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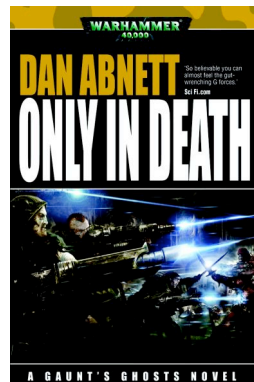
ONLY IN DEATH

A Gaunt's Ghosts novel

By Dan Abnett

In the war-torn Sabbat Worlds Crusade, Commissar Gaunt and his Tanith regiment the First-and-Only continue their battle to survive.

The Ghosts are deployed in an unforging new warzone, the fortress world of Jago, where they are detailed to hold the line no matter the cost. As the enemy assaults increase in fury, Gaunt and his regiment must face the terror of the present alongside the ghosts of their past, for only in death does duty end.



About the Author

Dan Abnett lives and works in Maidstone, Kent, in England. Well known for his comic work, he has written everything from the Mr Men to the X-Men in the last decade. His work for the Black Library includes the best-selling Gaunt's Ghosts novels, the Inquisitor Eisenhorn and Ravenor trilogies, and the Horus Heresy novels *Horus Rising* and *Legion*. Together with author Mike Lee, he has also worked on the Malus Darkblade series.

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THERE WERE STRANGE echoes in Hinzerhaus, echoes that took a while to get used to. Alone in one chamber, a man might hear the footsteps of a comrade two floors up and a hundred metres distant. Sound carried.

If the wind ever gets in here, Baskevyl thought, what a song it will sing.

He was moving down through the house in search of the power room. At every turn or junction, he consulted a scrap of paper. Mkoll had written out directions to the power room for him. The charts couldn't be trusted. Daur and Rawne had gone nose to nose the night before over the location of a room marked as the 'lesser hall'. It had nearly got ugly – Baskevyl was sure Daur had been on the verge of throwing a punch – until Gaunt pointed out that, for one thing, Daur's chart and Rawne's chart were appreciably different and, for another, they were having their argument in the lesser hall.

Looking back on it, Baskevyl reflected that perhaps the gravest cause for concern during the argument had been Daur's behaviour. Ban Daur, clean-cut and Throne-fearing, was a model officer, the last person you'd ever expect to see swinging for a senior man.

It's because we're spooked, every man jack. Some admit it, some don't, but we're all spooked by this bad rock and this labyrinth house. There's something in the air here, some–

dry skulls in a dusty valley

–thing palpable, an oozing tension.

Whatever it was, it wasn't in the water because there wasn't any. The well was dead. They were living off their own bottles, on quarter rations. Ludd had been detailed to mark all water bottles

with a piece of chalk, and write up any man drinking too much. As a result, everybody loved Nahum Ludd.

Baskevyl's mouth tasted as dry as a storm coat's pocket lining, and his tongue felt like a scrap of webbing. He'd snatched two hours' sleep since they'd entered the house, and all one hundred and twenty minutes of it had been a dream about a fountain, gushing pure, bright liquid.

Baskevyl checked his crumpled paper. It told him to follow the next staircase down, and he obeyed. The walls were panelled in a dark, glossy material that had been overlaid in turn by a light coating of pale dust. The white wall lights pulsed slowly.

He heard footsteps approaching, and paused to see who was coming down the stairs behind him. No one appeared. It was just another echo, relayed through the warren of halls. During his ten-minute walk from the main staircase, he'd heard all manner of things: footsteps, voices, the bump and rattle of crates being stowed. Once, he'd heard a snatch of distinct conversation, three men complaining about the water rationing. The voices had come and gone, as if the men had been walking right past him.

When he arrived at the next landing, he found two troopers standing watch, Tokar and Garond from J Company. They both visibly jumped when he walked into view, then saluted with nervous laughs.

'On edge?' he asked.

'We thought you were another echo,' said Garond.

'We keep hearing noises, then there's no one there,' said Tokar. 'Feth, you gave us a scare.'

'My apologies,' said Baskevyl. 'The power room?'

'Down there, sir,' Garond said, indicating the narrow staircase behind him.

Baskevyl nodded. 'Anything to report? Apart from noises?'

Tokar and Garond shook their heads. Baskevyl nodded again, and took a quick look around the landing space. 'What about that?' he asked.

'What, sir?' asked Tokar.

Baskevyl pointed at the wall opposite. 'That.'

'I don't see anything,' Tokar began.

'In the dust,' Baskevyl insisted.

The troopers squinted.

'Oh!' said Garond suddenly. 'It's been drawn there! Gak, I didn't see that. Did you see that, Tokar?'

'First time I've noticed it.'

'Did either of you draw it?' asked Baskevyl.

'No,' they both answered together.

He could see they hadn't. It had been drawn in the dust on the satin-brown wall panel, but so long ago the lines themselves had been covered in dust. It was just a ghost image, a human face, neither specifically male nor female, open-mouthed. There were no eyes. It had been drawn in the dust with slow, lazy finger strokes. Somehow, Baskevyl felt certain they had been slow and lazy.

'What the gak is it?' Garond asked.

Baskevyl stared at the face. It was unsettling. 'I don't know.'

'Why,' Tokar began, 'why didn't we notice it before? We've been standing here two hours.'

'I don't know,' Baskevyl repeated. He took a deep breath. 'Wash it off.'

'With what, sir?' asked Garond.

'Spit?' Tokar suggested.

'Wipe it off, then. Use your capes.'

The troopers moved forward to oblige, scooping up handfuls of their camo-capes.

Baskevyl noticed how they hesitated. Neither one wanted to be the first to touch it.

'NOT IN HERE, PLEASE,' said Dorden as he entered the high-ceilinged room.

Gaunt paused in the act of emptying an appreciable quantity of dust out of his boot onto the floor.

'Why not? Is there a medical reason?'

‘If this is going to be the field station, then I have to keep it swept of dust,’ Dorden tutted, putting down an armful of medical cartons.

‘The field station?’ Gaunt asked.

‘Yes,’ said Dorden.

When Gaunt didn’t reply, Dorden looked at him. He saw Gaunt’s sarcastically arched eyebrows. He saw the old stuffed leather chair Gaunt was sitting in, the ancient desk behind him, the stacks of kit bags and munition boxes.

‘Not the field station, then?’ he asked.

‘My office, I think you’ll find.’

‘Ah.’

‘The field station is three chambers along, on the right.’

Dorden shook his head. ‘These fething maps. Are they of use to any man?’

Gaunt shook his head. ‘Not any I’ve met.’ With some satisfaction, he poured the dust out of his boot. It drizzled out in a long, smoking shower.

Dorden looked around. The room was dark and tall, fast in the heart of the house. Dirty outlines on the sheened brown walls showed where paintings had once hung. It had been impressive once, a fine stateroom. Now it seemed like a cave, lit by the dim glow of the lamps.

With a slight start, Dorden realised they weren’t alone. There was a third person in the room. Eszrah ap Niht was sitting in one corner, patiently reading an old book by the light of the wall lamp he had huddled up to. His fingertip was moving under the text, sticking at difficult words.

The Nihtgane had developed quite a thirst for knowledge and Gaunt had taught him his letters well. However, no one had yet convinced Eszrah that wearing sunshades indoors wasn’t a good idea.

‘What are you reading there, Eszrah?’ Dorden called out. The old doctor still hadn’t quite got the trick of pronouncing Eszrah’s name.

Eszrah looked up from his book. ‘Yt is ancallyd The Mirror of Smoke,’ he replied.

‘Ah,’ said Dorden. He glanced at Gaunt, who was busy evacuating grit from his other boot. ‘One of your favourites.’

Gaunt nodded. ‘Yes, it is.’

‘What’s that phrase, that famous phrase? “By dying, we finish our service to the Emperor?” Or something?’

‘I think you mean “Only in death, does duty end”,’ said Gaunt. The colonel-commissar was staring down at his bootless feet. His filthy toes poked out of the holes in his socks. He wiggled them.

‘That’s it,’ said Dorden.

‘Not original to the author, of course,’ said Gaunt, preoccupied with his own feet. ‘An old proverb.’

Dorden nodded. ‘And rather disheartening.’

Gaunt looked up at him. ‘Disheartening? Don’t you intend to die in the service of the God-Emperor? Is there something you’d like to tell your commissar, Tolin?’

Dorden chuckled. ‘Do you know how old I am, Ibram?’

Gaunt shrugged.

‘Well,’ said Dorden, ‘let’s just say if I’d chosen to muster out at Guard retirement age, as per the edicts, I’d have been a man of leisure for thirteen years now.’

‘Feth? Really?’

Tolin Dorden smiled. ‘Age-muster is, of course, voluntary. Besides, where would I go?’

Gaunt didn’t answer.

‘You know how I see myself ending my days?’ asked Dorden. ‘As a local doctor. A local doctor, serving some backwater community on a colony world. That’d be all right with me. The day comes I get too old, too slow to keep up with the pace of the Tanith First, that’s where I want to end up. Leave me somewhere, would you? Somewhere I can treat sprains and flu and ague, and the odd broken bone or colicky newborn. Somewhere quiet. Will you do that for me, when the day comes?’

‘You’ll be with us forever,’ retorted Gaunt.

‘That’s what I’m afraid of.’

Gaunt stared at him. ‘Afraid?’

Dorden sighed. ‘How much longer, Ibram? How many more years, how many more battles? We all die sometime. I saw my world die, and now I go from war to war, seeing out the last of my people, one by one. I don’t want to be the last man of Tanith, Ibram, scrubbing blood off the surgery table as they wheel out the second to last man of Tanith in a body bag.’

‘It wouldn’t go like that—’ Gaunt began.

‘No, it wouldn’t,’ Dorden agreed. ‘One day, I’ll just get too old and dodderly and you’ll have to remove me from service.’

‘Hardly. Look at Zweil.’

Dorden grinned. ‘If that old fool makes a mistake, people don’t die.’

Gaunt got to his feet. ‘I’ll find you that colony world, time comes,’ he said. ‘That’s a promise. Maybe it’ll even be the world the Tanith get to settle. Our reward for service.’

‘Ibram, do you honestly believe that’s ever going to happen?’

Gaunt was silent for a long time. ‘No,’ he said finally.

Warmaster Slaydo had promised Gaunt the settlement rights of the first world he won, as a reward after Balhaut. Gaunt had always intended to share that reward with the homeless Tanith. ‘Somehow, I doubt Macaroth will honour a rash promise his predecessor made,’ Gaunt said quietly.

‘If he does intend to,’ said Dorden, ‘then just make sure we don’t win here. The Tanith would lynch you if you won them this bad rock.’

Dorden looked up at the vacant places on the walls.

‘I wonder what hung here,’ he said.

‘Do you?’ Gaunt replied. ‘All I seem to wonder is... who took them down?’

‘What about you?’ Dorden asked.

‘Me? What about me?’

‘How do you see your service ending?’

Gaunt sighed and sat down again. ‘Tolin, we both know how my service is going to end, sooner or later.’

He gazed down at his socks. ‘Do you have a needle and thread I could borrow? Of course you do.’

‘You can darn, can you?’ asked Dorden with a slight smile.

‘I can learn to darn. This is unseemly for a man of my rank.’

‘Don’t you have spare socks?’

‘These are my spare socks.’

‘Dickerson.’

‘What?’

‘Dickerson, tall Belladon in Arcuda’s mob. I hear he darns socks for a few coins. He’s good. Used to be a seamster before the Guard. He’ll probably do yours for free.’

‘Thanks for the tip.’

Eszrah suddenly rose, his reynbow up and aimed. Gaunt and Dorden looked around.

Rawne entered.

‘It’s just Rawne,’ Gaunt told Eszrah. The partisan didn’t lower his bow.

‘What’s up?’ Gaunt asked Rawne.

‘Criid reckons she’s found something,’ Rawne said.

THE WARM STINK of energy greeted Baskevyl as he entered the power room.

The chamber was long and rectangular, with sloping ceilings. It was dominated by the bulk of the power hub, an iron kettle the size of a drop-pod. Power feeds ran off the kettle up into a broad roof socket, and grilled slits in the kettle’s sides throbbled with a slow glow that matched the gentle rhythm of the house lighting. Baskevyl could feel the pulsing warmth. It made no sound. Whatever generative reaction was going on inside, it was a curiously silent one.

The fire-team assigned to guard the power room had been playing cards in a huddle at the foot of the entry steps. They stood

when he came up, but he waved them back to their game with a smile.

‘How are things here?’ he asked Captain Domor.

Shoggy Domor was in charge of the fire-team detail. He walked over to the kettle with Baskevyl as the troopers resumed their quiet game. His bulbous augmetic eyes whirred quietly as they sharpened focus on the major.

‘I can’t really say, sir.’

‘Meaning?’

‘I don’t know what this is. It’s just running. It’s been running for a long, long time, and it continues to run. I have no idea what the operating process is.’

‘No idea?’ Baskevyl frowned. If anyone in the Ghosts knew engineering systems, it was Shoggy.

‘I think it’s chemical, but I’m not sure.’ Domor nodded at the pulsing, glowing kettle in front of them. ‘I doubt the chief would thank me if I tried opening it up to find out.’

‘There’s no feed? No fuel supply?’ Baskevyl asked.

‘None, sir.’

‘We need a tech out here, a tech-adept,’ Baskevyl muttered to himself. He pressed his hands against the fat belly of the kettle, then took them away. The iron had throbbed under his touch, as if it was alive.

He looked around at Domor. ‘Look, just keep watch on it, as per orders. We may not know how it works, but at least it does, and it’s giving us lights. I’ll get a detail down here to relieve you in... shall we say three hours?’

Domor nodded. ‘What about the, er, noises, sir?’

‘You too, eh?’ asked Baskevyl. ‘I think this place has some weird acoustic qualities. Sound carries. Just try not to let it spook you.’

Domor seemed less than convinced.

‘What?’ Baskevyl asked.

Domor tilted his head to indicate they should take a walk. Casually, they skirted around the throbbing kettle together and put

its bulk between them and the huddle of troopers by the steps. Domor dropped his voice so his boys wouldn't hear.

'Footsteps and voices, right?' he asked softly.

'I've heard both. Like I said, I think sound ca—'

'What about the other noise?' asked Domor.

'What other noise?'

Domor shrugged. 'It comes and goes. A sort of grinding, scraping sound.'

'I haven't heard anything like that,' said Baskevyl.

'Come with me,' said Domor quietly. He stepped aside and called out to his troop. 'Chiria? You're in charge. I'm going to show Major B. the workshops.'

'Right you are, Shoggy,' she called back.

There was a door in the rear wall of the power room. Domor drew back the rusted bolts. He led Baskevyl into a series of four, small stone rooms that had once been workshops. The air within was much colder than it had been in the main hub room. It was chilly and stale, like an old pantry. Old wooden benches lined the walls, their surfaces worn. Wall racks had once held tools, but the tools had long gone. The sooty outlines of saws, pliers and wrenches hung under the old pegs.

Baskevyl peered along the row of workshop rooms. They were linked by stone arches. Domor pulled the door shut behind them.

'Listen,' he said.

'I don't hear anything,' replied Baskevyl.

'Listen,' Domor insisted.

GAUNT FOLLOWED RAWNE up a long, rickety wooden staircase into the very summit of the house. They came up into a room shaped like a belfry: a circular, domed chamber into which the wind shrilled through partially open metal shutters. The wind whined like—

dry skulls in a dusty valley

—a scolded dog.

'Can't we close them?' Gaunt asked, raising his voice above the sound.

‘No,’ Criid called back. ‘The mechanisms are jammed.’

Gaunt looked around. The base of the roof dome had eight large shutters around its circumference, all of them operated by brass winders. Years of dust had choked the gears. The shutters were frozen in various positions, like the half-closed eyelids of dying men. Eddies and scoots of dust billowed in around the sills and covered the floor like powdered snow.

‘What is this?’ Gaunt called.

‘Criid called it a windcote,’ Rawne cried back. ‘Look.’

The centre of the chamber was dominated by a huge perch: a rusted metal tree of fat iron rods where things had once roosted. There was bird lime on the floor, and the remains of food baskets.

‘I think they kept birds here, sir,’ Criid called out, holding her cloak hem up over her mouth and nose. ‘Messenger birds. You know, for flying messages.’

‘I grasp the concept,’ said Gaunt. He looked at the size of the shutters, imagining them wound back and fully open. ‘Big birds,’ he muttered.

He went over to the nearest shutter and bent down, trying to peer out of the wedged open slit. Windborne dust gusted into his face.

Coughing, he pulled back. ‘This’d make a great look out, if it wasn’t for that fething wind.’

Rawne nodded. He’d thought the same thing.

‘That wasn’t what I wanted you to see,’ Criid called out to them.

‘Then what?’

She pointed upwards. Something was hanging from the uppermost branch of the roosting perch.

‘That,’ shouted Criid.

It was a black iron face mask, swinging gently by its head straps in the swirling wind. The mask had a hooked nose and a snarling expression.

It was a Blood Pact grotesk.

Gaunt said something.

‘What?’ Rawne asked, against the scream of the wind.

‘I said there’s that trouble you were on about,’ said Gaunt.

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Baskevyl turned in a small slow circle, gazing up at the ceiling of the workshop.

‘You heard that, right?’ Domor whispered.

Baskevyl nodded. His mouth was dry, and it wasn’t entirely due to the short-rationed water. He’d heard the noise quite clearly, a grinding scrape, just like Shoggy Domor had described. It had sounded like... well Baskevyl wasn’t sure he could honestly say what it had sounded like, but the moment he’d heard it, an image had filled his mind, an image he hadn’t really wanted. It was the image of something vast and clammy, snake-like, all damp bone and glistening tissue, like a gigantic spinal chord, scraping and slithering along some deep, rough, rock-cut tunnel far below them, like a daemon-worm in the earth.

Lucien Wilder, in days long gone, had always said Baskevyl had been born with an imagination he’d have been better off without.

‘What does it sound like to you?’ asked Domor quietly.

Baskevyl didn’t reply. Urgently, he tried to banish the image from his head. He walked under the stone arch into the next workshop, then into the next, until he was standing in the end chamber. The walls were panelled, like everywhere else, in that satin brown material.

The noise came again. Gnarled vertebrae sleeved in wet, grey sinew, dragged across ragged stone. It slipped along rapidly, fluidly, like a desert snake. Baskevyl could hear loose pebbles and grit skittering out in its wake.

There was cold sweat on his back. The noise died away.

‘Well?’ Domor asked.

‘Vermin?’ asked Baskevyl. Domor stared at him. His augmetic eyes whirred and clicked, as if widening in scorn.

‘Vermin?’ he replied. ‘Have you seen any vermin?’

Baskevyl shook his head.

‘The place is dry and dead,’ said Domor. ‘There’s no vermin here, no insects, no scraps of food. If there were ever any vermin here, Major B, they’ve long since given up on the place.’

He was right. Baskevyl felt stupid for even suggesting it. There was no point trying to fob off smart men like Shoggy Domor with patent lies.

He heard the noise again, briefly, a wriggling scratch that faded away almost instantaneously. Baskevyl stepped towards the wall, and reached out. The satin brown panelling felt warm and organic to his touch. He tapped at it, at first hearing the dead reply of the stone wall behind it.

Then, as he moved his hand along, he got a hollow noise.

He glanced back at Domor, who was watching him.

‘There’s nothing behind this panel,’ he said.

‘What?’

‘There’s nothing behind this panel. Listen.’

He tapped again. A hollow dullness. ‘Get your team in here,’ Baskevyl began. The noise came back again. Baskevyl stiffened. Throne, but he could not help visualising the awful, clammy spine-thing, snaking through the dark.

‘Shoggy, would y–’ he started to say.

He heard another sound suddenly: a brief, leaden pop, like someone cracking a knuckle. How odd. Baskevyl looked up and down, studying the sheened brown patina of the wall panel.

There was a hole in the wall at chest height just to his right, a small hole, half a centimetre in diameter, that had certainly not been there before. The edges of the hole were smouldering slightly.

‘Shoggy?’ he said, and then registered a sudden, sharp sensation of pain. He glanced down at his right arm. A flesh wound was scorched right across the outside of his upper arm. It had burned through his jacket and shirt, and into the skin beneath, leaving a gouge of cooked, black blood.

‘Oh shit!’ he announced, stepping backwards. ‘Shoggy! I think I’ve just been shot.’

He turned around, slightly head-sick with shock. The las-round had come clean through the wall, sliced across the side of his right arm, and...

Domor was leaning back against the workbench behind them in a slightly awkward pose. He was staring at Baskevyl with his big, artificial eyes, which whirred and turned, unable to focus. He was trying to say something, but all he was managing to do was aspirate blood.

There was a black, bloody puncture in the middle of his chest. 'Oh, Throne. Shoggy?' Baskevyl cried, and stumbled towards him.

Domor, lolling sideways, finally managed to find a word and speak it. The word was, 'down.' It came out of his lips in a ghastly mist of blood.

Baskevyl grabbed Domor and dragged him over onto the workshop floor.

A second later, more holes began to appear in the satin brown panel: two, three, a dozen, twenty, forty.

On the other side of the wall panel, someone had just opened up with a las-weapon on full auto.

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