

GAUNT'S GHOSTS: THE SAINT

The second Gaunt's Ghosts omnibus

By Dan Abnett

Contains the novels *Honour Guard*, *The Guns of Tanith*, *Straight Silver* and *Sabbat Martyr* plus an introduction by the author.

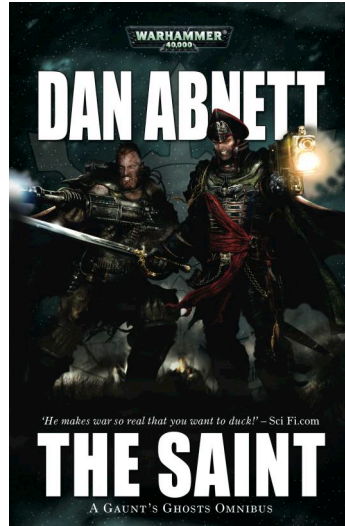
In the Chaos-infested Sabbat system, the massed ranks of the Imperial Guard stand shoulder to shoulder as they counter an invasion by Chaos forces.

Amongst the Guard are the troops of the Tanith First-and-Only, a displaced army forced to flee their home planet before it succumbed to the unrelenting assault of Chaos. Nicknamed the Ghosts, their specialist scouting role has thrown them into the thickest of the fighting, trying to complete whatever desperate mission their uncaring commanders have volunteered them for!

Gaunt must evade the treacherous scheming of rival regiments and the lethal firepower of the enemy if he is to win through and lead his Ghosts to victory.

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 popular strips Lone Wolves, Titan and Darkblade, the best-selling Gaunt's Ghosts novels, and the acclaimed Inquisitor Eisenhorn trilogy.



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(with Andy Hoare)

The following is an excerpt from *Gaunt's Ghosts: The Saint* by Dan Abnett. Published by the Black Library. Games Workshop, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

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THEY'D STRUNG THE king up with razor wire in a city square north of the river.

It was called the Square of Sublime Tranquillity, an eight-hectare court of sun-baked, pink basalt surrounded by the elegant, mosaic walls of the Universitariate Doctrinus. Little in the way of sublime tranquillity had happened there in the last ten days. The Pater's Pilgrims had seen to that.

Ibram Gaunt made a sharp, bat-like shadow on the flagstones as he ran to new cover, his storm coat flying out behind him. The sun was at its highest and a stark glare scorched the hard ground. Gaunt knew the light must be burning his skin too, but he felt nothing except the cool, blustering wind that filled the wide square.

He dropped into shelter behind an overturned, burnt-out Chimera troop carrier, and dumped the empty clip from his bolt pistol with a flick-click of his gloved thumb. He could hear a popping sound from far away, and raw metal dents appeared in the blackened armour of the dead Chimera's hull. Distant shots, their sound stolen by the wind.

Far behind, across the cooking pink stones of the open square, he could see black-uniformed Imperial Guardsmen edging out to follow him.

His men. Troopers of the Tanith First-and-Only. Gaunt noted their dispersal and glanced back at the king. The high king indeed, as he had been. What was his name again?

Rotten, swollen, humiliated, the noble corpse swung from a gibbet made of tie-beams and rusting truck-axles and couldn't

answer. Most of his immediate court and family were dangling next to him.

More popping. A hard, sharp dent appeared in the resilient metal next to Gaunt's head. Crumbs of paint flecked off with the impact.

Mkoll ducked into cover beside him, lasrifle braced.

'Took your time,' Gaunt teased.

'Hah! I trained you too fething well, colonel-commissar, that's all it is.'

They grinned at each other.

More troopers joined them, running the gauntlet across the open square. One jerked and fell, halfway across. His body would remain, sprawled and unmourned in the open, for at least another hour.

Larkin, Caffran, Lillo, Vamberfeld and Derin made it across. The five scurried in beside the Ghosts' leader and Mkoll, the regiment's scout commander.

Gaunt assayed a look out past the Chimera cover.

He ducked back as distant pops threw rounds at him.

'Four shooters. In the north-west corner.'

Mkoll smiled and shook his head, scolding like a parent. 'Nine at least. Haven't you listened to anything I've told you, Gaunt?'

Larkin, Derin and Caffran laughed. They were all Tanith, original Ghosts, veterans.

Lillo and Vamberfeld watched the apparently disrespectful exchange with alarm. They were Vervunhivers, newcomers to the Ghosts regiment. The Tanith called them 'fresh blood' if they were being charitable, 'scratchers' if they weren't really thinking, or 'cannon trash' if they were feeling cruel.

The new Vervunhive recruits wore the same matt-black fatigues and body armour as the Tanith, but their colouring and demeanour stood them apart.

As did their newly stamped, metal-stocked lasguns and the special silver axe-rake studs they wore on their collars.

'Don't worry,' said Gaunt, noting their unease and smiling. 'Mkoll regularly gets too big for his boots. I'll reprimand him when this is done.'

More pops, more dents.

Larkin fidgeted round to get a good look, resting his fine, nalwood-finished sniper weapon in a jag of broken armour with experienced grace. He was the regiment's best marksman.

'Got a target?' Gaunt asked.

'Oh, you bet,' assured the grizzled Larkin, working his weapon into optimum position with a lover's softness.

'Blow their fething faces off then, if you please.'

'You got it.'

'How... How can he see?' gasped Lillo, craning up. Caffran tugged him into cover, saving him an abrupt death as las-shots hissed around them.

'Sharpest eyes of all the Ghosts,' smiled Caffran.

Lillo nodded back, but resented the Tanith's cocky attitude. He was Marco Lillo, career soldier, twenty-one years in the Vervun Primary, and here was a kid, no more than twenty years old all told, telling him what to do.

Lillo shuffled round, aiming his long lasgun.

'I want the king, high king whatever-his-name-is,' said Gaunt softly. Distractedly, he rubbed at a ridge of an old scar across his right palm. 'I want him down. It's not right for him to be rotting up there.'

'Okay,' said Mkolll.

Lillo thought he had a shot and fired a sustained burst at the far side of the square. Lattice windows along the side of the Universitariat exploded inwards, but the hard breeze muffled the noise of the impacts.

Gaunt grabbed Lillo's weapon and pulled him down.

'Don't waste ammo, Marco,' he said.

He knows my name! He knows my name! Lillo was almost beside himself with the fact. He stared at Gaunt, basking in every moment of the brief acknowledgement. Ibram Gaunt was like a god to him. He had led Vervunhive to victory out of the surest defeat ten months past. He carried the sword to prove it.

Lillo regarded the colonel-commissar now: the tall, powerful build, the close-cropped blond hair half hidden by the commissar's cap, the lean cut of his intense face that so matched his name. Gaunt

was dressed in the black uniform of his breed, overtopped by a long, leather storm coat and the trademark Tanith camo-cape. Maybe not a god, because he's flesh and blood, Lillo thought... but a hero, none the less.

Larkin was firing. Hard, scratchy rasps issued from his gun.

The rate of fire spitting over their ducked heads reduced.

'What are we waiting for?' asked Vamberfeld.

Mkoll caught his sleeve and nodded back at the buildings behind them.

Vamberfeld saw a big man... a very big man... rise from cover and fire a missile launcher.

The snaking missile, trailing smoke, struck a coronet on the west of the square.

'Try again, Bragg!' Derin, Mkoll and Larkin chorused with a laugh.

Another missile soared over them, and blew the far corner of the square apart. Stone debris scattered across the open plaza.

Gaunt was up and running now, as were Mkoll, Caffran and Derin. Larkin continued to fire his expert shots from cover.

Vamberfeld and Lillo leapt up after the Tanith.

Lillo saw Derin buckle and fall as las-fire cut through him.

He paused and tried to help. The Tanith trooper's chest was a bloody mess and he was convulsing so hard it was impossible for Lillo to get a good grip on him. Mkoll appeared beside the struggling Lillo and together they dragged Derin into cover behind the makeshift gibbet as more las-fire peppered the flagstones.

Gaunt, Caffran and Vamberfeld made it to the far corner of the square.

Gaunt disappeared in through the jagged hole that Bragg's missile had made, his power sword raised and humming. It was the ceremonial weapon of Heironymo Sondar, once-lord of Vervunhive, and Gaunt now carried it as a mark of honour for his courageous defence of that hive. The keening, electric-blue blade flashed as it struck at shapes inside the hole.

Caffran ducked in after him, blasting from the hip. Few of the Ghosts were better than him in storm clearance. He was fast and ruthless.

He blocked Gaunt's back, gun flaring.

Niceg Vamberfeld had been a commercial cleric on Verghast before the Act of Consolation. He'd trained hard, and well, but this was all new to him. He followed the pair inside, plunging into a suddenly gloomy world of shadows, shadow-shapes and blazing energy weapons.

He shot something point blank as he came through the crumpled stone opening. Something else reared up at him, cackling, and he lanced it with his bayonet. He couldn't see the commissar-colonel or the young Tanith trooper any more. He couldn't see a galking thing, in fact. He started to panic. Something else shot at him from close range and a las-round spat past his ear.

He fired again, blinded by the close shot, and heard a dead weight fall.

Something grabbed him from behind.

There was an impact, and a spray of dust and blood. Vamberfeld fell over clumsily, a corpse on top of him. Face down in the hot dirt, Vamberfeld found his vision returning. He was suffused in blue light.

Power sword smoking, Ibram Gaunt dragged him up by the hand.

'Good work, Vamberfeld. We've taken the breach,' he said.

Vamberfeld was dumbstruck. And also covered in blood.

'Stay sane,' Gaunt told him, 'It gets better...'

They were in a cloister, or a circumambulatory, as far as the dazed Verghastite could tell. Bright shafts of sunlight stippled down through the complex sandstone lattices, but the main window sections were screened with ornately mosaiced wood panels. The air was dry and dead, and rich with the afterscents of las-fire, fyceline and fresh blood.

Vamberfeld could see Gaunt and Caffran moving ahead, Caffran hugging the cloister walls and searching for targets as Gaunt perused the enemy dead.

The dead. The dreaded Infardi.

When they had seized Hagia, the Chaos forces had taken the name Infardi, which meant ‘pilgrims’ in the local language, and adopted a green silk uniform that mocked the shrineworld’s religion. The name was meant to mock it too; by choosing a name in the local tongue, the enemy were defiling the very sanctity of the place. For six thousand years, this had been the shrineworld of Saint Sabbat, one of the most beloved of Imperial saints, after whom this entire star cluster – and this Imperial crusade – were named. By taking Hagia and proclaiming themselves pilgrims, the foe were committing the ultimate desecration. What unholy rites they had conducted here in Hagia’s holy places did not bear thinking about.

Vamberfeld had learned all about Pater Sin and his Chaos filth from the regimental briefings on the troop ship. Seeing it was something else. He glanced at the corpse nearest him: a large, gnarled man swathed in green silk wraps. Where the wraps parted or were torn away, Vamberfeld could see a wealth of tattoos: images of Saint Sabbat in grotesque congress with lascivious daemons, images of hell, runes of Chaos overprinting and polluting blessed symbols.

He felt light-headed. Despite the months of training he had endured after joining the Ghosts, he was still out of shape: a desk-bound cleric playing at being soldier.

His panic deepened.

Caffran was suddenly firing again, splintering the dark with his muzzle-flashes. Vamberfeld couldn’t see Gaunt any more. He threw himself flat on his belly and propped his gun as Colonel Corbec had taught him during Fundamental and Preparatory. His shots rattled up the colonnade past Caffran, supporting the young Tanith’s salvoes.

Ahead, a flock of figures in shimmering green flickered down the cloister, firing lasguns and automatic hard-slug weapons at them. Vamberfeld could hear chanting too.

Chanting wasn’t the right word, he realised. As they approached, the figures were murmuring, muttering long and complex phrases that overlapped and intertwined. He felt the sweat on his back go cold. He fired again. These troops were Infardi, the elite of Pater Sin. Emperor save him, he was in it up to his neck!

Gaunt dropped to his knee next to him, aiming and firing his bolt pistol in a two-handed brace. The trio of Imperial guns pummelled the Infardi advance in the narrow space.

There was a flash and a dull roar, and then light streamed in ahead of them, cutting into the side of the Infardi charge. Blowing another breach in the cloister, more Ghosts poured in, slaughtering the advancing foe.

Gaunt rose. The half-seen fighting ahead was sporadic now. He keyed his microbead intercom.

There was a click of static that Vamberfeld felt in his own earpiece, then: 'One, this is three. Clearing the space.' A pause, gunfire. 'Clearance confirmed.'

'One, three. Good work, Rawne. Fan inward and secure the precinct of the Universitariat.'

'Three, acknowledged.'

Gaunt looked down at Vamberfeld. 'You can get up now,' he said.

DIZZY, HIS HEART POUNDING, Vamberfeld almost fell back out into the sunlight and wind of the square. He thought he might pass out, or worse, vomit. He stood with his back to the hot cloister stonework and breathed deeply, aware of how cold his skin was.

He tried to find something to focus his attention on. Above the stupa and gilt domes of the Universitariat thousands of flags, pennants and banners fluttered in the eternal wind of Hagia. He had been told the faithful raised them in the belief that by inscribing their sins onto the banners they would have them blown away and absolved. There were so many... so many colours, shapes, designs...

Vamberfeld looked away.

The Square of Sublime Tranquillity was now full of advancing Ghosts, a hundred or more, spilling out across the pink flagstones, checking doors and cloister entranceways. A large group had formed around the gibbet where Mkoll was cutting the corpses down.

Vamberfeld slid down the wall until he was sitting on the stone flags of the square. He began to shake.

He was still shaking when the medics found him.

MKOLL, LILLO AND LARKIN were lowering the king's pitiful corpse when Gaunt approached. The colonel-commissar looked dourly at the tortured remains. Kings were two a penny on Hagia: a feudal world, controlled by city-states in the name of the hallowed God-Emperor, and every town had a king. But the king of Doctrinopolis, Hagia's first city, was the most exalted, the closest Hagia had to a planetary lord, and to see the highest officer of the Imperium disfigured so gravely offended Gaunt's heart.

'Infareem Infardus,' Gaunt muttered, remembering at last the high king's name from his briefing slates. He took off his cap and bowed his head. 'May the beloved Emperor rest you.'

'What do we do with them, sir?' Mkoll asked, gesturing to the miserable bodies.

'Whatever local custom decrees,' Gaunt answered. He looked about. 'Trooper! Over here!'

Trooper Brin Milo, the youngest Ghost, came running over at his commander's cry. The only civilian saved from Tanith, saved by Gaunt personally, Milo had served as Gaunt's adjutant until he had been old enough to join the ranks. All the Ghosts respected his close association with the colonel-commissar. Though an ordinary trooper, Milo was held in special regard.

Personally, Milo hated the fact that he was seen as a lucky charm.

'Sir?'

'I want you to find some of the locals, priests especially, and learn from them how they wish these bodies to be treated. I want it done according to their custom, Brin.'

Milo nodded and saluted. 'I'll see to it, sir.'

Gaunt turned away. Beyond the majestic Universitariat and the clustering roofs of the Doctrinopolis rose the Citadel, a vast white marble palace capping a high rock plateau. Pater Sin, the unholy intelligence behind the heretic army that had taken the Doctrinopolis, the commanding presence behind the entire enemy forces on this world, was up there somewhere. The Citadel was the primary objective, but getting to it was proving to be a slow, bloody

effort for the Imperial forces as they claimed their way through the Doctrinopolis street by street.

Gaunt called up his vox-officer, Raglon, and ordered him to patch links with the second and third fronts. Raglon had just reached Colonel Farris, commander of the Brevian Centennials at the sharp end of the third front pushing in through the north of the city, when they heard fresh firing from the Universitariat. Rawne's unit had engaged the enemy again.

FOUR KILOMETRES EAST, in the narrow streets of the quarter known as Old Town, the Tanith second front was locked in hard. Old Town was a warren of maze-like streets that wound between high, teetering dwellings linking small commercial yards and larger market places. A large number of Infardi, driven out of the defences on the holy river by the initial push of the Imperial armour, had gone to ground here.

It was bitter stuff, house to house, dwelling to dwelling, street to street. But the Tanith Ghosts, masters of stealth, excelled at street fighting.

Colonel Colm Corbec, the Ghost's second-in-command, was a massive, genial, shaggy brute beloved of his men. His good humour and rousing passion drove them forward; his fortitude and power inspired them. He held command by dint of sheer charisma, perhaps even more than Gaunt did, certainly more than Major Rawne, the regiment's cynical, ruthlessly efficient third officer.

Right now, Corbec couldn't use any of that charismatic leadership. Pinned by sustained las-fire behind a street corner drinking trough, he was cursing freely. The microbead intercom system worn by all Guardsmen was being blocked and distorted by the high buildings all around.

'Two! This is two! Respond, any troop units!' Corbec barked, fumbling with his rubber-sheathed earpiece. 'Come on! Come on!'

A drizzle of las-blasts rocked the old sandstone water-tub, scattering chips of stone. Corbec ducked again.

'Two! This is two! Come on!'

Corbec had his head buried against the base of the water-tub. He could smell damp stone. He saw, in sharp focus, tiny spiders clinging to filmy cones of web in the tub's bas-relief carvings, inches from his eyes.

He felt the warm stone shudder against his cheek as las-rounds hit the other side.

His microbead gurgled something, but the broken transmission was drowned by the noise of a tin ladle and two earthenware jugs falling off the edge of the trough.

'Say again! Say again!'

'-chief, we-'

'Again! This is two! Say again!'

'-to the west, we-'

Corbec growled a colourful oath and tore out his earpiece. He sneaked a look around the edge of the tub and threw himself back.

A single lasround whipped past, exploding against the wall behind him. It would have taken his head off if he hadn't moved.

Corbec rolled back onto his arse, his back against the tub, and checked his lasrifle. The curved magazine of the wooden-stocked weapon was two-thirds dry, so he pulled it out and snapped in a fresh one. The right-hand thigh pocket of his body armour was heavy with half-used clips. He always changed up to full-load when there was a chance. The half-spent were there at hand for dug-in resistance. He'd known more than one trooper who'd died when his cell had drained out in the middle of a firefight, when there was no time to reload.

There was a burst of firing ahead of him. Corbec spun, and noted the change in tone. The dull snap of the Infardi weapons was intermingled with the higher, piercing reports of Imperial guns.

He lifted his head above the edge of the tub. When he didn't get it shot off, he rolled up onto his feet and ran down the narrow alleyway.

There was fighting ahead. He leapt over the body of an Infardi sprawled in a doorway. The curving street was narrow and the dwellings on either side were tall. He hurried between hard shadow and patches of sunlight.

He came up behind three Ghosts, firing from cover across a market yard. One was a big man he recognised at once, even from the back.

'Kolea!'

Sergeant Gol Kolea was an ex-miner who'd fought through the Vervunhive war as a part of the 'scratch company' resistance. No one, not even the most war-weary and cynical Tanith, had anything but respect for the man and his selfless determination. The Verghastites practically worshipped him. He was a driven, quiet giant, almost the size of Corbec himself.

The colonel slid into cover beside him. 'What's new, sarge?'

Corbec grinned over the roar of weaponsfire.

'Nothing,' replied Kolea. Corbec liked the man immensely, but he had to admit the ex-miner had no sense of humour. In the months since the new recruits had joined the Ghosts, Corbec hadn't managed to engage Kolea at all in small talk or personal chat, and he was pretty sure none of the others had managed it either. But then the battle for Vervunhive had taken his wife and children, so Corbec imagined Kolea didn't have much to laugh or chat about any more.

Kolea pointed out over the crates of rotting produce they were using as cover.

'We're tight in here. They hold the buildings over the market and west down that street.'

As if to prove this, a flurry of hard-round and laser fire spattered down across their position.

'Feth,' sighed Corbec. 'That place over there is crawling with them.'

'I think it's the merchant guild hall. They're up on the fourth floor in serious numbers.'

Corbec rubbed his whiskers. 'So we can't go over. What's to the sides?'

'I tried that, sir.' It was Corporal Meryn, one of the other Ghosts crouched in the cover. 'Sneaked off left to find a side alley.'

'Result?'

'Almost got my arse shot off.'

'Thanks for trying,' Corbec nodded.

Chuckling, Meryn turned back to his spot-shooting.

Corbec crawled along the cover, passing the third Ghost, Wheln, and ducked under a metal handcart used by the market's produce workers. He looked the market yard up and down. On his side of it, Kolea, Meryn and Wheln had the alley end covered, and three further squads of Ghosts had taken firing positions in the lower storeys of the commercial premises to either side. Through a blown-out window, he could see Sergeant Bray and several others.

Opposing them, a salient of Infardi troops was dug into the whole streetblock. Corbec studied the area well, and took in other details besides. He had always held that brains won wars faster than bombs. Then again, he also believed that when it really came down to it, fighting your balls off never hurt.

You're a complex man, Sergeant Varl had once told him. He'd been taking the piss of course, and they'd both been off their heads on sacra. The memory made Colm Corbec smile.

Head down, Corbec sprinted to the neighbouring building, a potter's shop. Shattered porcelain and china fragments littered the ground inside and out. He paused near a shell hole in the side wall and called.

'Hey, inside! It's Corbec! I'm coming in so don't hose me with las!'

He swung inside.

In the old shop, troopers Rilke, Yael and Leyr were dug in, firing through the lowered window shutters. The shutters were holed in what seemed to Corbec to be a million places and just as many individual beams of light shafted in through them, catching the haze of smoke that lifted through the dark shop's air.

'Having fun, boys?' Corbec asked. They muttered various comments about the wanton proclivities of his mother and several other of his female relatives.

'Good to hear you're keeping your spirits up,' he replied. He began stamping on the pottery-covered floor.

'What the sacred feth are you doing, chief?' asked Yael. He was a youngster, no more than twenty-two, with a youngster's insubordinate cheek. Corbec liked that spirit a lot.

'Using my head, sonny,' smiled Corbec, pointing to his size eighteen field boot as he stomped it again.

Corbec raked away some china spoil and dragged up a floor-hatch by the metal yoke.

'Cellar,' he announced. The trio groaned.

He let the hatch slam down and crawled up to the window with them.

'Think about it, my brave Tanith studs. Take a look out there.'

They did, peering through the shredded shutter-slats.

'The market's raised... a raised podium. See there by that pile of drums? Gotta be a hatch. My money's on a warren of produce cellars under this whole market... and probably under that guild hall too.'

'My money's on you getting us all dead by lunchtime,' growled Leyr, a hard-edged, thirty-five year old veteran of the Tanith Magna militia.

'Have I got you dead yet?' asked Corbec.

'That's not the point—'

'Then shut up and listen. We'll be here til doomsday unless we break this deadlock. So let's fight smart. Use the fact this cess-pit of a city is a trazillion years old and full of basements, crypts and catacombs.'

He keyed his microbead intercom, adjusting the thin wire arm of the mike so it was close to his lips.

'This is two. You hearing me, six?'

'Six, two. Yes I am.'

'Bray, keep your men where they are and give the front of that hall a good seeing to in about... oh, ten minutes. Can you do that?'

'Six, got it. Firestorm in ten.'

'Good on you. Two, nine?'

'Nine, two.' Corbec heard Kolea's tight voice over the channel.

'Sarge, I'm in the pottery vendor's down from you. Leave Meryn and Wheln put and get over here.'

'Got you.'

Kolea scrambled in through the shell hole a few seconds later. He found Corbec shining his lamp-pack into the open cellar hatch.

'You know about tunnels, right?'

'Mines. I was a miner.'

'Same difference, it's all underground. Prep, we're going down.' He turned to Leyr, Rilke and Yael. 'Who's got a yen for adventure and a satchel full of tube-charges?'

Again, they groaned.

'You're safe, Rilke. I want you popping at those windows.'

Rilke was a superb sniper, second only to the regimental marksmanship champion Larkin. He had a long-pattern needle-las. 'Give up any tubes you got to these plucky volunteers.'

Leyr and Yael moved back to the hatch. Each of them, like Corbec and Kolea, wore twenty kilos of matt-black composite body armour over their fatigues and under their camo-cloaks. Most of that weight came from the modular webbing pouches filled with ammo, lamp-packs, sheathed blades, waterproof microbead sets, coiled climbing rope, rolls of surgical tape, ferro-plastic binders, Founding-issue Imperial texts, door-spikes, flashbombs, and all the rest of the standard issue Imperial Guard kit.

'Gonna be tight,' mused Leyr sourly, looking down into the hole where Kolea's flashlight played.

Kolea nodded and pulled off his camo-cloak. 'Ditch anything that will get hung up.' Leyr and Yael did so, as did Corbec himself. The cloaks went onto the floor, as did other loose items. All four copies of the Imperial Infantryman's Uplifting Primer hit the cloaks at the same time.

The men looked at Corbec, almost ashamed.

'Ahh, it's all up here,' Corbec said, tapping his temple.

Sergeant Kolea tamped a spike into the tiled floor and ran the end of his climbing rope through the eye. He dropped the snake of cable down into the hole.

'Who's first?' he asked.

Corbec would have preferred to let Kolea lead, but this was his call and he wanted them to know he trusted it.

He grabbed the rope, slung his lasrifle over his shoulder, and clambered down into the hole.

Kolea followed, then Leyr. Yael brought up the rear.

The cellar shaft was eight metres deep. Almost immediately, Corbec was struggling and sweating. Even though he had ditched a lot of kit, the sheer bulk of his webbing and body armour was confining him and screwing with his centre of balance.

He landed on a floor in the darkness and switched on his lamp-pack. The air was thick and foetid. He was in a cellar space four metres wide, dripping with ancient fluid and rot. His boots slogged through semi-solid waste and murk.

'Oh feth!' spat Leyr as he made the ground.

There was an arched conduit snaking off towards the underyard. It was less than a metre high and only half a metre wide. With kit and weapons, even stripped down, they had to hunch and edge in sideways, single file. The liquid ooze on the floor sucked up around their boot-tops.

Corbec attached his lamp-pack to the bayonet fitting under his lasgun's muzzle. He swung the weapon back and forth as best he could side on, bent over, and led them on into the soupy darkness.

'Probably wasn't the best idea in the galaxy to send either of us on this,' said Kolea behind him.

It was the closest Corbec had ever heard to a joke from the scratch sergeant. Apart from 'Try Again' Bragg, he and Kolea were the biggest men in the Tanith First. Neither Leyr and Yael topped out over two metres.

Corbec smiled. 'How did you manage? In the mines?'

Kolea slid round, passing Corbec in an awkward hunch. 'We crawled when the seams dipped. But there are other ways. Watch me.'

Corbec shone his light onto Kolea so that he and the two Tanith behind him could see. Kolea leaned back against the conduit wall until he was almost in a sitting position. Then he skirted along through the muck, bracing his back against the wall so that the top half of his body could remain upright. His feet ran against the foot of the far wall to prevent him slipping out.

'Very saucy,' said Corbec in admiration.

He followed suit, and so did Leyr and Yael. The quartet slid their way down the conduit. Overhead, through the thick stone, they

heard heavy fire. The ten minutes were up. Bray had begun his promised firestorm.

They were behind, too slow.

The conduit fanned and then opened out into a wide box. The stinking ooze was knee deep. Their flashlights found bas-relief markers of old saints on the walls.

At least the roof was higher here.

Straightening up, they headed forward through the tarry fluid. They were directly under the centre of the market yard now, by Corbec's estimation.

Another conduit led away towards what he presumed was the guild hall. Now Corbec led the way, double-time, back-crawling down the low conduit as Kolea had taught them.

They came on a shaft leading up.

By flashlight, they could see the sides were smooth brick, but the shaft was narrow, no more than a metre square.

By force of thighs alone, it was possible to edge up the shaft with back braced against one wall and feet against the other. Corbec led again.

Grunting and sweating, he climbed the shaft until his face was a few centimetres from a wooden hatch.

He looked down at Kolea, Yael and Leyr spidered into the flue below him.

'Here goes,' he said.

He pushed the hatch up. It didn't budge initially, then it slumped open. Light shone down. Corbec waited for gunfire but none came. He shuffled up the last of the shaft, shoulderblade by shoulderblade, and pushed out into the open.

He was in the guild hall basement. It was boarded up and empty, and there were several corpses on the floor, drizzled with flies.

Corbec pulled himself out of the shaft into the room. The others followed.

Rising, their legs wet and stinking from the passage, they moved out, lasguns ready, lamp-packs extinguished.

The percussive throb of las-fire rolled from the floor above.

Yael checked the corpses. ‘Infardi scum,’ he told the colonel. ‘Left to die.’

‘Let’s help their pals join them,’ Corbec smiled.

The four took the brick stairs in the basement corner as a pack, guns ready. A battered wooden door stood between them and the first floor.

His foot braced against the door, Corbec looked back at the three Ghosts clustered behind him.

‘What do you say? A day for heroes?’

All three nodded. He kicked in the door.

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