hammer his dish of silver, and then work it with abrasive wadding until it is a perfect reflector to a finesse of .0088 optical purity. Many die of septicemia or other wound-related infection before they accomplish this. Others, surviving the initial infections, spend many months or even years finishing the task. Thus, members of the cult may additionally be identified by blistering of the skin, tissue abnormalities and even significant necrotising scarring incurred during the long months of silver-working.*

*It is also my experience that few Fraternity members have codable or matchable fingerprints. Years of scrupulous endeavour with abrasive wadding wear away hands as well as silver.*

Overhead, the sky flashed and vibrated. Kara could hear the thunder now, and felt the drizzle in the wind. Fog-vapour smirched out the distance.

With the toe of her boot, she gingerly rolled over the body of the man Nayl had shot. He was dressed in cheap, worn foul-weather clothes made of woven

plastek fibre and leather. He had one augmented eye, crude and badly-sutured into the socket, and a velvet patch over the other.

‘Anyone we know?’ asked Nayl, coming up behind her.

Unlike the others, Nayl and Kara had not been recruited for ordo service by Ravenor himself. They had originally owed loyalty to Ravenor’s mentor, Inquisitor Gregor Eisenhorn. Somewhere along the line, a decade or more past, they had become Ravenor’s. Kara often thought of Eisenhorn. Stern, fierce, so much harder to bear than Ravenor, Eisenhorn had still been a good man to follow. And she owed him. But for Gregor Eisenhorn, she would still be a dancer-acrobat in the circuses of Bonaventure.

She often wondered what had become of her former master. She’d last seen him back in ’87, during the mission to 5213X. He’d been a wreck of a man by then, supported only by his burning will and fundamental augmentics. Some had said he’d crossed a line and become a radical. Kara didn’t believe that. Eisenhorn had always been so... hard-line. She thought of him fondly, as she did the others from that time. Alizabeth Bequin, God-Emperor rest her, dear Aemos, Medea Betancore and Fischig.

They had known some times together. Great times, bad times. But this was her place now.

‘Face doesn’t ring any bells,’ she said. She reached down and lifted the eye patch, just out of curiosity. A real eye, wide and glazed, lay beneath.

‘What the hell is that about?’ Nayl wondered.

Kara reached up and sleeked the short, red strands of her rain-wet hair back across her head. She looked across at Mathuin and Thonius beside the other body. Thonius was, as ever, elegantly dressed, and as he crouched in the mud, he fussed about his shoes.

Thonius would Ravenor’s pupil, which supposed that one day Thonius was to be promoted to full inquisitor. Ravenor had been Eisenhorn’s interrogator. Kara wondered sometimes if Carl had anything like the same stuff.

‘If you’d left him a little more intact, we might have made a more decent examination,’ Thonius complained.

‘This is a rotator cannon,’ Mathuin said bluntly. ‘It doesn’t do intact.’

Thonius prodded the grisly remains with a stick. ‘Well, I think we’ve got an augmented eye here too. And what’s either an eyepatch or a very unsatisfactory posing thong.’

Thonius’s caustic wit usually drew smiles from the band, but not this night. No one was in the mood for laughs. Ravenor, generally so forthcoming with his

team, had told them virtually nothing about the reasons for coming to Malinter. As far as anyone knew, he'd simply diverted them to this remote waste-world after receiving some private communiqué.

Most alarmingly of all, he'd chosen to join them on the surface. Ravenor usually ran his team telepathically from a distance via the wraithbone markers they all wore. He only came along in person when the stakes were high.

+Let's move on.+ Ravenor said.

*The grotto in the Eastern Telgs is deep in the smoking darkness of the forests. The glades are silent except for insect chitter, and wreathed with vapour and steam. There are biting centipedes everywhere, some as long as a man's finger, others as long as a man's leg. The air stinks of mildew.*

*Once every thirty-eight days, the rising star comes up at such an angle it forces its pale and famished light in through a natural hole in the rock face outside the grotto. The beams streak in down an eighty degree angle to the azimuth and strike the still freshwater of the pool in the grotto's base, lighting the milky water like a flame behind muslin.*

*The Fraternity cowers around the pool – after days of ritual starvation and self-flagellation – and attempts to interrupt the falling beams with their silver mirrors. At such times, I have observed, they remove the purple velvet patches from their real eyes and place them over their augmetics.*

*Their flashing mirrors reflect many colours of light. Having ingested lho seeds and other natural hallucinogenics, they glare into their mirrors, and begin to gabble incoherently.*

*Voxographic units, run on battery leads, are set around the grotto to record their ramblings. As the light fades again, the masters of the Fraternity play back the voxorders, and tease out the future truths – or lies – that they have been told.*

The tower, as they approached it, was far larger than they had first imagined. The main structure, splintered and ruined, rose a full half kilometre into the dark, bruised sky, like an accusing finger. At the base, like the bole of an ancient tree, it thickened out and spread into great piers and buttresses that anchored it into the headland. Crumbling stone bridge-spans linked the rocky shelf to the nearest piers.

There was no way of defining its origin or age, nor the hands – human or otherwise – that had constructed it. Even its purpose was in doubt. According to

the scans, it was the only artificial structure on Malinter. Older star maps referred to it simply by means of a symbol that indicated *ruin (antique/xenos)*.

As they picked their way through ancient screes of rubble and broken masonry towards the nearest span, the rain began to lash down, pattering on the mud and driving off the raised stonework. The rising wind began to shiver the glossy black ivy and climbing vines clinging in thick mats to the lower walls.

‘This message. It told you to come here?’ Nayl asked.

+What message?+

Nayl frowned and looked at the floating chair. ‘The message you got.’

+I never said anything about a message.+

‘Oh, come on! Fair play!’ Nayl growled. ‘Why won’t you tell us what we’re getting into here?’

+Harlon.+ Ravenor’s voice sliced into Nayl’s mind and he winced slightly. Ravenor’s telepathy was sometimes painfully sharp when he was troubled or preoccupied. Nayl realised that Ravenor’s thought-voice was directed at him alone, a private word the others couldn’t hear.

+Trust me, old friend. I dare tell you nothing until I’m sure of what we’re dealing with. If it turns out to be a trick, you could be biased by misinformation.+

‘I’m no amateur,’ Nayl countered. The others looked at him, hearing only his side of the conversation.

+I know, but you’re a loyal man. Loyalty sometimes blinds us. Trust me on this.+

‘What in the name of the Golden Throne was that?’ Thonius said abruptly. They’d all heard it. Ravenor and Kys had felt it.

High in the ruined summit of the tower, something had screamed. Loud, hideous, inhuman, drawn out. More screams, from other non-human voices, answered it. Each resounded both acoustically and psychically. The air temperature dropped sharply. Sheens of ice crackled into view, caking the upper sweep of the walls.

They moved on a few metres. The keening wails grew louder, whooping and circling within the high walls, as if screaming avian things were flying around inside. As lightning accompanies thunder, so each scream was accompanied by a sympathetic flash of light. The psychic shrieks seemed to draw the storm down, until a halo of flashing, jagged light coruscated in the sky above the tower. Corposant danced along the walls like white, fluorescent balls.

Kys, her psi-sensitive mind feeling it worse than the rest, paused to wipe

fresh blood off her lip with the back of her gwel-skin glove. Her nose was bleeding.

As she did so, the hostiles began trying to kill them again.

*The Divine Fraternity, may the ordos condemn their sick souls, seek to chart out the future. All possible futures, in fact. With their mirrors and their abominably practiced eyes, they identify events to come, and take special interest in those events that are ill-favoured. Disasters, plagues, invasions, collapses of governments, heresies, famines, defeats in battle. Doom, in any guise.*

*The masters of the Fraternity then disseminate the details of their oracles to the lower orders of their cult. By my estimation, the Fraternity numbers several thousand, many of them apparently upstanding Imperial citizens, spread through hundreds of worlds in the subsectors Antimar, Helican, Angelus and Ophidian. Once a 'prospect' as they call them has been identified, certain portions of the 'cult membership' are charged with doing everything they can to ensure that it comes to pass, preferably in the worst and most damaging way possible. If a plague is foreseen, then cult members will deliberately break quarantine orders to ensure that the outbreak spreads. If the prospect is a famine, they will plant incendiary bombs or bio-toxins in the Munitorum grain stores of the threatened world. A heretic emerges? They will protect him and publish his foul lies abroad. An invasion approaches? They are the fifth column who will destroy the defenders from within.*

*They seek doom. They seek to undermine the fabric of our Imperium, the culture of man, and cause it to founder and fall. They seek galactic apocalypse, an age of darkness and fire, wherein their unholy masters, the Ruinous Powers, can rise up and take governance of all.*

*Five times now I have thwarted their efforts. They hate me, and wish me dead. Now I seek to derail their efforts a sixth time, here, tonight, on Malinter. I have journeyed far out of my way, pursued by their murder-bands, to carry a warning.*

*For I have seen their latest prospect with my own eyes. And it is a terrible thing.*

Laser fire scorched across the mossy span of the bridge arch, sizzling in the rain. Some of it came from the ruin ahead, some from the crags behind them. Stonework shattered and split. Las-bolts and hard-rounds snapped and stung away from the age-polished cobbles.

‘Go!’ yelled Nayl, turning back towards the crags and firing his weapon in a two-handed brace. At his side, Kara Swole kicked her assault weapon into life. It bucked like a living thing, spitting spent casings out in a sideways flurry.

They backed across the bridge as the others ran ahead. Mathuin and Kys led the way, into the gunfire coming out of the dim archways and terraces ahead. Mathuin’s rotator cannon squealed, and flames danced around the spinning barrels. Stone debris and shorn ivy fluttered off the wounded walls. Kys saw a man, almost severed at the waist, drop from an archway into the lightless gulf below the bridge.

Ravenor and Thonius came up behind them. Thonius was still gazing up at the screamlight tearing and dancing around the tower top overhead. He had one hand raised, as if to protect his face from the bullets and laser fire whipping around him.

+Concentrate!+

‘Yes, yes... of course...’ Thonius replied.

Mathuin ran under the first arch into the gloom of the tower chambers. His augmetic eyes, little coals of red hard-light, gleaming inside his lids, immediately adjusted to the light conditions and revealed to him the things hidden in the shadows. He pivoted left and mowed down four hostiles with a sustained belch of cannon fire. More shot at him.

Kys ran in beside him. She had a laspistol harnessed at her waist, but she hadn’t drawn it yet. She extended the heels of her palms, and four kineblades slipped out of the sheaths built into the forearms of her shirt. Each was thin, razor-sharp, twelve centimetres long, and lacked handles. She controlled them with her mind, orbiting them about her body in wide, buzzing circuits, in a figure of eight, like some lethal human orrery.

A hostile opened fire directly at her with an autopistol, cracking off four shots. Without flinching, she faced them, circling a pair of the blades so they intercepted and deflected the first two shots. The second two she bent wide with her mind, so that they sailed off harmlessly like swatted flies.

Before he could fire again, Kys pinned the hostile to the stone wall with the third kineblade.

Mathuin was firing again. ‘You okay there, Kys?’ he yelled over the cannon’s roar.

‘Fine,’ she smiled. She was in her element. Dealing death in the name of the Emperor, punishing his enemies. That was all she lived for. She was a secretive being. Patience Kys was not her real name, and none of the band knew what

she'd been baptised. She'd been born on Sameter, in the Helican sub, and had grown to womanhood on that filthy, brow-beaten world. Things had happened to her there, things that had changed her and made her Patience Kys, the telekine killer. She never spoke of it. The simple fact was she had faced and beaten a miserable death, and now she was paying death back, in the God-Emperor's name, with souls more deserving of annihilation.

With a jerk of her mind, she tugged the kineblade out of the pinned corpse and flew it back to join the others. They whistled as they spun, deflecting more gunfire away from her. Five more hostiles lay ahead, concealed behind mouldering pillars. With a nasal grunt, she sped the kineblades away from her. They shot like guided missiles down the terraceway, arcing around obstacles, whipping around the pillars. Four of the hostiles fell, slashed open by the hurtling blades.

The fifth she yanked out of cover with her telekinesis and shot. Now, at last, the gun was in her hands.

Inexorable as a planet moving along its given path, Ravenor floated into the gloom, passing between Kys and Mathuin as the ex-bounty hunter hosed further mayhem at the last of the hostiles on his side. Thonius ran up alongside him.

'What now?' the interrogator asked hopefully. 'At least we're out of that ghastly rain.'

Screamlight echoed and flashed down through the tower from far above, reverberating the structure to its core. Kys shuddered involuntarily. Her nose was bleeding again.

+Carl? Zeph?+

Ravenor's mind-voice was quiet, as if he too was suffering the side-effects of the psychic screams. +Rearguard, please. Make sure Kara and Harlon make it in alive.+

'But-' Thonius complained. Mathuin was already running back to the archway.

+Do as I say, Carl!+

'Yes, inquisitor,' replied Thonius. He turned and hurried after Mathuin.

+With me, please, Patience.+

Kys had just retrieved her kineblades. She held out her arms to let them slide back into her cuff-sheaths. The concentrated activity had drained her telekinetic strength, and the terrible screamlight from above had sapped her badly.

+Are you up to this?+

Kys raised her laspistol. 'I was born up for this, Gideon,' she grinned.

*The prospect is, as most are, vague. There are no specifics. However, it is regarded as a one hundred per cent certainty by the masters of the Fraternity that a daemonic abomination is about to be manifested into the material universe. This, they predict, will come to pass between the years 400 and 403.M41. Emperor protect us, it may have already happened.*

*There are some details. The crucial event that triggers the manifestation will happen on Eustis Majoris, the overcrowded and dirty capital world of the Angelus subsector, within those aforementioned dates. It may, at the time, seem a minor event, but its consequences will be vast. Hundreds may die. Thousands... mayhap millions, if it is not stopped.*

*The daemon will take human form and walk the worlds of the Imperium undetected. It has a name. Phonetically 'SLIITE' or perhaps Slyte or Slight.*

*It must be stopped. Its birth must be prevented.*

*All I have done in my long career in service of the ordos, all I have achieved... will be as nothing if this daemon comes into being.*

‘It’s getting a little uncomfortable out here,’ Nayl remarked. A las-shot had just scored across the flesh of his upper arm, but he didn’t even wince.

‘Agreed,’ said Kara, ejecting another spent clip onto the cobbles of the span and slamming in a fresh one.

They’d been backing steadily under fire, and now the archway was tantalisingly close.

They both ducked their heads instinctively as heavy fire ripped out of the archway behind them and peppered the landwards-end of the bridge span. Mathuin was covering them at last.

They turned and ran into cover, bullets and lasfire chasing their heels.

Inside the archway, Thonius was waving them in. Mathuin’s cannon ground dry and he paused to pop out the ammo drum and slap in a fresh one from the heavy pouches around his waist.

Nayl bent in the shadows and reloaded his pistol quickly, expertly. He looked up and stared out into the torrential rain. Out there, in the dark of the storm and the swiftly falling night, he counted at least nine muzzle flashes barking their way.

‘How many?’ he asked.

This time, Mathuin didn’t answer. He turned his stony, hard light gaze towards Kara and raised an eyebrow.

‘Fifteen,’ she said at once.

‘Fifteen,’ mused Nayl. ‘That’s five each.’

‘Hey!’ said Thonius. ‘There are four of us here!’

‘I know,’ Nayl grinned. ‘But it’s still five each. Unless you intend to surprise us.’

‘You little bastard,’ snapped Thonius. He raised his weapon and pinked off several shots at enemy across the span.

‘Hmmm...’ said Nayl. ‘Still fifteen.’

+Kara. Can you join us?+

‘On my way, boss,’ said Kara Swole. She grinned at Nayl. ‘Can you deal here? I mean, now it’s seven and a half each.’

‘Get on,’ Nayl said. He started firing. Kara dashed off into the darkness behind them.

Thonius blasted away again. They all saw a hostile on the far side of bridge, through the rain, tumble and pitch off the crag.

‘There!’ Thonius said triumphantly.

‘Seven each then,’ Mathuin remarked to Nayl.

*The Divine Fraternity, as I have learned, find it particularly easy to identify in their prospects others who have dabbled in farseeing and clairvoyance. It is as if such individuals somehow illuminate their life courses by toying with the future. The bright track of one has attracted their particular attention. It is through him, and the men and women around him, that the prospect of the manifestation has come to light.*

*He will cause it. Him, or one of those close to him.*

*That is why I have taken it upon myself to warn him.*

*For he is my friend. My pupil. My interrogator.*

Kys hadn’t even seen or sensed the cultists behind the next archway. Ravenor, gliding forward without hesitation, pulped all four of them with his chair’s built-in psi-cannons.

Kys followed him, striding forward through lakes of leaking blood and mashed tissue. She was worn out. The constant screams were getting to her.

They heard footfalls behind them. Kara Swole ran into view. Kys lowered her weapon.

‘You called for me?’

+Indeed I did, Kara. I can’t get up there.+

Kara looked up into the gloomy rafters and beams above them.

‘No problem.’ She took off her coat. Beneath it, she was dressed in a simple matt-green bodyglove.

‘Hey, Kar. Luck,’ called Kys.

Kara smiled.

She limbered up for a moment and then leapt up into the rafters, gripping the mouldering wood and gaining momentum.

Rapidly, all her acrobat skills coming back to her, she ascended, hand over hand, leaping from beam to beam, defying the dreadful gulf beneath her.

She was getting increasingly close to the flitting source of the screamlight. Her pulse raced. Grunting, she somersaulted again, and landed on her feet on a crossmember.

Kara stood for a moment, feeling the streaming rain slick down over her from the tower’s exposed roof. She stuck out her hands for balance, the assault weapon tightly cinched close under her bosom.

There was a light above her, shining out from a stairless doorway in the shell of the tower. Faint artificial light, illuminating the millions of raindrops as they hurtled down the empty tower shaft towards her.

‘Seeing this?’ she asked.

+Yes, Kara.+

‘What you expected?’

+I have no idea.+

‘Here goes,’ she said and jumped into space, into rainfall, into air. A hesitation, on the brink, dark depths below her. Then she seized a rotting timber beam and swung, her fingers biting deep into the damp, flaking wood.

She pivoted in the air, and flew up into the doorway, feet first.

She landed firmly, balanced, arms wide.

A figure stood before her in the ruined tower room, illuminated by a single hovering glow-globe.

‘Hello Kara,’ the figure said. ‘It’s been a long time.’

She gasped. ‘Oh God-Emperor... my master...’

The man was tall, shrouded in a dark leather coat that did not quite conceal the crude augmetics supporting his frame. His head was bald, his eyes dark-rimmed. He leaned heavily on a metal staff.

Rainwater streaming off him, Inquisitor Gregor Eisenhorn gazed at her.

Down at the archway, Thonius recoiled in horror. ‘I think we have a problem,’ he said.

‘Don’t be such a pussy,’ Nayl said.

‘Actually, I think he might be right,’ said Mathuin. ‘That’s not good, is it?’

Nayl craned his neck to look. Something blocky and heavy was striding towards them over the bridge span. It was metal and solid, machined striding limbs hissing steam from piston bearings. Its arms were folded against the sides of its torso like the wings of a flightless bird. Those arms, each one a heavy lascannon, began to cough and spit. Massive hydraulic absorbers soaked up the recoil.

The archway collapsed in a shower of exploding masonry. Nayl, Thonius and Mathuin fled back into the cover of the gallery behind.

‘Emperor save me,’ Nayl exclaimed. ‘They’ve got a bloody dreadnought!’

Rainwater dripped off Eisenhorn’s nose. ‘Gideon? Is he with you, Kara?’ he asked.

‘Yes, he is,’ she stammered. ‘Throne, it’s good to see you.’

‘And you, my dear. But it’s important I speak to Gideon.’

Kara nodded. ‘Ware me,’ she said.

Far away, down below, Ravenor heard her. Kara Swole stiffened, her eyes clouding. The wraithbone pendant at her throat glowed with a dull, ethereal light.

She wasn’t Kara Swole any more. Her body was possessed by the mind of Gideon Ravenor.

‘Hello, Gregor,’ Kara’s mouth said.

‘Gideon. Well met. I was worried you wouldn’t come.’

‘And ignore a summons from my mentor? Phrased in Glossia? “Thorn wishes Talon ...” I was hardly going to ignore that.’

‘I thought you would appreciate a taste of the old, private code,’ said Eisenhorn. His frozen face failed to show the smile he was feeling.

‘How could I forget it, Thorn? You drummed it into me.’

Eisenhorn nodded. ‘Much effort getting here?’

Kara’s lips conveyed Ravenor’s words. ‘Some. An effort made to kill us. Nayl is holding them off at the gateway to the tower.’

‘Old Harlon, eh?’ Eisenhorn said. ‘Ever dependable. You’ve got a good man there, Gideon. A fine man. Give him my respects. And Kara too, best there is.’

‘I know, Gregor.’ A strangely intense expression that wasn’t her own appeared on Kara’s face. ‘I think it’s time you told me why you brought me here.’

‘Yes, it is. But in person, I think. That would be best. That way you can stop subjecting Kara to that effort of puppeting. And we can be more private. I’ll come down to you.’

‘How? There are no stairs.’

‘The same way I got up here,’ Eisenhorn said. He looked upwards, into the rain hosing down through the broken roof.

‘Cherubael?’ he whispered.

Something nightmarish up in the strobing screamlight answered him.

Its pitted steel hull glossy with rain, the dreadnought machine strode in through the shattered archway. The booming storm threw its hulking shadow a hundred jagging directions at once with its lightning. Its massive cannon pods pumped pneumatically as they retched out streams of las-bolts. The weapons made sharp, barking squeals as they discharged, a repeating note louder than the storm.

Behind it, three dozen armed brethren of the Divine Fraternity charged across the bridge span.

Stone split and fractured under the bombardment. Pillars that had stood for eons teetered and collapsed like felled trees, spraying stone shards out across the terrace flooring.

Nayl, Mathuin and Thonius retreated back into the empty inner chambers of the ruined tower. Even Mathuin’s rotator couldn’t so much as dent the dreadnought’s armour casing.

‘Someone really, really wants us dead,’ Thonius said.

‘Us... or the person we came here to meet,’ Nayl countered. They hurried down a dim colonnade and Nayl shoved both his comrades into the cover of a side arcade as cannon fire – bright as sunbursts – sizzled down the chamber.

‘Golden Throne! There’s got to be something we can try!’ Nayl said.

Mathuin reached into his coat pocket and pulled out three close-focus frag grenades. He held them like a market-seller would hold apples or ploins. It was just like Mathuin to bring a pocket full of explosives. He never felt properly dressed unless he was armed to the back teeth.

‘Don’t suppose you’ve got a mini-nuke in the other pocket?’ asked Thonius.

‘My other suit’s at the cleaners,’ Mathuin replied.

‘They’ll have to do,’ said Nayl. ‘We’ll go with what we’ve got.’ He looked round. They could hear the heavy clanking footfalls of the dreadnought bearing down on them, the hiss of its hydraulic pistons, the whirr of its motivators.

‘They may not even crack the thing’s plating,’ Mathuin remarked. As well as

a supply of ridiculous ordnance, Zeph Mathuin could always be relied on for copious pessimism.

‘We’ll have to get them close,’ said Thonius.

‘We?’ said Nayl. He’d already taken one of the grenades and was weighing it up like a ball.

‘Yes, Mr Nayl. We.’ Thonius took another of the grenades, holding it between finger and thumb like it was a potentially venomous insect. He really wasn’t comfortable with the physicality of fighting. Thonius could hack cogitators and archive stacks faster than any of them, and could rewrite codes that any of the rest didn’t even understand. He was Ravenor’s interrogator because of his considerable intellect, not his killing talents. That’s why Ravenor employed the likes of Nayl and Mathuin. ‘Three of us, three bombs,’ Thonius stated. ‘We’re all in this together. I’m not going to be pulped by that thing without having a go at stopping it myself.’

Nayl looked dubiously at Mathuin.

‘It’s not up for debate, you vulgarians,’ Thonius said snottily. ‘Don’t make me remind you I’m technically in charge here.’

‘Oh, that would explain why we’re technically nose deep in crap,’ Nayl said.

A thick section of stone wall blew in nearby, hammered to fragments by withering cannon fire. The massive weight of the dreadnought crushed heat-brittled stone into dust as it stomped through the gap.

The trio began to run again, down the next terrace, trying to put some distance between them and the killing machine.

‘Get ahead!’ Mathuin said. ‘I’ll take the first pop.’ Nayl nodded and grabbed hold of Thonius, who was still puzzling over his grenade, figuring out how to adjust the knurled dial to set the timer. Nayl got the interrogator into cover.

Thonius straightened his sleeves. ‘If you’ve pulled my coat out of shape, Nayl...’ he began.

Nayl glared at him.

Behind them, in the open, Mathuin primed his grenade and turned. As the dreadnought hove into view, he hurled the small, black charge.

Kara rejoined Ravenor and Kys like an ape, swinging down through the rafters and leaping the last few metres.

Eisenhorn descended after her. He was being carried by a grotesque figure, a human shape twisted and distended by arcane forces. The thing glowed with an eldritch inner light. Its bare limbs and torso were covered with runes and sigils.

Chains dragged from its ankles.

It set Eisenhorn's heavy, cumbersome form down on the flagstones.

'Thank you, Cherubael,' he said.

The thing, its head lolling brokenly, exposed its teeth in a dreadful smile.

'That's all? I can go back now?' it said. Its voice was like sandpaper on glass.

'There are many more phantoms up there to burn.'

'Go ahead,' Eisenhorn said.

The dreadful daemonhost zoomed back aloft into the rain-swept heights of the ruin. At once, the ghastly screaming began again. Light pulsed and flashed.

Eisenhorn faced Ravenor's chair. 'The Fraternity has unleashed everything they have tonight to stop me. To stop me talking to you. Daemonhosts of their own. Cherubael has been battling them. I think he's enjoying it.'

'He?' said Ravenor via his chair's voxponder. 'Last we met, you called that thing an "it", my master.'

Eisenhorn shrugged. His augmetics sighed with the gesture. 'We have reached an understanding. Does that shock you, Gideon?'

'Nothing shocks me any more,' said Ravenor.

'Good,' said Eisenhorn. He looked at Kara and Kys.

'We need a moment, Kara. If you and your friend wouldn't mind.'

'Patience Kys,' Kys said, stern and hard.

'I know who you are,' said Eisenhorn, and turned away with Ravenor. In a low voice, he began to tell his ex-pupil all he knew about the Divine Fraternity.

'Kar... that's Eisenhorn?' Kys whispered to Kara as they watched the figures withdraw.

'Yes,' replied Kara. She was still rather stunned by the meeting, and Ravenor's brief waring had left her tired.

'Everything you and Harlon have said about him... I expected...'

'What?'

'Something more intimidating. He's just a broken old man. And I can't think why he consorts with a Chaos-filth thing like that host-form.'

Kara shrugged. 'I don't know about the daemonhost. He fought it and hated it for so long, and then... I dunno. Maybe he's become the radical they say. But you're wrong. About him being a broken old man. Well, he's broken and he's old... but I'd rather go up against Ravenor unarmed than ever cross Gregor Eisenhorn.'

Mathuin's grenade exploded. The aim had been good, but the device had bounced oddly at the last moment and had gone off beneath the striding

dreadnought. The machine paced on through the ball of fire, untroubled.

Mathuin dived for cover as the cannons began pumping again.

‘Crap... my turn, I suppose,’ said Nayl. He clicked the setter to four seconds, thumbed the igniter, and ran out into the hallway, bowling the grenade underarm.

Then he threw himself into shelter.

The grenade bounced once, lifted with the spin Nayl had put on it, and smacked bluntly against the front shell of the dreadnought.

It was just rebounding off when it detonated.

The dreadnought vanished in a sheet of flame that boiled down the hallway, compressed and driven by the walls and roof.

As it cleared, Thonius saw the dreadnought. Its front was scorched, but it was far, far from dead.

‘Damn. Just me then,’ he said.

‘You’ve dabbled in farseeing,’ Eisenhorn said. ‘I know that. Your time spent with the eldar drew you in that direction.’

‘I won’t deny it,’ Ravenor replied.

‘That makes you bright to the Fraternity,’ said Eisenhorn. ‘It illuminates you in the interwoven pathways of the future. That’s why they located you in their prospects.’

Ravenor was quiet for a moment. ‘And you’ve come all this way, risked all this danger... to warn me?’

‘Of course.’

‘I’m flattered.’

‘Don’t be, Gideon. You’d do the same for me.’

‘I’m sure I would. But what you’re telling me is... crazy.’

Eisenhorn bowed his head and ran the fingers of his right hand up and down the cold grip of his runestaff.

‘Of course it sounds crazy,’ he said. ‘But it’s true. I ask you this... if you don’t believe me, why are these cultist fools trying so hard to prevent our meeting here tonight? They know it’s true. They want you denied of this warning.’

‘That I will trigger this manifestation? This daemon-birth?’

‘You, or one close to you. The trigger point is something that happens on Eustis Majoris.’

Within his force chair, Ravenor was numb. ‘I won’t lie, Gregor. My current investigations focus on that world. I was en route to Eustis Majoris when I

diverted to meet you here. But I have no knowledge of this *Slight*. It hasn't figured in any of my research. I can't believe that something I will do... or something one of my band will do... will—'

'Gideon, I can't believe my only ally these days is a daemonhost. Fate surprises us all.'

'So what should I do, now you've warned me? Abandon my investigations on Eustis? Shy away from that world in the hope that by avoiding it I can also avoid this prophecy?'

Eisenhorn's face was in shadow. 'Maybe you should.'

'No,' said Ravenor. 'What I should be is careful. Careful in my own actions, careful to oversee the actions of my team. If there is truth in the Fraternity's prophecy, it is surely bound up in the dire conspiracy I am just now uncovering on Eustis Majoris. But I must prosecute that case. I would be failing in the duty you charged me with if I didn't. After all, the future is not set. We make it, don't we?'

'I think we do. I hope we do.'

'Gregor, when have either of us shirked from serving the Throne just because we're afraid things might go bad? We are inquisitors, we seek. We do not hide.'

Eisenhorn raised his head and let the falling rain drops patter off his upraised palm. 'Gideon, I came to warn you, nothing else. I never expected you to change your course. Now, at least, you are aware of a "might be". You can be ready for it. That's all I wanted.'

Far behind them, the sound of rapid cannon-fire and dull explosions echoed through the tower.

'I think the time for conversation is over,' said Eisenhorn.

Thonius's pockets were not full of munitions and ordnance like Mathuin's, but he reached into them anyway. In one, a mini-cogitator, in another, two data-slates. In a third, a clasped leather case in which he had wrapped his tools: files, data-pins, fine brushes, tubes of lubricant, a vial of adhesive, pliers and tweezers. All the bric-a-brac that aided him in conquering and tinkering with cogitators and codifiers.

'Carl! Get into cover!' Nayl was yelling.

Thonius slid out the vial of adhesive and wiped the drooling nozzle down the side of the grenade ball, waiting a moment for it to get contact-tacky.

Then, taking a deep breath, he leapt out of cover into the face of the dreadnought and lobbed the grenade. It hit the front casing, and adhered there,

stuck fast.

Mathuin threw himself out of cover and tackled Thonius, bringing him down behind a pillar.

The grenade exploded.

‘You see?’ said Thonius. ‘You see how *thinking* works?’

But the dreadnought wasn’t finished. The blast had split its belly plates, but it was still moving, still striding, still firing.

Thonius shrugged. ‘Okay... we’re dead.’

The dreadnought suddenly stopped blasting. It faltered. A chill swept over the chamber.

Ravenor’s chair slid into view, heading towards the killer machine. With the force of his mind, he had momentarily jammed its weapons.

Sudden frost coated the walls, Ravenor’s chair and the dreadnought. The machine tried to move. Cycling mechanisms shuddered as it attempted to clear its guns.

A tall figure strode past Ravenor, heading for the dreadnought. It held a runestaff in one hand and a drawn sword in the other. Its robes fluttered out behind it, stiff with ice.

‘Holy Terra!’ exclaimed Nayl. ‘Eisenhorn?’

A second before Ravenor’s mental grip failed, a second before the cannons resumed their murderous work, Eisenhorn swung the sword – Barbarisater – and cleft the dreadnought in two. The sword-blade ripped along the fissure Thonius’s cunning grenade had put in it.

Eisenhorn turned aside and shielded his face as the dreadnought combusted.

He looked back at them all, terrible and majestic, backlit by flames. ‘Shall we?’ he said.

With their dreadnought gone, the remainder of the Fraternity force fled. The warband and the two inquisitors slaughtered many as they made their escape into the storm.

Tugging one of her kineblades out of a body with her mind, Kys watched Eisenhorn ripping his way through the faltering hostiles around them.

‘Now I see what you mean,’ she said to Kara Swole.

‘I’m done here,’ Gregor Eisenhorn said. He looked back across the bridge span to the tower. Screamlight was still dancing around the summit. ‘Cherubael needs my help now. I should go and see how he’s doing.’

‘I will be vigilant,’ Ravenor said.

Eisenhorn knelt and pressed his gnarled hands flat against the side of the chair.

‘The Emperor go with you. I’ve said my piece. It’s up to you now, Gideon.’

Eisenhorn rose and looked at the others. ‘Mamzel Kys. Interrogator. Mr Mathuin. A pleasure meeting you.’ He nodded to each of them. ‘Kara?’

She smiled. ‘Gregor.’

‘Never a hardship seeing you. Look after Gideon for me.’

‘I will.’

Eisenhorn looked at Harlon Nayl and held out a hand. Nayl clasped it with both of his.

‘Harlon. Like old times.’

‘Emperor protect you, Gregor.’

‘I hope so,’ Eisenhorn said, and walked away, back across the bridge span towards the tower where the screamlight still flashed and sparked. They knew they would not see him again.

Unless the future was not as set as it seemed.

Malinter fell away below them, vast and silent. Nayl piloted the transport up into low orbit, flashing out signals to their ship.

Once the nav was set and automatics had taken over, he turned his chair on its pivot and looked at Ravenor.

‘He wasn’t the same,’ he said.

+How do you mean?+

‘He seemed so sane I thought he was mad.’

+Yes. I thought that too. It’s hard to know whether I should believe him.+

‘About what?’

+About the dangers ahead, Harlon. The risks we may take.+

‘So... what do we do?’

+We carry on. We do our best. We serve the Emperor of Mankind. If what Gregor said comes to pass, we deal with it. Unless you have a better idea.’

‘Not a one,’ replied Nayl, turning back to study the controls.

+Good.+ sent Ravenor, and wheeled his chair around, returning to the cabin space behind where the others were gathered.

Nayl sighed and looked ahead at the turning starfields.

The future lay ahead, its back to them, saying nothing.

## About The Author

Dan Abnett is a novelist and award-winning comic book writer. He has written over thirty-five novels, including the acclaimed Gaunt's Ghosts series, the Eisenhower and Ravenor trilogies and, with Mike Lee, the Darkblade cycle. His novels *Horus Rising* and *Legion* (both for the Black Library) and his Torchwood novel *Border Princes* (for the BBC) were all bestsellers. His novel *Triumff*, for Angry Robot, was published in 2009 and nominated for the British Fantasy Society Award for Best Novel. He lives and works in Maidstone, Kent. Dan's blog and website can be found at [www.danabnett.com](http://www.danabnett.com)

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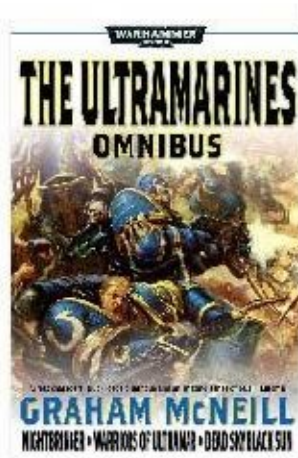
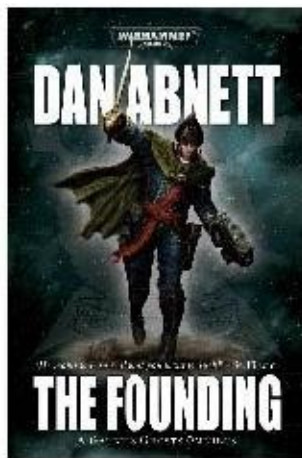
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