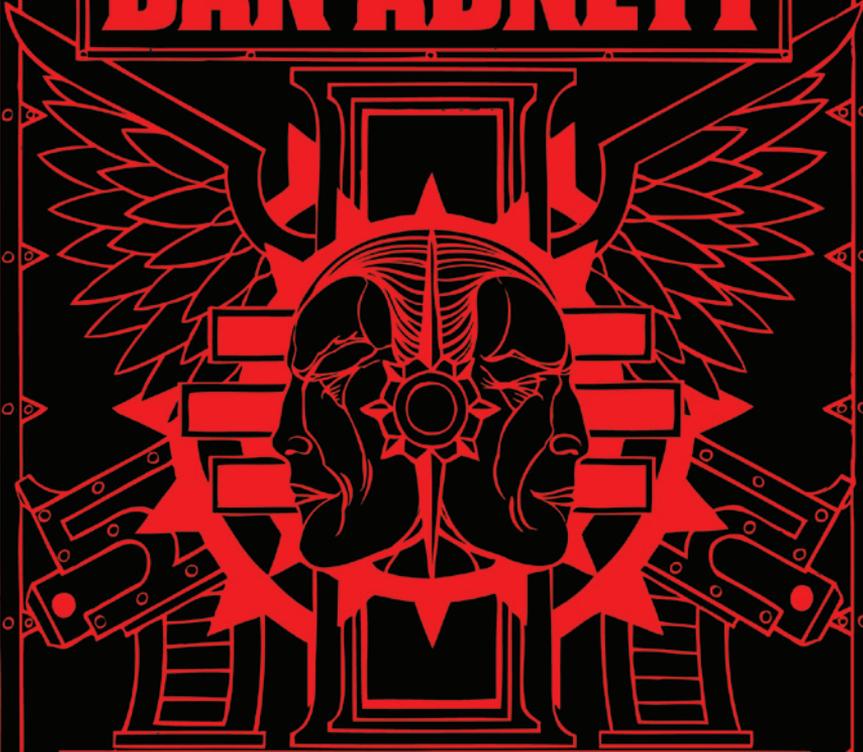


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DAN ABNETT



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dan Abnett is a multiple *New York Times* bestselling author and an award-winning comic book writer. He has written over forty novels, including the acclaimed Gaunt's Ghosts series, and the Eisenhorn and Ravenor trilogies. His Horus Heresy novel *Prospero Burns* topped the SF charts in the UK and the US. In addition to writing for Black Library, Dan scripts audio dramas, movies, games, comics and bestselling novels for major publishers in Britain and America. He lives and works in Maidstone, Kent.

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In the UK: Price £17.99 ISBN: 978-1-84970-201-0

In the US: Price \$24.99 (\$28.99 Canada) ISBN: 978-1-84970-202-7

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Let me tell it, now that I think of it. Frankly, I think of it often, for it shocked me and left a mark. His death affected the development of my character, so I consider it worth recording, though I appreciate that it was part of a greater story. Thus it is worth recording *in any case* according to the rationale that I set to decide which stories should be included here and which are surplus.

I didn't realise it at the time. At the time, it was just a shocking thing.

I was twenty-three. It was late in the day, getting dark. It was summer, though even summer was murky in Queen Mab, and the twilight that settled on the Maze Undue was always ugly. I had gone down to the locker to fetch a laspistol to practise with. Some bottles on a wall, that was all I intended. Mentor Saur had been critical of my marksmanship, saying that I lacked the hit rate of Corlam and Faria, and even (*to think!*) Roud, who was just fifteen. Also, I had just clumsily finished a function in the Iron Quarter where it would have been useful to shoot better. I had gone— no. That story is certainly surplus here. I needed to practise my pistol shooting. That is what matters.

I had seen people die. Let's be clear. Queen Mab is a violent city. I had seen fights. I had seen deaths. I had been obliged to draw or improvise weapons to defend myself and others. I had inflicted injury. It is entirely possible I had caused wounds that had led to death, or that my stray shots had, on occasion, slain some wretch that I wasn't aware of.

But I had not seen death like this.

The drill was lit. The Maze Undue was generally lighted by wick lamps and candles, and by old glow-globes embedded in the ceiling panels. The globes were stained yellow with age, and hissed when they burned. In some hallways, we left out sticks or mop handles to strike the roof and jar them back into luminescence as required.

The drill was lit. Glow-globes shone like sickly suns. I went in to ask Mentor Saur to reset my cuff so I could bypass the pain door and take a pistol from the locker.

The drill was lit. I heard grunts of exertion, and thought Mentor Saur might be honing his blade craft. I didn't know of any candidates who would be training with him.

But he was fighting with someone.

They were fighting on the secondary ring, a canvas stage beside, and slightly below, the main sparring ring with its wooden railings. To the left were the practice dummies, and a row of pavis shields and ceramite bucklers hanging on pegs. To the right were the two mechanical sparring machines, switched off and dormant, limbs raised and frozen like rearing spiders.

I saw drops of blood flecked on the wooden railings, and a small pool tracked in a smear across the canvas of the secondary ring, like a guilty red arrow pointing to them, and I realised it wasn't a sparring session.

The man was breathing hard. He was blond and fairly young, and—

No. Saur first. Saur is more important in this story, and I realise I have done little more than mention his name so far.

Mentor Saur. Thaddeus Saur. Teacher of combat craft and measures of defence. He was

tall and bulky, owning the mass of a fighter. He was a daunting man, and I always thought of him as solid, compacted, as if he were wrought from a denser material than normal people, like a neutron star. He had a face like a cliff, clean-shaven, the skin coarse. His mouth was an axe groove, his nose a flattened stump. His eyes were small and heavy-lidded, as if they had evolved to protect themselves, like the eyes of a crocodilian. He was all function: shaved, clipped, trimmed and un-decorated, but his hair was a thick crown of white that hung down over his brow and ears. It was not a distinguished silver-white, like an elder statesman. It was yellow-white and lustreless, like parched straw or dirty snow. His teeth were small, and he had no little finger on his left hand. Until I met Deathrow, he was the most physically intimidating man I had ever known.

I had no idea of his age. He was old, a veteran of military service. He had a slight paunch, but that was just the inexorable spread of maturity rather than a lack of fitness. He was brutally strong and viciously fast. As ever, he was dressed in an armoured bodyglove, boots and gauntlets, all oxblood red; his working clothes.

So, the other man. He was younger and slighter, blond, plainly good-looking in a well-bred way. He was wearing the garb of an Enmabic merchantman – boots and breeches, heavy wool under-robos, and a winter coat of some quality, its collar raised and lined with gezl fur – but I knew at once that this was a disguise. He was dressed the way someone would dress if he had made a close and considered study of Queen Mab's merchant classes in order to pass as one.

I do not know what small detail betrayed this to me, but I knew it in a second. Perhaps it was because I have essayed similar feats of disguise very many times, for function after function. His disguise was not imperfect, I felt. It was instead *too* perfect.

They were fighting with short swords. Mentor Saur was brandishing the thick, twin-edged *cutro* he always kept at his side. His opponent, the stranger, should not have been any kind of match for him, in terms of bulk or skill or speed. But he was holding his own. In fact, he was doing better than that. Saur always carried a snub autopistol in the back of his belt, and I saw that weapon lying on the floor quite some distance away from them. Saur's right forearm was cut behind the wrist, and the bodyglove sleeve was sliced open and flapping.

He had drawn first, and been disarmed by a sword-thrust. It had only become a blade duel when Saur had been deprived of his pistol.

The stranger was wielding a curved *salinter* or short sabre, which I presumed he had brought with him. It was not a local weapon, not even local to the world. He knew how to use it. Besides the disarming wound, he had nicked Saur on the cheek and the left shoulder.

Saur was going for the face each time. From practice bouts, I knew this to be his way. It is a particularly invasive approach, and can provoke rash reactions that lead to failures of technique. One is hard-wired to guard one's face, one's eyes. To focus the attack there forces the opponent to fight not only you, but his own autonomic responses as well. Saur was trying to undermine the stranger's technical control.

He was failing.

I thought that was remarkable. No one beat Saur, not in any form of combat. Then

I thought, almost simultaneously, why? Why are they fighting? Why is this man here? Blood had been drawn. This was no practice session, no combat lesson for a private client.

They were fighting in earnest.

The speed of the exchanged blows was ferociously rapid. The stranger was putting everything through his blade, and defending with deft footwork, opening the space when he could, staying side-on to minimise his profile as a target. Saur was trying to keep it tight, trying to close the reach, deflecting the stranger's thrusts with his sword and the metal bands stitched into the forearm of his left sleeve. He maintained a face-on stance so he could play in both sword and armoured sleeve.

Saur was dogged. He started to use his armoured sleeve as an offensive weapon, occupying the stranger's sword so he could lunge in with his *cutro*. When he jabbed, I thought he had killed the stranger right away, because the short sword's edge sliced through the man's chest.

But the stranger rotated and came away fast, cutting down and back with his *salinter* to deter Saur's follow-through. I saw that the stranger's very fine winter coat had been cut open, so that the left lapel lolled away, and the robe beneath was sliced too. I glimpsed, beneath that, the wire mesh of an armoured bodyglove. The stranger was not as soft as he looked.

Saur was, perhaps, dismayed to discover that the stranger was discreetly armoured. His killing blow would have been so sure, otherwise. He fumbled slightly, trying to reposition, trying not to lose the upper hand.

The stranger caught him across the side of the head.

I heard the crack of metal on flesh, the sound of an axe smacking a ripe tuber. Saur's head was snapped aside, his body rotating after it. Blood flew. It was in his dirty white hair. He crashed backwards into the railings of the upper ring, and knocked over a spit bucket. He half-fell, yet somehow kept his feet, but he was done. The stranger followed in, the *salinter* going for the throat while his opponent's guard was dropped.

You have to remember the speed. You have to appreciate, as I tell you this, that virtually no time at all had passed since I first entered the room and saw them fighting. Three, four seconds: enough time for them to trade two dozen blows. I had come in with just enough time to grasp the basic situation and see Saur fall.

I never liked Thaddeus Saur. It's safe to say my feelings towards the cruel bastard were stronger and more negative than that. But he was of the Maze Undue, and so was I, and this could not be permitted.

I started forwards. I shouted out a great cry, and snatched a buckler from the pegs. My cuff was turned to *dead*, so the force of my bluntness came with me and my shout.

It can be like a slap to have a pariah come at you, aggressive, unlimited. To even a non-sensitive, a regular human, the psykanic null of a blank mind can be disturbing, if only fleetingly.

The stranger recoiled. It was enough of a surprise to stop him cutting out Saur's throat. My interruption wasn't going to stop there. I hurled the buckler like a discus.

The small, circular shield missed him, but he was obliged to duck. Saur was far from finished. He kicked out, savagely, and caught the stranger on the inside of his thigh with his heel, throwing the man sideways, clumsily.

The stranger landed, hands on the canvas, but was ready as Saur propelled himself

forwards and kicked the mentor's legs away. Saur slammed onto his back.

I was, all this time, still running at him. I turned the run into a flying kick.

He rolled under me, flat to the floor, and sprang up as I landed and turned.

I think he wanted to say something to me, but he didn't know what. Perhaps he wanted to tell me to flee, to back away from a fight I had no part in, but he couldn't. If he wanted Saur dead, he had to kill me too, or the whole house would come down on his head.

I could sense his conflict. Unarmed as I was, I drove at him, using his reluctance against him. Fighting Saur was one thing, but he didn't want to engage a young woman. His response was half-hearted. He tried to shove me away. He tried to spare me his blade, though it was still in his hand. I think he hoped to clip me with the hilt or pommel and perhaps knock me out.

I would not let him off so easily. I grasped his wrist, turned it and, with my other hand, punched the pressure point in his upper arm.

The *salinter* flew out of his deadened fingers.

'Who are you?' I demanded.

He rammed me aside with both hands. I staggered and fell, knocking down a rack of wooden exercise staves.

I got up, gripping one stave and kicking the others out of my way. The stranger was backing away from me, his hands up.

I think he intended to cut his losses and flee.

He doubled up as Saur's *cutro* tore into him from behind. The short sword went through his coat, through his robes, through his under-jack and mesh, and sliced into his waist. Saur ripped the blade free, and blood squirted out across the canvas. The stranger stumbled away, his head wobbling like a drunkard's, his feet unsure, his eyes confused. He had both hands clamped to his waist, but even tight together, they could not plug the hole in him. Blood poured out, like red wine from a jug. His hands and sleeves were soaked with it.

His mouth opened and closed, without managing to form words.

He fell down on his back. Saur just stood there, watching him bleed out, the bloodied *cutro* low at his side.

Blood formed a huge, dark red mirror on the canvas around the stranger. The mirror crept out. Blood soaked his coat and robes, covered his hands, and flecked his face. He stared at the ceiling, his mouth fluttering open and shut, his legs twitching.

I bent over him.

Perhaps he didn't have to die, I thought. We could hold him, bind his injury, call for the city watch. I tried to apply pressure to his ghastly wound, but it was open, and as big as a dog's mouth. My hands were no better at stemming the flow of blood than his had been.

He suddenly, finally, saw me instead of the ceiling and the lights. He blinked, refocused. Tiny beads of blood had lodged in his eyelashes.

'What is this? Who are you?' I asked.

He said a word. It came out of him like a gasp, more breath than sound.

It was a word I had not heard before.

He said, 'Cognitae.'

There was a bang, right in my ear, and it made me jump because it was sudden and close and painfully loud. A bark of pressure clouted me along with the noise. I flinched as

bloody backspatter hit my face, throat and chest. I had his blood in my eyes.

Mentor Saur put another round through the stranger's face for good measure, and then holstered his snub pistol.