

# INTO THE DARK...

by Dan Abnett



They had gone out into the Low Worlds, where death was expecting them. Indeed, of all the things out there in the dark hoping to make their acquaintance, death was probably the most hospitable.

The dropship shook like a seedcase in the wind.

"You see the whole world, yet you see nothing," remarked Zarn Vertigon. The savant was sitting quietly in an arrestor seat at the back of the dropship cabin. He had unscrewed the lens disks of his left-eye optic to clean them, but the jolt of atmospheric entry was too brutal, so he sat instead with the delicate components cupped patiently between his hands in a piece of cloth, waiting for a landing, or an abrupt high atmosphere death.

"What?" asked Alia Kanaed. She was up front, in one of the worn leather helm station seats, beside the hunched beetle shape of the pilot-servitor. She tapped one of its upper manipulator arms, and indicated the dark block of the dropzone that digital chevrons were chasing across a real-time hololith of the landscape far below, a landscape that yawed and turned as the servitor made its course adjustments.

The mesh grilles of the servitor's mouthparts emitted a series of clacks that indicated it had understood.

Kanaed turned again and looked back at the savant.

"I said what?" she said, "as in what the hell are you on about?" Irritation showed in the slight crease between her eyes. She had never been particularly tolerant of the savant. Then, as Hessk always pointed out, she had never been particularly tolerant of anything.

"You see the whole world, yet you see nothing," Vertigon repeated. "It is a quote. Attributed to Alexis Ferroth, the Great Cartographer of the Surena Dynasty. I think it was intended as a commentary on the political naivety of the usurper Kalisto Surena."

"Really?"

"But I was applying it specifically to this situation," Vertigon replied evenly.

"Imagine my surprise," said Kanaed.

"Yes," said Vertigon, cupping the delicate optic rings.

"If you're going to say something, just say it," said Kanaed. "Don't dance." Her tone was mild, but it had been every bit as mild the day she uttered the words, "No more than you deserve," as she buried her void-dark sword through the heart and spine of the heretic Goran Drakos.

"Enough, children," said Callan Hessk.

He lowered his boots from the seat-back in front of him and turned sideways in his seat so he could glance up-cabin at Kanaed and down-cabin at Vertigon.

"Alia, don't look for fights. Zarn...what's the matter with you? This is a simple business."

"Is it?" asked Vertigon. "Is it really?"

Callan Hessk sighed.

"We are all sworn servants of Inquisitor Tortane, and answer to his authority willingly. Tortane has told us to come here, and do this thing. It is simple. It is a simple business."

Vertigon shrugged, still keeping the parts of his augmetic eye carefully nested between his hands.

"Yet...none of us have ever met Inquisitor Tortane. We serve at a distance. He sends us instructions that are simple, I agree. Go here. Do this. Except, when there is such distance involved, and such simplicity of instruction, it is clear that Inquisitor Tortane expects some nuance from us."

"Does it?" asked Hessk.

"Of course," said the savant. He began screwing the lens rings back into his augmetic socket, one by one. "To suggest otherwise would be to assume that the Inquisitor is stupid, and I think we can agree he is not. He expects us to act autonomously, to interpret his simple instruction and sophisticate our plans. He expects us to be his proxies here, to do in person, for him, what he is not here in person to do."

Hessk heard Kanaed groan. Without looking at her, he held up a warning finger.

"Vertigon," he said, "I have field command of this team. The Inquisitor's instructions were direct: seek passage to this world, examine the site for which he has given us coordinates, and report our findings back to him. What part of that requires sophistication?"

Vertigon had finished refitting his optics. He blink-whirred them once, and then released his harness and stood up. With a hand holding the ceiling rail, he edged down the aisle of the bumping dropship.

"Below us," he said, indicating both the hololithic display and the night-side shadow beyond the dropship's small, thick cockpit ports, "is Epsilon Angel KZ-8, outermost world of the prohibited Angel KZ-8 system. Nothing is known about it. Indeed, virtually nothing is known about the entire system."

"Except for the..." Kanaed paused.

"The artefact? The Sleeping Fortress?" Vertigon asked.

"Yes, apart from that, and even that is an unsubstantiated myth. But he sends us here, to this remote world, far, far out from the zone where the mythical fortress is said to orbit. We know one mysterious thing about this empty system, and it is not the thing our master the Inquisitor sends us to look at."

Callan Hessk frowned. The savant was voicing uneasy thoughts that had been gnawing at Hessk's mind since they had left Juno.

Vertigon pointed directly at the jumping track of the glowing hololithic display.

"We have one set of coordinates. We do not even know if it is a viable landing zone."

"Terrain-reading auspex seems to think—" Kanaed began.

"Hmm. Use of the word 'seems' there, it bothers me," said Vertigon. He pointed at the screen again.

"You see the whole world, yet you see nothing," he repeated. "We have virtually no data. Thanks to atmospheric, we don't even have a reliable auspex return. Yet we treat this as the front door. Would Tortane expect us to be so literal, or would he expect us

to think clearly and intelligently and perform this undertaking the way he would if he was here personally?"

"He's right," said Dayglass. They all looked at her. The voidborn was hunched in one of the seats recessed beneath the port-side underwing. Her long legs were drawn up, knees to chin. "Annoying, but right."

There was a long pause, broken only by the rattle and bump of the long descent and the click of the pilot-servitor.

"Let's consider our options, then," said Callan Hessk.

"Vertigon was wrong about one thing," said Alia Kanaed. "I've met Tortane."

"Yes, but afterwards he mind-wiped you," said Hessk, "so you can't tell us a blessed thing about him."

"Whatever," Kanaed replied, savouring what she clearly felt was a tiny triumph. "I've still met him."

The landing was rough. Hessk decided to alter the drop route and set down on a headland three clicks from the coordinates, a headland that the auspex was able to resolve as clear and solid.

As if aggrieved by this wanton diversion, the atmosphere trembled and turned into a violent storm. Ribbons of lightning eight or nine kilometres long ripped through the thickening sky. Wind speeds topped nine hundred per hour. The clouds were like ink in water and the rain was like an iron wall.

A thirty minute descent turned into a ninety minute hell-ride. They lost through-put telemetry within fifteen minutes, and secondary power in twenty. A lightning strike sheared their hull armour and torched their number three engine.

Even Hessk thought they were dead at that point.

But they lived, though the ride that followed was brutal. It was like being shaken in a tin box. Strapped into their arrestor seats, they held on. Dayglass put her head between her hands and sobbed. She had never coped well with anything except the cold serenity of space. Vertigon, usually strong of constitution, vomited discreetly into a poly-bag. Even the vehement Kanaed looked green.

Callan Hessk, cold-hearted killer of monsters, buckled up tight and prepped his twin Tronsvasse autopistols.

The pilot-servitor brought them in. It was blind by the end. Telemetry lost, it had focused on an exact memory of the chosen landing site. The stress fried its primary and sub brains. It was dead by the time they breathed out and reached to unclasp their arrestor straps.

The dropship's systems sighed, fluttered, and went blank as the servitor's vital spark ebbed away.

Epsilon had a life-sustaining atmosphere, or at least one that wouldn't kill them anytime soon. They stepped out of the smouldering dropship into a gigantic darkness.

They were on a high slope forested by tree-like fungal growths that were as black as the surrounding night. Below them, across the broad, rift valley, dark with swaying vegetation, the storm rolled and flashed. The thunder was like concussion in the air, and the rain rinsed their faces. The world smelled odd. It was wet, peaty, sappy. There was the scent of ozone.

There was something else, too.

Hessk pulled a hooded jacket around his shoulders. He had a handheld auspex and a hefty stablight.

"This way," he said, reading off the auspex display. The little screen underlit his face.

The four of them headed down the slope, moving through the rain-swept thickets of fungus trees as they came down the headland. The ground was wet mulch underfoot. Rain beat at them. Their four, jerking stablights were the only light sources apart from the phantom strobe of the lightning. Around them, the curious fungal trees creaked and groaned as they strained in the night wind.

The trees were huge. The darkness was infinite. The four of them, and their four small light beams, were tiny.

Callan Hessk led the way. Impressively tall in his boots, he was a stone cold killer with a mind like a high-grade cogitator. He wore a long leather coat under his hooded weather-jacket, and heavy deck boots. He had a face like a monolithic statue, and violet eyes. His grey hair had been crop cut with a buzzer. Inquisitor Tortane had recognised Hessk's talents as a leader and an unscrupulous killer years before, and saved him from a life in Juno's slum-habs, the short, infamous life of a desperado.

In return, he had served Tortane, and served him well, performing as his agent in the field. But they had never met. Tortane had never allowed that to be a possibility.

As a consequence, Callan thought it was possible he might not like Faros Tortane.

Behind Hessk came the savant, Zarn Vertigon. Vertigon was unusual for a savant. He was reasonably young and very robust. Ex-Guard, he knew how to fight, and knew how to handle the ancient long las he kept slung in its slipcase over his shoulder. Hessk had seen him fight. Zarn did it well.

A savant who wasn't an old fart and could handle himself in combat. Hessk counted that as a plus.

Zarn's story was odd, and only half-told. He'd been with a Havarth regimental unit on one of the interminable Askellian campaigns. The way Zarn told it, they'd been ordered to assault a hill, but the hill wasn't a hill, it was some kind of structure: A mechanism, an artefact, alien and as old as hell. Zarn's unit was slaughtered on the way up. Zarn was hit, blinded, half his face burned off.

When he woke up, in a medicae station eighteen kilometres from the frontline, he discovered that, in the depths of his pain and injury, the hill had given him something. It had imparted a little of its ancient sentience to him. He understood things, things he had never understood before. He knew things...a lot of things.

Zarn Vertigon had instincts that left most men blinking. The worst part was, his ability scared everyone, including Zarn himself.

Dayglass, the voidborn psyker, followed Zarn, her long dress bedraggled by the rain. Tall and painfully slender, she carried no weapons, and her exquisitely large black mirror-eyes reflected the storm. Her long black hair hung limp.

Alia Kanaed brought up the rear, cradling her hell-rifle. She was muscular, tall and full-figured, her form strapped into a red leather bodyglove. Her face was a sculpture of cheekbones and jawline, forming piercing, pale blue eyes. Her hair was short and white. The djin blade slung between her shoulder blades in a bound scabbard whispered to itself.

"This is going to end in tears," Alia muttered.

She didn't specify whose.

