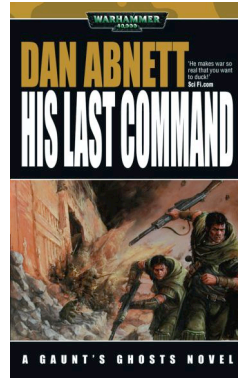


HIS LAST COMMAND

A Gaunt's Ghosts novel

By Dan Abnett

It is the twenty-first year of the Sabbat Worlds Crusade and Warmaster Macaroth's main battle-groups are making large gains against the Chaos forces of Urlock Gaur. Against all odds, Colonel-Commissar Ibram Gaunt returns from a long mission behind enemy lines, only to find his regiment, the Tanith First-and-Only, has been redeployed under a charismatic new commander. Gaunt faces his most difficult battle yet as he fights to reclaim his command before the evil forces of Chaos counter-attack..



About the Author

Dan Abnett lives and works in Maidstone, Kent, in England. Well known for his comic work, he has written everything from the Mr Men to the X-Men in the last decade. His work for the Black Library includes the popular strips Lone Wolves, Titan and Darkblade, the best-selling Gaunt's Ghosts novels, and the acclaimed Inquisitor Eisenhorn trilogy.

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LUDD WALKED INTO the small interview cell and heard the hatch lock up behind him. The cell was crude and stark: just scuffed bare metal and rivets, glow-globes recessed in cages, a small steel chair and table in front of the wire screen cage. Pict units mounted high in the corners of the cell recorded the scene from multiple angles. The air was stale and stuffy. On the far side of the wire screen stood another empty steel chair.

Ludd put the plastek sack he was holding down on the deck, took off his gloves, and laid them on the small table along with his data-case. Then he sat down, opened the case, and took out two paper dossiers and a dataslate.

A buzzer sounded and the door inside the cage opened. Ludd rose to his feet.

Gaunt entered, and the door closed automatically behind him. He glanced briefly at Ludd and then sat down on the empty chair.

‘Commissar Gaunt,’ Ludd said, and took his seat again so he was face to face with Gaunt through the wire screen.

‘I’d like to begin by apologising,’ Ludd said.

‘For what?’

‘You said yesterday, during the altercation in the lord general’s quarters, that you didn’t believe you could trust me any more. I want to assure you that you can. If I gave you any cause that provoked yesterday’s incident, I apologise.’

Gaunt’s hard gaze flickered up and down Ludd. ‘You locked us up in a cargo pod,’ he said.

‘In order to placate Kanow, who would have had you shot.

Besides, can we start to be realistic, sir? You have served the best

part of your career as a commissar and a discipline officer. Given the circumstances, would you have handled it differently?’

Gaunt shrugged.

‘Let me put it more plainly. You encounter a dozen armed renegades. No idents, no warrants. Their story is difficult to believe. They are... not attired to regulations. Indeed, they are shabby. Barbaric. At the very least they have suffered hardships. Perhaps they have gone native. It is also entirely possible that they are tainted and corrupt. And they demand a personal audience with the most senior ranking Imperial officer in the quadrant. Do you not agree that any Imperial commissar would be duty-bound to exercise the utmost caution in dealing with them?’

There was a long silence. Gaunt shrugged again, and stared at the floor behind Ludd as if bored.

Ludd was about to continue when Gaunt spoke. ‘Let me put it plainly, then. You are a unit commander. Your team has been sent on a high priority mission behind enemy lines on the personal request of the lord general commander. The secrecy of the mission is paramount. Against the odds, after the best part of two years in the field, you get your team out again. Whole, alive, mission accomplished. But you are treated like pariahs, like soldiers of the enemy, mistrusted, abused, threatened with execution. Do you not agree that any Imperial officer would be duty-bound to do everything to safeguard his men under such circumstances?’

Ludd pursed his lips. ‘Yes, sir,’ he said. ‘Within the letter of regulation law. Threatening the person of the lord general—’

Gaunt shook his head sadly. ‘I didn’t threaten him.’

‘Please, sir—’

‘I did not aim the weapon directly at him, nor make any personal threat against his life.’

‘Semantics, sir. Regulation law—’

‘I’ve fought wars in the name of the God-Emperor most of my adult life, Ludd. Sometimes regulation law gets bent or snapped in the name of victory and honour. I’ve never known the God-Emperor object to that. He protects those who rise above the petty inhibitions

of life and code and combat to serve what is true and correct. I don't much care about myself, but my men, my team... they deserve better. They have given everything except their lives. I will not permit the blunt ignorance of the Commissariat to take those from them too. I am a true servant of the Throne, Ludd. I resent very much being treated as anything else.'

Ludd sighed. 'Candidly, sir?'

Gaunt nodded.

'You don't have to convince me. But therein lies your problem. I'm not the one you have to convince.'

Gaunt leaned back in his seat, stroked his long, dirty fingers down through his heavy, woaded beard and then folded his hands across his chest, almost forming the sign of the aquila. 'So what are you doing here, Ludd?' he asked.

Ludd opened one of the dossiers on the table in front of him, and weighed down the corner of the spread card cover with the dataslate. 'There is to be a tribunal,' he said. 'You, and each member of your team, will be examined by the Office of the Commissariat. Individually. It is being called a debrief, but there is a lot at stake.'

'For me?'

'For all of you. Lady Commissar-General Balshin suspects taint.'

'Does she?'

'Sir, it would be suspected of any individual or unit exposed for such a length of time on an enemy-occupied world. You know that. Chaos taint is a very real possibility. It may be in you and you don't even know it. It might also—'

'What?'

Ludd shook his head. 'Nothing.'

'Say what you were going to say.'

'I prefer not to, sir.'

Gaunt smiled. There was something predatory about the way the expression changed his face. Like a fox, Ludd thought.

'You'd prefer not to. Because you fear what you have to say might enrage me. Or at the very least piss me off.'

'That would be a fair assessment, yes, sir.'

Gaunt leaned forward. 'You know what a wirewolf is, son?'

'No, sir, I do not.'

'Lucky you. I've killed six of them personally. Say what you have to say. I'm big enough to take it.'

Ludd cleared his throat. 'All right. You might be tainted with the mark of Chaos and not even know it. Furthermore, a subconscious taint like that might also explain your paranoia and your volatile, desperate behaviour.'

'Like waving a gun in Van Voytz's face, you mean?'

'Yes, sir.'

Gaunt leaned forward a little further, and hooked his grubby fingers through the mesh of the wire screen. He glared at Ludd. His voice became a tiny, dry crackle. 'So you think my mind might have been poisoned by the enemy, corrupted without me even knowing about it, and that's why I'm a... what? A loose cannon?'

Ludd shrank back slightly. 'You asked me to be frank...'

'You fething little-!' Gaunt snarled, and threw himself at the wire screen, his teeth bared.

Ludd leapt up so fast his chair toppled over. Then he realised that Gaunt was sitting back, laughing.

'Ludd, you're too easy. Throne, your face just then. Want to go change your underwear?'

Ludd righted the fallen chair and sat back down. 'That sort of display isn't going to help,' he said.

'Can't take a joke?' Gaunt asked, still amused with himself. 'A little gallows humour?'

'No, sir,' said Ludd. Gaunt nodded and folded his arms, his amusement subsiding.

'And if I can't,' Ludd added, 'you can be sure as hell Lady Balshin won't. Pull a stunt like that during the tribunal and she'll have you ten-ninety-six in a flash.'

'I have no doubt. It was clear to me the woman had a little too much starch in her drawers.'

'Again-' Ludd began.

Gaunt waved a hand dismissively and looked away. ‘Ludd, you’re talking to me like you’re coaching me. Are you coaching me?’

‘I’m trying to prep you for the examination, sir. Understand, the examination will be both verbal and medical. You will have to submit to all manner of analysis scans and investigative procedures. All of you will. Balshin will be thorough. The merest hint, be it verbal or physiological, that any of you are unsound... she will declare Commissariat Edict ten-ninety-six on all of you.’

Gaunt looked at the deck.

‘I take it you recall what that edict is?’

‘Of course I do. Do you intend to prepare every one of my team for the hearings?’

‘Provided I have the time, yes. I’d appreciate it if you passed the word along to your team members to cooperate with me.’

Gaunt looked up. ‘I’ll recommend it. It’s up to them. Be advised, you’ll have trouble with Cirk, Feygor, Mkoll and Eszrah especially. In fact, I’d like to be present when you handle Eszrah. He’s... not Guard. He’s not like anything you or this tribunal will have ever handled.’

Ludd made a note on the dossier with a steel stylus. ‘So noted. I’ll see what I can do.’

‘So why do we get you as an advocate, Ludd?’ Gaunt asked.

‘You’re permitted one under the rules of the tribunal, sir,’ Ludd replied.

‘And we don’t get to pick?’ Gaunt asked.

Ludd put his stylus down and looked squarely through the cage at Gaunt. ‘No, sir. It’s a voluntary thing. The tribunal appoints an advocate if no one volunteers, of course. No one did besides me.’

‘Feth,’ said Gaunt, with a sad shake of his head. ‘How old are you, Ludd?’

‘Twenty-three, sir.’

‘So a twenty-three year-old junior is the only friend we’ve got?’

‘I could stand aside, allow the tribunal to appoint. You’d probably get Faragut. I didn’t think you’d want that, so I put my name forward.’

‘Thank you,’ said Ibram Gaunt.

Ludd turned a few pages in the open dossier and replaced the dataslate to weight them down. ‘I need to clarify a few points, sir. So I’m up to speed for the hearing. I will be a greater asset if I’m not taken by surprise.’

‘Go on.’

‘This mission you refer to. You mentioned it back at Camp Xeno too. But without specifics. It was on Gereon, right?’

‘That’s right.’

‘What were the parameters?’

‘The parameters were encoded vermillion, Ludd. Between me and the lord general. I can’t divulge them to you.’

‘Then that makes it hard for me to—’

‘Go to Van Voytz. If he gives you written clearance, I’ll tell you. If he comes and gives me a direct order, I’ll tell you. Otherwise, my lips are sealed... to you and the tribunal.’

‘I’ll do that,’ said Ludd. He closed the dossiers and put them away. ‘The hearings begin tomorrow at 16.00 hours. As mission commander, you’ll be called first. Your testimony may take a day or two to hear. I’ll be back at 18.00 hours, sooner if I can get the waiver from the lord general. We may be prepping into the night.’

‘If that’s what it takes.’

‘One last thing,’ Ludd said, picking up the plastek sack from the floor beside his chair and dropping it into the hopper basket built into the wire screen at knee height. ‘I need you to shower and put on this change of clothes. Your team will have to do the same. I’ll provide kit for them as necessary.’

Gaunt looked dubiously at the sack of clothes. ‘What I’m wearing,’ he said firmly, ‘I’ve been wearing through it all. It’s my uniform, though I don’t suppose you’d recognise it any more. Patched, repaired, sewn back together, it’s been on me from start to finish. It’s like my skin, Ludd.’

‘That’s exactly the problem. You’re filthy. Ragged. You smell. I can smell you from here, and I can tell you, the smell isn’t pleasant. I’m not talking dirt, sir, I’m talking a sweet, sickly stench. Like corruption, like taint. And that grey hue to your skin.’

‘That won’t come off easily.’

‘Try. Scrub. And shave, for Throne’s sake. Don’t give the commissar-general any reason to suspect you more than she does.’

Gaunt took the plastek sack out of the hopper.

‘So I stink?’

‘Like a bastard, sir. Like a daemon of the archenemy.’

The Commissariat guards led Gaunt back along the cellblock of the Leviathan’s detention deck. Grim bars of lumin strip made a ladder of light along the low ceiling. The air was damp and musty. Patches of green-white corrosion mottled the iron walls.

They were walking past a row of individual cages. Each one contained a Ghost. Young Dughan Beltayn was in the first cage, sitting close to the bars. He nodded to Gaunt, a little eager, a little hopeful, and Gaunt tried to put some reassurance into the half-smile he sent back to his adjutant as he passed. Next in line was Cirk. She simply followed Gaunt with her caustic gaze as he went by, then looked away as he tried to make eye contact.

Flame-trooper Aongus Brostin, thuggish and hairy, was in the next cage. He was standing at the back, leaning against the far wall, with his meaty, tattooed arms folded and his eyes closed. Dreaming of lho-sticks, no doubt. Then came Ceglan Varl, sitting on his cell’s fold-down cot. The sergeant was stripped to the waist, displaying his dirty, lean torso and his battered augmetic shoulder. He flipped Gaunt a laconic salute.

‘Just keep walking,’ said one of the guards.

In the next cell sat Hlaine Larkin, huddled in a corner, looking more like a tanned leather bag of bones and nerves than ever. He watched Gaunt pass with a sniper’s unblinking stare. Larkin’s neighbour was Simen Urwin Macharius Bonin, Mach Bonin, the darkly-handsome and preternaturally fortunate scout-trooper. Bonin

was standing at the cage front, leaning forward and clutching the bars with raised hands.

‘Any luck?’ he asked.

‘Shut up,’ one of the guards said.

‘Screw you too,’ Bonin called after them.

Gaunt passed the cell holding Tona Criid. She’d not cut her hair since the start of the mission, and it had grown out long and straight, returning to its original, brick-brown colour, stained with Untill grey. She’d taken to wearing it loose, swept down to veil the left side of her face. Gaunt knew why. As he passed her cage, she made the quick Tanith code-gesture that was Ghost shorthand for ‘everything all right?’

Gaunt managed to reply with a quick nod before he was marched on out of sight.

Eszrah ap Niht, or Eszrah Night as they had all come to know the Untill partisan, stood in the next cell, silent and staring, his mosaic-edged eyes hidden behind the old, battered pair of sunshades Varl had given him so long ago.

‘Histye seolfor, soule Eszrah,’ Gaunt called out quickly in the Sleepwalker’s ancient tongue

‘Be quiet!’ the guard behind him cried, and prodded Gaunt between the shoulder-blades with his maul.

Gaunt stopped in his tracks and looked round at the three armoured guards. ‘Do that again,’ he began, ‘and you’ll–’

‘What?’ taunted the guard, patting his maul into the palm of his glove.

Gaunt bit back, tried to counsel his temper, tried to remember what Ludd had told him.

He turned round and continued to walk. The next cage in the line held Scout-Sergeant Oan Mkoll. The grizzled, older man remained staring at the floor as Gaunt went by.

Murtan Feygor lay on the cot in the next cell. He sat up as Gaunt passed and called out ‘We dead yet, Ghostmaker?’ His voice had a rasping, monotonous quality thanks to the augmetic larynx in his corded throat, the legacy of an old war wound.

One of the guards kicked the bars of Feygor's cage as they went by.

'Oh, you think so? You think so?' Feygor called after them. 'Come back here, you feth-wipe, come back here and I'll make your momma weep.' The threat was curiously dry and flat uttered in that monotone. It was almost comical.

Rawne was in the final cage they passed. He was sitting on the floor, near the front, his back against the left-hand cell partition. He didn't even bother to look up.

At the last cage on the block, the guards slid the barred gate open. Gaunt looked at them.

'Shower pen?' he asked.

'We'll be back in twenty minutes,' one of the guards replied. Gaunt nodded, and stepped into the empty cell. The guards slammed the cage shut with a reverberating clang of metal on metal, locked it, and walked away.

Gaunt dropped the plastek sack onto the cell floor, then walked across to the right hand partition and slithered down, his back to it, near the cage mouth.

'So what's the story, Bram?' Rawne asked quietly from the other side of the wall.

'We're in it up to our necks, Eli,' Gaunt replied. 'My bad call, I think. I pushed them way too far.'

There was a long pause.

'Don't beat yourself up,' Rawne said. 'We all knew why you called it like you did. They were treating us like shit. You couldn't take chances.'

'Maybe I should have. We're facing a tribunal. Balshin's in charge. Van Voytz may not be on side any more, after what I did.'

'Combat necessity, Bram,' Rawne replied, stoically. 'If we'd stayed in that fething pod...'

'We might be all right now. Or in a better situation. I should have trusted Ludd.'

'That feth?'

‘We’re all going to have to trust him now, Elim. That feth’s our only friend. Pass the word along. We have to comply with his every instruction and recommendation, or we’re blindfolded with our backs to a wall.’

‘Why?’

Gaunt sighed. ‘The accusation is Chaos taint.’

‘Hard to prove.’

‘Harder to disprove. Eli, as a commissar, I’d always err on the side of caution.’

‘Shoot first, you mean?’

‘Shoot first.’

‘Feth.’

‘Ludd’s in our corner, and I may be able to swing Van Voytz round, if I can get any time with him. But make sure the Ghosts cooperate with Ludd. Whether you like him or not, he’s the only decent card in our hand.’

‘That an order?’

‘More than any other I’ve ever given you.’

‘Consider it done.’

Gaunt looked over at the sagging plastek sack nearby. ‘Ludd wants us to shower and clean ourselves up. Get new fatigues on. Get fresh, shaved and scrubbed for the hearings.’

‘I’m fine as I am.’

‘Rawne, I’m not kidding. We stink of filth and corruption. We reek of what they think is taint. Everyone does this, or they’ll answer to me.’

‘Eszrah won’t like it.’

‘I know.’

‘And Cirk...’

‘I know. Leave her to me.’

‘You gonna follow my advice?’ Rawne asked.

Gaunt shook his head. Rawne’s advice, repeated two dozen times through the last few days, had been to sell Cirk out, to give her to the Commissariat in exchange for the Ghosts’ lives. He’d never liked her. And that was crazy, because in the last ten months she’d

given Rawne so many reasons to do so. Sabbatine Cirk was a brave, driven officer. But there was just something about her that was inherently untrustworthy. On Gereon, she'd suffered under the archenemy occupation too long. She'd learned that essential skill of the die-hard resistance fighter, that quality that was both a blessing and curse: no one, not a friend, not a family member, not even a life-partner, was beyond betrayal if it benefitted the cause. That made her as mercurial and unpredictable as a razor-snake.

Cirk had been Elim Rawne's lover for the past eight months. Rawne desired her, but he still didn't like her much, or trust her even slightly.

'So what happens now?' Rawne asked.

'They'll start with me. You'll be next, I'm guessing. Stick to the facts. And observe our clearance unless I tell you otherwise.'

'Got it. Feth, I can't believe I'm thinking this, but... we'd have been safer staying on Gereon.'

Gaunt grinned. 'Yes, maybe. But we had our chance and we took it. We had to get off-world with the news about Sturm. And about the Sons. Demands of duty, Eli.'

'And this is how they thank us,' Rawne said bitterly. Gaunt heard him slide closer to the edge of the wall. Rawne's dirty hand appeared through the bars.

'I never wanted to go to Gereon,' Gaunt heard him say. 'I thought it was madness, I thought it was suicide, and it so nearly was. But I did what you ordered and what the God-Emperor deserved. And by feth, I never expected it to turn out like this. We're loyal soldiers of the Imperium, Bram. After all we did, and all we sacrificed, where the hell did justice go?'

Gaunt reached his own hand out through the bars and clasped Rawne's.

'It's coming, Eli. On my life, it's coming.'

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