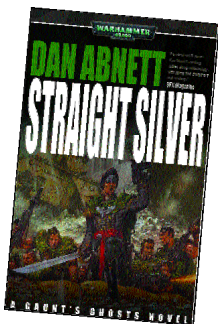


# STRAIGHT SILVER

A GAUNT'S GHOSTS NOVEL BY DAN ABNETT

ON THE BATTLEFIELDS of Aexe Cardinal, the struggling forces of the Imperial Guard are locked in a deadly stalemate with the dark armies of Chaos. Commissar Ibram Gaunt and his regiment, the Tanith First-and-Only, are thrown headlong into this living hell of trench warfare, where death from lethal artillery is always just a moment away. The only chance for Gaunt and his lightly armed scouts to survive is to volunteer for a mission so dangerous that no one else dares accept it!



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.

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## TWO

# THE WOUNDED RIVER

*'From Bassin to Seronne, the rural valley commends itself to the visitor, and in clement season there are many rewards to be had: the old parish churches, the cafes and inns, and the undemanding footpaths and bridle ways of the tranquil riverbanks.'*

– Fweber's Touring Guide  
to Mittel Aexe, 720th edition

THE GROUND WAS peppered with ancient, rain-filled shell holes for as far as he could see. A pock-marked surface, like the cratered plain of some dead moon. The wet soil was greenish grey and the pools were dark emerald or black, though some were skinned with frothy white scum. Nothing seemed to stand taller than the height of a man's shoulder. A few poles and staves jutted from the mud, the occasional scoured remains of a tree, iron hoop-stakes and piquets and coils of barbed wire.

The sky was leaden and bulging with creased blotches of grey and yellow clouds. To the east, a dark haze of rain fuzzed the horizon into a filthy smudge.

Mkoll lowered his field scope and spat on the ground. The air was heavy with a dusty, chalky smell that got into the back of the throat. He could feel the grit abrading his teeth. It was the smell of dead land, of earth that had been disturbed and pulverised and thrown over so many times that it leaked its powdered essence into the air.

'Well, this is fething lovely,' muttered Bonin sarcastically. Mkoll glanced round at him and nodded. It was disturbing, this place. Tanith scouts had an unerring sense of direction, but the sheer featureless morass around them made it feel like they were nowhere at all. All of his men seemed uneasy: the usually cheerful Bonin, Caober from Gaunt's own platoon, Hwlan from ten, Baen from Varl's mob. Even Mkvenner, Corbec's lean, taciturn scout from two platoon, normally the model of composed calm, seemed unsettled.

Caober had a small map that Gaunt had given him. He held it up, flicking his index finger against the paper in frustration. 'Sitwale Wood,' he said at last.

'Sitwale *Wood*? Hwlan echoed, stressing the second word.

Caober shrugged. 'The levelling glories of field artillery,' he said, 'beneath which all things are rendered equal.'

There was a track of sorts, rutted and mired. The scout party moved off behind Mkoll, following it north-east. About a kilometre further on, and the track made a crossroads marked by a temporary sign. '55th/9th rg' pointed one arm. '916th/88/ac' read another. 'R'forq ASHQ & 42nd rg' announced the arm that pointed the way they had come. The last one, pointing west, read 'Real Life.'

'Company!' Baen called. There were lights on the track behind them, and the sound of labouring engines. Mkoll waved his men off the track.

A jolting field truck, smeared in mud, rumbled past, turning east. Behind it came a staggering file of artillery tractors towing 0.12 feldkannone pieces. Axe Alliance infantry in filthy green greatcoats walked beside the column. Their heads were covered with canvas bag-hoods with rough-cut slits for eyes and mouths. Most carried metal pry-bars or coils of wire matting to free up wheels when they bogged in. The hooded men reminded Bonin of the scarecrows used on the fruit farms back home in County Cuhulic. No one paid any attention to the Tanith team.

Twenty tractors, thirty, thirty-five, then twelve high-sided haycarts piled with shells that had been jacketed for protection in wicker sleeves. The carts were drawn by hippine teams, ten to a cart. These beasts were thin and wild-eyed, and stank of disease as they whinneyed and snorted along, every step a struggle.

After the slow carts came infantry, trudging under the weight of full field kit, their heads wrapped up in their dirty scarves.

Mkoll watched an officer step out of file and stand by the signpost waving his troops around in the right direction.

After a few minutes, the officer turned and walked over to the Tanith. His greatcoat was stiff with mud and when he pulled the scarf away from his dirty face, Mkoll was shocked to see how young he was.

'Lost?' he began. Then he noticed Mkoll's rank pins and made a more formal salute.

'No,' said Mkoll, stepping up. 'Sergeant Mkoll, Tanith First.'

'You're from the Imperial expedition?'

'That's right.'

'Lieutenant Fevrierson, 30th battalion, Genswick Foot.' His accent was tight and clipped. Aexegarian. 'It's a pleasure to see you. Where is your main force?'

'Moving into reserve,' replied Mkoll. 'Our commander's sent us up to scope the leading edge.'

'Scope the...?'

'Assess the disposition of the forward line,' Mkoll glossed. The young man nodded. It was partly the accent, Mkoll thought. Mine's as unfamiliar to him as his is to me. That and the fact that they're still using old terms. He reminded himself that this war – this world – had been isolated for a good time.

'We're moving up to the 55th sector,' said Fevrierson. 'You're welcome to tag along.'

Mkoll nodded his thanks and made a brief hand signal that the lieutenant didn't catch. Immediately, the five men in his patrol were at his side. They fell in with the still plodding stream of Alliance infantry.

Fevrierson made light conversation as they walked. He was a little wary of the newcomers. Their kit was very clean and in good order, apart from the splashes they'd picked up on the day's hike. The fabric of their uniforms was of a type he didn't recognise. It looked comfortable and strong, and possibly synthetic. They carried powerful-looking rifles that didn't seem to have any sort of ejection ports for spent cartridges. Could they be energy weapons? Fevrierson had never seen a lasgun close up, and they made him feel ashamed of his long, heavy bolt-action autorifle. The off-worlders also had tech items like power scopes and ear-bead comm-links. Individual trooper comm-links! They were truly from another place, like the characters in the demiscuto science-romance digests his brother used to buy from the news vendor.

'This a rotation?' Mkolll asked.

'Yah. It used to be a week up and then two in reserve, but it's alternate on and off now.'

'You and your men have been in billets for a week?'

'Yah.' Mkolll bit back a comment about the filthy state of the locals, but Fevrierson had seen the look.

'There are no washing facilities at Jen-Frow. The billets are poor. No water for laundry.'

Mkolll nodded. 'I meant no disrespect.'

'Yah, of course,' said the Aexegarian earnestly.

'You'll soon be dirty, soon enough,' muttered one of his file. Men around sniggered.

'That's enough, Herxer!' Fevrierson growled.

'It's okay,' said Bonin. 'We do dirty good. We've been in dirty scraps before.'

'Where's your commanding officer?' Mkolll asked Fevrierson.

'I *am* the commanding officer,' he said.

A WHISTLE BLEW from the rear echelon, then a second, then another coming up the file.

Fevrierson took out his own and blew. 'Off the road! Off the road!'

Mkolll wondered if it was an attack, though there was no sign of anything and the chilly, wet landscape was otherwise virtually silent. They heard hooves. Cavalry was moving up the road at a canter, and the infantry were standing off to let them through.

The Aexegarians cheered and waved their scarves and gensfilly bonnets as the riders went past. The cavaliers were dressed in blue and gold coats with bright green sashes and white, bell-top shakos. They sat upright and haughty, eyes front, saddle-sabres clattering at their hips. Their mounts were gigantic flightless birds with grey feathers and vast hooked beaks, powering along on massive, blue-fleshed limbs.

'Feth me!' said Hwlan.

The front riders held lances with fluttering bannerols, but the rest carried short-action rifles. None of them seemed to be holding any sort of reins or bridles.

'Hussars. Carbine-hussars,' said Fevrierson proudly. 'A fine sight.'

'What are those bird things?' asked Caober.

'Struthids,' said Fevrierson. He frowned. 'You've never seen a struthid before?'

'I've seen plenty,' said Caober. 'And now I've seen everything.'

'They don't have reins,' said Mkoll. 'Do they control with their feet?'

'They're psicavalry,' said Fevrierson. 'They need both hands to operate the carbines in a charge, so each man has a puppeteer, linking him to his steed.'

'An implant? Augmetic?'

'I don't know those words. A puppeteer's a little machine. They put them in the men's heads surgically. The struthid has one grafted in to match. It creates a brain link and lets the man drive the bird.'

Over sixty hussars galloped past and then the infantry returned to the road. Mkoll saw some of the Aexegarian troopers retrieving the odd feather from the mud and fixing them to their coat collars.

'Lucky charms,' Fevrierson said.

AFTER ANOTHER FORTY-FIVE minutes, Mkoll realised the track was sloping down, though the landscape around remained spread out in its flat, pocked immensity. They were entering the rear portions of the trench network. The horizon had been clear earlier because everything vital had been sunk and dug in.

The workings were of immense size, some as wide as city streets and ten metres deep. Where they extended below the water table, duckboards had been laid down and teams of sappers were manning hand-pumped bilges. Strings of electrical lights ran down the carefully revetted walls and Mkoll could smell the ozone of shield generators. Armoured vehicles and trucks moved down the working line, and when one appeared, they had to stand to in lay-bys cut into the trench wall to allow them past. Troops hurried back and forth, some in greens, some in greys, a few in blues and golds or russets, all locals, all filthy. It was like entering a partially buried city. Some sections of trench were entirely roofed in with wired flakboard, with lighting hanging from the tunnel roofs.

'This is something,' said Baen to Mkoll. 'I expected trenches, but not like this.'

'They've had forty years to build it,' said Mkoll.

And they'd built it well. Massive, mainstreet-style reserve trenches, often shored up with rockcrete, off which ran barrack dugouts to the west and communication and support trenches to the east, towards the front. Running as they did from sap-heads

and deep munition wells, the support trenches were shallower but zig-zagged, or were well provided with solid traverses to protect the vulnerable links and make them easier to defend compartmentally. To the east, about a kilometre away by Mkoll's estimation, lay the line of the fire trenches. To the west, rearwards, lay deeper pits accessed by communication trenches laid with narrow-gauge rails.

'The gun-pits,' Fevrierson said. Even the main artillery was dug in subsoil, Mkoll thought. The rails were for shell-carts. A few moments later they had to pause to allow barrows of massive wicker-wrapped shells to be heaved across the reserve trench and up the supply channels to the gun-pits. Fevrierson checked his watch. 'Readying for the night firing,' he said.

The Genswick Foot halted and stood easy in a firing trench as Fevrierson reported to the sector's staff blockhouse. He took Mkoll with him.

The blockhouse was a series of armoured rooms buried deep in the ground off the reserve mainway. It had folding shutters and gas curtains at the entrance.

Inside, it was warm and damp and busy. There was a chart room, and a vox-annex where a row of signallers chattered into bulky old-style field sets.

Sheafs of thick vox-line cables ran out along the entrance hall and away through loopholes. Inside the main entrance, sweating, ruddy-faced runners sat on a bench, waiting to be sent out again.

Mkoll waited at a reinforced door while Fevrierson signed in. From his vantage point, the Tanith could see a small command room filled with military aides grouped around a low map table. They were all in shabby but impressive number one uniforms: more blue and gold, more green, some yellow, some grey and some dark red.

Mkoll hadn't got the hang of the varied insignia or liveries yet. The men in grey tended to be quite dark skinned, and the few in red were pale and red or blond haired.

Fevrierson was reporting to a sallow-faced general whose green uniform seemed loose and ill-fitting. The man's face was drawn. He's lost weight since that kit was tailored for him, Mkoll thought.

The general talked to Fevrierson for a while, pointing to items on the map-table, and signed an order sheet. Then Fevrierson said something, and indicated Mkoll.

The general nodded and strode over to where the Tanith scout was waiting. Mkoll snapped a salute that the general gave back.

'We weren't expecting you for another two days,' said the general.

'We're not up in force, sir. My commanding officer ordered me forward in advance to assess the field.'

The general nodded and then surprised Mkoll by making the sign of the aquila across his chest and offering his hand.

'It's good to see you anyway and I thank the Throne you've come. I'm Hargunten, CoS, 55th region. Welcome to the Peinforq Line.'

'Sir. Mkoll, Tanith First.'

'What do you need, sergeant?'

'A look at the line and the chance to report back to Rhonforq,' said Mkoll. He produced the papers Gaunt had drawn up for him, countersigned by Buzzle.

General Hargunten looked them over. 'Wait here,' he said. 'The Genswick are moving forward to station 143, so you might as well go with them.'

He moved off to confer with other staff. As Mkoll waited he saw that one of the red-uniformed officers was looking him up and down. A colonel, by his pins. Mkoll didn't know the crossed-sabres and heraldic dragon of the man's insignia.

'Imperial?' he said after a while, his accent new to Mkoll. Thick, glottal, rich.

'Yes, sir.'

'Come to save us all.'

'Come to fight the arch-enemy, sir.'

The colonel snorted. His skin was very pale and slightly freckled and his side-shaved hair was red-gold.

'We can win this war,' he said.

'I have no doubt.'

'Without your help,' he finished.

'Not for me to say, sir.'

The colonel grunted and turned away. Fevrierson returned, with the general.

'Papers in order, sergeant,' Hargunten said, returning them to Mkoll. 'Go with the lieutenant here. See your way around. My compliments to your commander.'

Mkoll tucked the folded papers into his webbing pouch and saluted.

'See the front,' the colonel called out. 'See a war like you have never known.'

'I've known war, sir,' said Mkolle and, turning, strode out of the blockhouse.

'SCHLEIQ ME! I can't believe you did that!' Fevrierson exclaimed as they came out through the gas curtains into the damp evening air.

'Do what?'

'Smarterd him like that!'

'Who was he?'

'Redjacq!'

'Who?'

Fevrierson blinked at Mkolle as if he was mad. 'Redjacq... Redjacq Ankre, of Kottmark?'

'Means nothing.'

'The Kottstadt Wyverns?'

'Really, I don't know. Kottmark is the neighbouring country, isn't it?'

'Yah... and the other senior partner in the Alliance. We'd be dead now if the Kottmarkers hadn't joined the war twenty years ago.'

'And this Redjacq... he's something special?'

'Their finest field commander. Leads the Wyverns. Furies, they are. We're lucky to have them in this sector.'

'I'm sure you are.'

IT WAS GETTING dark by then. Fevrierson got his infantry moving, and they went up through a series of zig-zagging communications trenches to the front-line position. There, things were more the way Mkolle had expected. No electrics, just the occasional promethium lamp or brazier. Dirty fire trenches dug in about three metres deep and heavily traversed with cross-spars and earth-filled gabions. A firestep made of stone lintels laid up against the base of the leading wall beneath the breastwork and iron loop holes. Despite the duckboards, the trenches were swilling with liquid mud and alive with vermin.

Wretched soldiers in blue coats stood down and began to retire in slow, weary lines as the Genswick Foot relieved them and took their places beneath the parapet.

The sky was clouding over and the light seemed to leak out of it. Thunder rumbled somewhere. The trenches stank. Mkolle

turned to his men. 'Caober, Baen, Bonin... up that way. Mkvenner, Hwlan... back the other. Twenty minutes and back to me. See what you see.'

They moved away, but Mkoll caught Mkvenner's sleeve and held him back a moment. Unofficially, Mkvenner was Mkoll's number two in the scouts, totally dedicated and totally ruthless in a way that Mkoll, for all his reputation, could never hope to be. Some Tanith said Mkvenner had been trained in the old martial ways of cwlwhl, the fighting art of the Nalsheen, legendary warriors who had maintained law during Tanith's troubled feudal days. Mkoll always quashed those rumours, mainly because they were true and he knew how close Mkvenner guarded his background.

'Keep an eye on Hwlan,' Mkoll told him. 'Ten platoon is unsettled right now, with Criid taking over. Make sure he's together.'

Mkvenner nodded and made off. Mkoll watched the tall, lithe figure retreating down the busy trench.

Mkoll joined Fevrierson in the command dugout. It was little more than a shed built into the leading edge of the trench. There was a V-shaped binocular periscope on a tripod stand, and Mkoll took a lookout.

It was his first look at the battleground. In the twilight, it was a miserable place, though he was certain it would look even more miserable by day. Torn earth, incomprehensible wreckage, tall piquet fences of dangling wire. A kilometre away, the shattered land dipped a little and spread into a wide flood plain of poisoned water and stagnant pools interspersed with muddy islets and ridge-crests of shell-blown soil.

'A lot of water down there,' he said.

'That's the river.'

Mkoll looked again. 'It's no river...'

Fevrierson smiled at him. 'Oh yah! That's the beautiful Naeme, proud lifeflow of the borderlands!'

'But it's just pools and lakes and flooded flats...'

Mkoll's voice trailed off. He realised a river would look like that if it had been shelled for forty years. The banks, the environs, even the riverbed itself would have been ripped apart and pummelled into ruins. But the water still flowed. Where once it had been a proud, major river meandering through meadows and sleepy villages on its long journey to the sea, it was now cut loose, leaking out across the punished landscape like blood from a wound, its original form and structure lost to the war.

There was a soft 'pop' and the area below them was suddenly bathed in chilly white light. A few seconds more and other starshell flares burst, glowing, in the sky. Through the scope now, everything looked bleached and cold, hard shadows shivered as the flares slowly dropped.

'Corpse light,' said Fevrierson, putting on his steel helmet. 'Brace yourself,' he said.

'Why?'

'It's time for war.'

Distantly, a whistle blew. A bull-horn wound up and died again, its moan echoing across the front.

The gun-pits of the Peinforq Line woke up.

The sound and light split the darkness and eclipsed the tremulous glow of the starshells. The earth shook. In the deep pits and weapon-dens behind the line's spinal trenches, large calibre howitzers and mortars hurled munitions up into the gathering dusk. Elevated feldkannone and rocketshargen joined them.

Mkoll looked back at the Alliance lines and watched the thunderous light show. Two kilometres west of him and for twenty kilometres to north and south, the guns blazed and muzzle-fires strobed and danced. Massive, brilliant flashes flickered up and down the artillery line, some of them casting weird, momentary shadows from their pits. Mkoll heard the concussive screech of heavy shells lobbing overhead, the deeper, pneumatic twang of mortars, the huge crump of bombards. Rockets went up and over, squealing in the air and leaving trails of fire.

He'd never seen a bombardment on this scale before. Not even at Vervunhive.

Mkoll looked east, through the scope. A ragged strip of detonations and flame-storms was creeping across the ruined land on the far side of the wounded river. He could smell fyceline and iron in the wind, and then the stench of mud rendered into steam.

Fevrierson seemed content. He sat back and took a tin cup of caffeine from his subaltern.

'Want one?' he asked.

'No,' said Mkoll. The bombardment was shaking his marrow.

'They'll keep this up for a few hours, then they might signal us to advance.'

'Feth,' said Mkoll.

'You might as well have a cup,' said Fevrierson. 'We could be here for a w—'

There was a sudden roar and a shockwave of heat slammed across the front line from the west. Fevrierson stumbled to his feet. He stared back at the Aexe lines. A white hot cone of fire licked up from the direction of the allied artillery positions.

‘Not a misfire, surely...’ he began.

There was another colossal bang and a flash and this time it knocked them all over. Whistles were blowing.

‘That’s shellfire,’ Mkolll said, getting up.

‘But they’ve got nothing that—’

A third roar. Then a fourth. Then a dozen heavy impacts along the line to the north-west. Gargantuan fires blazed into the night.

‘Schleiq!’ Fevrierson cried. ‘What the hell is that?’

‘Something new?’ Mkolll asked.

A runner almost fell into the dugout, dripping with perspiration. ‘Order to repel!’ he gasped.

‘Repel?’ Fevrierson said.

Mkolll grabbed the scope. Out in the no-man’s land of the Naeme Valley, phantom shapes were advancing towards them.

‘Get your men to stand ready,’ he told the young lieutenant. ‘We’re being assaulted.’

Do the Ghosts stand any chance of surviving the lethal trench warfare of Aexe Cardinal? Read STRAIGHT SILVER to find out!

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