

GAUNT'S GHOSTS: THE FOUNDING

The first Gaunt's Ghosts omnibus

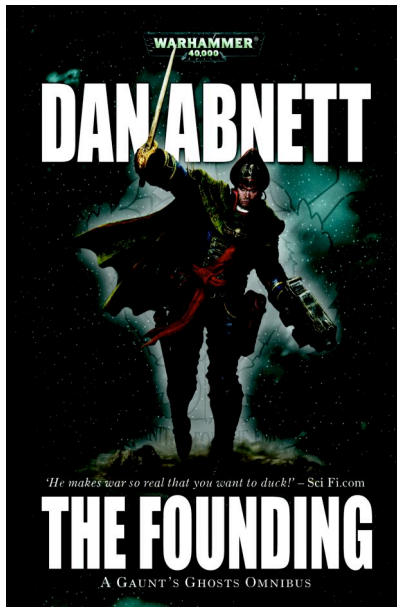
By Dan Abnett

Contains the novels *First & Only*, *Ghostmaker* and *Necropolis*, the short story *In Remembrance* 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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The following is an excerpt from *Gaunt's Ghosts: The Founding* by Dan Abnett.

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THE NIGHT SKY was matt and dark, like the material of the fatigues they wore, day after day. The dawn stabbed in, as silent and sudden as a knife-wound, welling up a dull redness through the black cloth of the sky.

Eventually the sun rose, casting raw amber light down over the trench lines. The star was big, heavy and red, like a rotten, roasted fruit. Dawn lightning crackled a thousand kilometres away.

Colm Corbec woke, acknowledged briefly the thousand aches and snarls in his limbs and frame, and rolled out of his billet in the trench dugout. His great, booted feet kissed into the grey slime of the trench floor where the duckboards didn't meet.

Corbec was a large man on the wrong side of forty, built like an ox and going to fat. His broad and hairy forearms were decorated with blue spiral tattoos and his beard was thick and shaggy. He wore the black webbing and fatigues of the Tanith and also the ubiquitous camo-cloak which had become their trademark. He also shared the pale complexion, black hair and blue eyes of his people. He was the colonel of the Tanith First-and-Only, the so-called Gaunt's Ghosts.

He yawned. Down the trench, under the frag-sack and gabion breastwork and the spools of rusting razor wire, the Ghosts awoke too. There were coughs, gasps, soft yelps as nightmares became real in the light of waking. Matches struck under the low bevel of the parapet; firearms were un-swaddled and the damp cleaned off. Firing mechanisms were slammed in and out. Food parcels were unhooked from their vermin-proof positions up on the billet roofs.

Shuffling in the ooze, Corbec stretched and cast an eye down the long, zigzag traverses of the trench to see where the picket sentries were returning, pale and weary, asleep on their feet. The twinkling lights of the vast communication up-link masts flashed eleven kilometres behind them, rising between the rusting, shell-pocked roofs of the gargantuan shipyard silos and the vast Titan fabrication bunkers and foundry sheds of the Adeptus Mechanicus tech-priesthood.

The dark stealth capes of the picket sentries, the distinctive uniform of the Tanith First and Only, were lank and stiff with dried mud. Their replacements at the picket, bleary eyed and puffy, slapped them on the arms as they passed, exchanging jokes and cigarettes. The night sentries, though, were too weary to be forthcoming.

They were ghosts, returning to their graves, Corbec thought. As are we all.

In a hollow under the trench wall, Mad Larkin, the first squad's wiry sniper, was cooking up something that approximated caffeine in a battered tin tray over a fusion burner. The acrid stink hooked Corbec by the nostrils.

'Give me some of that, Larks,' the colonel said, squelching across the trench.

Larkin was a skinny, stringy, unhealthily pale man in his fifties with three silver hoops through his left ear and a purple-blue spiral-wyrm tattoo on his sunken right cheek. He offered up a misshapen metal cup. There was a fragile look, of fatigue and fear, in his wrinkled eyes. 'This morning, do you reckon? This morning?'

Corbec pursed his lips, enjoying the warmth of the cup in his hefty paw. 'Who knows...' His voice trailed off.

High in the orange troposphere, a matched pair of Imperial fighters shrieked over, curved around the lines and plumed away north. Fire smoke lifted from Adeptus Mechanicus work-temples on the horizon, great cathedrals of industry, now burning from within. A second later, the dry wind brought the crump of detonations.

Corbec watched the fighters go and sipped his drink. It was almost unbearably disgusting. 'Good stuff,' he muttered to Larkin.

A KILOMETRE OFF, DOWN the etched zigzag of the trench line, Trooper Fulke was busily going crazy. Major Rawne, the regiment's second officer, was woken by the sound of a lasgun firing at close range, the phosphorescent impacts ringing into frag-sacks and mud.

Rawne spun out of his cramped billet as his adjutant, Feygor, stumbled up nearby. There were shouts and oaths from the men around them. Fulke had seen vermin, the ever-present vermin, attacking his rations, chewing into the plastic seals with their snapping lizard mouths. As Rawne blundered down the trench, the animals skittered away past him, lopping on their big, rabbit-legs, their lice-ridden pelts smeared flat with ooze. Fulke was firing his lasgun on full auto into his sleeping cavity under the bulwark, screaming obscenities at the top of his fractured voice.

Feygor got there first, wrestling the weapon from the bawling trooper. Fulke turned his fists on the adjutant, mashing his nose, splashing up grey mud-water with his scrambling boots.

Rawne slid in past Feygor, and put Fulke out with a hook to the jaw.

There was a crack of bone and the trooper went down, whimpering, in the drainage gully.

'Assemble a firing squad detail,' Rawne spat at the bloody Feygor unceremoniously and stalked back to his dugout.

TROOPER BRAGG WOVE back to his bunk. A huge man, unarguably the largest of the Ghosts, he was a peaceable, simple soul. They called him 'Try Again' Bragg because of his terrible aim. He'd been on picket all night and now his bed was singing a lullaby he couldn't resist. He slammed into young Trooper Caffran at a turn in the dugout and almost knocked the smaller man flat. Bragg hauled him up, his weariness clamming his apologies in his mouth.

'No harm done, Try,' Caffran said. 'Get to your billet.'

Bragg blundered on. Two paces more and he'd even forgotten what he'd done. He simply had an afterimage memory of an apology he should have made to a good friend. Fatigue was total.

Caffran ducked down into the crevice of the command dugout, just off the third communication trench. There was a thick polyfibre shield over the door, and layers of anti-gas curtaining. He knocked twice and then pulled back the heavy drapes and dropped into the deep cavity.

THE OFFICER'S DUGOUT was deep, accessed only by an aluminium ladder lashed to the wall. Inside, the light was a frosty white from the sodium burners. The floor was well-made of duckboards and there were even such marks of civilisation as shelves, books, charts and an aroma of decent caffeine.

Sliding down into the command burrow, Caffran noticed first Brin Milo, the sixteen year-old mascot the Ghosts had acquired at their Founding. Word was, Milo had been rescued personally from the fires of their homeworld by the commissar himself, and this bond had led him to his status of regimental musician and adjutant to their senior officer. Caffran didn't like to be around the boy much. There was something about his youth and his brightness of eye that reminded him of the world they had lost. It was ironic: back on Tanith with only a year or two between them, they like as not would have been friends.

Milo was setting out breakfast on a small camp table. The smell was delicious: cooking eggs and ham and some toasted bread. Caffran envied the commissar, his position and his luxuries.

'Has the commissar slept well?' Caffran asked.

'He hasn't slept at all,' Milo replied. 'He's been up through the night reviewing reconnaissance transmissions from the orbital watch.'

Caffran hesitated in the entranceway to the burrow, clutching his sealed purse of communique's. He was a small man, for a Tanith, and young, with shaved black hair and a blue dragon tattoo on his temple.

'Come in, sit yourself down.' At first, Caffran thought Milo had spoken, but it was the commissar himself. Ibram Gaunt emerged from the rear chamber of the dugout looking pale and drawn. He was dressed in his uniform trousers and a white singlet with

regimental braces strapped tight in place. He gestured Caffran to the seat opposite him at the small camp table and then swung down onto the other stool.

Caffran hesitated again and then sat at the place indicated.

Gaunt was a tall, hard man in his forties, and his lean face utterly matched his name. Trooper Caffran admired the commissar enormously and had studied his previous actions at Balhaut, at Formal Prime, his service with the Hyrkan Eighth, even his majestic command of the disaster that was Tanith.

Gaunt seemed more tired than Caffran had ever seen, but he trusted this man to bring them through. If anyone could redeem the Ghosts it would be Ibram Gaunt. He was a rare beast, a political officer who had been granted full regimental command and the brevet rank of colonel.

‘I’m sorry to interrupt your breakfast, commissar,’ Caffran said, sitting uneasily at the camp table, fussing with the purse of communiqués.

‘Not at all, Caffran. In fact, you’re just in time to join me.’ Caffran hesitated once more, not knowing if this was a joke.

‘I’m serious,’ Gaunt said. ‘You look as hungry as I feel. And I’m sure Brin has cooked up more than enough for two.’

As if on cue, the boy produced two ceramic plates of food – mashed eggs and grilled ham with tough, toasted chunks of wheatbread. Caffran looked at the plate in front of him for a moment as Gaunt tucked into his with relish.

‘Go on, eat up. It’s not every day you get a chance to taste officers’ rations,’ Gaunt said, wolfing down a forkful of eggs.

Caffran nervously picked up his own fork and began to eat. It was the best meal he’d had in sixty days. It reminded him of his days as an apprentice engineer in the wood mills of lost Tanith, back before the Founding and the Loss, of the wholesome suppers served on the long tables of the refectory after last shift. Before long, he was consuming the breakfast with as much gusto as the commissar, who smiled at him appreciatively.

The boy Milo then produced a steaming pot of thick caffeine, and it was time to talk business.

‘So, what do the dispatches tell us this morning?’ Gaunt started.

‘I don’t know, sir,’ Caffran said, pulling out the communiqué purse and dropping it onto the tabletop in front of him. ‘I just carry these things. I never ask what’s in them.’

Gaunt paused for a moment, chewing a mouthful of eggs and ham. He took a long sip of his steaming drink and then reached out for the purse.

Caffran thought to look away as Gaunt unsealed the plastic envelope and read the print-out strips contained within.

‘I’ve been up all night at that thing,’ Gaunt said, gesturing over his shoulder to the green glow of the tactical communication artificer, built into the muddy wall of the command burrow. ‘And it’s told me nothing.’

Gaunt reviewed the dispatches that spilled out of Caffran’s purse. ‘I bet you and the men are wondering how long we’ll be dug into this hell-hole,’ Gaunt said. ‘The truth is, I can’t tell you. This is a war of attrition. We could be here for months.’

Caffran was by now feeling so warm and satisfied by the good meal he had just eaten that the commissar could have told him his mother had been murdered by orks and he wouldn’t have worried much.

‘Sir?’ Milo’s voice was a sudden intruder into the gentle calm.

Gaunt looked up. ‘What is it, Brin?’ he said.

‘I think... that is... I think there’s an attack coming.’

Caffran chuckled. ‘How could you know—’ he began but the commissar cut him off.

‘Somehow, Milo’s sensed each attack so far before it’s come. Each one. Seems he has a gift for anticipating shell-fall. Perhaps it’s his young ears.’ Gaunt crooked a wry grin at Caffran. ‘Do you want to argue, eh?’

Caffran was about to answer when the first wail of shells howled in.

GAUNT LEAPT TO HIS feet, knocking the camp table over. It was the sudden motion rather than the scream of incoming shells which made Caffran leap up in shock. Gaunt was scrabbling for his side-

arm, hanging in its holster on a hook by the steps. He grabbed the speech-horn of the vox-caster set, slung under the racks that held his books.

‘Gaunt to all units! To arms! To arms! Prepare for maximum resistance!’

Caffran didn’t wait for any further instruction. He was already up the steps and banging through the gas curtains as volleys of shells assaulted their trenches. Huge plumes of vaporised mud spat up from the trench head behind him and the narrow gully was full of the yells of suddenly animated guardsmen.

A shell whinnied down low across his position and dug a hole the size of a drop-ship behind the rear breastwork of the trench. Liquid mud drizzled down on him. Caffran pulled his lasgun from its sling and slithered up towards the top of the trench firestep. There was chaos, panic, troopers hurrying in every direction, screaming and shouting.

Was this it? Was this the final moment in the long, drawn-out conflict they had found themselves in? Caffran tried to slide up the side of the trench far enough to get a sight over the lip, across no-man’s land to the enemies’ emplacements which they had been locked into for the last six months. All he could see was a mist of smoke and mud.

There was a crackle of las weapons and several screams. More shells fell. One of them found the centre of a nearby communications trench. Then the screaming became real and immediate. The drizzle that fell on him was no longer water and mud. There were body parts in it.

Caffran cursed and wiped the sight-lens of his lasgun clean of filth. Behind him he heard a shout, a powerful voice that echoed along the traverses of the trench and seemed to shake the duckboards. He looked back to see Commissar Gaunt emerging from his dugout.

Gaunt was dressed now in his full dress uniform and cap, the camo-cloak of his adopted regiment swirling about his shoulders, his face a mask of bellowing rage. In one hand he held his bolt pistol

and in the other his chainsword, which whined and sang in the early morning air.

‘In the name of Tanith! Now they are on us we must fight! Hold the line and hold your fire until they come over the mud wall!’

Caffran felt a rejoicing in his soul. The commissar was with them and they would succeed, no matter the odds. Then something closed down his world with a vibratory shock that blew mud up into the air and seemed to separate his spirit from his body.

The section of trench had taken a direct hit. Dozens of men were dead. Caffran lay stunned in the broken line of duckboards and splattered mud. A hand grabbed him by the shoulder and hauled him up. Blinking, he looked up to see the face of Gaunt. Gaunt looked at him with a solemn, yet inspiring gaze.

‘Sleeping after a good breakfast?’ the commissar enquired of the bewildered trooper.

‘No sir... I... I...’

The crack of lasguns and needle lasers began to whip around them from the armoured loopholes on the trench head. Gaunt wrenched Caffran back to his feet.

‘I think the time has come,’ Gaunt said, ‘and I’d like all of my brave men to be in the line with me when we advance.’

Spitting out grey mud, Caffran laughed. ‘I’m with you, sir,’ he said, ‘from Tanith to wherever we end up.’

Caffran heard the whine of Gaunt’s chainsword as the commissar leapt up the scaling ladder nailed into the trench wall above the firestep and yelled to his men.

‘Men of Tanith! Do you want to live forever?’

Their reply, loud and raucous, was lost in the barrage of shells. But Ibram Gaunt knew what they had said.

Weapons blazing, Gaunt’s Ghosts went over the top and blasted their way towards glory, death or whatever else awaited them in the smoke.

Gaunt's Ghosts: The Founding can be purchased in all better bookstores, Games Workshop and other hobby stores, or direct from this website and GW mail order.

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