

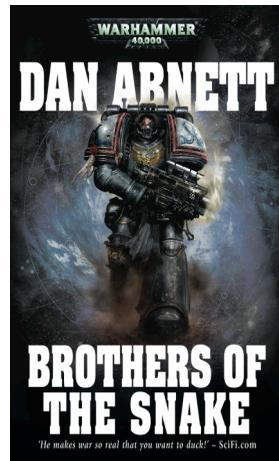
BROTHERS OF THE SNAKE

A Warhammer 40,000 novel

By Dan Abnett

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About the Author

Dan Abnett is a novelist and award-winning comic book writer. He has written twenty-five novels for the Black Library, including the acclaimed Gaunt's Ghosts series and the Eisenhorn and Ravenor trilogies, and, with Mike Lee, the Darkblade cycle. His Black Library novel *Horus Rising* and his Torchwood novel *Border Princes* (for the BBC) were both bestsellers. He lives and works in Maidstone, Kent.

Dan's website can be found at www.DanAbnett.com

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The following is an excerpt from *Brothers of the Snake* by Dan Abnett. Published by the Black Library. Games Workshop, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

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In the last days of the Ripening Season, in the northern cantons of Pythos, harvesters working late one hot, thundery evening in a field of swinecorn and eating lily, saw a piece of lightning fall down onto the world behind the Pythoan Hills.

They knew it was a piece of lightning, for what else could it have been? It made a streak of white light across the soft, blue evening clouds that was so bright that it left a memory of itself on their vision when they closed their eyes. When it landed, far away and out of sight, it made a crack like thunder. In the warm, sultry hours of those late days, summer storms regularly rumbled in and out of the sky and sometimes broke with great violence. And now a piece of one had torn loose and fallen out of the air. So the story passed from village to village.

In due time, a day or two after the event, the story reached the court of Samial Cater Hanfire, First Legislator of the Pythoan Cantons, brought into his zinc palace on the hill, along with a box of berries, by a talkative fruiterer delivering from the produce market. It came to Hanfire by way of a kitchen boy, two gossiping maid-slaves and a dutiful butler. Legislator Hanfire was a wise and educated man, as one might expect a man of his station to be. He had been schooled in the Academy at Fuce and had travelled widely in his day, once as far as the thistle forests on the Western Tip. He was educated enough to know that lightning was not a solid commodity that simply fell from the sky from time to time.

A slave was sent down to the produce market, which was by then closing its shutters for the day, and the fruiterer was summoned back to the palace. There, he retold his story to Hanfire. He was a small, humble man, cowed by the presence of authority, and unduly ashamed of his hands, which had been stained almost blue by the juices

of the fruit he traded in. He tried to keep them concealed in the folds of his patched apron.

Hanfire listened carefully, and then made the man repeat the story while the little metal golem at the foot of the First Legislator's wooden throne recorded the account on a clattering hand press. Hanfire then thanked the fruiterer and offered him some wine and a plate of food, which the fruiterer refused, and three electrum coins, which the fruiterer hastily accepted before fleeing the zinc palace. Hanfire dined alone, reading back through the ink-impressed sheets that had rolled out of the golem's hand press, and by the time his steward brought the fruit posset and the small, crystal thimble of amasec, he knew what was now expected of him.

A rider was sent, without delay, to the High Legislator at Fuce, bearing a report written in Hanfire's own hand, requesting that the official Receiver of Wreck attend Pythos with all haste.

The Receiver of Wreck, a tall, hard-boned man called Hensher, arrived by fleet coach with his entourage two days later. After consultation with First Legislator

Hanfire, the Receiver went up-country into the hills to make his survey. Hanfire accompanied him. This was not usual, but Hanfire was an educated man, and wonderfully curious about out-worldly matters.

The rising country was hot and dry. Summer storms lingered about the high places, and the sky was bruised with clouds like the skin of a windfall fruit. The string of coaches made good progress up the winding trackways, stopping at villages along the way to gather news. At each place, the locals came out in great crowds. They had never seen such important men in the flesh before, nor such finely garbed soldiers or such magnificent vehicles. They had never seen tailored clothes, or laslock rifles, or anything as inconceivable as the little metal golem.

They humbly told the First Legislator and the hard-boned Receiver everything they knew, as well as many things they didn't. The story had grown and it had been embellished, and trimmings of the very finest rumour had been attached to it. Yes, a piece of lightning had fallen from out of the sky. A great, splitting noise it had

made when it fell. Where? Well, beyond the hills there, towards the vale known as Charycon. Now it rolled about there, grinding and grumbling, lost and bewildered, sometimes lighting up the sky at night with firework flashes.

Hanfire listened attentively. The Receiver of Wreck had his own golem make careful notes, and seemed little impressed. At the hamlet of Peros, beside the tumbling headwater of the Pythoa, the locals solemnly swore that the piece of lighting had set fire to great spaces of wilderness wood behind Charycon, an inferno that had raged for days and nights, until a storm downpour had quenched it. At Timmaes, a tiny place of low stone crofts, the inhabitants told of noises after dark and strange figures seen at a distance by shepherds on the hill pastures.

The hamlet of Gellyn, when they passed through it, was strangely empty, as if it had been vacated in a hurry. ‘Simple folk fear things,’ the Receiver told Hanfire as the coaches rattled onwards. ‘It is their way, as we might expect.’

Hanfire shrugged, sitting back in his suede upholstered seat to feel the cool breeze of the coach's air fans.

'They would flee their homes? Run off into the night?'
'A piece of lightning has fallen from out of the sky,' the Receiver said, smiling the first smile Hanfire had seen cross his face. 'It could be dangerous.'

'But it's not?' asked First Legislator Hanfire.

'You wouldn't have summoned me if you thought so,' replied the Receiver, going back through the pages of the report his golem had produced during the day. 'You did the right thing, of course by sending for me. I admire your worldliness, sir.'

Hanfire knew he had just been complimented, but he wasn't quite sure how. 'I'm sorry?'

The Receiver looked up, peering through his half-moon spectacles. 'It's quite clearly a ship. A vessel that has foundered and crashed, just as you surmised. In the name of the High Legislator and the God-Emperor who preserves all, we must locate the site and secure it.'

'Is it dangerous then?' Hanfire asked.

The Receiver took down a zinc box from the luggage rack. It was a measuring device of some type and it had been clicking like a cricket for the past day and a half.

‘See?’ said the Receiver.

‘I’m not sure...’ replied Hanfire.

The Receiver adjusted a dial and the clicking became louder and more intense. ‘Residue,’ he said.

‘Contamination. It has permeated this landscape.

Probably the spill from a drive system. Once we’ve found the site, the area should be confined.’

‘You’ve done this before?’ asked Hanfire.

‘I am the Receiver of Wreck,’ the other man said. ‘This is my job. Things fall from the heavens all the time, and thanks to men such as yourself, they are brought to my attention. There are fabulous treasures to be secured, in the name of the High Legislator. Technologies. Devices. Precious metals. And if it is a vessel of our Holy Imperium, there may be good human people in dire need of rescue.’

Hanfire had been very much enjoying his journey into the hills with the Receiver. It was a welcome change for

him to spend time in the company of a learned, finely educated man, but now he felt some alarm. He was out of his depth. The Receiver was so much more cosmopolitan than he was. He knew such things. He knew of wonders beyond the mortal sphere. He knew of space and its mysteries. He spoke of them matter-of-factly, as if they were commonplace.

‘Have you ever...’ Hanfire began.

‘Have I ever what, sir?’ the Receiver asked.

Hanfire felt rather silly asking the question, but he needed to know. ‘Have you ever been... beyond Baal Solock?’

The Receiver of Wreck smiled again. ‘I was born on Eidon, sir, and came here as a child.’

The full, dizzying burden of that confession silenced First Legislator Hanfire for an hour or more.

When he spoke again, in the rocking, bouncing carriage, it was to ask the other question that had been gnawing away at the edges of his thoughts.

‘What if it isn’t?’

The Receiver of Wreck had been annotating the pages of the golem's report with a silver quill. He looked up at the First Legislator.

‘Sir?’

Hanfire took off his gloves and rubbed his hands, though the night was warm. ‘What if the vessel is not ours?

What if it is... other?’

The Receiver of Wreck sat back and put his papers aside.

‘The term we use is xenos, sir. Alien in origin. It may be, but such occurrences are very, very rare.’

‘But what if it is?’ asked Hanfire. He scolded himself inwardly for being so silly. It was just that he had never considered the idea before.

The Receiver reached up and pulled the communication thread. The fleet coach came to a halt, and the entire procession stopped around it. Hensher raised the window blinds and called out a command.

The retinue of twenty men-at-arms hurried forward and assembled outside the coach, snapping to attention.

Receiver Hensher had brought them with him from Fuce.

They were very excellent men indeed, tall and strong,

plated in quality field armour of khaki metal. They bore the finest and most modern laslocks that Hanfire had ever seen.

‘Ordinate Klue,’ the Receiver called from the coach window, ‘what is the principal order of the detachment?’ ‘To make safe the wreck and exterminate anything that is xenos,’ the master-at-arms barked from behind his visor. The Receiver looked around at Hanfire. ‘These are good men. The best. Specialists, you might say. I pity the alien scum that meets with them in dispute. We are quite safe.’ ‘They are splendid indeed,’ Hanfire said. He took his seat again.

‘Carry on, Klue,’ Hensher called, and the procession began to roll forward again.

‘I haven’t allayed your fears, have I, sir?’ Receiver Hensher asked after a while.

Hanfire smiled. ‘I have heard such things, sir: stories, murky rumours: warning tales of the Ruinous Powers, and the dread greenskins. They say they fall upon worlds and slay them utterly. I have been told, especially, of the thin, dark ones—’

‘Ah, the primuls. They are just a bad memory now.’

‘Stories say that they have stripped many worlds in the Reef Stars with their cruelty.’

‘The primuls may once have been fact. But they are not here. I don’t believe they exist any more. They are legends, stories, First Legislator.’

Hanfire couldn’t let it go. ‘But if they were... your fine detachment would be no match for them, would it?’

Receiver Hensher sighed. ‘No, sir, not if the stories were true. But there is always ultimate salvation.’ He leaned forward, and showed Hanfire his signet ring. It was curiously wrought, and marked with a double-looped serpent symbol.

‘If doom ever came to Baal Solock, this would be our answer.’

Hanfire looked at the signet ring for a moment and then burst out laughing.

‘Now you’re telling me stories, sir! The sign of the snake? That’s a folk tale! Children are taught that the coils of the snake enfold us and that its eye watches over us, unblinking... but that’s just nursery talk.’

‘Why?’

‘Because it is, Hensher! Just a myth! Supreme warriors in grey armour, waiting to sweep in and guard us? A child’s tale!’

‘Is the God-Emperor of Mankind a myth too, First Legislator?’

‘Of course not!’

‘Have you ever seen him?’

‘No!’

‘Yet you believe in him?’

‘Upon my life, sir,’ said Hanfire.

‘Do not dismiss the Snakes of Ithaka, then. They are real. They have made an undertaking to guard us, until the end of time. I believe this and so should you. If we find calamity here, if my fine detachment of guards cannot cope... if, if, if... then I will send instruction to Fuce and a petition will be made to the Brotherhood of the Snake. They are honour bound to answer.’

‘Has that ever been done?’ Hanfire asked.

‘Of course,’ said the Receiver of Wreck.

‘When?’

Hensher frowned as he thought. ‘If memory serves, it was last done six hundred and thirty-three years ago, in the time of High Legislator Ebregun.’

‘And the Snakes of Ithaka came to Baal Solock’s aid?’

‘So the annals say.’

Hanfire shrugged and sat back. He didn’t believe a word of it.

The night was warm and light. Thunder rolled like a rock around the drum of the sky, and gentle sheet lightning lit the hills with an almost constant radiance, like a flickering twilight. It was high time they stopped for the night and rested the teams of quadruped servitors drawing the coaches. First Legislator Hanfire informed the Receiver of Wreck that a hamlet called Tourmel lay just another half an hour away up the track. There, they might find lodging, or at least a space to pitch their dormitory tents.

‘The Vale of Charycon is less than an hour away beyond Tourmel. We can be on it at first light.’

This plan met with the Receiver's approval. The procession rattled on, its lanterns lit now, through the fragrant groves of musk trees and sandalwood.

And then it stopped.

Hanfire climbed down out of the fleet coach after the Receiver. The men-at-arms stood by the trackside, peering out into the dark woodland beyond the road. They had their weapons raised. Thunder rolled. In the shivering glow of the sheet lightning, they looked like statues.

'What is it?' Hanfire asked, and the Receiver shushed him. Hanfire swallowed. His unease returned. His pulse began to race.

'Ordinate Klue?' The Receiver whispered.

'Something in the trees, sir,' the soldier replied quietly.

'It's been following us for the last ten minutes.'

'Probably a lost goat or a—' Hanfire began lightly.

'Please, sir,' Hensher whispered. 'Quiet.'

One of the other soldiers suddenly raised his hand and pointed out into the dark. Klue nodded, and gestured for

his men to move in. In a wide line, they stole forward into the trees. Hensher followed them.

He glanced back at Hanfire. 'Stay with the coaches, First Legislator.'

Hanfire obeyed. In a moment, both the men-at-arms and the Receiver of Wreck had vanished into the thickets. A silence descended, stirred only by the grumbling storm and the wheezes of the servitor teams.

Hanfire walked back to the fleet coach. Coachmen and servants had climbed down from their seats, and stood around in small groups, quietly watching the woods.

Hanfire could tell many of them were scared.

In an effort to display the sort of composure that ought to distinguish a man of high office, Hanfire went back to his coach, got in, and sat down to read some tithe returns he'd brought on the trip. He took his zinc quill out of its case, and determinedly began to make annotations in the margins of the forms by the light of the coach lamps.

After a few minutes, he heard a pop from off in the distance. It sounded remarkably like the plosive sound that corks made when pulled from flasks of effervescent

Fucean wine. There was another one shortly afterwards, then two more in quick succession.

Hanfire put down his quill and climbed out of the coach. The footmen and drivers were still staring into the darkness.

Two more pops. Then an odd rattle, like pebbles rolling down the swaying blade of a push-pull saw. This was followed by another sound, muffled and far away.

‘That was a man,’ one of the coachmen said.

‘Be quiet,’ said Hanfire.

‘It was a man, sir,’ the coachman insisted. ‘He cried out.’ Hanfire turned and looked sternly at the coachman. The coachman’s name was Petters, and he had been the First Legislator’s team driver for eight years. Hanfire couldn’t bring himself to reprimand such a four-square, faithful retainer.

He didn’t have to. One look at Hanfire’s disapproving expression and Coachman Petters bowed. ‘My apologies, First Legislator.’

Hanfire smiled. ‘There’s nothing to be scared of,’ he told the people around him. ‘Did you not see the fine fellows

Receiver Hensher brought with him? I doubt the High Legislator himself boasts a troop so formidable.’

Some of them smiled. Hanfire was pleased they’d been even slightly soothed by his remark. Inside, once again, he didn’t believe a word of it.

They waited a while longer. Over the low mumble of the thunder, they heard more pops and more rattles. Then a cry again, unmistakable this time.

The retainers looked at Hanfire. He could taste their fear. ‘Take your places,’ he told them. ‘Get ready to proceed. Kester, unlock the gun chest and issue weapons to the coach riders.’

The retainers hurried to their places, some calling out orders. Hanfire turned back to look into the black thickets. More pops, four or five in a rapid, almost frantic series.

Then a smell came to Hanfire on the night air: a curious smell, dry and dead. He couldn’t place it. Years before, he’d visited Marblevault, on the edges of the Old Desert. There, the hot wind had blown out of the empty quarters,

filling the city with the desiccated, mineral stink of the desert.

It was like that, but not quite.

‘Sir, we are ready to proceed,’ Petters called down from the driving board of the fleet coach. Hanfire raised his right hand.

‘Wait. We should wait a moment longer.’

They waited. The quad-servitors snorted anxiously, pawing the turf. Behind him, Hanfire heard a rapid clicking. He thought it was one of the coach riders slotting shells into a repeating rifle.

It was the Receiver’s zinc box up in the luggage rack, the measuring device. It was clicking as fast and loud as the finger cymbals the houris of Marblevault clattered when they danced.

Hanfire cleared his throat, swallowing hard again. ‘We will proceed!’ he called out.

‘Sir!’ Petters called from his vantage up on the fleet coach. ‘Look! Look there!’

Hanfire looked. Something was moving out in the trees. Something was approaching them – a figure. A running figure.

Hanfire heard weapons cock.

‘Hold your shots!’ he cried.

The running figure came closer, tearing and clawing through the underbrush in its haste. It came into view.

It was the Receiver of Wreck.

His clothes were torn, and his hard-boned face pricked with blood by passing brambles. He ran towards Hanfire and the fleet coach.

‘What is it?’ asked Hanfire.

‘Get the coaches moving,’ Hensher said. ‘Quickly now.’

‘What’s going on?’

The Receiver didn’t answer. He ran to the rear of the fleet coach and dragged the canvas travel cover off the vox-caster set secured on the luggage rack.

‘What is going on?’ Hanfire demanded, hurrying after him.

‘Run, First Legislator,’ the Receiver said, urgently throwing switches to power up the vox-set. ‘Everyone

here must run. Now! Tell them. Order them. Run south in the name of the Golden Throne.’

‘You are scaring me, sir,’ said Hanfire.

‘Good. I mean to. I’ve seen what’s out there. Holy Terra, my men. All my men...’

Hanfire glanced back at the dark woods then looked at the Receiver. ‘What about your men?’

‘They’re dead,’ said the Receiver.

The First Legislator felt a cold, stony weight sink into his gut. ‘What precisely do you mean?’ he asked, very clearly and carefully.

‘I mean precisely that they’re all dead!’ Hensher barked.

‘Have you shit for brains, man? Are you stupid? I’m using simple bloody words—’

‘There’s no need to be offensive,’ Hanfire said, smarting.

‘I wish you had, sir,’ Hensher said.

‘I’m staying here,’ Hanfire said. ‘This is my land, my territory. I hold it in fealty to the High Legislator himself. I’ll be damned if I flee from the soil I am elected to protect.’

‘Then you’ll be damned,’ said the Receiver. He climbed into the abandoned fleet coach, and pulled a strongbox off the luggage rack. It had been sitting beside his clucking zinc device. The Receiver opened the strongbox and took out two matched firing pieces, gold-inlaid bolt pistols that had been nested in the red velvet slots within. He loaded both, quickly and surely, and handed one to Hanfire.

‘You are a brave soul, First Legislator Hanfire,’ said the Receiver of Wreck. ‘I wish I could have got to know you better.’

‘There’s still time,’ Hanfire began.

‘No. I’m afraid there’s not,’ said the Receiver of Wreck.

‘I’m so sorry, sir. I have misjudged this. We are in trouble.’

‘You mean... you and I?’

‘I mean Baal Solock.’

First Legislator Hanfire sighed and nodded. He took his place beside the Receiver of Wreck, in front of the empty fleet coach.

The primuls appeared. One or two at first, forlorn and rake-thin figures in the soft flicker of the lightning. Then more, a dozen, two dozen. They were very black and hard: spiked figures that stepped quietly out of the thickets, gleaming in the storm light. They seemed to Hanfire to have the character of hooks or thorns about them. So very glossy-black and sharp.

The Receiver of Wreck raised his pistol. Samial Cater Hanfire did the same.

‘I really am so sorry,’ the Receiver of Wreck said.

‘No need to be,’ replied the First Legislator.

They began to fire.

Behind them, drowned out by the roar of their pistols, the zinc device continued its furious clicking, and the vox-caster continued to pulse.

BROTHERS OF THE SNAKE can be purchased in all better bookstores, Games Workshop and other hobby stores, or direct from this website and GW mail order.

Price £6.99 (UK) / \$7.99 (US) / \$9.50 (CAN)

ISBN 13: 978 1 84416 547 6

- Bookshops: Distributed in the UK and the US by Simon & Schuster Books.

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