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# SALVATION'S REACH

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**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](http://www.danabnett.com)

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SOMETHING, PERHAPS THE year of living by the skin of his teeth on occupied Gereon, or merely the fact of having been born a sly and ruthless son of a bitch, had given Major Rawne of the Tanith First a certain edge.

He could usually smell trouble coming. That morning, he could definitely smell trouble coming. As edges went, his was as fine and sharp as the one along the blade of his straight silver warknife.

At dawn, with the twin suns beginning to burn up through the petrochemical smog across the city bay, he left the regimental billet and walked down to the rockcrete wasteland of the bayside revetment. There, he wandered as far as the bridge, and crossed over to the pontoons in front of the island guardhouse.

The pontoon walkway clunked underfoot. Looking down through the mesh, he could see the water, toxic brown and frothy. The massive galvanic plants along the bay, Adeptus Mechanicus developments that powered and lit the hive city's core systems, had just flushed their heatsinks, and filled the coastline with its morning dose of radioactive effluent. There was steam in the air, steam that stank of sulphur and rolled like a fog bank, white in the suns' light. The waters of the bay and estuary had been corrosively acidic for a thousand years. It was sobering to think that anything still lived in it.

But things did. Just below the surface, they squirmed and moved, leech-mouthed, slug-slick, with dentition like crowded pincushions and eyes like phlegm. Rawne could see them, following him beneath the surface; a dark, wriggling mass. What gave them their edge? Was it the sound of his footsteps, the passing heat signature of his body? Pheromones? His shadow on the water?

They were survivors. They had adapted to their environment instead of allowing it to kill them. And they killed anything that threatened them.

Just like him.

Three Urdeshi troopers were manning the guardhouse. They didn't know him, and he didn't know them. They weren't his concern. He had chosen that particular morning because it was pretty much the last chance he was going to get before the regiment shipped out. The point of no turning back had been reached.

But still, there was the nagging discomfort of his edge. Something was off. Something was wrong. He'd chosen the wrong day to try it. Maybe the troopers suspected him of something, maybe they were wired up for some reason. Maybe something had given away his true intent.

Under ordinary circumstances, the doubt would have been enough to make him abort, turn around, and go home. The uncertainty would have been sufficient to make him blow it off and try again another day when the odds were more favourable.

Except there weren't going to be any more other days. It was now, or it was never. There were no more chances. The monster, that monster, should have been dead long since. Justice and decency demanded it, and only the dedicated efforts of good men who ought to have known better were ensuring the monster's salvation.

Dedication. Rawne had always possessed a measure of dedication. He knew what was right and what was wrong. He knew when an order was a bad thing and needed to be ignored. He knew that sometimes a man had to be counter-intuitive. A man had to do what looked like a bad thing so that everything else would be right in the end.

The monster was destined to die. Its death was required, demanded. Efforts had already

been made, by more than one interested party. Rawne couldn't stand by and let things carry on.

Rawne was a man of serious convictions, after all. Thankfully, they'd all been wiped from his record the day he joined the Imperial Guard.

The Urdeshi watched him as he approached. What did they suspect? Did they know what he had really come for?

He stopped at the outer cage gate. The Urdeshi troopers wore black metal pins that indicated they had been seconded to serve the Commissariat's S Company, the close protection and security detail. They asked him his name and his business, and studied the papers he passed through the metal letterbox. One of them took a long time over the Contact Permission document signed by Rawne's commanding officer, as though he had literacy problems.

They let him through. They checked his ID tags. They eyed his tattoos with scorn. He was some kind of heathen farm-head from an agri-world, an indentured barbarian, not a proper fighting man from a civilised place like Urdesh. Only his rank kept the insults at bay.

They took his sidearm, put it in the guardhouse locker, and made him sign for it. Then they patted him down.

The Urdeshi had been fairly thorough up until that point, but now the long night shift and a clutch of caffeine headaches began to show. Rawne had been patted down by the very best in his time. He knew precisely how to twist or turn, innocent movements that looked like balance-keeping, so that even somebody taking the pat-down seriously could be misled and misdirected. Rawne kept his hands raised. By the time they'd finished, they would believe they had methodically checked everywhere, where in fact he had kept them entirely clear of one or two areas.

They found the knife. Tanith warknife, straight silver, buckled to his right shin.

'What's this?' asked one.

'Back-up,' replied Rawne.

They took it, made him sign for it.

He'd wanted them to find it. It was the decoy. People believed they'd done a thorough job if they found something. People usually stopped searching at that point.

'You've got thirty minutes,' said one of the guards. 'That is the permitted duration authorised by your papers. You will be back here in twenty-nine minutes. If you're not, we will come looking for you and you will be considered a justified target.'

Rawne nodded.

They opened the inner cage gate. Its chain hoist clattered. He walked through the guardhouse and out onto the inner causeway of the pontoons. The tide clearly caught here between the vast stone piers of the island. There was a pronounced stink of sulphur, and a soupy mass of dissolving garbage lapped against the slimy walls of the inlet.

He left the pontoon walkway and climbed stone steps that brought him in under the archway entrance. The island was an artificial atoll of stone and rockcrete built to support a squat, formidable lighthouse tower. The bridge that had originally connected it to the shore had long since rotted away. It had been replaced by the metal pontoon and the walk span.

The lighthouse hadn't burned for a long time. Dark and neglected, the tower's thick walls and inaccessibility had been put to other uses.

Once he was out of sight of the guardhouse, Rawne stepped back into the shadows. He reached down to his left calf, and removed the other Tanith warknife he was carrying. He had tied it around his shin with boot laces. The one he'd surrendered had been Meryn's. Rawne had taken it without asking. Meryn would probably be searching his billet for it already. It added to Rawne's enjoyment of the whole enterprise to think that, whatever else happened, Meryn would end up on a charge for misplacing his regimental dagger.

Rawne believed the knife would probably be enough. It certainly ought to be enough for any self-respecting Tanith-born to get the job done. But he wanted to cover all the variables.

Off to the side of the lowering entrance archway was a dim stone cistern. It had once been the chute of a garderobe, or a drain-away built to cope with heavy storm swells. The edge of his warknife, deftly applied, freed the lip of the cast iron cover. Rawne hooked his fingers around the bars of the cover and lifted it out. There was a damp stone well underneath, with water lurking in the darkness at the bottom. Other things lurked down there too, things with pincushion gums and egg-white eyes. He could hear them slopping and writhing gleefully, as if entertained by his cunning.

The cord had been attached to the underside of the drain cover, so that it hung down into the shaft of the well, weighted by the waxed burlap musette bag on the end. He pulled the line up, and the bag with it, opened the drawstring top, and took out the heavy object wrapped in vizzly cloth.

It was a collection of objects in fact, all of them dense and heavy. Machined metal components. Rawne spread the cloth on the stone floor beside the drain, and laid the parts out on it. He slotted them together, quickly and skilfully. He'd done it a thousand times before. He could have done it blindfold. Each piece clacked or wound into place. The smell of gun oil was sweet and strong in his nostrils.

Standard Munitorum-issue laspistol, Khulan V pattern. It was one of the original stamped blanks shipped from Khulan for finishing in the armouries of Tanith, prior to issue at the Tanith Founding. The palm-spur had been fitted with a handmade nalwood grip, and age and use had lent the figuring greater beauty than any varnish or lacquer could have achieved.

The pistol had been smuggled into the lighthouse over a period of weeks, one part at a time. It lacked a power cell, a flash sleeve and the side casings. Rawne reached into his belt pouch. Inside were two cigars rolled in black liquorice paper. The S Company sentries had taken them out, sniffed them, and given them back. Each cigar was in a little tin case. Except they weren't. One of the tin cases was actually a flash sleeve. Rawne blew out the traces of tobacco fibre and screwed the sleeve onto the end of the barrel.

The Urdeshi had also failed to notice that he was wearing four tags, not two. Rawne unlooped the two side plates from the slender chain, dropped the tags back down under the neckline of his vest, and slotted the side plates into position.

Then he struck the tip of his knife into the back of his boot heel, and pulled the heel block away from the upper. The power cell was secured in a cavity he'd hollowed out of the heel. Rawne stamped the heel back in place, then slapped the cell into the gun. He toggled off, armed it, got a tiny green light on the grip just above his thumb. He felt the ambient hum of a charged las weapon.

He dropped the drain cover back, slipped the knife into his belt, and walked up the steps from the entrance archway with the pistol down at his side in his right hand.

There was a semicircular stone chamber beyond, large and full of echoes. Munitorum-issue armoured window units had been bolted or heat-fused into the gaping stone sockets. Rawne passed on into a larger stone chamber, fully circular and three or four storeys high. It was the core of the lighthouse. In the base, dead centre, stood some of the old lampwork, a great, engineered brass contraption with a wick-mount, winding handles, and a reservoir feed from the promethium sump below. A huge frame of gearing and chainlines surrounded it to elevate the lamp to the beacon room at the apex of the tower once it was lit.

The brass lampwork was black with age and the chains had rusted. The gears and winders were so corroded they had frozen, blotched green and white, and would never turn again. Decades of dust had accreted on the black grease of the lamp head and wick assembly in such quantity it looked like some exotic, thickly furred animal mounted on display.

Rawne walked up the stairs that ran around the curve of the chamber wall. There was no rail,

and he made no sound, though the latter was not even deliberate. Like many Tanith, he had been taught by that great educator, life, not to give himself away.

He smelled caffeine and the unmistakable aroma of fried nutrition fibre. Slab, staple of the common lasman's diet, cornerstone of Guard rations.

Rawne reached a landing space. There was a doorway ahead. A guard, another Urdeshi man, was sitting beside the doorway on a chair borrowed from another building. Rawne kept the laspistol against his hip so that the man wouldn't see it immediately. He kept walking. It was all about confidence. Confidence was the key to everything. Use enough of it and you could pull off any scam, win any fight, or bed any mamzel. The more you acted like you were absolutely supposed to be doing something, the less chance anyone would ask what the hell you were up to, until it was too late, and they were – depending on the circumstances – financially worse off, dead, or surprisingly naked.

The guard didn't spare him a second look. Rawne passed him, and went in through the doorway.

The room had originally been the tower master's chamber. It was bare boards and grilled windows, and the corkscrew staircase ran up the inside wall to the platform levels higher in the tower. The room currently contained a heavy wooden cot, a small trolley table and an old wooden chair.

The cot was neatly made, the blanket and bedroll laid out as if for a barrack hall inspection. On the table was a small lumen lamp, some books and a cookhouse tray. On the tray was a tin cup and a flask of caffeine, a salt shaker, a mess dish with the remains of a serving of slab cake, hard biscuits and refried bean paste, and a worn metal spoon. Rawne was surprised they'd allowed a spoon. A determined man could turn a spoon into a weapon. He could sharpen it against stone, stab with it. If he didn't have time to work its edge, he could improvise. Even blunt, it could do damage to an eye or a throat if driven with enough force.

Maybe it's me, Rawne thought. Maybe I just see weapons in everything. Maybe to other people, that's just a spoon.

The books were all Imperial tracts and trancemissionary pamphlets, stamp-printed on brown, low-quality paper. It was all the monster ever seemed to read. He said they helped to settle him and fortify his resolve.

The monster was sitting in the chair beside the table, reading one of the tracts while he digested his breakfast. He was wearing unmarked black fatigues, boots and a brown hide jacket. His shaved scalp and face were covered in deliberate ritual scars, old and puckered, but the hands holding the trancemissionary treatise were soft and unmarked.

The monster became aware of Rawne's approach. He stopped reading and looked up.

'Major Rawne,' he said. 'I did not expect to see you this morning.'

So damn polite. Like a real person.

'Pheguth,' Rawne replied.

The monster looked startled for a second. It wasn't just the fact that he had been called traitor in his own, abhuman tongue. It was the fluency of it. Rawne's time on occupied Gereon had allowed him to acquire a conversational grasp of the Archenemy language. He didn't merely know the word for betrayer, he could deliver it with colloquial authenticity. It was as though a part of the monster's old life had come back to threaten him.

The monster saw the weapon. He saw Rawne raising the laspistol from the guarded place beside his hip.

'Major-' he began.

Rawne said nothing else. He took aim and fired.

The crack of the discharge echoed around the room. Rawne heard seabirds roosting in the upper parts of the lighthouse launch into the air at the sound of the shot. Nothing else.

Footsteps. There would be footsteps. Which side would they come from? What angle did he need to cover?

Rawne looked at the monster. The monster, Mabbon Etogaur, looked back at him.

'Come on, or you're a dead man,' Rawne said.

Mabbon got up out of his chair. Rawne's shot had severed the heavy iron chain that linked the etogaur's manacles to a hefty floor pin. He looped up the trailing, cut end of the chain around his right hand.

'I don't understand,' Mabbon said.

'No time to explain,' Rawne replied.

It was going to be from the right.

The sea window blew in, exploding in a spray of armoured glass fragments. There was a man outside, on the lighthouse's external walkway.

Rawne tackled Mabbon and brought him down behind the trolley table and the cot. Three more las-shots shrieked in through the blown window space and scorched holes in the opposite wall. Prone, Mabbon looked at Rawne.

Rawne gestured for him to keep down.

The shooter outside switched his lasrifle to full auto and unleashed a storm of rounds into the room. Several struck the side of the heavy cot, splintering the wood and slamming the frame backwards. Some hit the trolley table and knocked it over. Some punctured the back of the old chair and filled the air with dust and floating animal hair fibres.

Silence. Dust and smoke drifted in the sunlight. Mabbon looked set to move. Rawne, still flat on his belly, reached out and picked up the salt shaker that had been knocked off the tray. He used it like a pen, and drew on the stone floor in salt. The looping white lines formed the scratch symbol for 'play dead'. The Blood Pact scratch symbol. Some said Rawne had learned far more on Gereon than was entirely good for him.

Mabbon looked at the symbol and nodded.

The shooter was cautious. He had killed the guard at the door before Rawne's arrival: cut his throat and left him sitting in his chair. Then he'd gone out onto the walkway and circled around, probably intending to get up and fire at Mabbon from above. The noise of Rawne's shot had forced him to make his play earlier than he had intended.

A minute passed, a full minute. It felt like a year to the two men pressed down on the floor behind the cot as they tried not to twitch or breathe. A second minute was almost up before something moved against the light and a figure stepped in through the blown window.

An Urdeshi trooper, by his clothes and his lasrifle; uniforms and Guard-issue weapons could be stolen. The boots crunched on the broken glass.

Rawne let him get a metre or so into the room, then fired under the cot. The las-shot clipped the man's left calf and he toppled with a squeal. Rawne leapt up at once, bounding over the battered cot to finish things. He was hoping to take the man alive for interrogation, but he was also fully prepared to seal the deal with a kill shot if necessary.

He almost fell off the cot mid-bound as shots tore down from above. A second shooter was firing from high up inside the tower, perched on the rail-less spiral of the stairs.

Rawne landed on top of the first shooter. It was an accident, but he worked with it. The man fought back. Rawne saw his face, close-up, and recognised him. They wrestled. Shots from above struck the floor beside them. The man had Rawne's wrist. Rawne couldn't aim his pistol. The man's lasrifle, looped around the man's torso on its strap, was wedged between them.

Rawne threw a hooking punch. He couldn't aim with the pistol, so he struck with it. The butt collided with the man's cheek and snapped his head around, but the impact tore the pistol out of Rawne's grip, and it went skittering away across the floor.

More shots struck the ground around them from above. Rawne rolled over hard, dragging his dazed assailant with him, like two lovers tumbling. He couldn't pull the lasrifle off the shooter because of the strap, but he got his right hand around the barrel to direct it, and his left hand down and low to squeeze the trigger.



The weapon was still set on full auto. Las-shots hosed up the throat of the lighthouse, deflecting off the curved walls, blowing out chunks of brick and stonework. It wasn't the cleanest piece of shooting Rawne had ever executed, but he managed to drag the chasing wildfire across the section of screwstair where the second shooter was crouching.

Hit, though perhaps not fatally, the second shooter yelped and fell. He somersaulted down a dozen steps, cracking off the stone edges, and then grazed against the curve of the wall and flew right off the staircase entirely. He dropped eight metres, straight down, onto the prisoner's wooden chair, which exploded into kindling and dust under the impact.

Rawne was up. There was no opportunity for respite. A third assassin had appeared, rushing in through the main doorway. Like the other two, he was dressed as an Urdeshi trooper. He had a lasrifle with a bayonet fixed. He, too, had a face Rawne knew.

Rawne's laspistol was out of reach. The lasrifle was tangled around the body of the first shooter on the floor. Rawne went at the third attacker instead, closing the distance between them as fast as he could, ripping out his warknife.

The third assassin fired, but Rawne's straight silver had already parried his bayonet and turned the muzzle aside. The shot went out through the blown window. The assassin tried to re-aim, but Rawne fenced with his blade again and deflected the bayonet so that the next shots went clean up the tower space.

The assassin tried to club Rawne with an underswing of his tilted rifle. Rawne spun his warknife so that the pommel was behind his thumb, then punched the blade sideways, knuckles up. The blow slashed the assassin's throat, left to right. Blood gouted into the air, as though someone had tossed a beaker of red ink. Rawne ripped back in the opposite direction, and tore a second cut across the man's torso, right to left. The assassin fell on his knees with a deadweight thump, his lifeblood exiting his body under pressure through the two huge splits. He collapsed onto his face.

Rawne stepped back, spinning the warknife back upright in his hand, and then swung around, alerted by a sound from behind him.

The first shooter had got back up on his hobbled leg, raising his rifle to his broken cheek to shoot Rawne in the back. But Mabbon had seized him from behind. The etogaur's broken manacles were wrapped around the man's throat, crushing the life out of him. Mabbon's face was absolutely expressionless.

The man struggled and made a cracked choking noise. Mabbon slammed his face into the stone surround of the blown window and then let the chain go slack, dropping him dead on the floor.

'The timing of your visit was quite fortunate,' he remarked.

Rawne nodded, picking up the third assassin's rifle in case there were any further surprises.

The three dead assassins all had the same face.