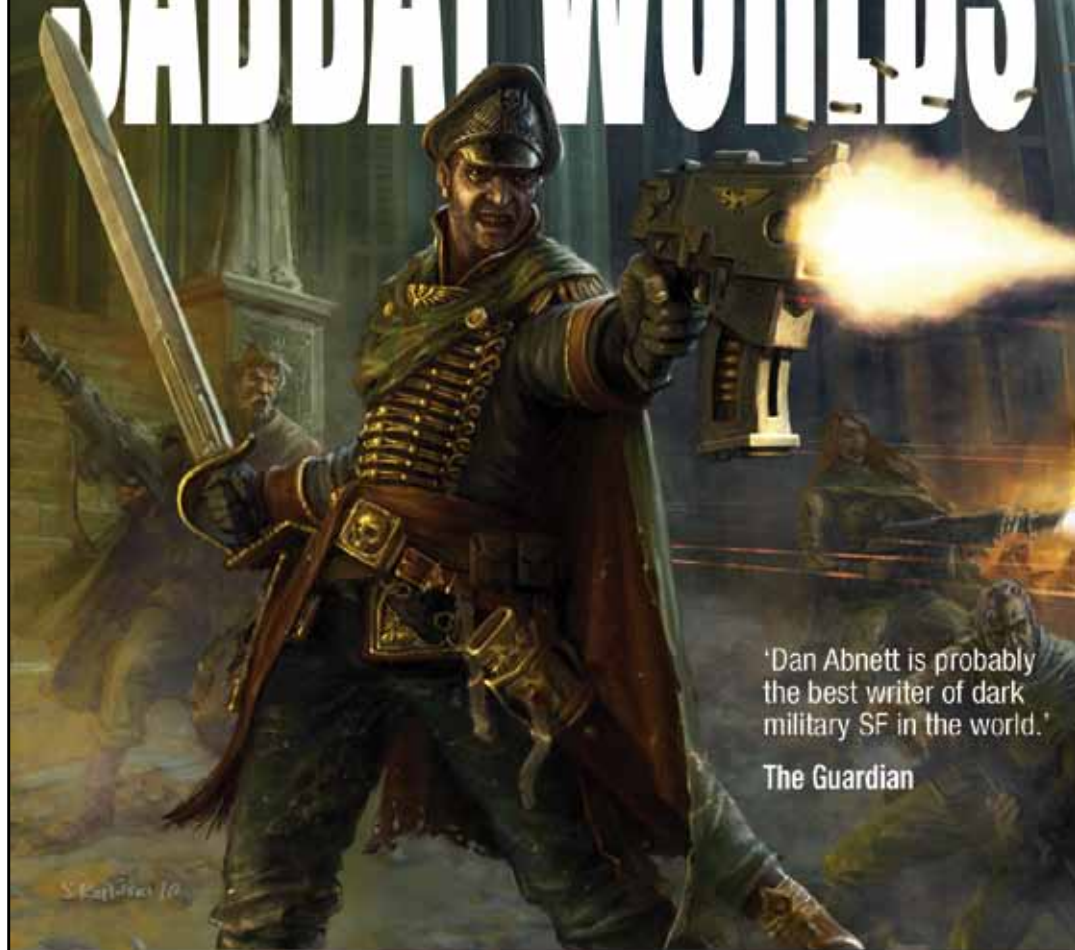


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ABOUT THE EDITOR

Dan Abnett is a novelist and award-winning comic book writer. He has written almost forty novels, including the acclaimed Gaunt's Ghosts series, and the Eisenhorn and Ravenor trilogies. His latest Horus Heresy novel *Prospero Burns* was a New York Times bestseller, and topped the SF charts in the UK and the US. In addition to writing for Black Library, Dan is highly regarded in the comics industry for his work for both Marvel and DC, and has written a number of other bestselling novels, including *Torchwood: Border Princes*, *Doctor Who: The Story of Martha*, *Triumph* and *Embedded*. He lives and works in Maidstone, Kent. Dan's blog and website can be found at www.danabnett.com

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From APOSTLE'S CREED
by Graham McNeill

LARICE YANKED THE stick hard right, viffing down and barely avoiding a drifting stream of cannon fire from a diving Hell Talon. The pilot had misjudged his deflection, and she rolled back and deployed her air brakes, coming in around behind the bat as it slashed through the formation. She pushed out the throttle, lining up her shot, when she heard the shrill warning tone of a weapons lock.

'Five, break left!' shouted Leena Sharto.

Her target forgotten, Larice pulled left and down, driving the engine to full military power and weaving in and out of the morass of duelling planes. A Razor flashed in front of her, a Navy bird in hot pursuit, and she squeezed off a short burst of las. The pilot's canopy disintegrated in a shower of diamond splinters as it spun away.

Larice didn't watch it die. She twisted left and right, trying to locate her pursuer. It was still locked on to her, but she couldn't see it. An eye-wateringly bright blizzard of las-fire flashed over her and she threw her aircraft down, finally catching the blaze of light from the enemy guns.

Larice flew like a flock of Killers were on her tail, jinking and viffing through the air like an aerial acrobat. Her pursuer stayed with her, but there were few who understood how a Thunderbolt danced as well as Larice Asche, and it couldn't match her turns.

'You're fixated,' she said, grunting as a high-g turn drove the breath from her. 'And that's gotten you killed.'

She hauled back on the stick and flexed her plane through a screaming hammerhead turn, pulling vertical before rolling her tail section over and aiming her aircraft straight down. It was a risky manoeuvre, bleeding speed and leaving her hanging in the air. The Razor was right below her, lining up its shot, but Larice fired first.

Her quads banged and thumped, and the Razor split open in a storming burst of debris. Larice dropped through the flaming wreckage, her canopy awash with fire and the fuselage thumping with impacts. Nothing flashed red and she pulled out of her dive, coming level and increasing speed in case any other enemy craft were waiting to pounce.

None were, and she rolled back into the fight. The sky was thick with bats, swarming, razor-winged darts that flew aggressively and protected the slower bombers with the tenacity of a mother grox defending her offspring.

They outnumbered the Imperial aircraft, but that advantage wasn't counting for much. Larice knew the Archenemy were careless with their craft, preferring overwhelming numbers to skill and talent in the air. With every passing minute, the bombers were getting closer to Coriana, but their numbers were thinning as they went. The Apostles and sixty other planes were dancing with them at low altitude, screaming over the ice and outlying industrial complexes surrounding the city.

Larice saw a stretched V of aircraft taking the low-level approach to Coriana and thumbed the vox.

'This is Five, seven plus heavy bombers with escort going in low over the refineries.'

'I see them, Five.' Seekan.

'Take the lead, Five. I'm right behind you.' Suhr.

'Lead us in, Larice,' said a familiar voice and she smiled as she recognised the laconic tones.

She smiled. 'Good to have you on board, Laquell.'

'I've got Schaw and Ysor from Indigo with me,' voxed Laquell. 'On your left wing.'

Larice looked over, seeing Laquell's trio of fighters, and pushed her stick forwards and surged power to the afterburners.

'Five on lead,' said Larice, switching to quads.

'Bear in mind that we're flying over incredibly volatile structures,' advised Seekan as though informing them of light cloud cover. 'Short, controlled bursts only.'

'Diving in now,' said Larice. 'Stoop and sting those escorts!'

Almost as soon as she'd armed her guns, the two groups of aircraft were tangled up in a madly spinning, close-range dogfight. Larice rolled hard left, catching sight of a Razor's tail section, and followed it down.

Every move the Razor made, Larice was with him, the planes spinning around the sky like insects in a bizarre mating ritual. The plane spun right, but Larice was waiting for it. It flashed across her gunsight and she pulled the cannon trigger.

'Got you,' she hissed as bright laser bolts tore into the enemy plane's fuselage and ripped the darting craft in two.

The plane spewed smoke and flames, tumbling downwards, and Larice caught a glimpse of the blood-splattered pilot as he struggled weakly with his doomed aircraft.

She rolled out of her attack, turning back into the fight.

Aircraft swooped and dived around her, and she watched

Seekan saw the tail off a Tormentor with a precise burst of las-fire. Owen Thule peppered a Hell Blade with his quads and lit up a Razor seconds later as he viffed over the wreckage and stood his plane on its wing to shred a spinning Hell Talon.

A diving Razor slotted itself in on his six and gunfire punched holes in his right wing.

'Eight, break right!' yelled Larice as her threat board lit up.

She slammed the stick right and feathered the engines as a white rocket contrail speared past her canopy.

Red metal suddenly filled her vision and she swore, pushing the plane down and left as the belly of a Hell Blade screamed over her canopy, so close she felt she could reach out and touch it. Its jetwash threw her around for a moment until she was able to bring herself level again and come back on Owen Thule. She breathed deeply, amazed at how close the near miss had been.

'He's stuck to my six!' shouted Thule.

'I'm on him,' shouted Laquell, spinning his Thunderbolt into a rolling S to come in on the bat's five. His deflection was perfect and the bat flew straight into his storm of shells, blowing apart as its engine detonated.

'Thanks,' voxed Thule, turning into another engagement.

'Laquell! Heads up!' called Larice, 'You got one on your high six!'

Cannon shells spat from a Hell Blade's guns, a couple raking the topside armour of the Thunderbolt. Larice saw it was armed with underslung rockets too.

'Damn! Bad guy on my tail! Schaw, get him off me!'

'I'm on it,' replied his wingman.

The rear of Laquell's Thunderbolt spat brightly burning flares in an attempt to prevent the enemy rocket from locking onto his engine emissions. He threw the plane into a series of wild manoeuvres to try and shake his pursuer.

'Damn, this guy's good!' swore Laquell as the bat matched him move for move.

'Rocket away!' shouted Schaw.

'Breaking left!' answered Laquell, rolling hard and down.

'Come on...' prayed Larice, kicking in the afterburner and diving hard. She felt her vision

greying under the pressure of the increased g-forces. Her flight suit expanded and she felt the composition of her air-mix change as she pushed the craft to the edge of the envelope.

She mashed the cannon trigger and filled the air behind Laquell's plane with las-fire.

The missile detonated prematurely as one of Larice's shots clipped its warhead. She felt the shockwave of its detonation and laughed in relief.

Laquell spun his plane round in a screaming turn and chopped the throttle, almost stalling the craft. The pilot of the Hell Blade tried to stay with him, but the explosion had concealed Laquell's survival, and its pilot couldn't match the Thunderbolt's turn.

The cocky pilot of the 235th rolled inverted and pulled in behind the red aircraft, slotting it neatly between his gunsights. Quad fire banged from the nose guns, shredding the bat's tailpipe and blowing the aircraft apart in a spectacular orange fireball.

Laquell hollered his triumph over the vox and flew over the debris.

Larice checked the auspex and saw the remaining five bombers had broken through the fighter cordon and were heading towards the civilian areas of Coriana. A screen of twelve bats lingered in their wash, ready to turn on any pursuit.

'Apostle Five in pursuit,' said Larice. 'Who's with me?'

'Apostle Lead,' said Seekan.

'Indigo Lead,' replied Laquell.

'Apostle Nine,' said Ziner Krone.

'Apostle Six,' said Saul Cirksen.

'Indigo Two,' said Schaw.

'Rise to Angels minus five hundred and dive on burners,' ordered Seekan, asserting his natural authority over this ad hoc squadron. A flight's destination altitude was never given in the open, and 'Angels' was a set altitude that changed every day. In this case it had been set at a thousand metres.

The Thunderbolts, a mix of camo-green and cream, snapped up in a sharp climb before aiming their guns down upon the bats.

'Turn and burn,' ordered Seekan.

Larice hit her afterburners, closing the distance to the bombers and their escort in a matter of moments. The bats broke into a combat spread and the Thunderbolts slashed through their formation. Larice tagged one plane, shearing its left wing off with her quads. It tumbled end over end into the ground, and ploughed a fiery gouge through a maze of pipework extending from an aluminium-skinned structure.

Laquell splashed another and each of the Apostles claimed a kill before they vectored back into the fight. Now it was one on one, and Larice shot her quads at a crimson Hell Talon with bloody teeth painted on its swept wings. The Talon threw itself into a low dive, sweeping under an aqueduct of pipes, and Larice followed him down. The bat slashed through the air, jinking past flame-topped towers, around vast, portalframed fabriks and between enormous cylindrical ore-silos.

Larice kept to her quads, loosing a sharp burst every time she got weapons lock, but the bat was good. He kept her at arm's length, always anticipating her deflections and viffing out of the way in time.

'Stand still, frig you,' she hissed, deploying air brakes and vectoring right to sidestep around the tall lifter derricks of a Leman Russ assembly yard. Swaying pallets of building materials flashed past her canopy and she caught the terrified 'O' of the derrick's crewman, passing within a metre of her wingtip. The bat spun around a blazing plume of venting gases from a promethium refinery and a host of las-bolts exploded around her. She felt the hammer blows on her fuselage and jinked down.

Whip aerials on the roof of a manufactory snapped off on her underside and she snagged a trailing cord from a Mechanicus banner. It burned up in her heat bloom, and Larice couldn't

decide what kind of omen that was. The bat arced past her canopy, and she stood her plane on its end, rolling inverted and hitting the burners again to get on its tail.

The gases from the refinery surged in her jetwash and punched her after the bat like she'd been launched from the rails with her rocket assist. The acceleration slammed her back in her seat, but seconds later she was right on the bat's tail. Larice cut her burners and mashed the firing trigger. A stream of autocannon shells ripped into the bat's engines and sliced through its entire length. Literally sawn in two, the shorn halves of the bat fell out of the sky in flames.

Larice pulled up, hearing triumphant shouts from the other pilots as they splashed their targets. Only Schaw failed to take down his bat, misjudging a turn and ending up with a bat on his tail instead. Seekan shot down the bat, and the Imperial planes roared after the rising bombers as they started their attack runs.

Too slow to evade the Imperial pursuit, the Tormentors unloaded their bombs early and aimed their aircraft towards the ground. Each one ploughed into the tangle of pipes, bridges and construction yards of Coriana's industrial hinterland, leaving a trail of devastation hundreds of metres long. Fires raged in the swathes of burning jet fuel wreckage, and Larice pulled up through banks of shimmering thermals and buffeting winds of exploding ordnance.

It wasn't pretty, but looking towards the untouched habstacks, residential sprawls and mercia districts, she knew it could have been a lot worse.

From OF THEIR LIVES IN THE RUINS OF THEIR CITIES

by Dan Abnett

THE EMACIATED GHOSTS of Kosdorf come at them through the skeletal ruins. They have become desperate. Their need, their hunger has overwhelmed their caution. They loom through useless doors and peer through empty windows. They clamber out of sour drains and emerge from cover behind spills of rubble. They fire their weapons and call out in pleading, raw voices.

The rain has thickened the dying light. Muzzle flashes flutter dark orange, like old flame.

The Tanith knot tight, and fend them off with precision. They fall back through the manufactory into the data library.

It's there they lose their first life. A Tanith infantryman is caught by autogun fire. He staggers suddenly, as if winded. Then he simply goes limp and falls. His hands don't even come up to break his impact against the tiled floor. Men rush to him, and drag him into cover, but Gaunt knows he's gone by the way his heels are kicking out. Blood soaks the man's tunic, and smears the floor in a great curl like black glass when they drag him. First blood.

Gaunt doesn't know the dead man's name. It's one of the names he hasn't learned yet. He hates himself for realising, just for a second, that it's one less he'll have to bother with.

Gaunt keeps the nalwood stock of Caffran's lasrifle tight against his shoulder and looses single shots. The temptation to switch to auto is almost unbearable.

The lobby of the data library is a big space, which once had a glass roof, now fallen in. Rain pours in, every single moving drop of it catching the light. Kosdorfer ghosts get up on the lobby's gallery, and angle fire down at the Tanith below. The top of the desk once used by the venerable clerk of records stipples and splinters, and the row of ornate brass kiosks where scholars and gnostics once filled out their data requests dent and quiver. Floor tiles crack. The delicate etched metal facings of the wall pit and dimple.

Corbec looks out at Gaunt from behind a chipped marble column.

'This won't do,' he shouts.

Gaunt nods back.

'Support!' Corbec yells.

They've been sparing with their heavy weapon all day. They're only a light advance team, and

they weren't packing much to begin with.

The big man comes up level with Corbec, head down. He's carrying the lascarbine he's been fighting with, but he's got a long canvas sleeve across his back. He unclasps it to slide out the rocket tube.

The big man's name is Bragg. He really is big. He's not much taller than Corbec, but he's got breadth across the shoulders. There's a younger Tanith with him, one of the kids, a boy called Beltayn. He's carrying the leather box with the eight anti-tank rockets in it, and he gets one out while Bragg snaps up the tube's mechanical range-finder.

'Any time you like, Try!' Larkin yells out from behind an archway that is becoming riddled with shots. 'Shut your noise,' Bragg replies genially. He glances at Gaunt abruptly.

'Sorry, colonel-commissar, sir!' he says.

'Get on with it, please!' Gaunt shouts. It's not so much the heavy fire they're taking, it's the voices. It's probably his imagination, but the pleading, moaning voices of the Kosdorfers calling out to them are starting to make sense to him.

Beltayn goes to offer up the rocket to Bragg's launcher, and a las-bolt fells him. Gaunt's eyes widen as the rocket tumbles out of the hands of the falling boy and drops towards the tiled floor.

It hits, bounces, a tail-fin dents slightly.

It doesn't detonate.

Gaunt dashes forward. Corbec has reached Bragg too. Bragg has picked up the rocket. He taps it cheerfully against his head.

'No fear,' he says. 'Arming pin's still in.'

Gaunt snatches the rocket, and stoops to the box to swap it for an undamaged one.

'See to the boy!' he says to Corbec.

'Just a flesh wound!' Corbec replies, hunched over Beltayn. 'Just his arm.'

'Get him back to the archway!'

'I can't leave—'

'Get his arse back to the archway, colonel! I'll do this!'

'Yes sir!'

Corbec starts dragging the boy back towards the main archway. Men come out of cover to help him. Gaunt gets a clean rocket out of the box. He rolls it in his hands to check it by eye. It's been a long time since he loaded, a long time since he learned basic skills. A long time since he was the boy, the Hyrkan boy, apprenticed to war, born into it as if it was a family business.

'Set?' he asks the big man.

'Yes, sir!' says Bragg.

Gaunt fits the rocket and removes the arming pin. Bragg hoists the top-heavy tube onto the shelf of his shoulder and takes aim at the lobby gallery. Gaunt slaps him twice on the shoulder.

'Ease!' he yells.

'Ease!' Bragg yells back. The word opens the mouth and stops the eardrums bursting.

Bragg pulls the bare metal trigger. The ignition thumps the air, and blow-back spits from the back of the tube and throws up dust. The rocket howls off in the other direction, on a trail of flame. It hits the gallery just under the rail, and detonates volcanically. The entire gallery lifts for a second, and then comes down like an avalanche, spilling rubble, stonework, grit, glass and men. It collapses with a drawn-out roar, a death rattle of noise and disintegration.

Gaunt looks at Bragg. Bragg grins. Their ears are ringing.

Gaunt signals back to the archway.

They run in through the archway, through the smoke blowing from the lobby. They get down. Corbec has signalled a pause while they wait to hear how the enemy redeploys.

It gets quieter. The building settles. Rubble clatters as it falls now and then. Glass tinkles.

Gaunt sinks down next to Bragg, his back to a wall.

'First time that time,' says Larkin from a corner nearby.

'I know,' says Bragg. He looks at Gaunt. He's proud of himself.

'Sometimes I miss,' he explains.

'I know,' says Gaunt. The big man's nickname is Try Again because he's always messing up the first shot.

Gaunt sits quiet for a minute or two. He wipes the sweat off his face. He thinks about trying again, and second chances.

Sometimes there just isn't the opportunity or the willingness to make things better. Sometimes you can't simply have another go. You make a choice, and it's a bad one, and you're left with it. No amount of trying again will fix it. Don't expect anyone to feel sorry for you, to cut you slack; you made a mistake you'll have to live with.

It was like failing to play the glittering game when he had the chance as one of Slaydo's brightest; like leaving the Hyrkans; like trying to salvage anything from the Tanith disaster; like thinking he could win broken, grieving men over; like coming out with a small advance force into a city grave, just because he was bored of sitting in his tent.

He takes his cap off, leans the crown of his head back against the damp wall and closes his eyes. He opens them again. It's dark above him, the roofspace of the library. Beads of rainwater and flakes of plaster are dripping and splattering down towards him, catching the intermittent lightning, like snow, like the slow traffic of stars through the aching loneliness of space.

He remembers something, one little thing. He puts his hand in his pocket, just to touch the letter, just to put his fingers on the letter his old friend Blenner sent him: Blenner, his friend from Schola Progenium, manufacturer of fake plastic explosives and practical jokes.

Blenner, manufacturer of empty promises, too, no doubt. The letter's old. The offer may not still stand, if it ever did. Vaynom Blenner was not the most reliable man, and his mouth had a habit of making offers the rest of him couldn't keep.

But it's a small hope, a sustaining thing, the possibility of trying again.

The letter is gone.

Suddenly alert, torn from his reverie, Gaunt begins to search his pockets. It's really gone. The pocket he thought he'd put it in is hanging off, thanks to the thrust of a rusty sword bayonet. All the pockets of his field jacket and storm coat are empty.

The letter's lost. It's outside somewhere in this grave of a city, disintegrating in the rain.

'What's the matter?' asks Bragg, noticing Gaunt's activity.

'Nothing,' says Gaunt.

'You sure?'

Gaunt nods.

'Good,' says Bragg, sitting back again. 'I thought you might have the torments on you.'

'The torments?'

'Everyone gets them,' says Bragg. 'Everyone has their own. Bad dreams. Bad memories. Most of us, it's about where we come from. Tanith, you know.'

'I know,' says Gaunt.

'We miss it,' says Bragg, like this idea might, somehow, not be clear to anyone. 'It's hard to bear. It's hard to think about what happened to it, sometimes. It gets us inside. You know Gutes?'

Bragg points across at Piet Gutes, one of the men who was in the guild house with Domor. Like all the Tanith, Gutes is resting for a moment, sitting against a wall, feet pulled in, gun across his knees, listening.

'Yeah,' says Gaunt.

'Friend of mine,' says Bragg. 'He had a daughter called Finra, and she had a daughter called Foonna. Feth, but he misses them. Not being away from them, you understand. Just them not being there to return to. And Mkendrick?'

Bragg points to another infantryman. His voice is low.

'He left a brother in Tanith Steeple. I think he had family in Attica too, an uncle—'

'Why are you telling me this, trooper?' Gaunt asks. 'I know what happened. I know what I did. Do you want me to suffer? I can't make amends. I can't do that.'

Bragg frowns.

'I thought,' he starts to say.

'What?' asks Gaunt.

'I thought that's what you were trying to do,' says Bragg. 'With us. I thought you were trying to make something good out of what was left of Tanith.'

'With respect, trooper, you're the only man in the regiment who thinks that. Also, with respect to the fighting merits of the Tanith, I'm an Imperial Guard commander, not a miracle worker. I've got a few men, a handful in the great scheme of things. We're never going to accomplish much. We're going to be a line of code in the middle of a Munitorum levy report, if that.'

'Oh, you never know,' says Bragg. 'Anyway, it doesn't matter if we don't. All that matters is you do right by the men.'

'I do right by them?'

'That's all we want,' says Bragg with a smile. 'We're Tanith. We're used to knowing where we're going. We're used to finding our way. We're lost now. All we want from you is for you to find a path for us and set us on it.'

Someone nearby says something.

Corbec holds up a hand, makes a gesture. Pattering rain. Otherwise, silence.

Everyone's listening.

Gaunt pats the big man on the arm and goes over to join Corbec.

'What is it?' he asks.

'Beltayn says he heard something,' Corbec replies. The boy is settled in beside Corbec, the wounded arm packed and taped. He looks at Gaunt.

He says, 'Something's awry.'

'What's that supposed to mean?' asks Gaunt.

Corbec indicates he should listen. Gaunt cranes his neck.

The Kosdorfers are moving. They're talking again. Their whispers are breathing out of the ruins to reach the Tanith position.

Gaunt looks sharply at Corbec.

'I think I can understand the words,' he says.

'Me too,' Corbec nods.

Gaunt swallows hard. He's got a sick feeling, and he's not sure where it's coming from. The feeling is telling him that he's not suddenly comprehending the Kosdorfers because they are speaking Low Gothic.

He's understanding them because he's learned their language.

THE BOY WAKES up with a start.

'Go back to sleep,' Dorden tells him. 'You need your sleep.'

Dorden's standing in the doorway of the tent, watching the evening coming in.

Milo gets up.

'Are they back yet?' he asks.

Dorden shakes his head.

'Someone needs to go and look for them,' the boy says flatly. 'I had another dream. A really unpleasant one. Someone needs to go and look for them.'

'Just go back to sleep,' Dorden insists. The boy slumps a little, and turns back to his cot.

'You dreamed they were in trouble, did you?' Dorden asks, trying to humour the boy.

'No,' replies the boy, sitting down on the cot and looking back at the medicae. 'That's not why I have the feeling they're in trouble. I didn't dream it, that's just common sense.'

They're overdue. My bad dream, it was just a dream about numbers. Like last night and the night before.'

'Numbers?' asks Dorden.

Milo nods. 'Just some numbers. In my dream, I'm trying to write these numbers down, over and over, but my stylus won't work, and for some reason that's not a pleasant dream to have.'

Dorden looks at the boy. He asks, 'So what are the numbers, Brin?', still humouring him.

The boy reels the numbers off.

'When did he tell you that?' Dorden asks.

'Who?'

'Gaunt.'

'He didn't tell me anything,' says the boy. 'He certainly didn't tell me those numbers. I just told you, they were in my dream. I dreamed about them.'

'Are you lying to me, Brin?'

'No, sir.'

Dorden keeps staring at the boy a minute more, as if a lie will suddenly give itself away, like the moon coming out from behind a cloud.

'Why do those numbers matter?' the boy asks.

'They're Gaunt's command code,' says Dorden.

'EXPLAIN YOURSELF,' THE voice demands. It comes out like an echo, from the ruins, the ghost of a voice. 'Explain yourself. We don't understand why.'

The voice tunes in and out, like a vox that's getting interference.

'We're hungry,' it adds.

Corbec looks at Gaunt. He wants to reply, Gaunt can see it on his face. Gaunt shakes his head.

'You left us here,' the voice says. It's two or three voices now, all speaking at once, like two or three vox sets tuned to the same signal, their speakers slightly out of sync. 'Why did you leave us here? We don't understand why you left us behind.'

'Feth's sake is that?' Corbec mutters to Gaunt. All good humour has gone from him. He's looking pinched and scared.

'You left us behind, and we're hungry,' the voices plead.

'I don't know,' says Gaunt. 'A trick.'

He says it, but he doesn't believe it. It's an uglier thing than that. The voices don't really sound like voices when you listen hard, or vox transmits either. They sound like... like other noises that have been carefully mixed up and glued together to make voice sounds. All the noises of the dead city have been harvested: the scatter of pebbles, the slump of masonry, the splinter and smash of glass, the creak of rebar, the crack of tiles, the spatter of rain. All those things and millions more besides, blended into a sound mosaic that almost perfectly imitates the sound of human speech.

Almost, but not quite.

Almost human, but not human enough.

'You left us behind, and we're hungry. Explain yourself.

We don't understand why you left us. We don't understand why you didn't come.'

The Tanith are all up, all disturbed. Knuckles are white where hands grip weapons. Everyone's soaking wet.

Everyone's watching the dripping shadows. Gaunt needs them to keep it together. He knows they can all hear it. The inhuman imperfection in the voices.

'I know what that is,' says Larkin.

'Steady, Larks,' growls Corbec.

'I know what that is. I know, I know what that is,' the marksman says. 'I know it. It's Tanith.'

'Shut up, Larks.'

'It's Tanith. It's dead Tanith calling to us! It's Tanith calling to us, calling us back!'

'Shut up please, Larks!'

'Larkin, shut your mouth!' Gaunt barks.

Larkin makes a sound, a mewling sob. Fear's inside him, deep as a bayonet.

The voices are out there in the dark and the rain. The words seem to move from one speaker to the next. Dead speakers. Broken throats.

'We don't understand why you didn't come. We don't understand. We don't know who we are any more. We don't know where we belong.'

Gaunt looks at Corbec.

'We getting out?' he asks.

'Through the back way?'

'Whatever way we can find.'

'What happened to holding this place until reinforcements arrive?' asks Corbec.

'No one's coming this way that we want to meet,' says Gaunt.

Corbec turns to the advance force.

'Get ready to move,' he orders.

The voice pleads, 'Where do we belong? We don't know where we belong.'

'It's Tanith!' Larkin cries out. 'It's the old place calling out to us!'

Gaunt grabs him, and pushes him against a wall.

'Listen to me,' he says. 'Larkin? Larkin? Listen to me! Get yourself under control! Something worse than death happened here, something much worse!'

'What?' Larkin whines, wanting to know and not wanting to know.

'Something Tanith was spared, do you understand me?'

Larkin makes the sobbing sound again. Gaunt lets him go, lets him sag against the wall. He turns, and the men are all around him. Mkoll's right there, Mkvenner too, looking as if they're going to step in and pull Gaunt and Larkin apart. The Tanith men are all staring at him. No one's looking away.

'Do you understand?' Gaunt asks them. 'All of you? Any of you?'

'We understand what you did,' one of them says.

'Oh, this isn't helping anything, lads!' Corbec rumbles.

Gaunt ignores Corbec and laughs a brutal laugh. 'I'm a destroyer of worlds, am I? You credit me with too much power. Indecent amounts of it. And anyway, I don't much care what you think of me.'

'Let's go! Let's go now,' says Corbec.

'There's only one thing I want you to understand,' Gaunt says.

'What's that?' asks Larkin, his mouth trembling.

'The worst thing you can imagine,' says Gaunt, 'is not the worst thing. Not by a long way.'