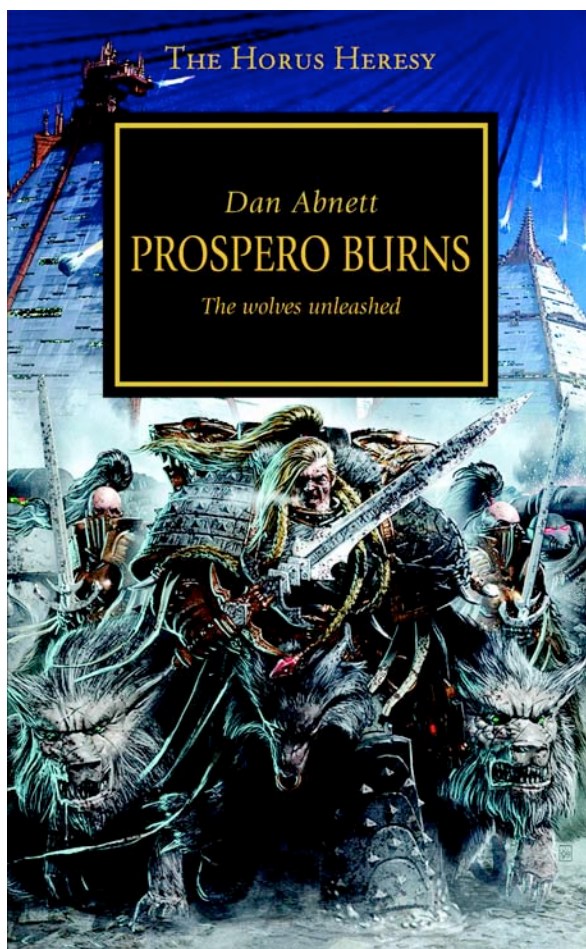




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# PROSPERO BURNS

*A Horus Heresy novel*

*By Dan Abnett*

The Emperor is enraged. Primarch Magnus the Red, of the Thousand Sons Legion, has made a catastrophic mistake and endangered the safety of Terra. With no other choice, the Emperor charges Lemman Russ, Primarch of the Space Wolves, with the apprehension of his brother from the Thousand Sons home world of Prospero. This planet of sorcerers will not be easy to overcome, but Russ and his Space Wolves are not easily deterred. With wrath in his heart, Russ is determined to bring Magnus to justice and the events that decide the fate of Prospero are set in motion.

## **About the Author**

Dan Abnett is a novelist and award-winning comic book writer. He has written over thirty-five novels, including the acclaimed Gaunt's Ghosts series, the Eisenhorn and Ravenor trilogies and, with Mike Lee, the Darkblade cycle. His novels Horus Rising and Legion (both for the Black Library) and his Torchwood novel Border Princes (for the BBC) were all bestsellers. His novel Triumph, for Angry Robot, was published in 2009 and nominated for the British Fantasy Society Award for Best Novel. He lives and works in Maidstone, Kent. Dan's blog and website can be found at [www.danabnett.com](http://www.danabnett.com) Follow him on Twitter@VincentAbnett

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THE WOLVES DESCENDED and they did so silently. Not a grunt of effort, not a gasp of labour, not a click or crackle from a vox device, not a clink or chime from an uncased weapon or an unlagged armour piece. Hair was tied back and lacquered or braided. Gloves and boot-treads were dusted with ground hrosshvalur scales for grip. The hard edges of armour sections were blunted with pelts and fur wrappings. Behind tight leather masks, mouths were shut.

The Quietude's robusts matched the Astartes in bulk and strength. They had been engineered that way. Each one was hardwired with remarkable sensitivity to motion, to light, to heat and to pheromonal scent. Somehow, they still didn't see the Wolves coming.

Why don't the men of Tra draw their weapons, Hawser wondered? His panic began to escalate. Great Terra above, they've all forgotten to draw their weapons! The words almost flew out of him as the Wolves began to drop out of the girderwork and onto the heads of the robusts patrolling below them.

Most went for the neck. A robust was big, but the weight of a fully armoured Astartes dropping on it from

above was enough to bring it down onto the deck, hard. With open hands, unencumbered by weapons, the Astartes gripped their targets' heads, and twisted them against the direction of fall, snapping the cervical process.

It was an economical and ruthless execution. The Wolves were using their own bodies as counterweights to clean-break steelweave spinal columns. The first audible traces of the fight were the rapid-fire cracks of fifty or more necks breaking. The sounds overlapped, almost simultaneous, like firecrackers kicking off across the vast, polished deckspace. Like knuckles cracking.

Distress and medical attention signals began to bleat and shrill. Few of the robusts who had been brought down were actually dead, as they did not enjoy life in the same way that conventional humans did. The robusts were simply disabled, helpless, the command transmissions between their brains and their combat-wired bodies broken. An odd chorus of information alerts began to sound throughout the dock's megastructure. Layer added upon layer incrementally, as different bands of the Quietude's social networks became aware of what was happening.

Stealth ceased to be a commodity of any value.

Having made their first kills, the Wolves rose to their feet. They were all, very suddenly, aiming guns. The fastest way to arm themselves had been to appropriate the weapons that were ready-drawn and clutched in the paralysed hands of their robust victims. The Wolves came up raising streamlined chrome heat-beamers and gravity rifles. It was really not Hawser's place, then or later, to remark how sleek and unlikely these weapons looked in the hands of Rout members. It was like seeing

pieces of glass sculpture or stainless surgical tools gripped in the mouths of wild dogs.

Instead, Hawser's account reflected the following point. It is, the Wolf King teaches, good practice to use an enemy's weapon against him. An enemy may fabricate wonderful armour, but the Wolves of Fenris have learned through experience that the effectiveness of an enemy's protection is proportionate to the efficacy of his weapons. This may be a deliberate design philosophy, but it is more usually a simple, instinctive consequence. An enemy may think 'I know it is possible for armour to be strong to X degree, because I am able to forge armour that strong; therefore I need to develop a weapon that can split armour of X degree, in case I ever encounter an opponent as well-armoured as I know I can be.'

The heat-beamers emitted thin streaks of sizzling white light that hurt the eyes. They made no dramatic noises except for the sharp explosions that occurred when the beams struck a target.

The gravity rifles launched pellets of ultra-dense metal that laced the dock's warm air with quick smudges like greasy finger marks on glass. These weapons were louder. They made noises like whips cracking, underscored by oddly modulated burps of power. Unlike the heat beams, which split robust armour open in messy eruptions of cooking innards and superhot plate fragments, the gravity rifle pellets were penetrators that made tiny, pin-prick entry marks and extravagantly gigantic exit wounds. Stricken robusts faltered as their chests caved in under scorching heat-beam assault, or lurched as their backs blew out in sprays of spalling, shattered plastics, liquidised internals and bone shards.

It was almost pathetic. The Quietude had a martial reputation that was measured in centuries and light years, and the robusts were their battlefield elite. Here, they were falling down like clumsy idiots on an icy day, like clowns in a pantomime, a dozen of them, two dozen, three, smack on their faces or slam on their backs, legs out from under them, not a single one of them even managing to return fire, not a single one.

When the robusts finally began to rally, the Wolves played the next card in their hand. They tossed away the captured guns and switched to their own weapons, principally their bolters. The Quietude's social networks had frantically analysed the nature of the threat, and processed an immediate response. This took the networks less than eight seconds. The robusts were armoured with interlocking, overlapping skins of woven steel as their principal layer of protection, but each one also possessed a variable force field as an outer defensive sheath. After only eight seconds of shooting, the social networks of the Olamic Quietude successfully and precisely identified the nature of the weapons being used against its robusts. They instantly adjusted the composition of the individual force fields to compensate.

As a result, the robusts were effectively proofed against heat-beams and gravitic pellets at exactly the same moment as they started to take Imperial bolter fire.

Further humiliation was heaped upon the Quietude's reputation. The men of Tra spread out, firing from the chest, mowing down the robusts as they attempted to compose themselves.

For this, thought Hawser, for this work, for these deeds: this is why the companies of Wolves are kept.

He had never seen a boltgun live-fired before. All his eight-and-the-rest decades of experience, all the conflict

he'd witnessed, and he'd never seen a boltgun shot. Boltguns were the symbol of Imperial superiority and Terran unification, emphatically potent and reductively simple. They were Astartes weapons, not exclusively, but as a hallmark thing. Few men had the build to heft one. They were the crude, mechanical arms of a previous age, durable and reliable, with few sophisticated parts that could malfunction or jam. They were brute technology that, instead of being superseded and replaced by complex modern weapon systems, had simply been perfected and scaled up. An Astartes with a boltgun was a man with a carbine, nightmarishly exaggerated.

The sight of it reminded Hawser of how un-human the Wolves were. He had been amongst them for long enough to have become used to the look of them and the way they towered over him.

Still, they were positively reassuring compared to the forces of the Quietude.

Skull measurements and other biological data taken from captured Quietude specimens had confirmed their Terran ancestry. At some point long before the fall of Old Night, a branch of Terran expansion had brought the Quietude's gene pool into this out-flung, unremembered corner of the galaxy. The commander of the 40th Imperial Expedition Fleet, along with his technical advisors and savants, believed that this exodus had taken place during the First Great Age of Technology, perhaps as long as fifteen thousand years earlier. The Quietude possessed a level of technological aptitude that was extremely sophisticated, and so divergent from Terran or even Martian standards as to suggest a long incubation and, possibly, the influence of a xenobiological culture.



At some early stage in their post-Terran life, the humans of the Quietude had given up their humanity. They operated in social networks, cohered by communications webs neurally spliced into them at birth. They sacrificed most of their flesh anatomy to ritualised surgical procedures during childhood that prepared them to inhabit artificial bodies. Pretty much all that remained of a Quietude adult, organically speaking, were the brain, skull and spinal cord. These rested in the neck socket of an elegantly engineered humanoid chassis, which contained the machine-analogue organs that fed the brain and kept it alive.

That explained why the shot-up robusts were pooling almost purple fluids around their carcasses instead of blood.

The citizens of the Quietude wore hoods of silver circuitry over their skulls, and hologram masks instead of faces. As the boltguns killed them, the masks flickered out and failed, and revealed the self-inflicted inhumanity beneath.

Aeska had carried Hawser down with Tra, instructing Hawser to hold onto his neck. He'd clung on like a pelt, and Aeska had carried him as if his weight had no significance to the Astartes, and even when they'd been going hand-over-hand down through the dock's girder lattice, even when the only thing preventing Hawser from plunging to his death was the grip of his fingers around Aeska's neck, he'd kept his eyes open. He had not done this because he'd jumped down enough flues in the Aett to develop a head for heights. He'd done it because he'd known he had to. It was expected of him.

On the principal deck level, as the assault began, Aeska had set Hawser on the ground behind him and told him to walk in his shadow. The vast, polished deck yawned

away on either side of them, curved like the surface of a world seen from orbit, and the lattice above was like the branches of a dense thorn thicket. The air was laced with bolter fire.

Hawser needed very little encouragement.

Five minutes into the fight, the Quietude finally began to claw back. The first Rout blood they spilled was from a warrior called Galeg, who was hit by a gravity pellet. The shot turned his left arm, from the elbow down, into a bloody twig, rattling with bracelets of shattered armour. Galeg shut the pain down and advanced on his attacker, swinging out a chain axe. Steam and blood-smoke sizzled from his injured limb.

The shot had not come from one of the robust warrior units. Three graciles, the lighter weight technical versions, had retrieved the weapon of a fallen robust and set it up on a lattice walkway. Galeg bounded up onto the walkway as they missed him with two more desperate shots, and dismembered them with his wailing axe. He did this with relish, and let out wet growls as their fracturing chassis shattered under his axe-blows and emitted strangulated electronic shrieks.

When Galeg had finished his kill, he signalled his ability to continue with a casual air-punch of his bloody, ruined fist, a gesture that Hawser found chilling.

Several robusts had defended the entrance to a major engineering underspace with what looked like a heavier, perhaps crew-served, version of the gravity rifle. The colossal bursts of fire, ripping up the underspace approach from an unseen source, vaporised Hjad, the first Wolf to come into view. Bear wheeled the rest of his pack aside. There was no point in providing further targets. Hawser saw Bear take out a small hand axe, a one-piece steel cast, and mark the bulkhead beside the

underspace slope. He did it quickly and deftly. It was evidently a mark he'd made many times: four hard cuts to form a crude diamond shape, then a fifth notch bisecting the diamond. Hawser considered the mark gouged into the bulkhead metal, and realised what it was.

It was an incredibly simplified symbol for an eye. It was a mark of aversion.

THE OLAMIC QUIETUDE had been hostile from the very point of contact. Suspicious and unwilling to formalise any kind of convergence, they had engaged the 40th Fleet in two separate ship actions in an attempt to drive the expedition out of Quietude space. During the second of these skirmishes, the Quietude managed to capture the crew of an Imperial warship.

The commander of the 40th Imperial Expedition Fleet sent a warning to the Quietude, explaining that peaceful contact and exchange was the primary goal of the Imperium of Terra, and the Quietude's aggressive stance would not be tolerated. The warship and its crew would be returned. Negotiations would begin. Dialogue with Imperial iterators would begin and understanding reached. The Quietude made its first direct response. It explained, as if to a child, or perhaps to a pet dog or bird that it was trying to train, that it was the true and sole heir of the Terran legacy. As its name suggested, it was resting in an everlasting state of readiness to resume contact with its birthworld. It had waited patiently through the apocalyptic ages of storm and tempest.

The Imperials who now approached its borders were pretenders. They were not what they claimed to be. Any fool could see that they were the crude artifice of some alien race trying to mock-up what it thought would pass for human.

The Quietude supported this verdict with copious annotated evidence from its interrogation of the Imperial prisoners. Each prisoner, the Quietude stated, displayed over fifteen thousand points of differential that revealed them to be non-human impostors, as the vivisections clearly demonstrated.

The commander of the 40th Expedition Fleet sent for the nearest Astartes.

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