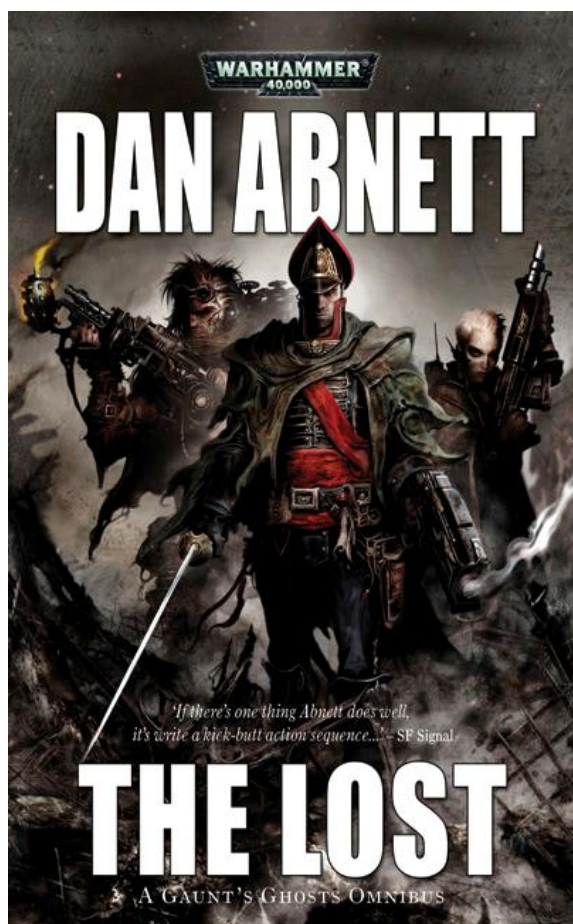




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THE LOST

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By Dan Abnett

The Tanith First-And-Only are among the most legendary regiments of Imperial Guard and at their head stands Commissar Ibram Gaunt, unflinching in duty and unrelenting in combat. The Lost sees the very future of the regiment in jeopardy as Gaunt battles the forces of Chaos across the Sabbat Worlds, from rescue missions to the horrors of the battlefield. Can the Tanith First-And-Only survive the dangers they are faced with, or will they be forever lost?

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
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BROTHERS OF THE SNAKE

The following is an excerpt from *The Lost* by Dan Abnett.

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ON THE SIX hundred and fourth Day of Pain, the two hundred and twenty-first day of the Imperial Year 774, Gerome Landerson left his place of work at the sounding of the carnyx horn. The horn signalled the change from day-labour to night-labour.

He was weary, hungry and drenched with sweat. His arms and spine ached from swinging a hammer, and his hands were so numbed from the constant impacts that he could no longer feel his fingers. But he did not trudge towards the cookshops or the washhouses with the other day-labourers from the Iconoclave, nor did he begin the long walk back to the consented habitats along the river wall of Ineuron Town.

Instead, he walked west, down through the fractured arches of the town's old commercia. Markets had once thrived there ó the daily cheaps of foodstuffs, grain, livestock, instruments ó and the licensed mercantile houses had once raised their lavish silk tents and displayed the gewgaws and trinkets of their trade.

Landerson had always loved the commercia for its flavour of the faraway. He'd once bought a small metal plaque with an engraving of an Ecclesiarchy templum on Enothis just because it had travelled so far. Now the faraway seemed even more remote and unreachable, even though it was his business tonight.

The commercia was a ruin these days. What remained of the vast roof vault was smoke-blackened and rotten, and the rows of metal stalls where the traders had congregated for the daily cheaps were twisted and corroding. On the rubble-strewn ground, a few furtive dealers lurked by oilcan fires, bartering luxuries like marrowbones and bent cutlery for ration coins and consent wafers. Every time there was a hint of an excubitor patrol passing nearby, the scavengers melted away into the shadows.

Landerson walked on, trying to rub some life back into his soot-caked hands. He left the commercia via the wide flight of white marble steps, steps still riddled with the black boreholes of las-fire, and began down the Avenue of Shins. That wasn't its real name of course, but the yoke of oppression bred black humour in the conquered. This had been the Avenue of the Aquila. Long and broad, it was lined on either side by rows of oulrite plinths. The statue of an Imperial hero had once stood on each. The invaders had demolished them all. Now only splintered stone shins rose from the proud feet planted on those plinths. Hence the name.

Talix trees, tall and slender, grew along the outsides of the avenue. At least two had been decapitated and remade into gibbets for the wirewolves. There was no point trying to avoid them. Landerson walked on, trying not to look up at the skeletal mannequins hanging limply from the axl-trees on their metal strings. They creaked, swinging slightly in the breeze.

Daylight was fading. The sky, already hazy with the perpetual canopy of dust, had taken on a sheen as if a fog were closing in. To the west, the furnaces of the meat foundries glazed the low clouds with a glow the colour of pomegranate flesh. Landerson knew he had to hurry now. His imago consented him only for activity during daylight.

He was crossing the square at Tallenhall when he smelled the glyf. It stank like a discharged battery pack, an ionized scent, the tang of blood and metal. He huddled down in the overgrown hedge by the tangled iron railings and watched. The glyf appeared in the northern corner of the square, drifting like a balloon eight metres up, slow and lazy. As soon as he had located it, he tried to look away, but it was impossible. The floating sigils, bright as neon, locked his attention. He felt his stomach churn at the sight of those abominable, intertwined symbols, his gorge rising. At the back of his mind, he heard a chattering, like the sound of swarming insects rubbing their wing cases. The imago in the flesh of his left arm twitched.

The glyf wavered, then began to glide away, out of sight behind the shell of the town library. As soon as it was gone, Landerson sank onto his hands and dry-heaved violently into the burned grass. When he closed his eyes, he could see the obscene symbols shining in meaningless repeats on the back of his eyelids.

Unsteady, he rose to his feet, succumbed to a spell of giddiness, and slumped against the bent railings for support.

∴Voi shet!ø a hard voice barked.

He shook his head, trying to straighten up. Boots crunched across the brick dust towards him.

-Voi shet! Ecchr Anark setriketan!ø

Landerson raised his hands in supplication. -Consented!
Consented, magir!ø

The three excubitors surrounded him. Each was two metres tall and clad in heavy buckled boots and long coats of grey scale armour. They aimed their ornate las-locks at him.

-I am consented, magir!øhe pleaded, trying to show them his imago.

One of them cuffed him down onto his knees.

-Shet atraga ydereta haspa? Voi leng haspa?ø

-Í I donø speak youróø

There was a click, and a crackle of vox noise. One of them spoke again, but its coarse words were obscured by a rasping mechanical echo.

-What is your purpose here?ø

-I am consented to pass in daylight, magir,øhe answered.

-Look at me!øAgain, the barbarous tongue was overlaid with augmented-generated speech.

Landerson looked up. The excubitor leaning over him was as hellish as any of its kind. Only the upper half of its head was visible ó pale, shrivelled and hairless. A dripping cluster of metal tubes and pipes sprouted from the back of its wrinkled skull and connected to the steaming, panting support box strapped across its back. Three huge, sutured scars split its face, one down through each eye socket ó in which augmented ocular mounts were now sewn ó and the third straight down over the bridge of a nose from which all flesh had been debrided. A large brass collar rose in front of the face, mercifully obscuring the excubitorø mouth and most of the nasal area. The front of this collar mounted a wire-grilled speaking box, which the excubitor had switched to -translateø

-Í I look upon you, and I am graced by your beauty,ø

Landerson gasped as clearly as he could.

-Name?øthe thing snapped.

-Landerson, Gerome, consented of day, b-by the will of the Anarch.ø

-Place of industry?ø

-The Iconoclave, magir.ø

-You work in the Breaking House?ø

-Yes, magir.ø

-Display to me your consent!ø

Landerson lifted his left arm and drew back the sleeve of his torn workcoat to reveal the imago in its blister of clear pus.

-Eletraa kyh drowk!øthe excubitor said to one of its companions.

-Chee ataah drowk,øcame the reply. The sentinel drew a long metal tool from its belt, the size and shape of a candle-snuffer, and placed the cup over Landersonø imago. Landerson gasped as he felt the thing in his flesh writhe. Small runes lit up on the shank of the tool. The cup withdrew.

The third excubitor grabbed Landerson by the head and turned it roughly so as to better examine the stigma on his left cheek.

-Fehet gahesh,øit said, letting him go.

-Go home, interceded one,øthe first excubitor told Landerson, the machine words back-echoed by the alien speech. -Go home and do not let us catch you out here again.ø

-Y-yes, magir. At once.ø

-Or we will have sport with you. Us, or the wirewolves.ø

-I understand, magir. Thank you.ø

The excubitor stepped back. It covered the grille of its speaking box with one hand. Its brethren did the same.

-We serve the word of the Anarch, whose word drowns out all others.ø

Landerson covered his own mouth quickly. -Whose word drowns out all others,øhe repeated quickly.

The excubitors looked at him for a moment longer, then shouldered their massive las-locks and walked away across the overgrown square.

It was a long while before Landerson had recovered enough to get back on his feet.

IT WAS ALMOST dark when he reached the abandoned mill at the edge of the town. The dimming sky was lit by fires: the burning masses of the distant hives and the closer glows of the ahenum furnaces that powered the townø new industries. On the wide roadway below the mill, torches were bobbing and drums were beating. Another procession of proselytes was being led to the shrines by the ordinals.

Landerson tapped on the wooden door.

-How is Gereon?øasked a voice from within.

-Gereon lives,øLanderson replied.

—Despite their efforts, the voice responded. The door swung open, revealing only darkness. Landerson peered in.

Then he felt the nudge of an autopistol muzzle against the back of his head.

—You're late.

—I ran into trouble.

—It had better not have followed you.

—No, sir.

—Step in, nice and easy.

Landerson edged into the darkness. A light came on, in his face.

—Check him! a voice said, as the door swung closed behind him.

Hands grabbed him and hustled him forward. The paddle of an auspex buzzed as it was passed up and down his body.

—Clean! someone said.

The hands withdrew. Landerson squinted into the light, resolving his surroundings. A dank cellar of the old mill, figures all around, flashlights aimed his way.

Colonel Ballerat stepped into the light, holstering his pistol.

—Landerson, he said.

—Good to see you, sir, Landerson, replied.

Ballerat moved forward and embraced Landerson. He did so with only one hand. Ballerat's left arm and left leg had been ripped away in the foundries. He had a crude prosthetic that allowed him to walk, but his left arm was just a nub.

—I'm relieved you got the message. Ballerat smiled. —I was beginning to worry you hadn't.

—I got it all right, Landerson said. —Dropped into my food pail. It was difficult getting away. Is it tonight, sir?

Ballerat nodded. —Yes, it is. They're definitely down. We need to make contact so we can move to the next stage.

Landerson nodded. —How many, sir?

—How many what? Ballerat asked.

—I mean, what sort of numbers, sir? Disposition? What sort of size is the liberation force?

Ballerat paused. —We don't know yet, major. Working on that. The key thing right now is to make contact with their recon advance so we can lead them in.

—Understood, sir.

—I'm sending you, Lefivre and Purchason.

—I know them both, sir. Good men. We served in the PDF together.

Ballerat smiled. "That's what I thought. So you know the area well. Rendezvous is an agri-complex at the Shedowtonland Crossroads. Contact code is 07Tanith Magna00."

Landerson repeated the words. "What does that mean, sir?"

Ballerat shrugged. "Damned if I know. A Guard code. Ah, here they come."

Lefivre and Purchason approached. Both were dressed in the ragged, scabbled-together remnants of PDF combat gear. Lefivre was a short, blond man with a scrappy beard. Purchason was taller, leaner and dark-haired. Both shook hands with Landerson. Both carried silenced autorifles.

Another member of the resistance hurried over with a set of fatigues, equipment and weapons for Landerson. Crouching, Landerson began to sort through the stuff.

"That can wait," Ballerat said. "We have to strip you out first, son."

Landerson nodded and rose to his feet. Ballerat led him into an adjoining chamber that stank of animals, chyme and dung. The air was warm and heavy. Landerson could hear grox snorting and farting in the gloom.

"Ready?" Ballerat asked him.

"I'd just like to get it over with, sir," Landerson said. He pulled up the sleeve of his left arm.

Several other men appeared and took him by the shoulders, holding him tight. One offered him a bottle of amasec. Landerson took a deep swig. "Good boy," the man said. "Helps dull the pain. Now bite on this. You'll need it."

Landerson bit down hard on the leather belt that was pushed into his mouth.

The surgeon was a woman, an old lady from the habs. She smiled at Landerson, who was now pinned by four men, and poured more amasec over the imago.

Landerson felt it squirm.

"They don't like that at all," the surgeon muttered. "It numbs them. Makes them sleepy, dull. Makes them easier to withdraw. Steel yourself, boy."

She produced a scalpel, and quickly slit open the huge blister on his forearm. It popped, and viscous fluid poured out. Landerson bit down. It hurt already. The coiled black thing in the meat of his arm, now exposed, fidgeted and tightened in the sore, red cavity. He tried not to look, but he could not help it.

The surgeon reached in with long-handled tweezers.

She began to pull. Most of the glistening black grub came away in the first tug, but the long, barbed tail, dark and thorned like razor-wire, resisted. She pulled more firmly and Landerson bit down harder, feeling his flesh tear. The grub began to squirm and wriggle between the tips of the tweezers. Agony pulsed down Landerson's arm. It felt like a barbed fishing line was being drawn out down an artery.

The surgeon doused the wound with more alcohol, and yanked hard. Landerson bit through the belt. The whipping grub tore free, jiggling at the end of her surgical tool.

—Now! she cried.

One of Ballerat's men had already slit open the haunch of one of the grox in the stalls. The old woman stabbed the twitching grub into the wound, and then, as she released it, clamped the wound shut with a wadding of anaesthetape and bandage.

She held it tight, fighting as if something was trying to get out from under the wadding.

—We're all right, she said finally. —I think it's taken.

Everyone fell silent for a few long minutes, listening intently for the sound of an excubitor alarm or worse. Landerson realised he was shaking hard. The old woman beckoned to one of the men to hold the wadding tight to the animal's flank, and came over to Landerson to bind his wound.

She cleaned it carefully, sealed it, bandaged it, and then gave him a shot of painkillers and counterseptic agents.

Landerson began to feel a little better, though he was slightly distressed to note an odd sensation of absence. All those months, longing to be rid of the foul, twitching thing under his skin, and now his body seemed to miss the imago.

—Are you feeling all right? Ballerat asked him, emerging from the shadows.

—Yes, sir, Landerson lied.

—I'd like to give you more time to recover, but we don't have it. Set to move?

Landerson nodded.

Ballerat showed him a crumpled, hand-drawn map. —Take a moment to study this. Memorise it, because I can't let you take it. This is the route I suggest you follow. These are the times and locations of the patrols we know about.

Landerson studied the information hard, looking away from time to time and then back at the map to test his recall. Then Ballerat handed him an envelope, and Landerson glanced inside.

-What's this for? he asked.

-You never know, the colonel replied. Landerson put the envelope inside his jacket.

-Right, said Ballerat, nodding Lefivre and Purchason over to join them. -Rendezvous is set for twenty-three fifteen. Find out what they need from us and do your best to provide it. Contact with us is via the usual methods. We'll be staging a diversion event about forty minutes prior to rendezvous that should draw surplus attention away from your zone. Any questions?

The three men shook their heads.

Ballerat couldn't make the full sign of the aquila, but he placed his right hand over his heart as if he were. -Good fortune, and for the sake of Gereon, may the Emperor protect you.

THE NIGHT WAS cool and damp. Landerson had almost forgotten how it felt to be outside in the dark. They made good progress out of Ineuron Town, smuggling themselves through the western palisades, and then headed out across the old ornamental park called the Ambulatory. The lights of the town flickered behind them, and once in a while they heard distant horns and kettle drums.

The bloodiest phase of the battle for Ineuron Town had been fought around the precincts of the Ambulatory and the ground, now fully overgrown, was littered with machine debris and pathetic scatters of human bone. The three men made no sound. Ballerat hadn't picked them for this mission simply because of their local knowledge. All three had been in the ranger-recon brigade of the PDF.

Halfway across the Ambulatory they had to take cover behind a thicket of juvenile talix trees as a patrol went by: two half-tracks, blazing with hunting spotlights, the lead one resembling an ice sled because of the long string of fetch-hounds straining ahead of it on chains. The animals growled and rasped, pulling at their harnesses. They were trained to scent imagos and also human pheromones. The last thing Landerson and his companions had done before leaving the mill was stand under a crude gravity shower that soaked them with scent-repellents.

The patrol moved away. Landerson signalled the other two men forward. He used the sign language fluently, like his last ranger-

recon mission had been the day before. But he noticed that his left arm felt curiously light. Had the old woman got it all out? Or was there some piece of the grub still inside him, yearning foró

Landerson dismissed the thought. If even a scrap of the imago had been left behind, corposant would be crackling over every gibbet in the town and the wirewolves would be gathering.

They left the Ambulatory, and picked their way through the silent ruins of the tiered hab blocks that ran down the slopes of Mexley Hill. This suburb was an agriculture district, marking the point at which the heavy industry of the inner conurbations gave way to the farmland disciplines of the town's rural skirts. Behind the habs, strips of crop fields were laid out across the hillside and over into the next valley. Landerson could smell silage, plant rot, and the distinctive perfume of canterwheat. But the crop, unharvested, had gone over, and the smell was unpleasantly strong, with a sickly tinge of fermentation.

Purchason stopped dead and signed a warning. The trio melted into cover behind the yard wall at the rear of one of the habs.

Thirty metres away, a glyf hung, almost stationary, above the lane.

In the dark, the glyf was even more terrifying than the one that had passed Landerson by in daylight. Its coiled, burning symbols seemed to writhe like snakes, forming one unholy rune then another, bright against the night sky as if they were written in liquid flame. Landerson could hear it crackling like a log fire. He could hear the thick, nauseating insect noise. This time, he managed to look away.

He was suddenly aware of Lefivre next to him. The man was shaking badly. Glancing round, Landerson saw that his companion had his eyes locked on the infernal glyf. Tears were trickling from eyes that refused to blink. Landerson reached out quickly and took Lefivre's weapon just moments before it slithered out of the man's nerveless hands. In the half light, he could see Lefivre's jaw working and his adam's apple bobbing. Lefivre's lips were pinched and white. He was fighting not to scream, but it was a fight he was about to lose.

Landerson clamped his hand over Lefivre's mouth. Realising what was happening, Purchason grabbed Lefivre too, hugging him tight to keep him upright and pin his arms. Landerson felt Lefivre's mouth grind open, and squeezed his hand tighter, fighting back a cry as Lefivre's teeth bit into his palm.

The glyf trembled. The insect noise increased, purring, then sank away. The glyf drifted off to the north, hissing over the shattered roofs of the hab terrace and then away across the park. Landerson and Purchason maintained their grip on Lefivre. Ten seconds later, five excubitors ran past along the lane, heading towards the town. The glyf had found something, and now the patrol was drawing in. After a few minutes, they heard the dull bark of las-locks discharging.

Some poor unconsented, no doubt, hiding in the rambles of the park.

Landerson realised he was now unconsented too.

He took his hand away. Blood pattered onto the stony path. Lefivre slumped over, panting like a dog. In his terror, he'd lost control of his bladder.

—I'm sorryí I'm sorryí øhe gasped.

—It's fine, øLanderson whispered.

—Your handí ø

—It's fine, øLanderson repeated. His hand really hurt. Lefivre had bitten a large chunk out of his palm. Now he smelled of blood, Lefivre smelled of piss, and they all stank of the sweat the tension had engulfed them in.

Landerson wrapped his hand in his neck cloth, and prayed they would not meet any fetch-hounds.

IT WAS ALMOST twenty-two thirty when they reached the Shedowtonland Crossroads. Left untended and unirrigated, the paddies had dried up, and now great areas of fertile land were reduced to caked mud mouldering with neglected, blighted crops. The air was ripe with mildew and corruption.

Thunder rolled in the distance, out beyond the agriculture belt, out in the untamed swampland of the Untill. Once, those miasmal regions had been seen as danger zones. Now, post intercession, they seemed safe compared to the populated areas.

They skirted wide round the bulky prefabs of the agri-complex and then turned back into them, weapons ready, long suppressor tubes fixed. They crept through the shadows, between immobilised tractor units and dredge-harvesters in the low garages, and on past iron pens where swine had been slaughtered and left to decompose. More than once they disturbed carrion mammals feeding on refuse, local fauna lured out of the swamps by the scent of decay. Squalling,

the small creatures bushed their tails up and started off into the darkness.

Lefivre was still spooked. He swung his gun at every last forager.

-You gotta calm down,øLanderson whispered.

-I know.ø

-Really, friend. Deep breaths. I canø have you jumping.ø

-No, major. Of course not.ø

Apart from the foragers, there were rats everywhere. Everywhere in the Imperium, Landerson imagined. The starships of Holy Terra had spread many things across the galaxy ó faith, colonists, technology, civilisation ó but nothing so comprehensively or so surely as the indomitable *rattus rattus*. Before the Intercession, he had heard learned men joke that the Imperium was actually forged by rats, and humans were just along for the ride. On some worlds, the accidentally imported rat had overmastered all other life forms. On other worlds, they had interbred and created monsters.

The three men completed a circuit check, and found nothing except some sickening runes daubed on the outer fence that might have been charged to become glyfs. Landerson didnø want to risk it, so he doused each one he found with the flask of consecrated water that had been issued as part of his kit.

Purchason helped. Lefivre held back. He didnø want to look at the marks. He didnø want his mind to lapse that way again.

They reached the main buildings. It was twenty-two thirty-seven. Pretty much on cue, they heard a boom from the town behind them. A fiery glow slowly rose into the sky. Then a buzzing filled the air. In the valley below them, they saw glyfs floating like ball lightning, drawn to the commotion.

The colonelø diversion was underway.

-Emperor protect you,øLanderson muttered.

Landerson checked the main door. It was unlocked. Weapon braced, he crouched his way in as Lefivre pushed the door open. Purchason stood to his left, rifle raised to cover.

The prefab hallway was dark. There was an intense smell of dry fertilizer. Rats scurried.

Landerson signalled Lefivre to watch the door, then he and Purchason swept up the hallway, covering each other door by door. The place was deserted. Chairs and tables were overturned, agricultural cogitators smashed, seed incubators and nursery racks destroyed.

There was a dim light ahead. Cautiously, they prowled on, signing to each other, weapons set. The light was coming from a central office area. A single candle, guttering on a desk.

Landerson glanced at Purchason. Purchason shook his head. He had no idea what was going on either.

They slid inside. The room was empty apart from broken furniture and the desk with the candle. The windows were locked. There was only one door.

–This is the place,øsaid Landerson as loudly as he dared.

–What the hellø that candle about? Are they here already?ø

Landerson looked around for a second time. –I donø know,øhe whispered. –Go check on Lefivre.ø

Purchason nodded and slid back out into the hallway. Landerson stood by the desk, his weapon aimed at the doorway. A minute passed. Two. His hands began to sweat.

He heard a faint noise.

–Purchason?øhe called quietly.

The candle suddenly went out. An arm locked about his body, pinning his weapon. He felt a blade at his throat.

–Say it now and say it right,øsaid a voice in his ear.

–T-tanith Magnaí ø

The grip released.

Landerson turned in the darkness, terrified.

–Where are you?øhe gasped.

–Still here,øthe voice said, behind him again. Landerson switched round.

–What are you doing?øhe breathed. –Show yourself!ø

–All in good time. You got a name?øThe voice was behind him yet again. Landerson froze.

–Major Gerome Landerson, Gereon PDF.ø

There was a click of tinder sticks and the candle on the desk relit. Landerson swung round to look at it, gun raised. The candle fluttered, solitary. There was no sign of whoever had lit it.

–Stop it!øLanderson said. –Where are you?ø

–Right here.øLanderson froze as he felt the cold muzzle of a weapon rest against the back of his neck. –Put the gun down.ø

Landerson gently placed his silenced rifle on the desk.

–How did you get in?øhe whispered.

–I was here all the time.ø

–But I searched the roomøø

–Not well enough.ø

-Who are you?ø

-My name is Mkoll. Sergeant of scouts, Tanith First-and-Only.ø

-Could you take the gun off my neck?ø

A man appeared in the candlelight in front of Landerson. He was short, compact, shrouded in a camouflage cloak that seemed to melt into the darkness. -I could,øhe said softly, -if it was my gun. Ven? Let the poor guy off the leash.ø

The pressure of the gun-muzzle went away. Landerson glanced round and saw the second man. Just a shadow in the extremity of the candlelight. Taller than the first, a murmur of a shape.

-W-what are you?øLanderson stammered. -Ghosts?ø

By the light of the single candle flame, Landerson saw the eyes of the man calling himself Mkoll crinkle and glint. A smile. That was the most unnerving thing of all, for clearly this was a face unaccustomed to smiles.

-You could say that,øMkoll said.

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