ON THE SHATTERED world of Verghast, Gaunt and his Ghosts find themselves embroiled within an ancient and deadly civil war as a mighty hive-city is besieged by an unrelenting foe. When treachery from within brings the city's defences crashing down, rivalry and corruption threaten to bring the Tanith Ghosts to the brink of defeat. Imperial Commissar Ibram Gaunt must find new allies and new Ghosts if he is to save Vervunhive from the deadliest threat of all – the dread legions of Chaos.

DAN ABNETT is a writer of prose and comic books who lives in the UK. His popular series featuring Gaunt's Ghosts, Inquisitor Eisenhorn, Darkblade, Titan and many more have endeared him to sf and fantasy fans around the globe as a major new talent.
‘Enough!’ Gaunt snarled. The gunfire which had been shaking the martial court died away fitfully. The air reeked of laser discharge, cartridge powder and blood. VPHC corpses littered the floor and the shattered wooden seating ranks. One or two Bluebloods lay amongst them.

The half-dozen or so surviving VPHC officers, some wounded, had been forced into a corner, and Gilbear and his men, high on adrenaline, were about to execute them.

‘Hold fire!’ Gaunt snapped, moving in front of Gilbear, who glowered with anger-bright eyes and refused to put up his smoking hellgun. ‘Hold fire, I said! We came down to break up an illegal tribunal. Let’s not make another wrong by taking the law into our own hands!’

‘You can dispense it! You’re a commissar!’ Gilbear growled and his men agreed loudly.

‘When there’s time – not here. You men, find shackles. Cuff these bastards and lock them in the cells.’
'Do as he says, Gilbear,' Sturm said, approaching and holstering his pistol. The Blueblood troopers began to herd the prisoners roughly out of the room.

Gaunt looked around the chamber. Pater sat against the far wall, with Bwelt fanning his pallid face with a scribe-slate. Daur was releasing the Narmenian defendants.

The room was a ruin. Sturm's elite troops had slaughtered more than two thirds of the VPHCers present in a brutal action that had lasted two minutes and had cost them three Bluebloods. Tarrian was dead, his rib-cage blasted open like a burned-out ship's hull.

Gaunt crossed to Kowle. The commissar was sat on one of the lower seating tiers, head bowed, clutching a hell-burn across his right bicep.

'It's the end for you, Kowle. You knew damn well what an abuse of the law this was. I'll personally oversee the avulsion of your career. A public disgrace... for the Peoples' Hero.'

Kowle slowly looked up into Gaunt's dark eyes. He said nothing, as there was nothing left to say.

Gaunt turned away from the disturbing beige eyes. He remembered Balhaut in the early weeks of that campaign. Serving as part of Slaydo's command cadre, he had first encountered Kowle and his wretchedly vicious ways. Gaunt had thought he embodied the very worst aspects of the Commissariat. After one particularly unnecessary punishment detail, when Kowle had had a man flogged to death for wearing the wrong cap-badge, Gaunt had used his influence with the warmaster to have Kowle transferred to duties on the south-west continent, away from the main front. That had been the start of Kowle's career decline, Gaunt realised now, a decline that had led him to the Vervunhive posting. Gaunt couldn't let it go. He turned back.

'You had a chance here, Pius. A chance to make good. You've the strength a commissar needs, you just have... no control. Too busy enjoying the power and prestige of being the chief Imperial commissar to the armies of Verghast.'

'Don't,' whispered Kowle. 'Don't lecture me. Don't use my name like you're my friend. You're frightened of me because I have a strength you lack. It was the same on Balhaut, when you were Slaydo's lap-dog. You thought I would eclipse you, so you used your position to have me sidelined.'
Gaunt opened his mouth in astonishment. Words failed him for a moment. ‘Is that what you think? That I reported you to advance my own career?’

‘It’s what I know.’ Kowle got to his feet slowly, wiping flecks of blood from his cheek. ‘Actually, I’m almost glad its over for me. I can go to my damnation relishing the knowledge that you’ve lost here. Vervunhive won’t survive now, not with the likes of you and Sturm in charge. You haven’t got the balls.’

‘Like you, you mean?’ Gaunt laughed. ‘I would have led this hive to victory. It’s a matter of courage, of iron will, of making decisions that may be unpalatable but which serve the greater triumph.’

‘I’m just glad that history will never get a chance to prove you wrong, Kowle. Surrender your weapon and rank pins.’

Kowle stood unmoving for a while, then tossed his pistol and insignia onto the floor. Gaunt looked down at them for a moment and then walked away.

‘Appraise me of the situation upstairs,’ Gaunt said to Sturm. ‘When you arrived, you said the hive was under assault.’

‘A storm on all fronts. It looked grim, Gaunt.’ Sturm refused to make eye contact with the Tanith commissar. ‘Marshal Croe was ordering a full deployment to repulse.’

‘Sir?’

Gaunt and Sturm looked round. Captain Daur stood nearby, his face alarmingly pale. He held out a data-slate. ‘I used the stockade’s codifier link to access House Command. I thought you’d want an update and...’

His voice trailed off.

Gaunt took the slate and read it, thumbing the cursor rune to scroll the illuminated data. He could barely believe what he was seeing. The information was already a half-hour old. The Shield was down. Massive assaults and shelling had punished the hive. Zoican forces were already inside the Curtain Wall.

Gaunt looked across at Grizmund and his fellow Narmenians, flexing their freed limbs and sharing a flask of water. He’d come down here on a matter of individual justice and when his back was turned, hell had overtaken Vervunhive.

He almost doubted there’d be anything left to return to now at the surface.

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UNDER THE CO-ORDINATED command of Major Rawne and Colonel Corday, the Tanith and Volpone units holding Veyveyr Gate staunchly resisted the massive Zoican push for six hours, hammered by extraordinary levels of shelling. There was no ebb in the heedless advance of Zoican foot troops and the waste ground immediately outside the gate was littered for hundreds of metres around with the enemy dead. Along the ore-work emplacements at the top of the Spoil, Mkoll's marksmen and Ormon's Spoilers held the slag slopes with relentless expertise.

Mkoll voxed Rawne when his ammunition supplies began to dwindle. Both had sent requests to House Command for immediate resupply, but the link was dead, and neither liked the look of the great firestorms seething out of the hive heartland behind them.

Larkin, holding a chimney stack with MkVenner and Domor, had personally taken thirty-nine kills. It was his all-time best in any theatre, but he had neither time nor compunction enough to celebrate. The more he killed, the more the memory of the Zoican's bared face burned in his racing mind.

At the brunt-end of the Veyveyr position, Bragg ran out of rockets for his launcher and discarded it. It was overheating anyway. His autogun jammed after a few shots, so he moved down the trench, keeping his hefty frame lower than the parapet as las-fire hammered in, and he took over a tripod-mounted stubber whose crew had been shot.

As he began to squeeze the brass trigger-pull of the thumping heavy weapon, he saw Feygor spin back and drop nearby. A las-round had hit him in the neck.

Lesp, the field medic attending the trench, scrambled over to Feygor, leaving a gut-shot Volpone who was beyond his help.

'Is he okay?' Bragg yelled.

Lesp fought with the struggling Feygor, clamping wet dressings around the scorched and melted flesh of his neck and trying to clear an airway.

'His trachea is fused! Feth! Help me hold him!'

Bragg fired a last burst or two and then dropped from the stub-nest and ran to Feygor and the slender medic. It took all of his gargantuan strength to hold Feygor down as Lesp worked. The las-hit had cauterised the wound, so there was precious little blood, but the heat had melted the larynx and the windpipe into a gristly knot and Feygor was suffocating.
His eyes were white with pain and fear, and his mouth clacked as he screamed silent curses.

‘Feth!’ Lesp threw the small, plastic-handled scalpel away in disgust and pulled out his long, silver Tanith knife. He stuck it into Feygor’s throat under the blackened mass of the scorched wound and opened a slot in the windpipe big enough to feed a chest-tube down.

Feygor began breathing again, rattling and gurgling through the tube.

Lesp yelled something up at Bragg that a nearby shell-fall drowned out.

“What?”

“‘We have to get him clear!’”

Bragg hoisted Feygor up in his arms without question and began to run with him, back down the lines.

The Tanith units that had held Veyveyr two nights before pushed south from their temporary mustering yard as soon as the Shield failed. Corbec led them and Sergeant Baffels’s platoon was amongst them.

Lacking orders from House Command, Corbec had agreed to move west while Colonel Bulwar’s NorthCol forces moved east, hoping to reinforce the Veyveyr and Croe positions.

In tight manufactory enclaves behind the once-proud Veyveyr rail terminal, Corbec’s deployment encountered crossfire from the west. Corbec realised in horror that while Veyveyr might be sound, the enemy were pouring in through Sondar Gate unstaunched. He set up a scarifying resistance in a factory structure called Guild Githran Agricultural and he tried to vox his situation to Rawne or Corday.

Corday eventually responded. It took a while for Corbec to convince him that enemy forces, already in the inner hive, were in danger of encircling the solid Veyveyr defence.

They chose a window each, coughing in the dust that the bombardment was shaking up from the old floor boards.

Milo saw las-rounds punching through the fibre-board siders of the broken building, and he heard the grunt-gasp of flamers. The enemy was right outside.

From the windows, under Baffels’s direction, they fired at will. It was difficult to see what they were hitting. Filain and
Tokar both yowled out victory whoops as they guessed they brought Zoicans down.

Rhys, one window down from Milo, stopped firing and sagged as if very tired.

Milo pulled round and called out to him, stopping short when he saw the bloodless las-hole in Rhys's forehead.

A falling shell blew out a silo nearby and the building shook.

Colonel Corbec's voice came over the microbead link, calm and stern.

'This is the one, boys. Do it right, or die here'

Milo loaded a fresh cell and joined his platoon in blasting from the chewed window holes.

More than three hundred Tanith were still resting, off-guard, in their makeshift chem-plant billet when the Shield came down and the onslaught began. Sergeant Bray, the ranking officer, had them all dress and arm at once, and he voxed House Command for instructions.

House Command was dead. Bray found he couldn't reach Corbec, Rawne or Gaunt — or any military authorities. What vox-links were still live were awash with mindless panic or the insidious chatter broadcasts of the enemy.

Bray made a command decision, the biggest he'd ever made in his career. He pulled the Tanith under his charge back from the billets and had them dig in amongst the rubble wastelands behind, wastelands created in the first bombardment at the start of the war.

It was an informed, judicious command. Gaunt had taught tactics thoroughly and Bray had listened. A move forward, towards Sondar Gate and the Square of Marshals three kilometres south, would have been foolhardy given the lack of solid intelligence. Staying put would have left them in a wide, warehouse sector difficult to secure or defend.

The rubble wastes played directly to the Ghosts' strengths. Here they could dig in, cover themselves and form a solid front.

As if to confirm Bray's decision, mortar fire levelled the chem-plant billets twenty minutes after the Tanith had withdrawn. Advance storm-units of Zoican infantry crossed into the waste-land half an hour later and were cut down by the well-defend- ed Ghosts. In the following hours, Bray's men engaged and held off over two thousand ochre-clad troops and began to form a
line of resistance that stymied the Zoican push in from Sondar Gate.

Then Zoican tanks began to arrive, trundling up through the blasted arterial roads adjoining the Square of Marshals. They were light, fast machines built for infantry support, ochre-drab and covered with netting, with turrets set back on the main hull, mounting pairs of small-calibre cannons. Bray had thoughtfully removed all the rocket grenades and launchers from the billet stockpile, and his men began to hunt tanks in the jagged piles of the wasteland, leaving their lasrifles in foxholes so they could carry, aim and load the rocket tubes. In three hours of intense fighting, they destroyed twenty machines. The slipways off the arterials were ablaze with crackling tank hulls by the time heavier armour units – massive main battle-tanks and super-heavy self-propelled guns – began to roll and clank up into the chem-district.

Caffran braced against the kick of the rocket launcher and banged off a projectile grenade that he swore went directly down the fat barrel of an approaching siege tank, blowing the turret clean off. Dust and debris winnowed back over his position, and he scrambled around to reach another foxhole, Trooper Trygg running with him with the belt of rockets.

Caffran could hear Bray yelling commands nearby.

He slipped into a drain culvert and sloshed along through the ankle-deep muck. Trygg was saying something behind him, but Caffran wasn’t really listening.

It was beginning to rain. With the Shield down, the inner habs were exposed to the downpour. The wasteland became a quagmire of oily mud in under a quarter of an hour. Caffran reached the ruins of a habitat and searched for a good firing point. A hundred metres away, Tanith launchers barked and spat rockets at the rumbling Zoican advance. Every few moments, there would be a plangent thump and another tank round would scream overhead.

Caffran was wet through. The rainfall was cutting visibility to thirty metres. He clambered up on the scorched wreck of an old armchair and hoisted himself up into an upper-window space, from which he could get a good view of the rubble waste outside.

‘Toss me a few live ones!’ he called down to Trygg.

Trygg made a sound like a scalded cat and fell, severed at the
waist. Ochre-armoured stormtroops flooded into the ruin below Caffran, firing wildly. A shot hit Trugg's belt of grenades and the blast threw Caffran clear of the building shell and onto the rubble outside.

Caffran clawed his way upright as Zoicans rushed him from three sides. Pulling out his Tanith dagger, he plunged it through the eyeslit of the nearest. He clubbed the next down with his rocket tube.

Another shot at him and missed.

Caffran rolled away, firing his loaded rocket launcher. The rocket hit the Zoican in the gut, lifted him twenty metres into the air and blew him apart.

There was a crack of las-fire and a Zoican that Caffran hadn't seen dropped dead behind him.

He glanced about.

Holding the laspistol Caffran had given her as a gift, Tona Criid crept out of cover. She turned once, killing another Zoican with a double shot.

Caffran grabbed her by the hand and they ran into the cover of a nearby hab as dozens more Zoican troopers advanced, firing as they came.

In the shadows of the hab ruin, Caffran looked at her, one soot-smeared face mirrored by the other.

'Caffran,' he said.

'Criid,' she replied.

The Zoicans were right outside, firing into the ruins.

'Good to know you,' he said.

The Cage Elevators carried them up as far as Level Sub-6 before the power in the Low Spine failed and the cars ground to a screeching halt. Soot and dust trickled and fluttered down the echoing shaft from above.

They exited the lifts on their bellies, crawling out through grille-doors that had half-missed the next floor, and they found themselves in a poorly lit access corridor between water treatment plants.

Gaunt and Bwelt had to pull Pater bodily out of the lift car and onto the floor. The old man was panting and refused to go on.

Gilbear and his troops had fanned down the hallway, guns ready. Daur had guard of Kowle and Sturm was trying to light a shredded stub-end of cigar. Grizmund and his officers were taut
and attentive, armed with shotguns they had taken from the VPHC dead.

‘Where are we?’ Gaunt asked Bwelt.

‘Level Sub-6. An underhive section, actually.’

Gaunt nodded. ‘We need a staircase access.’

Down the damp hallway, one of Gilbear’s men cried out he’d found a stepwell.

‘Stay with him and move him on when he’s able,’ Gaunt told Bwelt, indicating the ailing Pater.

He crossed to Grizmund. ‘As soon as we reach the surface, I need you to rejoin your units.’

Grizmund nodded. ‘I’ll do my best. Once I’ve got to them, what channel should we use?’

‘Ten ninety gamma,’ Gaunt replied. It was the old Hyrkan wavelength. ‘I’m heading up-Spine to try to get the Shield back on. Use that channel to co-ordinate. Code phrase is “Uncle Dercius”’.

‘Uncle Dercius?’

‘Just remember it, okay?’

Grizmund nodded again. ‘Sure. And I won’t forget your efforts today, colonel-commissar.’

‘Get out there and prove my belief in you,’ Gaunt snarled. ‘I need the Narmenian armour at full strength if I’m going to hold this place.’

General Grizmund and his men pushed on past and hurried up the stairs.

‘Sounds like you’ve taken command, Gaunt,’ Sturm said snidely.

Gaunt turned to him. ‘In the absence of other command voices…’

Sturm’s face lost its smile and its colour.

‘I’m still ranking Guard commander here, Ibram Gaunt. Or had you forgotten?’

‘It’s been so long since you issued an order, Noches Sturm, I probably have.’

The two men faced each other in the low, musty basement corridor. Gaunt wasn’t backing down now.

‘We have no choice, my dear colonel-commissar: a full tactical retreat. Vervunhive is lost. These things happen. You get used to it.’

‘Maybe you do. Maybe you’ve had more experience in run-
ning away than me.’
    ‘You low-life swine!’ Gilbear rasped, stomping forward.
    Gaunt punched him in the face, dropping him to the floor.
    ‘Get up and get used to me, Gilbear. We’ve got a fething heavy
    task ahead of us, and I need the best the Volpone can muster.’
    The Volpone troops were massing around them and even
    Pater had got up onto his feet for a better view.
    ‘The Shield must be turned back on. It’s a priority. We’ve got
to get up into the top of the hive and effect that. Don’t fight me
here. There’ll be more than enough fighting to go around later.’
    Gaunt reached down with his hand to pull Gilbear up. The
big Blueblood hesitated and then accepted the grip.
    Gaunt pulled Gilbear right up to his face, nose to nose.
    ‘So let’s go see what kind of soldier you are, colonel,’ the
Blueblood said.

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