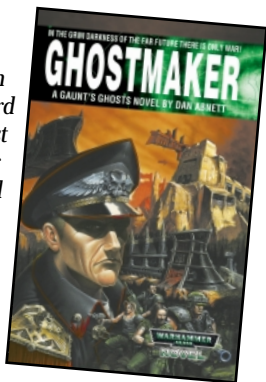


GHOSTMAKER

A GAUNT'S GHOSTS NOVEL BY DAN ABNETT

IN THE NIGHTMARE future of Warhammer 40,000, mankind teeters on the brink of extinction. The Imperial Guard are humanity's first line of defence against the remorseless assaults of the enemy. For the men of the Tanith First-and-Only and their fearless commander, Commissar Ibram Gaunt, it is a war in which they must be prepared to lay down, not just their bodies, but their very souls.

DAN ABNETT is a writer of prose and comic books who lives in the UK. His popular series featuring Gaunt's Ghosts, Inquisitor Eisenhorn, Darkblade, Titan and many more have endeared him to sf and fantasy fans around the globe as a major new talent.



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A BLOODING

THEY WERE A good two hours into the dark, black-trunked forests of the Voltemand Mirewoods, tracks churning the filthy ooze and the roar of their engines resonating from the sickly canopy of leaves above, when Colonel Ortiz saw death.

It wore red, and stood in the trees to the right of the track, in plain sight, unmoving, watching his column of Basilisks as they passed along the trackway. It was the lack of movement that chilled Ortiz. He did a double take, first seeing the figure as they passed it before realising what it was.

Almost twice a man's height, frighteningly broad, armour the colour of rusty blood, crested by recurve brass antlers. The face was a graven death's head. Daemon. Chaos Warrior. *World Eater*.

Ortiz snapped his gaze back to it and felt his blood drain away. He fumbled for his radio link.

'Alarm! Alarm! Ambush to the right!' he yelled into the set. Gears slammed and whined, and hundreds of tons of mechanised steel shuddered, foundered and slithered on the muddy track, penned, trapped, too cumbersome to react quickly.

By then the Chaos Space Marine had begun to move. So had its six comrades, each emerging from the woods around them.

Panic seized Ortiz's convoy cluster: the ten-vehicle forward portion of a heavy column of eighty flame-and-feather painted Basilisk tanks of the 'Serpents', the Ketzok 17th Armoured Regiment, sent in to support the frontal push of the Royal Volpone 50th, the so-called 'Bluebloods'. The Ketzok had the firepower to flatten a city, but caught on a strangled trackway, in a thick woodland, with no room to turn or traverse, and with monstrous enemies at close quarters, far too close to bring the main guns to bear, they were all but helpless. Panic alarms spread backwards down the straggled column, from convoy portion to portion. Ortiz heard tree trunks shatter as some commanders tried to haul their machines off the track.

The World Eaters started baying as they advanced, wrenching out of their augmented throats deep, inhuman calls that whooped across the trackway and shivered the metal of the tank armour. They howled the name of the bloody abomination they worshipped.

'Small arms!' Ortiz ordered. 'Use the pintle mounts!' As he spoke, he cranked round the autocannon mounted on his vehicle's rear and angled it at the nearest monster.

The killing started. The rasping belch of flamers reached his ears and he heard the screams of men cooking inside their superheated tank hulls. The Chaos Marine he had first spotted reached the Basilisk ahead of his and began to chop its shell like firewood with a chain-axe. Sparks blew up from punctured metal. Sparks, flames, metal shards, meat.

Screaming, Ortiz trained his mounted gun on the World Eater and fired. He shot long at first, but corrected before the monster could turn. The creature didn't seem to feel the first hits. Ortiz clenched the trigger and streamed the heavy tracer fire at the red spectre. At last the figure shuddered, convulsed and then blew apart.

Ortiz cursed. The World Eaters soaked up the sort of punishment that would kill a Leman Russ. He realised his ammo drum was almost empty. He was snapping it free and shouting to his bombardier for a fresh one when the shadow fell on him.

Ortiz turned.

Another Chaos Marine stood on the rear of the Basilisk behind him, a giant blocking out the pale sunlight. It stooped, and howled its victory shout into his face, assaulting him with concussive sonic force and wretched odour. Ortiz recoiled as if

he had been hit by a macro shell. He could not move. The World Eater chuckled, a macabre, deep growl from behind the visor, a seismic rumble. The chainsword in its fist whined and swung up...

The blow didn't fall. The monster rocked, two or three times, swayed for a moment. And exploded.

Smearred with grease and ichor, Ortiz scrambled up out of his hatch. He was suddenly aware of a whole new layer of gunfire – sustained lasgun blasts, the chatter of support weapons, the crump of grenades. Another force was moving out of the woods, crushing the Chaos Marine ambush hard against the steel flanks of his artillery machines.

As Ortiz watched, the remaining World Eaters died. One was punctured dozens of times by lasgun fire and fell face down into the mire. Another was flamed repeatedly as he ripped apart the wreck of a Basilisk with his steel hands. The flames touched off the tank's magazine and the marine was incinerated with his victims. His hideous roar lingered long after the white-hot flames had consumed him.

The column's saviours emerged from the forest around them. Imperial Guards: tall, dark-haired, pale-skinned men in black fatigues, a scruffy, straggle-haired mob almost invisible in their patterned camo-cloaks. Ortiz heard strange, disturbing pipe music strike up a banshee wail in the close forest, and a victory yelp erupted from the men. It was met by cheers and whoops from his own crews.

Ortiz leapt down into the mud and approached the Imperial Guardsmen through the drifting smoke.

'I'm Colonel Ortiz. You boys have my earnest thanks.' he said. 'Who are you?'

The nearest man, a giant with unruly black hair, a tangled, braided beard and thick, bare arms decorated with blue spiral tattoos, smiled jauntily and saluted, bringing up his lasgun. 'Colonel Corbec, Tanith First-and-Only. Our pleasure, I'm sure.'

Ortiz nodded back. He found he was still shaking. He could barely bring himself to look down at the dead Chaos Marine, sprawled in the mud nearby. 'Takes discipline to ambush an ambush. Your men certainly know stealth. Why is—'

He got no further. The bearded giant, Corbec, suddenly froze, a look of dismay on his face. Then he was leaping forward with a cry, tackling Ortiz down into the blue-black mud.

The 'dead' World Eater lifted his horned skull out of the muck and half-raised his bolter. But that was all. Then a shrieking chainsword decapitated him.

The heavy, dead parts flopped back into the mud. One of them rolled.

Ibram Gaunt brandished with his keening chain sword like a duellist and then thumbed it to 'idle'. He turned to Corbec and Ortiz as they got up, caked in black filth. Ortiz stared at the tall, powerful man in the long dark coat and cap of an Imperial Commissar. His face was blade thin, his eyes as dark as space. He looked like he could rip a world asunder with his hands.

'Meet the boss,' Corbec chuckled at Ortiz's side. 'Colonel-Commissar Gaunt.'

Ortiz nodded, wiping his face. 'So, you're Gaunt's Ghosts.'

MAJOR GILBEAR poured himself a brandy from the decanter on the teak stand. 'Just who the hell are these awful barbarian scum?' he asked, sipping from the huge crystal balloon.

At his desk, General Noches Sturm put down his pen and sat back. 'Oh, please, help yourself to my brandy, Gilbear,' he muttered, though the sarcasm was lost on his massive aide.

Gilbear reclined on a chaise beside the flickering amber displays of the message-caster, and gazed at his commander. 'Ghosts? That's what they call them, isn't it?'

Sturm nodded, observing his senior adjutant. Gilbear – Gizhaum Danver De Banzi Haight Gilbear, to give him his full name – was the second son of the Haight Gilbears of Solenhofen, the royal house of Volpone. He was nearly two and half metres tall and arrogantly powerful, with the big, blunt, bland features and languid, hooded eyes of the aristocracy. Gilbear wore the grey and gold uniform of the Royal Volpone 50th, the so-called Bluebloods, who believed they were the noblest regiment in the Imperial Guard.

Sturm sat back in his chair. 'They are indeed called Ghosts. Gaunt's Ghosts. And they're here because I requested them.'

Gilbear cocked a disdainful eyebrow. 'You requested them?'

'We've had nigh on six weeks, and we can't shake the enemy from Voltis City. They command everything west of the Bokore Valley. Warmaster Macaroth is not pleased. All the while they hold Voltemand, they have a road into the heart of the Sabbat

Worlds. So you see I need a lever. I need to introduce a new element to break our deadlock.'

'That rabble?' Gilbear sneered. 'I watched them as they mustered after the drop-ships landed them. Hairy, illiterate primitives, with tattoos and nose rings.'

Sturm lifted a data-slate from his desktop and shook it at Gilbear. 'Have you read the reports General Hadrak filed after the Sloka took Blackshard? He credits Gaunt's mob with the decisive incursion. It seems they excel at stealth raids.'

Sturm got to his feet and adjusted the sit of his resplendent Blueblood staff uniform. The study was bathed in yellow sunlight that streamed in through the conservatory doors at the end, softened by net drapes. He rested his hand on the antique globe of Voltemand in its mahogany stand by the desk and span it idly, gazing out across the grounds of Vortimor House. This place had been the country seat of one of Voltemand's most honoured noble families, a vast, grey manse, fringed with mauve climbing plants, situated in ornamental parkland thirty kilometres south of Voltis City. It had been an ideal location to establish his Supreme Headquarters.

Outside, on the lawn, a squad of Blueblood elite in full battle dress were executing a precision synchronised drill with chainswords. Metal flashed and whirled, perfect and poised. Beyond them, a garden of trellises and arbours led down to a boating lake, calm and smoky in the afternoon light. Navigation lights flashed slowly on the barbed masts of the communications array in the herbarium. Somewhere in the stable block, strutting gaudcocks whooped and called.

You wouldn't think there was a war on, mused Sturm. He wondered where the previous owners of the manse were now. Did they make it off world before the first assault? Are they huddled and starving in the belly hold of a refugee ship, reduced overnight to a level with their former vassals? Or are they bone-ash in the ruins of Kosdorf, or on the burning Metis Road? Or did they die screaming and melting at the orbital port when the legions of Chaos first fell on their world, vaporised with the very ships they struggled to escape in?

Who cares? thought Sturm. The war is all that matters. The glory, the crusade, the Emperor. He would only care for the fallen when the bloody head of Chanthar, demagogue of the Chaos

army that held Voltis Citadel, was served up to him on a carving dish. And even then, he wouldn't care much.

Gilbear was on his feet, refilling his glass. 'This Gaunt, he's quite a fellow, isn't he? Wasn't he with the Hyrkan 8th?'

Sturm cleared his throat. 'Led them to victory at Balhaut. One of old Slaydo's chosen favourites. Made him a colonel-commisar, no less. It was decided he had the prestige to hammer a new regiment or two into shape, so they sent him to the planet Tanith to supervise the Founding there. A Chaos space fleet hit the world that very night, and he got out with just a few thousand men.'

Gilbear nodded. 'That's what I heard. Skin of his teeth. But that's his career in tatters, stuck with an under-strength rabble like that. Macaroth won't transfer him, will he?'

Sturm managed a small smile. 'Our beloved overlord does not look kindly on the favourites of his predecessor. Especially as Slaydo granted Gaunt and a handful of others the settlement rights of the first world they conquered. He and his Tanith rabble are an embarrassment to the new regime. But that serves us well. They will fight hard because they have everything to prove, and everything to win.'

'I say,' said Gilbear suddenly, lowering his glass. 'What if they do win? I mean, if they're as useful as you say?'

'They will facilitate our victory,' Sturm said, pouring himself a drink. 'They will not achieve anything else. We will serve Lord Macaroth twofold, by taking this world for him, and ridding him of Gaunt and his damn Ghosts.'

'YOU WERE expecting us?' Gaunt asked, riding on the top of Ortiz's Basilisk as the convoy moved on.

Colonel Ortiz nodded, leaning back against the raised top-hatch cover. 'We were ordered up the line last night to dig in at the north end of the Bokore Valley and pound the enemy fortifications on the western side. Soften them up, I suppose. En route, I got coded orders sent, telling us to meet your regiment at Pavis Crossroads and transport you as we advanced.'

Gaunt removed his cap and ran a hand through his short fair hair. 'We were ordered across country to the crossroads, all right,' he responded. 'Told to meet transport there for the next leg. But my scouts picked up the World Eaters' stench, so we doubled back and met you early.'

Ortiz shuddered. 'Good thing for us.'

Gaunt gazed along the line of the convoy as they moved on, taking in the massive bulk of the Basilisks as they ground up the snaking mud-track through the sickly, dim forest. His men were riding on the flanks of the great war machines, a dozen or more per vehicle, joking with the Serpent crews, exchanging drinks and smokes, some cleaning weapons or even snoozing as the lurch of the metal beasts allowed.

'So Sturm's sending you in?' Ortiz asked presently.

'Right down the river's floodplain to the gates of Voltis. He thinks we can take the city where fifty thousand of his Bluebloods have failed.'

'Can you?'

'We'll see,' Gaunt said, without the flicker of a smile. 'The Ghosts are new, unproven but for a skirmish on Blackshard. But they have certain... strengths.' He fell silent, and seemed to be admiring the gold and turquoise lines of the feather serpent design painted on the barrel of the Basilisk's main weapon. Its open beak was the muzzle. All the Ketzok machines were rich with similar decorations.

Ortiz whistled low to himself. 'Down the Bokore Valley into the mouth of hell. I don't envy you.'

Now Gaunt smiled. 'Just you keep pounding the western hills and keep them busy. In fact, blow them all away to kingdom come before we get there.'

'Deal,' laughed Ortiz.

'And don't drop your damn aim!' Gaunt added with a threatening chuckle. 'Remember you have friends in the valley!'

TWO VEHICLES BACK, Corbec nodded his thanks as he took the dark thin cigar his Basilisk commander offered.

'Doranz,' the Serpent said, introducing himself.

'Charmed,' Corbec said. The cigar tasted of licorice, but he smoked it anyway.

Lower down the hull of the tank, by Corbec's sprawled feet, the boy Milo was cleaning out the chanters of his Tanith pipe. It wheezed and squealed hoarsely. Doranz blanched. 'I'll tell you this: when I heard that boy's piping today, that hell-note, it almost scared me more than the damn blood cries of the enemy.'

Corbec chuckled. 'The pipe has its uses. It rallies us, it spooks the foe. Back home, the forests move and change. The pipes were a way to follow and not get lost.'

'Where is home?' Doranz asked.

'Nowhere now,' Corbec said and returned to his smoke.

ON THE BACK armour of another Basilisk, hulking Bragg, the biggest of the Ghosts, and small, wiry Larkin, were dicing with two of the tank's gun crew. Larkin had already won a gold signet ring set with a turquoise skull. Bragg had lost all his smokes, and two bottles of sacra. Every now and then, the lurch of the tank beneath them would flip the dice, or slide them under an exhaust baffle, prompting groans and accusations of fixing and cheating.

Up by the top hatch with the vehicle's commander, Major Rawne watched the game without amusement. The Basilisk commander felt uneasy about his passenger. Rawne was slender, dark and somehow dangerous. A starburst tattoo covered one eye. He was not... likeable or open like the other Ghosts seemed to be.

'So, major... what's your commissar like?' the commander began, by way of easing the silence.

'Gaunt?' Rawne asked, turning slowly to face the Serpent. 'He's a despicable bastard who left my world to die and one day I will slay him with my own hands.'

'Oh,' said the commander and found something rather more important to do down below.

ORTIZ PASSED Gaunt his flask. The afternoon was going and they were losing the light. Ortiz consulted a map-slate, angling it to show Gaunt. 'Navigation puts us about two kilometres or so short of Pavis Crossroads. We've made good time. We'll be on it before dark. I'm glad, I didn't want to have to turn on the floods and running lights to continue.'

'What do we know about Pavis?' Gaunt asked.

'Last reports were it was held by a battalion of Bluebloods. That was at oh-five-hundred this morning.'

'Wouldn't hurt to check,' Gaunt mused. 'There are worse things than rolling into an ambush position at twilight, but not many. Cluggan!'

He called down the hull to a big, grey-haired Ghost sat with others playing cards.

'Sir!' Cluggan said, scrambling back up the rocking Basilisk.

'Sergeant, take six men, jump down and scout ahead of the column. We're two kilometres short of this crossroads,' Gaunt showed Cluggan the map. 'Should be clear, but after our tangle with the damn World Eaters we'd best be sure.'

Cluggan saluted and slid back to his men. In a few moments they had gathered up their kits and weapons and swung down off the skirt armour onto the track. A moment more and they had vanished like smoke into the woods.

'That is impressive,' Ortiz said.

AT PAVIS CROSSROADS, the serpents spoke. Stretching their great painted beaks towards the night sky, they began their vast barrage.

Brin Milo cowered in the shadow of a medical Chimera, pressing his hands to his ears. He'd seen two battles up close: the fall of Tanith Magna and the storming of the citadel on Blackshard, but this was the first time he had ever encountered the sheer numbing wrath of armoured artillery.

The Ketzok Basilisks were dug in along the ridge in a straggled line about a mile long. They were hull-down into the grey earth, main weapons swung high, hurling death at the western hills across the valley nine kilometres away. They were firing at will, a sustained barrage that could, Corbec had assured him, go on all night. Every second at least one gun was sounding, lighting the darkness with its fierce muzzle flash, shaking the ground with its firing and recoil.

Pavis Crossroads was a stone obelisk marking the junction of the Metis Road that ran up the valley from Voltis City, and the Mirewood track that carried on towards the east. The Serpents' armour had rolled in at nightfall, ousting the encamped Bluebloods who held the junction, and deploying around the ridge-line, looking west. As the first stars began to shine, Ortiz's men began their onslaught.

Milo kept his eyes sharp for the commissar, and when he saw Gaunt striding towards a tented dugout beside the orbital communication stack, accompanied by his senior officers, Milo ran to join them.

'My scope!' requested Gaunt over the barrage. Milo pulled the commissar's brass-capped nightscope from his pack and Gaunt stepped up onto the parapet, scanning out of the dugout.

Corbec leaned up close by him, a thin black tube protruding from his beard.

Gaunt glanced round. 'What is that thing?' he asked.

Corbec took it out and displayed it proudly. 'Cigar. Liquorice, no less. Won a box off my gun-crate's C.O. and I think I'm getting a taste for them.

'See much?' he added.

'I can see the lights of Voltis. Watch fires and shrine-lights mostly. Not so inviting.'

Gaunt flipped his scope shut and jumped down from the parapet, handing the device back to Milo. The boy had already set up the field-map, a glass plate in a metal frame mounted like an easel on a brass tripod. Gaunt cranked the knurled lever on the side and the glass slowly lit with bluish light. He dropped in a ceramic slide engraved with the local geography and then angled the screen to show the assembled men: Corbec, Rawne, Cluggan, Orcha and the other officers.

'Bokore Valley,' Gaunt said, tapping the glass viewer with the tip of his long, silver Tanith war-knife. As if for emphasis, the nearest Basilisk outside fired and the dugout shook. The field map wobbled and soil trickled in from the roof.

'Four kilometres wide, twelve long, flanked to the west by steep hills where the enemy is well established. At the far end, Voltis City, the old Capital of Voltemand. Thirty metre curtain walls of basalt. Built as a fortress three hundred years ago, when they knew the art. The invading Chaos Host from off-planet seized it at day one as their main stronghold. The Volpone 50th have spent six weeks trying to crack it, but the bastards we met today show the kind of force they've been up against. We'll have a go tonight.'

He looked up, oblivious to the constant thunder outside. 'Major Rawne?'

Rawne stepped forward, almost reluctant to be anywhere near Gaunt. No one knew what had passed between them when they had been alone together on Blackshard, but everyone had seen Gaunt carry Rawne to safety on his shoulder, despite his own injuries. Surely that sort of action bonded men, not deepened their enmity?

Rawne adjusted a dial on the field-map's edge so that the plate displayed a different section of the chart-slide. 'The approach is straightforward. The Bokore River runs along the

wide valley floor. It is broad and slow-moving, especially at this time of year. Most of the way is choked with bulrushes and waterweed. We can move down the river channel undetected.'

'You've scouted this?' Gaunt asked.

'My squad returned not half an hour ago,' Rawne said smoothly. 'The Bluebloods had tried it a number of times, but they are semi-armoured and the mud was too great an impediment. We are lighter – and we are good.'

Gaunt nodded. 'Corbec?'

The big man sucked on his cigar. His genial eyes twinkled and it made Milo smile. 'We move by dark, of course. In the next half-hour. Staggered squads of thirty men to spread out our traces.' He tapped the map-screen at another place. 'Primary point of entry is the old city Watergate. Heavily defended of course. Secondary squads under Sergeant Cluggan will attempt to storm the wall at the western sanitation outfalls. I won't pretend either way will be a picnic.'

'Objective,' Gaunt said, 'get inside and open the city. We'll move in squads. One man in every ten will be carrying as much high explosive as he can. Squad leaders should select any man with demol experience. We provide cover for these demolition specialists to allow them to set charges that will take out sections of wall or gates. Anything that splits the city open.'

'I've spoken to the Blueblood colonel. He has seven thousand men in motorised units ready to advance and take advantage of any opening we can make. They will be monitoring on channel eighty. The signal will be "Thunderhead":'

There was silence, silence except for the relentless hammering of the Basilisk guns.

'Form up and move out,' Gaunt said.

Outside, Ortiz stood talking to several of his senior officers, one of them Doranz. They saw the Ghost officers emerge from the dugout and orders being given.

Across the emplacement, Ortiz caught Gaunt's eye. It was too loud for words, so he clenched his fist and rapped it twice against his heart, an old gesture for luck.

Gaunt nodded.

'Scary men,' Doranz said. 'I almost feel sorry for the enemy.'

Ortiz glanced round at him.

'I'm joking, of course,' Doranz added, but Ortiz wasn't sure he was.

MIDNIGHT HAD seen them waist deep in the stinking black water of the Bokore River reed beds, assailed by clouds of biting flies. Three hours' hard trudge through the oily shallows of the old river, and now the sheer walls of Voltis rose before them, lit by cressets and braziers high up. Behind them, like a distant argument, the Basilisks spat death up into the heavens, a distant, rolling roar and a series of orange flashes on the skyline.

Gaunt adjusted his nightscope and panned it round, seeing features in the darkness as a green negative. The watergate was thirty metres across and forty tall, the mouth of a great chute and adjoining system that returned water to the Bokore once it had driven the mills inside the city. Gaunt knew that somewhere sluices must have been lowered, and the flow stanchied, closing off the chute's operation. Sandbagged emplacements could be made out up in the shadows behind the gate's breastwork.

He adjusted his micro-bead link. 'Corbec?'

Colm Corbec heard his commander in the darkness and acknowledged. He waded forward through the reeds to Bragg, who had hunkered down behind a rotting jetty.

'When you're ready...' Corbec invited.

Bragg grinned, teeth bright in the starlight. He dragged the canvas cover off one of the two huge weapons he had lugged on his shoulders from Pavis Crossroads. The polished metal of the missile launcher had been dulled down with smears of Mirewood mud.

'Try Again' Bragg was a spectacularly lousy shot. But the watergate was a big target, and the missile rack held four melta-missiles.

The night exploded. Three missiles went straight up the throat of the chute. The force of the heat-blast sent stone debris, metal shards, water vapour and body parts out in a radius of fifty yards. The fourth vaporised a chunk of wall, and brought down a small avalanche of basalt chunks. For a moment the heat was so intense that Gaunt's nightscope read nothing but emerald glare. Then it showed him the chiselled mouth of the watergate had become a bubbling, blazing wound in the huge wall, a ragged, slumping incision in the sheer basalt. He could hear

agonised screaming from within the chute. Beyond the city wall, alarm bells and sirens rose in pandemonium.

The Ghosts charged the watergate. Orcha led the first squad up the sloping drain-away under the molten arch of ruptured stone. He and three of his men swung flamers in wide arcs, scorching and scouring up unto the darkness of the echoing chute. Behind them, Corbec brought in fire teams with lasguns who darted down into the side passages and cisterns of the watergate, butchering the cultists who had limped or crawled into cover after the first attack.

The third wave went in, under Major Rawne. In the front rank was Bragg, his empty launcher discarded in favour of the heavy bolter that he had liberated from its mounting back on Blackshard and now lugged around like a smaller man might heft a heavy rifle.

Gaunt leapt forward too, bolt pistol in one hand, chain sword in the other. He bellowed after his attacking men, all of them racing silhouettes backlit against the glittering water by fire. Milo sprang up, fumbling with the Tanith pipes under his arm.

'Now would be a good time, Brin,' Gaunt said.

Milo found the mouthpiece, inflated the bag and began to keen an old battle lament of Tanith, 'The Dark Path of the Forest'.

UP IN THE CHUTE, Orcha and his squad heard the shrill wail of the pipes outside. Damp darkness was before them.

'Close up,' Orcha snapped into his micro-bead.

'Aye.'

'To your left,' Brith yelled suddenly.

An assault cannon raged out of the darkness of a side chute. Brith, Orcha and two others disintegrated instantly into red mist and flesh pulp.

Troopers Gades and Caffran ducked back behind the buttress work of the huge vault.

'Enemy fire!' Caffran yelled into his bead. 'They have the chute covered in a killing sweep.'

Corbec cursed. He might have expected this.

'Stay down!' he ordered the young Ghost over the mike as he beckoned his first two squads up the lower chute, black water swilling around their knees.

'Hell of a foul place for a firefight,' mourned Mad Larkin, scoping with his lasgun.

'Stow it, Larks,' Corbec growled. Ahead they heard the nightmare chatter of the cannon, and the added rhythm of drums and guttural chants. Corbec knew Larkin was right. A tight, confined, unyielding stone tunnel was no place for a serious fight. This was a two-way massacre in the making.

'They're just trying to psyche us out,' he told his Ghosts smoothly as they edged forward.

'What d'you know? It's working!' Varl said.

The drums and chanting got louder, but suddenly the cannon shut off.

'It's stopped,' Caffran reported over the link.

Corbec looked round into Larkin's crazed eyes. 'What do you think? A trick to lure us out?'

Larkin sniffed the thick air. 'Smell that? Burning ceramite. I'd wager they've got an overheat jam.'

Corbec didn't answer. He cinched his bayonet onto his lasgun and charged up the slope of the chute, screaming louder and shriller than Milo's pipes. In uproar, the Ghost squads followed him.

Caffran and Gades joined the charge, bellowing, weapons held low as they splashed out from behind the buttress into the main vault.

Corbec leapt clear a sandbag line damming one gully and disembowelled the two cultists who were struggling to unjam the assault cannon.

Larkin dropped down on one knee in the brackish soup and popped the cover on his lasgun's darkscope. Carefully selecting his expert long shots, he blasted four cultists further down the chute.

Las and bolt fire slammed back at the Ghosts, dropping several of them. The charging Guardsmen met the cultist force head on in a tight, tall sub-chute, no wider than two men abreast. Bodies exploded, blasted at close range. Bayonets and blades sliced and jabbed. Corbec was in the thick of it. Already a chain sword had gashed his left hand and cost him a finger, and blood blurted from a slash to his shoulder. He speared a man, but lost his gun when the corpse's weight on the bayonet tore it out of his hands. He ripped out his fallback weapons, a laspistol and his Tanith knife of sheer silver. Around him in the frenzy, men killed or died in a confined press that was packed in close like a busy work transit, crowded at rush hour. Already

the water level was rising because of the depth of bodies and body parts in the gully.

Corbec shot a cultist through the head as he was charged, and then lashed sideways with the silver blade, opening a throat.

'For Tanith! First and Last and Only!' he screamed.

ADVANCING UP the tunnel fifty paces back, Gaunt could hear the sheer tumult of the nightmarish close-quarters fight in the chute. He looked down and saw that the trickle of Bokore River water that ran down over his boots was thick and red.

Ten yards further, he found Trooper Gades, part of Orcha's original squad. The boy had lost his legs to a chainsword and the water had carried his twitching form back down the smooth slope of the channel.

'Medic! Dorden! To me!' Gaunt bellow, cradling the coughing, gagging Gades in his arms.

Gades looked up at his commissar. 'A real close fight, so it is,' he said with remarkable clarity, 'packed in like fish in a can. The Ghosts will make ghosts tonight.'

Then he coughed again. Bloody matter vomited from his mouth and he was gone.

Gaunt stood.

Milo had faltered, looking down at Gades's stricken, miserable death.

'Play up!' urged Gaunt, and turned to shout down the chute to the Ghost main force in the bulrushes. 'Advance! Narrow file! For the Emperor and the glory of Tanith!'

With a deafening bellow, Gaunt's Ghosts charged forward en masse, breaking down into files of three, surging into the throbbing entrance to hell.

Up ahead, in the dark, close, smoky killing zone, Rawne slumped against a buttress, splashed in gore, and panted. By his side, Larkin squatted and fired shot after shot into the darkness.

Corbec suddenly loomed out of the smoke, a terrible apparition drenched in blood.

'Back!' he hissed. 'Back down the chute! Sound the retreat!'

'What is it?' Rawne said.

'What's that rumbling?' Larkin asked, distracted, pressing his ear to the stone work. 'Whole tunnel is vibrating!'

'Water,' Corbec said grimly. 'They've opened the sluices. They're going to wash us out!'



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