

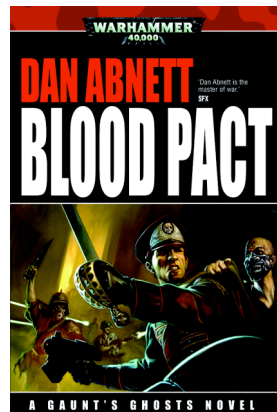
**BL PUBLISHING**

## ***BLOOD PACT***

*A Gaunt's Ghosts novel*

*By Dan Abnett*

Can anyone be trusted? Pulled back from the front line of the Sabbat Worlds Crusade, the men of the Tanith First-and-Only await news of their next deployment. But when an enemy prisoner is brought in for interrogation, Gaunt is drawn into a murderous web of intrigue. Who can be trusted, and exactly what does the prisoner know that makes him so valuable? The fate of the crusade rests upon the answers, and Gaunt must find them out before he is eliminated.



### **About the Author**

Dan Abnett is a novelist and award-winning comic book writer. He has written twenty-five novels for the Black Library, including the acclaimed Gaunt's Ghosts series and the Eisenhorn and Ravenor trilogies, and, with Mike Lee, the Darkblade cycle. His Black Library novel *Horus Rising* and his Torchwood novel *Border*

*Princes* (for the BBC) were both bestsellers. He lives and works in Maidstone, Kent.

Dan's website can be found at [www.DanAbnett.com](http://www.DanAbnett.com)

• **GAUNT'S GHOSTS** •

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Book 11 – **ONLY IN DEATH**  
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**DOUBLE EAGLE**  
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The following is an excerpt from *Blood Pact* by Dan Abnett.  
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‘Do you remember Vergule?’ asked Blenner, over lunch at the  
Mithredates Club.

‘Vergil?’ Gaunt replied. ‘Auguste Vergil? The Oudinot  
staffer?’

‘No, old man,’ Blenner laughed. ‘Ver-gule. Salman  
Vergule. Urdeshi fellow, served with the 42nd. We were in the field  
alongside him at Serpsika.’

‘You maybe,’ said Gaunt. ‘I was never at Serpsika. You’re  
thinking of somebody else.’

‘Am I?’ asked Blenner, with a touch of concern.

Across the table, Zettsman chuckled at them.

‘You’re like an old married couple, you pair,’ he said. He  
finished clipping the end of a fine, Khulan-leaf cigar, and lit it with a  
long, black match.

‘Are we indeed?’ replied Blenner.

‘I’m not sure which one of us should be more offended,’  
said Gaunt.

‘Neither am I,’ Blenner agreed.

‘You witter on so,’ remarked Hargiter, sipping caffeine from a little, heavy-bottomed glass.

‘I’ve never wittered in my life,’ said Gaunt.

Hargiter caught the look, and shrugged.

‘Well, maybe not. But he does,’ he said, gesturing at Blenner.

‘I resemble that remark!’ returned Blenner.

‘So what were you saying about this Vergule fellow?’ asked Edur.

Blenner tapped the top sheet of the broadside gazette he had been reading. ‘It turns out he’s been here all this while. Arrived a year ago, about the same time you did, ’Bram.’

‘Wait,’ said Gaunt, putting down the sugar tongs. ‘This Vergule, was he a tall fellow with a hangdog expression?’

‘That’s the one,’ said Blenner.

‘Yes, I do remember him. He was at Phantine, I believe. Anyway, if he’s here, I haven’t seen him around.’

‘You wouldn’t have done,’ replied Blenner. ‘It says here he’s entirely dead. His body’s been in the Urdesh regimental chapel for twelve months.’

‘What did he die of?’ asked Zettsman.

‘Oh, you know, war,’ said Blenner.

‘Where?’ asked Gaunt.

‘It doesn’t say,’ said Blenner, peering at the broadside. ‘Oh, wait, it does. Morlond.’

‘Not the only good soul lost there,’ remarked Edur grimly.

Blenner looked at Gaunt. ‘I was thinking, we should go and pay our respects. This afternoon, perhaps?’

‘I’ve got things to do, Vay.’

Vaynom Blenner sighed. ‘Tomorrow morning then? Come on, old man, we ought to toddle over there and apologise to him for not dropping by sooner. It’s the decent thing.’

‘I suppose,’ said Gaunt.

The majordomo, in crimson, black and gold, hovered beside the table where the five Imperial commissars were sitting.

‘Will there be anything else, sirs?’ he asked.

Gaunt shook his head. ‘Just bring me the tab to sign, would you?’

The major domo nodded. Blenner looked crestfallen.

‘I was considering another helping of fruit tart,’ he announced plaintively.

‘You’ll end up looking like a fruit tart,’ said Edur.

‘Steady, old man!’ Blenner replied. He looked hurt. He patted the orange Commissariat sash that was stretched around his ample stomach. ‘Solid muscle, that. Solid.’

‘Edur’s right,’ said Gaunt, taking a stylus from the majordomo to sign the bill. ‘When I came back from Gereon the first time, my duty breeches hung off me like a tent. The other morning – and they’re the same pair, mind – I realised I had begun

to fasten them on the third button. I used to have a washboard stomach.'

'Some of us still do, old man,' said Blenner.

'Wash-house, more like,' muttered Hargiter.

'Oi!' snorted Blenner. The others laughed.

'It's the passage of time,' said Blenner. 'That's what I'm saying. You came back from Gereon in '76, Ibram. That's knocking on five years ago. Face facts. We're all getting old.'

'Speak for yourself!' the other four men chorused. There was more laughter.

Gaunt told the majordomo to have his car brought around. He waited for Blenner in the atrium, out of courtesy. His oldest friend had disappeared into the club's cloakroom, complaining about a missing glove.

The atrium's marble columns had been draped in swathes of mourning crepe, and white lilies had been set in the onyx jardinières. At the far end of the hall, under the dished window that looked out across the street and north towards the Oligarchy Gate, two craftsmen in overalls were working on the last phase of restoration to the inlaid murals. The night manager of the Mithredates had told Gaunt the work was expected to be finished in another eighteen months. It had taken fifteen years to get that far. The club had been hit by a tank round in the final hours of the war, and the intricate murals had been badly damaged.

Gaunt wondered if there might not be better things to spend fifteen years rebuilding.

‘So what’s on your plate for the rest of the day?’ asked Zettsman, buttoning up his stormcoat as he walked over.

‘I might spend a few hours with the Kapaj,’ Gaunt replied.

‘You rate them?’

‘They’re decent enough,’ Gaunt answered. ‘I’d rather spend time with my own mob, but the Kapaj need to be whipped into shape, and Section is very keen on this mentoring role.’

‘Tell me about it,’ Zettsman replied. ‘I’ve been given a group of cadets and I’m expected to get them through their SP3 1s. They’re appalling. Throne help me, they manage to make Blenner look like he operates at an acceptable level of competence.’

Gaunt laughed, but it rankled. Lately, Blenner had been taking too many jibes below the waterline.

‘I don’t know why you put up with him,’ said Zettsman.

‘Who?’

‘Blenner, of course.’

Gaunt paused.

‘We were at schola progenium together,’ he said. ‘Vaynom has survived longer than anyone else I’ve known. I have to give him some credit for that.’

‘I suppose,’ replied Zettsman. ‘And he was right, of course, about time rolling on. None of us are getting any younger. It must be strange for you especially.’

‘What must?’ Gaunt asked.

‘Well, we’ve all done our bit over the years, and we’ve all had our moments, but your track record puts most of us to shame. If I’d done half the things you’ve done, I’d have taken a marshal’s baton and a seat at high command years ago.’

‘Not my style.’

‘Oh, and this is? Like I said, it must be very strange for you, this easy life, these leisurely meals, the evenings at the club. It must be odd to accept that your active service is done, and this is the end of it, mentoring new-found and growing a paunch while you fly a desk towards semi-retirement.’

‘What’s the matter?’ Blenner asked, catching up with Gaunt. He had found the elusive glove.

‘Nothing.’

‘Don’t give me that, Ibram. There’s a look on your face. Zettsman was here, just a moment ago. I saw him walking away. What did he say to you?’

‘Nothing,’ said Gaunt, again.

‘I’ll wrestle you to the ground, don’t think I won’t.’

Gaunt looked at Blenner. Blenner still hadn’t quite got used to the flash in his old friend’s new eyes.

‘Zettsman just said something,’ Gaunt replied. ‘He didn’t mean anything by it. It was just something I hadn’t really thought of before.’

‘Well, what?’ asked Blenner. ‘That you owe your entire career to my inspirational example?’

‘That part obviously came as a shock,’ said Gaunt. He smiled, but there was frost on it. ‘No, he just assumed that I was done. Didn’t give it a second thought. There was no malice meant. He just took for granted the idea that I’d done my part, and that my front-line career was over.’

‘Ah,’ said Blenner.

‘I have always assumed that, in due course, the routing order will come through, and I’ll take the First and Only back to the line. Crusade main front, secondary front, I don’t care. It never occurred to me it would be any other way.’

‘You worry too much,’ said Blenner.

‘I will get posted again, won’t I?’

‘You worry too much.’

‘But—’

‘Look, old man,’ said Blenner, patting Gaunt on the sleeve, ‘you were on the line a bloody long time. You and the Ghosts, how long was it?’

‘From the Founding? Twelve years.’

‘Twelve bloody years, old man! Twelve bloody years without rotation out of the line! Most regimental commanders would have been sending formal complaints to the top of the chain!’

‘I’d thought about it.’

‘And thank goodness they rotated you out before you had to.’

‘It’s been two years since Jago, Vay.’

‘You needed that long to recover, you old devil. The bastards nearly murdered you.’

Gaunt shrugged.

‘We’re rested now,’ he said. ‘We’ve come all this way back to Balhaut, to a world I never expected to see again, and we’ve sat around for a year, getting fat and bored and out of shape, and none of those things have filled me with anxiety, because I’ve been expecting the routing order any day.’

‘It’ll come,’ said Blenner.

‘Will it?’

‘Yes.’

‘They’ll send me back?’

‘Throne’s sake, Ibram, you’re the bloody poster boy for ridiculous Imperial heroism. They won’t be able to do without you at the front line for much longer.’

Gaunt nodded.

‘If you ask me,’ said Blenner, heading for the door, ‘I don’t know why you’re in such a bloody rush.’

Outside, there was a winter chill as hard as Gaunt’s mood. There was a touch of pink in the sky, and the light had turned the

cityscape a pale, floury white. They stood on the steps and pulled on their gloves, their breath fuming.

‘I’m sorry for the delay, sirs,’ said the doorman. Gaunt’s staff car had yet to appear. Hargiter was down on the pavement, waiting for his own limousine to arrive from the parking garage. They joined him.

Hargiter was studying the skyline. So many of the spires and domes were still clad in scaffolding and canvas lids. Like a gap-toothed smile, there were pieces missing.

‘You were here, weren’t you?’ Hargiter asked.

‘Oh, it was all very different then,’ said Blenner. ‘I remember the Tower of the Plutocrat—’

‘You weren’t here, Vay,’ said Gaunt. ‘You and the Greygorians were on Hisk.’

‘Fair play,’ pouted Blenner. ‘If you had let me finish, I was going to say “I remember the Tower of the Plutocrat from the many mezzotints and engravings I have seen”. Yes, Ibram was here. In fact, I believe he’s the principal reason there isn’t a Tower of the Plutocrat any more.’

‘I doubt you recognise the place,’ said Hargiter. ‘It took such a pounding, there can’t be much left that was standing when you were here.’

‘No,’ Gaunt agreed. ‘Time passes and things change. You tend to see things with different eyes.’

‘Of course, in his case,’ said Blenner, ‘he means that literally.’

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He walked to the end of Selwire Street and then, on a drafty corner, checked the directions that had been written on the scrap of paper. Daylight was bleeding away fast, and it felt as if it was taking the heat with it. He wondered if there was going to be snow. He wondered if it was going to be as heavy as the trouble he was getting into.

Left at the corner, the instructions read, along an underwalk, and then across a small court hidden behind a merchant’s townhouse and a busy garmentfab loft. Follow the six steps down from street level, the ones with a black iron handrail ending in a gryphon’s beak. There’ll be a red door, the colour of a victory medal’s ribbon.

Also, he thought, the colour that tended to edge the pages of a Commissariat charge-sheet.

There was no point thinking like that. He’d come too far to turn back. He went down the steps, and pressed the ivory button of the bell. He waited. The court above was lit by the lights of the garmentfab loft. They were working late. He could hear the clatter of stitching machines and thread-runners, like distant stub-fire.

The door opened, and a handsome woman in a green dress looked out at him. She seemed faintly amused, as if someone he couldn't see had told her something funny just before she'd opened the door.

'Captain,' she said.

'Hello,' he replied.

'I take it you haven't rung the wrong bell by mistake?'

'Not if this is Zolunder's,' he said.

'It doesn't say so above the door,' she replied, 'but it is. You'll need two things to get in.'

He showed her the fat roll of bills that had been sitting like a hot coal in his trouser pocket.

'That's one,' she said. 'The other's a name.'

'Daur,' said Ban Daur.

The hostess took him along a chilly corridor and downstairs into the main area of the parlour. The air smelled of quality spice from the burners, and music was provided by the cantor-finches fluttering and trilling in their delicate, suspended cages. Zolunder's was several levels removed from the common gaming dens and rowdy-houses where enlisted men lost their pay. It was demure and exclusive, catering for officers and aristocrats.

Three games were in progress around the broad, lacquer-work tables arranged in bays around the room. Attentive girls in long gowns drifted about with trays of drinks.

‘Why did you need my name?’ Daur asked the hostess, but he knew why. Zolunder’s had an illegal hardwire link to the Munitorum database, which they used to check identities. To get past the red door and the hostess in green, you had to be who you said you were. Deception did not go down at all well.

‘Security,’ she replied.

She took him to the bar. He was amused to see that it was made of a single, polished section of nalwood. Now was that a good omen or a bad one?

‘What’s amusing you?’ she asked.

‘Nothing.’

‘You haven’t done this before, have you?’ she asked.

‘No, it’s not really my speed,’ he said.

‘Then why?’ she asked

Daur shrugged. ‘I need to make a little money.’

‘You’ve got a little money in your pocket.’

‘A little more.’

‘You’re in trouble?’

‘Isn’t everyone?’ he asked.

The hostess frowned. It was a decent answer. Pretty much everyone she saw through the red door was in trouble, even if that trouble was just an over-fondness for cards. She always felt sorry for the punters who came along with desperate dreams of turning a little into a lot. It never happened.

She always felt especially sorry for the men, like the nice-looking captain before her, who seemed honest and good-hearted, but who were about to ruin their good character forever.

‘I’ll send someone over,’ she said.

‘Why?’ he asked.

‘To keep you company until a space opens at a table,’ she replied.

‘I thought you were keeping me company?’ he said.

She laughed.

‘You can’t afford me, captain,’ she said.

He blushed immediately.

‘I didn’t mean—’ he began.

She was genuinely surprised by the offence he imagined had been taken.

‘I’ll send someone over,’ she said.

The hostess left Daur at the bar and went away through a curtain into the private rooms. Urbano was watching the bar area on a monitor. He seemed in a particularly foul mood.

‘What’s up with this one, Elodie?’ he asked, gesturing at the screen image of Daur. ‘He’s got a fidget I don’t like.’

‘Well, he’s got a stake in his pocket that you will,’ she replied. ‘He’s a proper gentleman, and as pure as the driven. You can take him for everything. I’m sure you’ll enjoy that.’

‘How much has he got?’ Urbano asked. He was daintily cleaning his teeth with a stainless steel pick. Elodie had worked for Cyrus Urbano for eight years, and she still could not reconcile his gentle mannerisms with the frenzied brutality she knew he was capable of.

‘I didn’t take it and count it,’ she replied snidely, ‘but I’d say a thousand at least.’

Urbano whistled. ‘Where did a man like that get a thousand?’

‘Maybe he borrowed it from Guard payroll. That might explain his nerves.’

‘The wirelink says he’s an officer in the Tanith First,’ said Urbano, reading off the data-log.

‘He’s obviously got problems on his shoulders,’ said Elodie. ‘That makes him desperate, which makes him careless.’ She looked around at the girls waiting on the couches.

‘I need someone to charm him,’ she said. Two or three of her regulars were about to raise their hands.

‘Did you say he was Tanith?’ asked the new girl.

‘That’s right,’ said Elodie.

The girl got up.

‘I’ll take this one,’ she said.

‘That’s right, you’re from the dead world too, aren’t you?’ asked Elodie.

The girl nodded. She was good-looking, with the dark hair and pale skin of the Tanith. She'd only been with them two nights, on probation still, and she hadn't yet hosted a customer.

'Send someone with a bit more experience,' Urbano told Elodie.

'No, let's give her a chance. The Tanith connection's too good to miss out on. This Captain Daur needs careful handling if he's going to owe the house.'

Urbano shrugged his heavy shoulders. He looked over at the new girl and nodded.

'Off you go then,' Elodie told her. The new girl smiled, checked her reflection in the mirror, straightened her red silk gown, and headed for the exit.

'Just remember,' Elodie called after her. The new girl stopped and looked back.

'Try not to screw it up, Banda,' Elodie said.

The new girl smiled.

'I'll do my best,' she said.

'We should get a drink,' she said.

Daur looked up. He'd been watching the cantor-finches in the nearest cage.

'I wanted to keep my head straight,' he said.

'You here to play?' she asked, sitting down next to him, and draping the skirts of her red silk dress over her legs elegantly.

‘Yes,’ he said.

‘Then you’re here to have a good time,’ she said. ‘We’ll have a drink, and then perhaps another.’ She made a two-fingered gesture at the drinks servitor. ‘Sacra,’ she said.

‘That’s hard stuff,’ said Daur.

‘You don’t drink sacra?’

She leaned close to him, and sniffed him.

‘You’re not Tanith at all, are you?’ she asked.

‘Verghast,’ he said. ‘The regiments amalgamated after the siege of Vervunhive, and it was restructured—’

The girl in the red dress made her hand mimic a chattering mouth.

‘Lots of words, none of them interesting,’ she said. ‘What’s your name, Verghast?’

‘Ban. Ban Daur.’

‘Ban, eh? Well, I’m Ban-da.’

‘Really? Do you know, there’s a Tanith girl in the First called Jessi Banda. She looks just like you.’

‘Does she?’ asked Banda. ‘And I thought I was a one-off.’

‘Well,’ said Daur, ‘she’s quite beautiful too.’

Banda smiled. ‘There, you see. Mouth moving, better words coming out. That was almost charming.’

‘Oh, I can be,’ said Daur.

‘When?’ she asked.

The servitor put two small glasses of sacra in front of them.

‘I’ll warn you when it’s going to happen again,’ he said.

They clinked glasses.

‘You’re nervous,’ she said quietly.

‘This is all very new to me,’ he said.

‘Then why come here?’

‘I didn’t have much choice.’

‘Under pressure to perform are we?’ she asked.

‘Something like that.’

‘Let me guess,’ she said. ‘There’s an evil superior officer, and you’re horribly beholden to him, in debt somehow. He’s sent you here tonight to raise funds to get him off your back, because you’re such a butter-wouldn’t-melt innocent that you’ll take the house. You’re his secret weapon.’

Daur turned pale.

‘Don’t,’ he shuddered.

‘What’s the matter?’

‘Why did you say that?’

‘I was just joking. Throne, did I hit a little too close to home?’

Daur took another sip of his drink.

‘What’s his name?’ she asked.

‘Rawne,’ he replied.

‘Are you his secret weapon?’

‘How can I be if you’ve already seen through me?’

She shrugged. She saw Elodie signal from the curtain.

‘There’s a seat opening,’ she told Daur. ‘Are you feeling lucky?’

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Urbano watched the monitor as the Tanith captain took his place at one of the lacquer-work tables. The girl in the red dress stood at his side, draping an over-familiar arm across his shoulder.

‘This is going to be painful,’ he smiled. ‘The ninker’s terrified. Way out of his comfort zone. Easy meat.’

‘Either that,’ said Elodie, ‘or the best hustler you’ve ever seen. He’s almost too good to be true.’

‘He’s the genuine article,’ Urbano scoffed. ‘It’s right there on the data-log. We need to make him reckless. Let him play a couple of hands, and then take twenty thousand out of the safe and move it to the dealer’s drawer. Make sure he sees it. Make sure his mouth waters. I want his safety catches to flip all the way off.’

The cards were tall and hand-coloured. They flowed from the dealer’s hands like punch-tokens from a cogitator. There was a charged atmosphere around the table.

Rawne had taught Daur the rudiments of the game, a trick-and-trade variety called Suicide Kings, but he was hardly an expert. With each hand, it was a constant struggle to remember the basic combination hierarchy and the correct moments to discard, let alone

the tips he'd been given. Three of a kind sweeps two pairs, and quads sweep everything except the dynasties. The odds of a straight or regal dynasty are 649,739 to 1, so a lousy player always chases hands that are statistically unlikely. The deuce of swords reverses the march, the sequence of play, and allows for out-of-turn wagers. The king of cups, Blue Sejanus as he is called, is wild when the march is clockwise, and the ace of swords, its single pip bloated and enlarged to incorporate the tax-paid duty stamp, is wild counter-clock. Base your wagers on a calculation of your available outs. Certain court cards are magic kickers that could break tied hands.

So much to remember. Daur focused on the two chief rules. Limp, to stay in as long as possible, but make them aware of just how much you have in your pocket.

He played the minimal bets on every hand, but between deals, or when the march switched, he took out his roll of bills and pretended to count them under the edge of the table. He played through four hands, won nothing, and lost the minimum.

'For Throne's sake, have a real bid, why don't you?' the Tanith girl whispered into his ear.

Just before the fifth hand was dealt, the hostess in green came over to the table with a flat leather case. She unlocked the wooden drawer under the tabletop where the dealer was standing, and slid it out. There was cash in its wooden tray already, about fifteen hundred in mixed bills. She opened the case and loaded the

tray with twenty thousand in crisp bricks of currency. Daur watched the whole process, his blink-rate rising.

‘Could I get a drink?’ he asked the Tanith girl. ‘My mouth’s a little dry.’

‘Of course,’ she said, and left the table.

The hostess closed the drawer and went away with the case. The fifth hand came out. Daur had a pair of sevens. He began to bid with a little more vigour.

The Tanith girl came back, and put his drink on the table beside his wrist.

‘All done,’ she whispered in his ear. She looked at the table. ‘Getting a little bolder?’ she teased. The bidding went around the table again. It came down to Daur and another player, a sour-looking Navy officer, who called him.

They each had a pair sevens. The Navy man sniffed and turned his kicker. It was a ten of swords.

Daur flipped his own kicker.

The jack of cups.

The dealer swept the pot across to Daur. He’d just taken over a hundred on a single hand.

‘I’m beginning to like you,’ chuckled the Tanith girl, stroking his ear.

There was a sudden crash. It was the sort of crash that a door the colour of a victory medal’s ribbon would make if it got kicked in. There was a commotion, and some shouting. Players

jumped up from the tables, cards knocked askew. Four men in battledress burst into the parlour aiming service pistols. Some of the players and girls tried to leave, but the soldiers had all the exits blocked.

‘What the hell is this?’ Urbano demanded, storming out from the private areas. Elodie shrank back. She hoped her boss would have the sense not to kick off.

‘Looks like an illegal game to me,’ replied the Imperial commissar who wandered into the room through the soldiers aiming the pistols.

‘Oh, come on!’ said Urbano. ‘You know this is a waste of your time.’

The commissar looked around. ‘Huh. This is the famous Zolunder’s, eh? You’ve no idea how long the Commissariat has been trying to close you down.’

He looked at Urbano. ‘Nice place. I mean, tasteful. You’ve got a pattern on your carpet that’s not the consequence of vomit. That’s rare, by gambling parlour standards.’

‘You’re making a mistake, commissar...’

‘Hark,’ replied the commissar.

‘Well, Commissar Hark,’ said Urbano, ‘you should know that the Commissariat has tried this before, to no avail.’

‘Oh, I know how you cover yourself,’ said the commissar. ‘The oh-so-expensive lawyers you keep on retainer throw out any raid as an illegal search, and you keep your considerable cash

supplies locked up in a safe, knowing that we can only confiscate monies in game circulation. So we take a few hundred off your tables, stick you with a nuisance fine for unlicensed gaming, and go away with our tails between our legs.'

The commissar smiled at Urbano. 'The thing is, pal, we're not here to mount another pointless raid on Zolunder's tonight. But you're going to wish we were.'

'What are you talking about?' growled Urbano. 'Just give me the fine notice and get out.'

The commissar placed his hand on Daur's shoulder. Daur kept staring at the cards on the table, but he shivered.

'Hello, Daur.'

'Sir,' Daur whispered.

The commissar looked at Urbano. 'We're here for Captain Daur.'

'What's he done?'' asked Urbano.

'Not your business, but it wasn't pretty,' said the commissar. 'And it was enough to send him here tonight in a desperate attempt to raise enough cash for a ticket off-world. Let's have him, boys.'

The soldiers closed in around Daur and got him to his feet. One of them cuffed him and began to lead him away.

'Let him be!' the Tanith girl snapped.

'Bring her too,' the commissar told his men. 'Let's see what she knows about his activities.'

The Tanith girl began to scream and shout as another of the soldiers manhandled her off the premises.

The commissar looked back at Urbano.

‘One last piece of bad news for you,’ he said. ‘We’ve just apprehended a deserter in flight. That’ll make felony two, and it means we can seize all assets involved in said commission.’

‘You’ve got to be kidding me,’ Urbano breathed, his eyes wide with rage.

The commissar shook his head sweetly. His two remaining men cleared the table of all cash, emptied the pockets of the other players, and then opened the table drawer and removed the fat, crisp bricks of notes that Elodie had put in the tray. They dumped the takings into three canvas evidence bags.

‘Do you want a receipt?’ asked the commissar.

‘Get out,’ said Urbano.

Outside, it had begun to snow. The garmentfab had closed for the night and its windows were dark. The night sky over the ancient city was a threatening maroon haze. The men bundled Daur and the Tanith girl into the back of a cargo-8 and clambered aboard. The truck started up, and rolled down out of the court onto the empty street.

In the back of the truck, the commissar sat down on the bench facing Daur and the girl. He weighed the evidence sacks in his hands.

‘About twenty-two, twenty-three thousand,’ he said.

Daur stared back at him.

‘Commissar Hark’ he smiled. ‘Nice work, captain.’

‘Thanks,’ replied Daur. ‘You look a complete gimpy in that commissar suit, by the way.’

Rawne took off the commissar’s cap.

‘Well, it did the trick,’ he said.

‘I’ll say,’ chuckled Meryn, sitting back and unbuttoning the collar of his battledress.

‘Can I hold the stash?’ Banda asked Rawne. ‘Just hold it, for a moment?’

Rawne laughed and tossed her the evidence sacks.

She opened the canvas pouches and sniffed.

‘We’ll make a career criminal out of you yet, Daur,’ said Meryn.

‘This was strictly a one-time thing, Meryn,’ Daur replied.

‘Oh, they all say that,’ said Varl. ‘They absolutely all say that.’

The truck began to slow down. Rawne leaned over and rapped his fist against the partition.

‘Leyr? Cant? Why are we slowing down?’ he called.

‘Looks like the road’s shut, boss,’ Leyr’s voice came back from the cab. ‘We’re going to go left instead.’

The truck swung around.

‘As I was saying,’ said Varl, wagging a cheeky finger at Daur. ‘You have the poise of a master conman.’

Daur was about to respond when the truck slammed to a halt.

‘What the feth?’ asked Varl. ‘What the feth’s the matter, Cant?’ he shouted through the partition into the cab.

‘Roadblock!’ Trooper Cant’s voice answered.

‘What?’

‘It’s only the fething Commissariat!’ they heard Cant yell. ‘The real one, I mean!’

Rawne looked at Meryn, Varl, Banda and Daur.

‘Oh, not good,’ said Varl.

‘Yeah,’ said Rawne, ‘this is absolutely what not good feels like.’

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