

# The Iron Star

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This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this book are fictional, and any resemblance to real people or incidents is purely coincidental.



## I

Under an iron star set in a sky the colour of raw meat, the Ghosts of Tanith made their loyal but weary advance towards...

Dammit. What was the place called? He thought about it for a moment. The *somewhere-or-other bridge*. He was sure the name would come back to him. He looked around for his map, but his eyes were hurting again, and he couldn't find it.

It was a bridge, anyway. Another bridge. Another fething objective. This particular bridge lay at the western tip of... of... the *some such plateau*, on a world called... called *who the feth cares anymore*.

Truth be told, he certainly didn't. It was just another world and another battle.

The Ghosts didn't care either. They simply advanced, loyal but weary, weary but loyal; neither quality first, neither quality last.

They were tired, there was no mistaking that. They toiled along through the mud, under the raw-meat sky, heads low, hearts lower, their banners as limp as their spirits; lonely in life, and lonely in death.

In the distance, across the mire, the black figures gathered to watch them.

During long crusades, Guard regiments could stay on the front line without rotation for years at a time. Such was the size of the Imperium, whole seasons could be lost simply making shift aboard carrier transports from one zone world to the next.

The Ghosts of Tanith had been on front-line deployment for decades, without rotation, since the day their homeworld had blinked out in a hot puff of scatter-light.

He had been petitioning of late for his regiment to be rotated out of the line. He had become increasingly insistent on the subject. The phrase „loyal but weary“ appeared in almost every one of his dispatches to High Command. Late at night, under canvas or in the mud-stink of a dugout, or in the noon heat at a roadside during a rest stop, he worked hard to get the tone of his petitions right. *If it please you, sirs... begging your accommodation on this small matter, my masters...* The Ghosts were not cowards, but they had been pushed hard for too long. They yearned for respite and rotation. They were tired.

He knew he was.

His face was more drawn and lean than ever. These days, he walked with a bone-sore limp. When he washed, on those few, precious occasions when water actually pumped through a trench camp's shower block, he stood under the pitiful rusty trickle, scrubbing lice and dirt from his limbs, and found himself looking down at a body scored and welted by the traces of so many old wounds that he had lost track of their origins. This? Where had he got this? Fortis Binary? And this, this old puckered gouge? Where had he come by that? Monthax? Aexe Cardinal? Vervunhive?

It no longer seemed to matter. These days, it was often a struggle just to remember where he was.

„Are we still on... on *thingumajig?*“ he had asked his adjutant that morning while shaving.

His adjutant, whose name he was sure he knew well, had frowned, thinking the question over.

„*Thingumajig?* Uh... yes. I believe so, sir,“ the adjutant had replied.

The names really weren't of any consequence anymore, the names of cities or continents or worlds. Each one was just a new place to get into, and then get out of again, once the job was done. He'd stopped worrying about the names. He just concentrated on the jobs; loyal but weary, weary but loyal.

Sometimes, he was so tired he even forgot his own name.

He dipped his old cutthroat razor into the chipped bowl, washing off the foam and the residue of shorn bristles. He looked at his reflection in the cracked shaving mirror. Though the reflection didn't seem to have a face at all, he recognised it anyway.

Ibram Gaunt. That was it. Ibram Gaunt.

Of course it was.

## II

His eyes hurt. They hurt at night, when he was working at his latest pleading dispatch by the glow of a lamp, and they hurt by day, under the radioactive glimmer of the iron star. They hurt when he stared out across the mire to look at the black figures gathering to watch them.

The iron star was an ugly thing. It throbbed in the sky like an ingot cooling from the furnace. The sky was marbled black and red, like hung meat. The throb of the star made his head ache and his eyes run. Sometimes, when he dabbed the tears off his face, his fingertips came away red.

## III

A scout came running back along the muddy track. The track was so muddy that it was impassable to wheeled vehicles. The Tanith were up to their shins in the slime. The strange part was that there had been no rain, not a drop of rain since they had made planetfall on *who the feth cares anymore*. Well, none he could remember, anyway.

Things lurked in the mud. If you scraped it back, or dug it away to commence trench work, you risked striking the turret tops of tanks that had been sucked down under the ooze, or exposing the bodies of dead men, pale and sightless.

„There's so much mud,“ he said, watching the scout as he approached. „So much mud, but no rain. Why is that?“

„Don't you know where you are, Ibram?“ asked Medic Curth.

„I don't,“ he smiled. „That's a terrible confession for a commanding officer to make, isn't it?“

She grinned back. Curth was thin, but very pretty. „Under the circumstances, I'll forgive the lapse, Ibram.“

„Good,“ he said, nodding.

„So, where are we?“ he added. „Remind me?“

She leaned down and whispered into his ear.

## IV

A scout came running back along the muddy track. It was Leyr. No, Bonin. No, it was Leyr. „Ten units,“ Leyr reported. „They're dug down behind that stand of trees to the left of the bridge.“

„Well, we've got to get across the bridge,“ Gaunt said.

„Of course we have,“ said Medic Curth.

„This really isn't the time for a medical opinion,“ Gaunt told her.

„Sorry,“ she said, with a deferential nod of her head. She stood back to let some of the senior officers close in around Gaunt.

„The bridge is vital,“ Major Baskevyl said.

„Agreed,“ said Captain Daur.

„No question about it,“ nodded Captains Arcuda and Obel.

„Absolutely vital,“ Commissar Hark concurred. „We have to get across it, or—“

„Or what?“ asked Cadet-Commissar Nahum Ludd. The young man looked nervous. He glanced sidelong at Hark. Commissar Viktor Hark looked daggers at the youngster. „Try to keep up, Ludd,“ he hissed. „We have to get across the bridge before someone dies.“

„Oh,“ said Ludd. „Oh, right.“

„Another ten units,“ said Curth.

„Another ten?“ Gaunt asked. „I thought there were just ten. Just ten, wasn't it, Leyr?“

„Uhm, yes, sir. Ten units,“ said Leyr.

„Just enough to hold us here,“ said Curth.

„We really have to bring this operation to a successful close,“ said the old doctor, Dorden.

Gaunt nodded.

„Of course we do,“ he said. „I want this operation finished by nightfall. Ten, then. Ten. What are we looking at? Regular Gaurist forces or what? Ten units of what?“

„Blood, sir,“ replied Leyr.

„Blood Pact?“

„Yes, sir.“

„Well, that's a tough dance on anybody's card,“ Gaunt said. „May I take a look?“

He hurried up through the mud behind Leyr. The mud was deep, and it kept slowing him down, sucking at his boots, so that he advanced like a man wading through a dream. His heels, deep in the mire, kept knocking against skulls and helmets and the turrets of long-lost armour pieces.

Bonin, Mkoll and Maggs were waiting for them at the turn of the track. They hunkered down together behind a swirl of razorwire.

„How are you holding up, sir?“ Maggs asked him.

„Don't ask him questions, Maggs,“ Mkoll hissed. „We're not here to ask him questions.“

„Sorry,“ said Maggs.

„I'm fine, since you asked, Maggs," said Gaunt. „Why did you ask?"  
Maggs looked awkward.

„It's been a long tour," Bonin said. „You look tired, sir."

„Do I?" Gaunt responded.

„Just... Just want to make sure you're all right," nodded Maggs.

„Don't I look all right?" Gaunt asked.

„You have tears," Maggs began. He pointed to his own cheek. „Tears that look like blood," he added.

„Oh, that keeps happening," Gaunt tutted, wiping his face. „It's this iron star. Don't you feel it too?"

The scouts nodded.

„So, come on," Gaunt said. „I've come all the way up here to see. Show me."

## V

„Ten units of blood," said Mkoll, passing the scope to Gaunt. „There, in the trees, to the left of the bridge."

Gaunt peered through the scope. His eyes hurt. The trees weren't trees at all. They were angular stalks of chrome metal with thin, rod-like branches. The branches supported luminous white blossom, flower heads that glowed like lamp-packs. The trees were standing in a long thicket on a bank of mud that wallowed down into the river below the bridge. There were bloated bodies drifting in the stagnant water of the river. For a moment, Gaunt was afraid that he might be able to name every single one of the dead.

„To the left," Mkoll advised.

Gaunt adjusted his sight. He saw the Blood Pact. Ten units, all right. He could make out crimson spiked helmets, black-iron grotesk masks, and infantry uniforms dyed maroon with blood. They were clambering up the riverbanks, milling like fire-ants, constructing siege platforms along the stinking river to support mortars. He could hear the scrape and hum of their tools.

„Ten units, all right," said Gaunt. „Mkoll?"

„Yes, sir?"

„What's this bridge called again? I forget."

Mkoll hesitated. „It's the... the... *somewhere-or-other-bridge*, sir."

Gaunt laughed. „You don't know either, do you, chief?"

Mkoll laughed back. „So many worlds, so many objectives, sir. What can I tell you? Let me check my maps."

„You do that," said Gaunt. „My eyes hurt."

„That'll be the iron star," said Leyr.

„We have to seal this artery right now," said Curth.

„Seal it?" asked Gaunt.

„Yes," she said. „This artery here."

„You mean the river?" asked Gaunt.

„Uhm... what?"

„You mean the river?" asked Gaunt.

„Of course," she said. „It's vital we tie it off and seal it."

Gaunt nodded. „Well, we've got ten units to handle, but I agree. Mkoll?"

„Oh, we can manage it, sir,“ Mkoll assured him.  
Gaunt nodded. He looked at Curth and frowned.  
„I thought I left you with the command team, medic,“ he said.  
She pulled down her surgical mask and smiled at him. „You did, Ibram, but you know me,“ she said. „If we’re about to get casualties, I need to be up front.“  
„Good. Good thinking,“ he murmured.

## VI

The bridge, the *something-or-other-bridge*, was a dirty, iron monster. It looked as if it had been wrought from metal extracted from the iron star’s heart, and left to cool. It stretched out across the stagnant river on its pilings, ominous and forbidding. The bridge was so long, and the dead river so broad, they couldn’t see the far side. Gaunt wondered if he’d ever get across. It seemed like such a long way, and he was very tired. It felt as if time was running out.

„Is it true, sir? Is time against us?“

Gaunt turned. Kolea, Varl, Domor and Criid had advanced to join him. He was pleased to see them, four of his best officers, four of his best Ghosts.

„What was your question?“ he asked.

„Time, sir,“ said Gol Kolea. „They say time is against us.“

„Ten units of Blood Pact, right on the river here,“ Gaunt replied. „We’ve got to get this artery secure and get across the bridge by nightfall.“

Kolea nodded. Varl and Criid exchanged uneasy looks.

„How are your eyes, sir?“ asked Domor.

Gaunt looked at him. „Sore. They hurt. Thanks for asking.“

*Shoggy* Domor gestured to the bulbous augmetic eyes that had earned him his nickname and smiled.

„I know how it is with eyes,“ he said.

„Of course you do, *Shoggy*,“ Gaunt replied. „It’s just this iron star. It hurts my head.“

„Nobody likes it,“ said Varl.

„Sorry to say, we just have to get on and make the best of this,“ said Gaunt. „So, this artery? This river? How do we seal it? Suggestions?“

„We could burn it,“ said Kolea. „Cauterise it.“

Gaunt nodded. „Bring up the flamers. Hurry back to your companies and prepare to lead them forwards.“

The four of them hesitated.

„What are you waiting for?“ Gaunt asked.

„We wanted to stay with you,“ said Domor.

„We wanted to stay by your side,“ said Varl.

„That’s very loyal,“ Gaunt replied. „Get your Ghosts ready, and I’ll join you on the bridge. Come on, look lively! Do you want to live forever?“

Reluctantly, they backed away. Criid stared at him.

„We don’t want you to die,“ she said.

„That’s enough of that, Criid,“ Curth called out.

## VII

Gaunt stood on the rise above the dead river. The iron star throbbed. His eyes hurt.

He looked at the chrome trees and their luminous blossom. He heard the scrape and hum of the Blood Pact work teams, finishing their defences. He turned.

The black figures were still gathering out across the mire. There were half a dozen of them now: silent, faceless, watching.

„You’ve gone quiet,“ said Curth.

„What?“ he asked.

„You’ve gone quiet,“ she repeated. „Ibram? Say something.“

He sighed.

„It’s those fething figures,“ he said. „Those black figures. They’ve been watching us for a while.“

„What figures?“ Dorden asked.

„Can’t you see them?“ he asked. „There. Out there. Watching us. There was only one to begin with, but there are more now.“

„Ibram?“ said Curth softly. „There’s no one there.“

„Yes, there is. I can see them. Stay here.“

„Ibram?“ Curth said. „Ibram, where are you going?“

„Stay here, Ibram,“ Dorden urged.

„Stay with us,“ said Curth.

„Just a moment,“ he replied. „I’ll be right back. Just give me a moment.“

„Ibram, you can’t go wandering off on your own,“ said Curth. „It’s not safe.“

„Just give me a moment.“

He started to walk, sliding, slipping in the mire, his boots digging deep. He tried to keep sight of the black figures. Behind him, the voices calling out to him faded away.

It was further than he thought. Twice, he tripped over buried helmets and tank hatches, and fell. On both occasions, he lay in the mud for a while, not entirely sure he ever wanted to get up again. He was tired. His eyes hurt.

He staggered on, knee-deep in the wet, red mud. It smelled of rot and death. No surprise there. Battlefield mire often reeked of the blood and viscera that had soaked into it. Over the years, he’d become accustomed to the smell, but this was particularly strong, like an open gut wound or fresh arterial spill.

The black figures didn’t seem to be coming any closer, no matter how hard he toiled towards them. They remained distant, watching.

„Who are you?“ he yelled, but his voice was hoarse and the black figures declined to answer.

## VIII

„Where has he gone?“ Curth asked. „Ibram? Ibram, come back!“

„He’s not responding,“ said Dorden. „We’ve got to bring him back.“

„Ten units!“ Curth yelled. „Now!“

„I don’t think he can hear us,“ said Dorden. „He’s too far away.“

„Someone’s got to bring him back,“ said Curth. „Someone’s got to reach him and bring him back!“ She pulled down her mask and looked around. „Larkin? Over here. On the double!“

## IX

He couldn’t see the black figures anymore. They’d somehow vanished into the mist. He had gone too far and lost his bearings. No-man’s land stretched away in all directions.

*Well, that was stupid, he told himself. I have no idea where I am anymore. I’m lost out here.*

The iron star was the only constant. He looked up at it, ignoring the pain in his eyes. Perhaps he could take a bearing off it and find his way back. He couldn’t even hear Curth and Dorden anymore.

He was so tired. He sat down in the mud and wiped his eyes. His hands became wet with blood. So stupid to have wandered so far.

He thought about lying down and taking a nap. His head would be clearer after a nap. Just a quick nap. Just a moment to rest his eyes.

He looked up. The black figures stood around him, silent and grim. Mist fumed around them, battlefield vapour. The figures gazed down at him from under their hoods.

He rose to his feet, aching, unsteady.

„Who are you?“ he asked.

None of them replied.

„Who the feth are you and why are you watching me?“ he demanded.

The figures remained silent.

He lunged forward and pulled at the nearest figure’s cowl, trying to see its face.

„Who are you?“ he yelled.

There was a loud crack, and the figure’s head exploded in a clap of light. Gaunt turned.

„What are you doing all the way out here, sir?“ Larkin asked, lowering his long-las.

„I...“ Gaunt began.

He turned back. The figures had vanished again.

„Did you see them?“ he asked Larkin.

Larkin was quietly reloading his piece.

„Ominous black figures, gathering around a battlefield and waiting for slaughter to begin, you mean, sir?“ he asked.

„Yes. Yes!“

„I see ‘em all the time,“ said Larkin, slapping his next hot-shot load in place, „but I’m not the most reliable witness, am I?“

„You’ve got the best eye I’ve ever known, Larks,“ replied Gaunt.

„Maybe. Through a scope, maybe. But my brain, it’s wired funny. I see all sorts of feth. I’m surprised at you, though.“

„What do you mean?“ asked Gaunt.



„You? Jumping at shadows? Going off by yourself into feth knows where?“ Larkin grinned. „You were always the level-headed one. More even than Mkoll or Daur or Rawne. You always kept it together.“

„I still am, Larks,“ said Gaunt. „But I saw them. The black figures. You saw them too. You put a round through one of their skulls!“

Larkin shook his head. „I fired a warning shot to get your attention. You were floundering around out here in the mud, yelling at no one like a total idiot.“

„Was I?“

Larkin nodded. „It wasn't a good look. It didn't inspire much confidence. Pardon me for saying so, sir.“

Gaunt sat down in the mud again, heavily.

„I'm just so tired, Larks,“ he said. „You know? So tired. We've been on the line too long. I don't know how much longer I can do this.“

„Longer than the rest of us, I trust,“ smiled Larkin, „or we're all fethed.“

Gaunt looked up at his loyal master marksman. „Larkin,“ he said. „I see things. I keep seeing things. Worse than that, there are things I don't see. I know they're there, but I don't see them.“

„Your eyes, is it?“ asked Larkin.

„Yes. They hurt.“

„That's no surprise, seeing as what they did to you.“

„What? What does that mean?“ asked Gaunt.

„Nothing. Forget I said it,“ said Larkin.

„Who did what to me?“ Gaunt asked.

Larkin shook his head. „You've seen a lot, that's all I'm saying, sir. In your career, you've seen a lot of stuff, more than many men could stand seeing in a lifetime. You've seen destruction. You've seen death. You've seen friends and comrades perish right in front of you.“

„I have. I really have,“ said Gaunt.

„Let's get you back to the line, shall we?“ Larkin said, offering Gaunt his hand.

„You can see the way?“ asked Gaunt.

„Of course, I'm Tanith. I may not be a scout, but I've got the Tanith instinct. Follow me. Let's get you out of here before the black figures come back.“

Gaunt frowned. „I thought you said there weren't any black figures?“

Larkin shrugged. „Just because I see 'em all the time, doesn't mean they're real. Come on.“

## X

They trudged back towards the Ghost lines under the iron star.

„I'm tired, Larks,“ Gaunt said, after a while. „Let me rest for a moment.“

„Not here,“ Larkin replied, „it's not safe. Keep going. You can rest when we reach the lines.“

„I've got to stop,“ said Gaunt, „just for a moment. Let me stop for a moment and close my eyes.“

## XI

„I brought him back as far as I could,“ said Larkin sadly. „He doesn't want to come any further.“

„He's got to,“ replied Curth. „He's just got to.“

„He's not listening to me anymore,“ said Larkin. „He's just stopped.“

## XII

Sometimes, when he was able to steal an hour to sleep, stretched out in a habitent, or curled up on a rotting bunk in a dug-out, he dreamed of a world called Jago. The dreams were powerful, and full of miserable and lingering pain.

Given that he had stopped remembering, or even caring to remember, the names of the places he and the Ghosts had toiled through, loyal and weary, weary and loyal, he wondered why Jago in particular had remained in his memory and his dreams.

It had been a dry, dusty, wind-blown place. The dust had seeped into everything, and the wind had made a sound like air singing through the openings of skulls whose tops had been sawn off. Dry and dead, that was Jago. Dry and dead, and not oozing with mud and humid like... like *who the feth cares anymore*.

He had other dreams, sometimes. An old man called Boniface sometimes quizzed him about theology and philosophy in an old library. The old man, scarred and mutilated beyond belief, sat in a brass chair. In the dream, Gaunt would ask Boniface about his father, and the old man would refuse to reply.

Another dream involved someone called Uncle Dercius. Uncle Dercius would arrive unexpectedly. Gaunt would be playing with a carved wooden frigate on the sundecks, and would look up in glee as Uncle Dercius walked in. Uncle Dercius had a strange look on his face. He had a gift for Ibram. It was a signet ring.

In a different dream, someone called Colm Corbec was waiting for him in a woodland glade. Tall, bulky, bearded, Corbec was dressed in Tanith black, and smiled when Gaunt approached. Gaunt could smell the resin sap of nalwood. He knew Corbec was the greatest friend he'd ever had, and the greatest friend he'd ever lost.

Another dream, ebbing from some memory of a hive city, was filled by Merity Chass, of the noble House Chass. She was young and beautiful, and became even more beautiful when her dress slid away. Her voice was as soft as her skin. She said...

## XIII

„For Throne's sake, wake up!“

Gaunt started. Astonishingly, he had actually been dozing off. That had never happened before, not in three decades of soldiering, *I must be getting weary. Loyal but weary.*

„Don't fret, Rawne,“ Gaunt told his number two. „I'm right here. Just resting my eyes.“

„It's Curth, Ibram.“

„Oh. Yes, of course.“

„You were a long way away from me then.“

„I'm just tired, Curth. Just napping for a moment.“

„Try to stay with us. We've got to close this artery and cross the bridge.“

„Before nightfall.“

„Exactly,“ she replied.

„Let's get this done, then,“ he said. „I want to talk to the flammers.“

## XIV

The flame troopers gathered around him. Brostin, Dremmond, Lubba, Lyse, Nitorri and the rest. They stank of promethium fuel, their stock in trade.

„Where the Throne are your flammers?“ Gaunt asked.

„We left them outside,“ said Lubba.

„Outside?“ Gaunt asked.

„Lubba meant back on the track over there, sir,“ Dremmond said quickly. He nudged Lubba with a heavy, grubby arm. „Idiot.“

„Our tanks are being topped up just now,“ said Brostin, with a broad grin. „We're all ready to go. You give the word.“

„You understand the objectives?“ asked Gaunt.

„Why don't you run through them, just for us?“ Dremmond suggested.

„Haven't the company leaders briefed you?“ asked Gaunt.

„Of course they have,“ said Brostin.

„Immaculately,“ said Lyse.

„We just, uhm, like to hear it from you in person, sir,“ said Brostin.

Gaunt chuckled. „Very well. We have to get across this bridge by nightfall. Ten units of blood. Blood Pact. You've got to cauterise this artery right now.“

„Artery?“ asked Lubba.

„This river.“ Lubba nodded.

„Not a problem,“ said Brostin. He took out a lho-stick.

„Not here!“ Curth called out.

„I'm not going to light it, doc,“ Brostin protested.

„They'd see the spark,“ said Gaunt.

„Who's that, sir?“ asked Brostin, sucking on his un-lit lho-stick.

„The Blood Pact down on the river.“

„Oh, absolutely,“ Brostin replied. „That's why I'm being careful. We're ready to go as soon as you want.“

„Then get to it,“ said Gaunt. „And Brostin?“

„Sir?“

„Say hello to Mister Yellow for me.“

## XV

The iron star throbbed. The bridge waited. It seemed all too close to nightfall.

Gaunt adjusted his cap, brim first, checked the load of his bolt pistol, and drew out his power sword, the famous blade of Hieronymo Sondar. It purred as he switched it on.

He rose up, the mud squelching around his boots.

„First and Only!“ he yelled.

Whistles blew, and line officers called out orders for readiness. „Straight silver!“ Gaunt instructed. Clicks and clatters sounded down the Ghost formation as the Tanith fixed their warknives to their bayonet lugs.

„Flamers advance!“ Gaunt called.

The flame-troopers climbed up out of the forward dug-outs they'd crawled to. As they rose, their tanks thumped, and spears of liquid flame spat down across the river's edge. On their hastily constructed siege platforms, the Blood Pact troopers screamed as inferno engulfed them.

Mortar charges, carried over the dead river on pontoons, began to catch off and explode. Bodies and fragments of splintered wood were hurled up into the air on ferocious spurts of fire.

„Advance!“ Gaunt ordered, and the line officers repeated the call. He began running. Sword raised, he slipped and slithered in the mire. He heard the Ghosts behind him, the crack and fizzle of lasrifles, the roar of voices.

Enemy fire began to whip his way. It was so bright and quick, it hurt his eyes.

„Keep on them!“ he yelled.

„Steady, Ibram,“ Curth warned.

„Get into cover, medicae!“ he shouted at her.

„I'm staying right with you,“ Curth whispered.

He ploughed on into the billowing smoke. The air smelled of fyceline, blood and slime. Stray shells whumped in and kicked up mud that splattered across him. Blast concussions made the smoke eddy and swirl in curious patterns, like ripples on water. The noise was overwhelming.

He saw shapes moving towards him in the smoke ahead. Blood Pact troopers loomed into view, charging up from the river to meet them. Feral sounds and inhuman heresies issued from the screaming mouth-slits of their iron masks.

Grim human trophies, like finger bones and ears, jangled from their webbing and their munition belts.

Some of the Blood Pact carried lasrifles, with bayonets fixed. Others brandished spears or billhooks, or spiked hammers made for trench fighting. Their howls rose in intensity as they caught their first glimpse of the Imperial troops.

„Into them, Break their backs,“ Gaunt shouted. „The Emperor Protects!“

He didn't falter in his stride. If anything, he ran faster, raising his bolt pistol to shoot, swinging his sword back. For a beautiful moment, the weariness left him. It just lifted off him. He felt as if he could take on the Archenemy single-handed. He felt the way he had done as a young man, with the whole galaxy before him.

He fired two shots and knocked down a pair of charging Blood Pact troopers, who went over as if they had been demolished by wrecking balls.

Then he was in amongst the rest. He swung the power sword, and the blade went clean through a throat. A billhook sang towards his face, and he chopped it away, and then drove the sword, point-first, through the billhook owner's torso. Shapes whirled around him. This was the killing time—close combat, face to face, without quarter or compunction. Gaunt had tangled with the Archon's Blood Pact often enough to know that they fought like wolves, and seldom relented. Many were hard-bred Imperial Guardsmen, who had defected, or who had been seduced away from the power of the Throne by the perversions of Chaos. The Blood Pact was one of the few forces in the Archenemy's host with proper military training and discipline.

Ghosts slammed into the brawl around him, black shapes stabbing with glittering silver bayonets. Las weapons went off point blank, thumping bodies off their feet into the mire. Figures wrestled and grappled.

Gaunt shot another Blood Pact trooper, who was charging at him with a spear, and then ducked as a trench-mace came down to crush his skull. He kicked out the legs of the trooper with the mace and, as the man fell, Gaunt cleaved his sword through his shoulder blades and spine. Another came close, at Gaunt's elbow, and Gaunt made a quick back-turn and rammed the pommel and grip of his sword into the man's throat. The Blood Pact trooper stumbled backwards, choking, and Gaunt finished his work with a fencing master's thrust. Two more hurled themselves at him. A rusty bayonet grazed Gaunt's arm, ripping the sleeve of his stormcoat. He fired wildly, instinctively and, though wild, the bolt round blew a leg off at the hip. The other enemy trooper swung his billhook down, but Gaunt blocked it with his sword. The powered blade cut the billhook in half. Gaunt sliced his sword-arm backwards, and ran the blade in a slash across the man's chest. Blood exploded from the massive wound. The trooper dropped to his knees, masked face tilted up at the sky, and Gaunt took his head off.

„Tell your heathen masters the Ghosts have come for them!“ he yelled into the darkness.

Las bolts rained down through the smoke cover like incandescent drizzle, and made sucking, sizzling punctures in the mire. Gaunt heard the rasp and belch of flamers from nearby. Further off, mortars were grunting like bullfrogs at the river's edge, and autocannons were rattling like infernal mill engines.

Gaunt looked around, trying to assess the fight, but the smoke was shrouding everything. All he could see was blurred figures mobbing in the half-light. Someone lobbed a star-shell into the sky, where it wobbled and bobbed like a second, brighter iron star, but it did nothing to improve visibility.

His blood was up. As he faced down and killed three more Archenemy troopers, Gaunt recognised the firry in his heart. It was the old fury, a courage and a determination he had begun to fear he'd lost. These last few years, it had started to feel as though its fire had died out, leaving nothing in his soul but dull embers.

Some gust of passion had breathed upon those coals and rekindled the flames. With a measure of sadness, Gaunt realised that he only ever felt decently human when he was locked in the madhouse of battle. His dead soul blazed, and his dull limbs cast off their aches and pains. His mind became clear. His life, the very essence of his life as an Imperial soldier, was here, vital and vibrant in the insanity of combat.

Only on the razor-edge of life and death could he feel alive. Only in death could he live.

A Blood Pact officer, an etogaur, lunged out of the cinder-smog. He was a massive beast, with corded muscle bulging under his blood-stained coat. His grotesk was dirty gold. His huge greatsword was running with Imperial gore.

The etogaur growled as he looked around for another Guardsman to butcher.

„Over here, you son of a gak,“ Gaunt roared.

## **XVI**

Ana Curth bent over her patient. Battlefield medicine was not a precise art. Her scrubs were smeared with blood.

„I don't understand,“ she said. „His vitals are bright and strong, but he seems to be slipping away.“

Dorden put his hand on her shoulder. „We've done all we can.“

„No.“

„Ana, we have hundreds of casualties to treat. Perhaps—“

„No,“ she said, emphatically. „I'm not going to give up.“

„Look at his wounds,“ Dorden said, nodding down at the stricken patient. „The Blood Pact has done its work as brutally as ever.“

„There's still a chance,“ she said, reaching for a clean scalpel. „There's always a chance.“

## **XVII**

The etogaur uttered some abominable battle-cry, and expertly whirled his greatsword around his head and shoulders in a display of strength. It was a powered blade, and its gleaming length crackled with indigo sparks, like thread veins of electricity.

Gaunt's bolt pistol was spent. There was no time to reload. That suited him fine. He wanted this to be sword work.

The etogaur rushed him. Gaunt raised the sword of Hieronymo Sondar to parry the first swing, and managed to do so, but the sheer power of the heavy blade's impact jarred his wrist and forced him to brace his stance. The etogaur was fast. He evidently knew sword-play, and he revealed a master's finesse, even though he was wielding a monstrous, heavy blade designed for wholesale slaughter rather than duelling.

Gaunt blocked three more quick blows, turning his sword with a dextrous touch. The etogaur was using the sheer weight of his blade for momentum, swinging each blow into the next, changing his grip on the double-handed pommel to swoop and turn the greatsword around his body for maximum kill power.

The etogaur brought the greatsword around in a bodyline cut. Gaunt stopped it dead with a flat-blade parry, and then drove back, robbing the etogaur of swing momentum. With brute force, the etogaur hefted up his blade, and tried

to swing again. His sword was twice as long as Gaunt's. He had reach. He had power.

His boots sloshing in the mire, Gaunt out-paced him, and turned around his left flank. The etogaur tried to turn, but Gaunt drove in a slice that the etogaur barely parried away. He was wrong-footed, unbalanced.

As the etogaur tried to regain his poise and bring his greatsword up, Gaunt ripped his sword in. The weight of the blade cut through the greatsword's grip. It cut through the etogaur's right wrist, and severed all the digits of his left hand.

The etogaur uttered a bark of disbelief. He took a step backwards, blood squirting from his wrist stump and his dismembered hand. He stared at Gaunt through the eye-slits of his dirty gold mask, awaiting the finishing stroke.

Gaunt aimed his sword at the etogaur, tip first. „Run,“ he said. „Run and tell them. The Ghosts of Tanith have come, and they will kill you all.“

The etogaur began to howl. He turned and stumbled away into the smoke, bleating out his distress and his terror.

Gaunt allowed himself a smile. He could feel tears of blood on his face.

Turning, he saw a Ghost nearby, beset by two Blood Pact troopers. He hurled himself into the brawl, and severed the spine of one of the Archenemy warriors with his sword. The beleaguered Ghost used the advantage to lance the other Blood Pact marauder with his bayonet.

„Are you in one piece?“ Gaunt asked as the Ghost yanked his blade out of the corpse.

„I'm all right, sir,“ the Ghost replied. Gaunt realised that it was Beltayn, his adjutant.

„Good to see you, Bel. How're you holding up?“

„This is a pretty bad fix, sir, isn't it?“ said Beltayn. His face was ash-white.

„I'll be fine, Bel.“

„I think, sir...“

„What?“

„Something's awry.“

Gaunt laughed and gestured at the smoke, flames and corpses around them. „You figured that out all by yourself, did you?“

Beltayn shook his head.

„I mean, I've heard things on the vox,“ he said. „We've broken their spirit here, but it sounds like they've got reinforcements moving in on our flank.“

„More Blood Pact?“

„No, sir. From the vox-bursts, it sounds like the Sons of Sek.“

Gaunt felt a chill. The Blood Pact were daemons enough. Their cohorts had been raised by the Archon with the specific intention of matching the Imperial Guard in the Sabbat Worlds theatre. Anakwanar Sek was the Archon's most fearsome lieutenant commander. Inspired by the example of the Blood Pact, Sek had developed his own elite force. Gaunt had seen the Sons at work on... where was it... Gereon, that was it, Gereon. The Sons of Sek had appeared to be even more formidable than the Blood Pact. The Sons had an appetite for atrocity. The Ghosts had yet to enjoy the dubious pleasure of meeting them in full combat.

„Where's Rawne?“ asked Gaunt.

„I don't know, sir,“ Beltayn replied.

„Baskevyl, then? Daur? Kolea?“

„I can't get them on the vox.“

„Get me Corbec, at least!“

Beltayn looked at him oddly.

„What?“ asked Gaunt.

„Colonel Corbec, sir... he's been dead these last five years.“

Gaunt paused. „Of course he has. Of course he has...“

„Sir?“

„Bel, we have to get this bridge secured before nightfall.“ Beltayn looked up at the smoke cover overhead. „And when will that be, do you think?“

„I don't know. We just have to get the bridge secured.“

„I don't even know where the bridge is anymore,“ said Beltayn.

„It's over that way,“ Gaunt replied, gesturing over his left shoulder. „It's close. Bel, I need you to run back and rally the main force. I need you to find Rawne or Kolea and get them ready. Let them know we're about to be flanked by the Sons. Tell them I'm gathering up the forward elements and heading for the bridge.“

„Is that wise, sir?“ asked Beltayn.

„The bridge is our objective, Beltayn. We need to secure it. Tell Rawne I'm forming up every Ghost I can find and leading them towards the bridge approach. He's got to cover our arses from a flank attack. Come on, Bel. It's not rocket science!“

Beltayn nodded. He took up his las and turned to go. Then he paused, and offered Gaunt his hand.

„Bel?“

„In case we don't meet again, sir,“ said Beltayn. „I want you to know that it's been an honour to serve.“

Gaunt took Beltayn's hand. „It's been an honour to serve with you, Dughan. But we will meet again.“

„We'd better,“ said Beltayn, and ran off. Gaunt watched until his adjutant had vanished into the shrouding smoke. He turned, and continued to advance.

Blood Pact bodies littered the mud, some already sinking into its fathomless embrace. Gaunt thought he'd find Ghost platoons ahead, but there was no sign of them. They'd pushed in beside him. Where the feth had they vanished to?

He reloaded his bolt pistol as he trudged forwards. He could smell the river. The spinning, twisting smoke was eclipsing the sky. All sounds and signs of fighting had abated.

His eyes started to hurt again. He couldn't see far in the damned smoke.

Then he saw Nessa.

## **XVIII**

Nessa Bourah was one of his finest snipers. She'd served through the Vervunhive siege as part of the people's resistance, and joined the Ghosts at liberation.

Nessa had taken up a shooting pitch in a muddy foxhole on the river bank, and was scoping for a target. Saturation bombing during the battle of Vervunhive had rendered her profoundly deaf. Without a spotter, she was entirely unaware of the Blood Pact trooper closing in behind her, machete raised.



Gaunt raised his bolt pistol, sighted it, and blew the Blood Pacter's head off. Nessa jumped in surprise as the body crashed down beside her. She turned and raised her long-las.

*It's me*, Gaunt signed.

Nessa lowered her rifle.

„You took me by surprise,“ she said, in her delicious, slightly nasal accent.

„Not as much as he would have,“ Gaunt suggested.

She touched his chin, and turned his face towards her.

„So I can see,“ she demanded. „So I can see your mouth!“

*Sorry*, he signed.

He got down in the foxhole beside her, making sure she could see his face.

„Where are the others?“ he asked.

Nessa shook her head. „I haven't seen anyone. It's quiet.“

„Something's wrong,“ he said.

„What?“

*Something's wrong*, he signed. He'd made a point of learning the art after Vervunhive. Nessa wasn't the only deaf trooper in his regiment. Many of them, like Nessa, had eschewed augmetics, favouring the strength of silence in war.

„We should be very quiet,“ she agreed.

*If we should be quiet, why aren't you signing to me?* he signed.

„I'm deaf. I can read your signing,“ she said. „How would you read mine?“

„I don't understand,“ he said.

Nessa reached out a hand and ran her finger along his cheek, circling his right eye.

„I did like your eyes so very much,“ she said. „They were so strong. I suppose they can be replaced.“

„Replaced? What are you talking about?“

„They took your eyes, sir. Out in the wastelands of Jago, they took your eyes.“

„What are you talking about?“

She shrank back. „I'm sorry,“ she said. „I thought you knew.“

„Knew what? No one's taken my eyes. I can see you. Nessa, I can see you!“

„Just like I can hear you,“ she replied. „It's funny, that, isn't it?“

„Nessa—“

„I'm sorry. I'm glad you can see me. I really am.“

„I don't understand,“ he said. His eyes had started to hurt again. The iron star was burning down through the smoke.

*You're blind and I'm deaf*, she signed. *What a great partnership. I just wish I could stay here with you.*

„Nessa?“ he cried. „Nessa?“

Gaunt was alone in the foxhole. Nessa had gone. Her long-las and ammo belt lay beside him, as if she'd just been there. He could still smell her.

„I'm not blind,“ he told nobody. „I'm not blind. I can see this. I can see the river. I can see the bridge.“

The bridge seemed as far away as ever. As the smoke slowly cleared and dusk settled, Gaunt watched the bridge from the foxhole cover. He studied it through Nessa's scope. Where had she gone? She'd been right there. She'd been right—

He saw movement down by the bridge. He adjusted the scope and, by the evil light of the iron star, saw the black figures gathering at the mouth of the bridge. There were a dozen of them. They were watching him.

He took up the long-las, checked its load, and wondered about his aim. Could he hit one of them at this range? Nessa could, Larks too, but Gaunt was not a trained marksman. Maybe he could place a shot amongst them and scare them off.

They were beginning to annoy him. What did they want? Did they want him? Had they come for him? He wasn't having that.

He lowered the rifle. There was no point wasting ammo. He was going to need it. He could hear drums, drums beating the skewed, alien tempos of the Sons of Sek.

There was going to be a great deal more bloodshed before the night was out. He wondered if he had the strength to face it. He was so tired. His eyes hurt.

*What had Nessa meant? Who took my eyes?*

His body ached. Sleep seemed like such a perfect release. Just for a minute, perhaps? A few minutes' sleep.

He closed his eyes.

## XX

There was a long, squealing tone, a warning note.

„Flatline!“ Dorden cried.

„Paddles!“ Curth yelled, tears in her eyes.

„It's no good—“

„Paddles! Seventy mil adrenolec shunt! Another ten units!“

The note whined on.

„Ana, it's a flatline. There's no purpose in prolonging—“

„Give me the fething paddles now!“ she ordered.

## XXI

He did not dream. There was only darkness. It was a lonely place. He couldn't even sense the iron star anymore. There was just a sound, a persistent whining note. It cut through his empty, dreamless darkness, droning, squealing, monotonous.

He woke with a start, slammed awake as if by some vast shock. The whining note quit, and was replaced by the thump of the enemy drums.

He was still in the foxhole. The world was cast in twilight. *Who the feth cares anymore* was just minutes away from nightfall.

Something had woken him. Some kind of contact had brought him back from the darkness of his sleep.

„This'll never do,“ a voice said.

He sat up. „Who’s there?“

„Going to sleep on the job? You’d have given us double RIP duties if you’d caught us doing that,“ another voice chuckled.

„Who’s there?“ Gaunt demanded, reaching for his bolt pistol. „I can’t see you! Who’s there?“

„Of course you can’t see us,“ said a third voice. It was very flat and artificial, and carried no emphasis or emotion. It sounded sarcastic. „You can’t see anything.“

„But it’s all right, sir,“ said a fourth voice, a young voice. „We can see you.“

„So you’re safe,“ said the first voice. It was a rich, genial, reassuring voice. „For now, anyway.“

„Gotta get moving, mind,“ said the flat sarcastic voice. „Can’t stay here forever.“

„And we can only look after you for a little while,“ said the second, chuckling voice.

Gaunt rose to his feet, swinging the bolt pistol around blindly. „Show yourselves!“

„Well, if it makes it easier for you,“ sighed the first voice.

Gaunt blinked. Four men were suddenly visible, crouching around the foxhole, staring in at him. They were Ghosts, in black Ghost kit, their weapons loose but ready in their hands.

„Better?“ asked their bearded leader.

„Corbec?“ Gaunt whispered.

„Hello, ‘bram,“ said Colm Corbec with a grin. „Been a while. Looks like you’ve been through the fething wars.“

„Colm, it’s good to see you,“ said Gaunt, lowering his pistol. „I thought I was alone out here. What are our strengths? How many other Ghost platoons made it this far?“

Corbec smiled and shook his head. He glanced at his companions. „Just the five of us. We’ll have to make do, won’t we, lads?“

The other three nodded.

„It’s good to see you,“ Gaunt repeated.

„You’re not seeing us,“ said the owner of the monotone voice. „You’re not seeing anything. They took out your eyes.“

„Hush your drone, Feygor,“ said Corbec.

„He doesn’t understand.“ Feygor shrugged.

„But it is good to see you again, sir,“ said the biggest of the four Ghosts with a chuckle. „Maybe we should toast to old times with a sip of sacra?“

„We need clear heads just now, Bragg,“ said Corbec. „We’ve got to get to the bridge.“

„Well, it was just a thought,“ said Try Again Bragg.

„There’s no point us trying to get to the bridge,“ said Gaunt. „There are only five of us. What good would that do?“

„It’s what matters,“ said the youngest Ghost. „It’s why we’re here.“

„I don’t understand, Caff,“ said Gaunt.

„Let’s just get over the bridge, sir,“ said Caffran. „Then you’ll understand everything.“

## XXII

They left the safety of the foxhole and began to track their way down towards the bridge. The river was a dead thing, full of corpses. The ruins of the Blood Pact platforms smouldered in the evening haze. Gaunt could still hear the drums of the Sons of Sek, pounding like an irregular heartbeat.

Caffran took point, sweeping ahead with his lasrifle. The boy was good, sharp, a potential scout. Gaunt tried to remember why he hadn't promoted Caffran to Mkoll's unit. It was a clear oversight. Gaunt must have had a good reason not to send the boy on.

Corbec and Feygor flanked Gaunt, weapons ready. Corbec was humming an old Tanith wood-song. The sound of it made Gaunt feel much more comfortable. Just like the old days. Corbec would hum along to Milo's pipes. Why didn't that happen anymore? Where had Corbec been, these last few combat tours?

Gaunt remembered Beltayn saying something about Corbec. He couldn't quite recall what it was.

Feygor was quiet. Everything he said sounded like a petulant sarcastic jibe thanks to his artificial larynx. He kept his comments to himself.

Try brought up the rear, lugging his twin autocannons.

„Just like old times, huh?“ he said.

„Noise discipline!“ Corbec hissed.

„Yeah, just like old times then,“ said Bragg.

Caffran held up a hand for full stop.

They halted.

Gaunt readied his pistol and his sword. He'd wanted to bring Nessa's long-las, but Corbec had told him Nessa might want it back and he should leave it be.

„Caff?“ Gaunt called.

*Movement*, Caffran signed.

„Great,“ said Feygor. This time, his sarcasm was intentional.

The drumming had got louder and faster, like a racing heart.

„What have we got, Caff?“ asked Corbec softly, crawling forwards.

„Sons of Sek between us and the bridge,“ Caffran reported. „Dozens of them.“

„What about the watchers?“ asked Gaunt.

„The what?“ asked Feygor.

„The watchers in black,“ said Gaunt.

„Oh, them,“ said Bragg. "They're just your imagination, they are.“

„What?“ asked Gaunt.

„Everyone shut up,“ said Corbec. „We're about to wade into the deep and stinky. Everyone locked? Everyone loaded?“

„Yes, sir,“ the three Ghosts replied.

„Ibram?“

Gaunt nodded. „I'm ready, Colm. Who wants to live forever?“

„Well, you, I hope,“ said Corbec. „For a while, at least. That's the whole point of this.“

Gaunt looked at him.

„You've got to live, Ibram,“ said Corbec. „You've just got to. That's the way of it. You're important, more important than you can imagine. You and the

Ghosts, it's going to be down to you. The whole Crusade depends on you. Win or lose, it's going to be down to you in the end."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Colm," Gaunt said.

"I know you don't," said Corbec, "but you will."

"You said *me and the Ghosts*," said Gaunt. "You're Ghosts too."

"Yes, we are," said Bragg. "We really are."

"Let's do this, shall we, gents?" Corbec suggested. "On three. One, two..."

## XXIII

The Sons of Sek were the hardest bastards Gaunt had ever encountered on the field of war. Chasing for the bridge, the five Ghosts ploughed into them. The fight turned to hell. It wasn't exhilarating. The old fury didn't re-light.

It was a bloody, butchering slog. It was war at its darkest and most tenacious.

The Sons came at them from all sides in the twilight. Drumming was the only sound Gaunt could hear. Feygor, Caffran and Corbec slammed off shots as they came in, and Bragg followed on, blasting with his cannons. He mowed them down. The Sons of Sek were so many, he didn't have to try again. Gaunt's sword swung and struck. He emptied his bolt pistol four times.

He thought they would be overwhelmed. He thought they weren't going to make it, but they were fast, and they were good, and they had surprise on their side, despite the incredible ferocity of the Sons of Sek.

They were Ghosts. They were five of the best Guardsmen the Imperium had ever produced.

They covered one another. They checked and turned with expertise. They watched the flanks, they plastered the angles, they fired in turns to stagger reloading. At any given point in the action at least three of them were shooting.

They cut through the Sons like an elite strike force, because they were an elite strike force. They were immortals. They were gods of war.

They reached the bridge.

## XXIV

"On you go, then," said Corbec.

"We all go across," said Gaunt. He turned to look at the four Ghosts. They were standing, weapons ready, in a semi-circle behind him, facing the bridge.

"That's not how it works," said Feygor.

"We can't cross the bridge," said Caffran.

"But you've got to," said Bragg.

"I'm not going to leave you here," said Gaunt.

"That's just how it goes," said Corbec. "You go on alone from here. You cross the bridge. We stay on this side."

"Why?"

„Because we have to,“ said Corbec. „We can't cross over, but you can. Now go on with you. Don't make us wish we hadn't made this effort. Cross the fething bridge, 'bram. Cross it.“

„But—“

„Cross it!“ snapped Bragg.

„You'll see us again soon enough, sir,“ said Caffran. „Unless you do end up living for ever,“ said Feygor.

Gaunt turned and looked at the bridge. It was vast and empty and iron, and it seemed to stretch away as far as he could see.

„I don't know,“ he said. „I'm tired. My eyes hurt. I don't know if I can make it all that way.“

„You have to,“ said Caffran. „They're waiting for you on the other side.“

„I'm so tired, Caff,“ Gaunt said. „Can't I stay here with you?“

„Get on with you!“ Corbec growled.

„I don't think I can make it all the way,“ said Gaunt.

„We can't come with you,“ said Corbec. „We can't carry you over there. Someone else will have to help you.“

„Colm?“ Gaunt said, sinking to the ground.

„See you in another life, all right?“ said Corbec.

Gaunt was alone.

## XXV

„Get up,“ said Rawne.

Gaunt looked up. „Eli?“

„Get up, you fether. Get up.“

„Eli?“

Rawne peered down at him. „Don't you dare do this to me, Gaunt. If anyone's going to finish you, it's going to be me. Don't you dare do this.“

Gaunt clambered to his feet. „I don't like your tone, Major Rawne.“

„Oh, bite me,“ said Rawne. „Come on, you bastard. You're coming back with us.“

„Us?“ murmured Gaunt.

„Seyadhe true, soule,“ said Eszrah ap Niht. Ezra and Rawne scooped Gaunt up between them and began to walk him across the bridge.

„It's so far,“ muttered Gaunt. „And the Sons of Sek... the Sons of Sek are right behind us.“

„The Sons of Sek can eat my arse,“ said Rawne. „You're coming home with us. Throne, you weigh a ton. Try using your legs! Help me out!“

„I'm trying, Rawne. My eyes hurt so much.“

„They put your eyes out in the wastelands of Jago,“ said Rawne. „The Blood Pact torturers virtually hacked you to pieces. Curth and Dorden, they've been fighting to patch you together again. You'll get new eyes. Augmetics. You'll get grafts and organ bionics. Just keep walking.“

„Jago?“ Gaunt whispered. He began to remember.

„Oh, don't be such a pussy, Gaunt! I've come all this way for you!“ Rawne tried to check his temper. „Me. Me, for Throne's sake. Don't you dare die on me now!“

„I...“ Gaunt said, feeling himself almost dragged along by Rawne and the Nihtgane. „I remember. The iron star.“

„The what?“ asked Rawne.

„The iron star,“ Gaunt replied. „A heated poker, a branding iron, stabbing into my eyes, burning them out, taking them. Oh, Throne.“

„Stay with me, Ibram! We’re almost there!“

„Histye, soule,“ whispered Eszrah ap Niht. „Life, it bekkons.“

## XXVI

The watchers in black were waiting for them at the far end of the bridge.

„Give him over to us,“ one said.

„Yeah, feth you,“ Rawne replied, struggling to hold Gaunt upright. „Feth you very much!“

„He’s gone too far,“ said the leader of the black figures. „The poor, poor boy. He’s seen enough. Let him sleep now. Let him rest. We’ll take care of him. Don’t eke out his agony. Don’t force him to come back into a world that he hates.“

„Get out of our way,“ said Rawne.

„Ibram’s at his end. It would be a mercy,“ said the leader of the black figures. „We’ll take good care of him, Eli. Trust us. We’ll nurse him into the darkness. It’s what we do.“

He lowered his cowl. It was Zweil. Around him, the other ayatani priests pulled back their hoods.

„Come on, Eli,“ Zweil said. „He’s done enough. Let him rest. Let us sing him to sleep. Let us anoint his body and send him off to the final rest. He deserves it. He deserves it. His war is done.“

Slumped between Eszrah and Rawne, Gaunt slowly looked up.

„Father,“ he said, blood dribbling from his gutted eye sockets, „I thank you for your compassion. I really do. Rest is so tempting. It’s so very, very tempting. But I don’t think I’m done yet.“

Zweil sighed. „I was only trying to help.“

„Then don’t help me die, father,“ Gaunt said. „Help me live.“

## XXVII

The ayatani priests carried Gaunt’s body off the bridge onto the far side of the river. Wet with Gaunt’s blood, Rawne and Ezra followed them.

„I’ve got a pulse!“ Curth cried.

„Thready but solid,“ Dorden noted.

„Ten units of blood!“ Curth ordered.

„Will he live?“ asked Rawne, pulling down his surgical mask.

„You’ve all been through here,“ Curth replied, „all the Ghosts. You’ve tried to reassure him, and keep him stable. Yes, Eli, despite everything, I think he might live yet.“

„He deserves the peace of death,“ said Zweil, sitting at the end of the cot. „I could still give him the last rites.“

„I don't think that's going to be necessary, father,“ said Dorden.  
Gaunt stirred. „Colm...“ he murmured.  
„He's dreaming again,“ said Rawne.

## XXVIII

*From: Curth, medicae functionary, Tanith First.*

*To: Acting Commander, Elikon HQ, Jago.*

*It pleases me to be able to inform you, sir, that Colonel-Commissar Ibram Gaunt has roused from his coma. The injuries the colonel-commissar suffered at the hands of the Blood Pact torturers were severe (please see my request for augmetic optical implants). He suffered three systemic organ failures on the table, and the loss of his eyes is a terrible mutilation. Skin grafting will continue for several months.*

*I am, however, delighted to report that Ibram Gaunt is alive.*

*Your honoured servant,*

*Ana Curth (medicae).*

## XXIX

„Are we still on... on Jago?“ he had asked his adjutant that morning while shaving.

His adjutant, Beltayn, had frowned, thinking the question over.

„Jago? Uh... yes. I believe so, sir,“ he had replied.

The names really weren't of any consequence anymore, the names of cities or continents or worlds. Each one was just a new place to get into, and then get out of again, once the job was done. He'd stopped worrying about the names. He just concentrated on the jobs; loyal but weary, weary but loyal.

Sometimes, he was so tired he even forgot his own name.

He dipped his old cut throat razor into the chipped bowl, washing off the foam and the residue of shorn bristles. He looked at his reflection in the cracked shaving mirror. Though the reflection didn't seem to have eyes, he recognised it anyway.

Ibram Gaunt. That was it. Ibram Gaunt.

Of course it was.

