

BROTHERS OF THE SNAKE

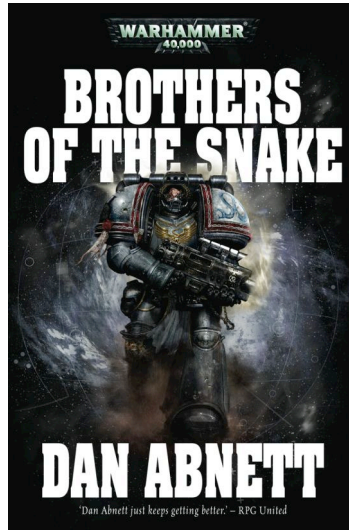
A Warhammer 40,000 novel

By Dan Abnett

In the grim darkness of the 41st millennium, the Space Marines are the supreme defenders of humanity. Genetically engineered superhumans, clad in power armour, and equipped with fearsome weapons, they are the Imperium's ultimate shock troops.

From their home planet Ithaka, the Iron Snakes constantly send out forces to protect Imperial planets from aliens, whether these be a small force of marauders or a full-scale invasion.

In *Brothers of the Snake*, Dan Abnett turns his awesome storytelling talents to the Iron Snakes Chapter of Space Marines. Follow the trials and tribulations of Brother-Sergeant Priad and Damocles squad as they train and recruit, and pit themselves in battle against orks, dark eldar and the forces of Chaos.



About the Author

Dan Abnett lives and works in Maidstone, Kent, in England. Well known for his comic work, he has written everything from the Mr Men to the X-Men in the last decade. His work for the Black Library includes the popular strips Lone Wolves, Titan and Darkblade, the best-selling Gaunt's Ghosts novels, and the acclaimed Inquisitor Eisenhorn trilogy.

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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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GREEN ROCK, AMBER sky, white heat. It was all revealed in a lurid glare that slanted in through the widening aperture of the whining hydraulic landing ramp.

The tip of the armoured ramp crunched into the mica glass dust of the landing circle. The oily piston struts hissed to a halt. Steam dissipated, and there it was. Eidon. A precious, ancient world, and one possessed of a savage, natural beauty.

So thought Petrok, Chapter Librarian, as he stepped down out of his landing shuttle and surveyed the open majesty of the land. He was framed for war, bareheaded and clean-shaven, his black locks bound up behind his deep skull, a towering form tall and broad even for a Space Marine. The edges of his gunmetal grey power armour were lined with white and red.

But he did not lack a soul. Eidon was starkly beautiful. The rocks in the landscape around the blasted landing circle were vivid green, semi-crystal, glittering in the warm, clear air. Along the skyline, jagged vents spat white fire into the air. The phosphor fires, burning up from deep seams and faults in the earth beneath, powered the foundries and smithies of venerable Eidon City.

White heat, the flames that kept the smelters and manufactories of Eidon turning in the Emperor's name.

Petrok remarked upon the majesty of the place to his lexicanium, Rodos, as they walked together down the cinder path from the landing circle, under shattered rockcrete arches, towards the main Imperial staging post, their bearers in procession behind

them. Rodos looked at him as if uncertain as to whether Petrok was joking or not.

Petrok decided to drop it. If the man couldn't see it, then there was no point explaining. Some Ithakan hearts, he knew, were too ironclad to see anything but war. Petrok wondered if the fact that he could see the beauty was his weakness or his greatest strength.

Doom had come to Eidon the year before, when the dark eldar had taken it in a single night. The action had marked the start of a renewed period of primul raids, as the foe launched out of their shadowy fastnesses and hiding places to strike into the Reef Worlds. Due to the strategic position of its base world, it was the Chapter's blood privilege to bear the brunt of all incursions into this part of the Imperium, and it had been so since records began.

Imperial Guardsmen – a massed force of three hundred thousand, mainly Leoparda stormtroops and Donorian light armour – had been deployed to Eidon in the first months to effect a liberation. They had failed, ground to a standstill.

Freeing six squads of the phratry from the ongoing reprisals against the dark eldar incursions elsewhere in the Reef Worlds, mighty Seydon, Master of the Chapter, had sent his Snakes to succeed on Eidon where the Guard had foundered. The force was led by the veteran Hero-Captain Phobor, and by Librarian Petrok.

Petrok's landing had been delayed by an orbital bombardment. By the time he and the young, tonsured lexicanium marched into the Imperial staging post, Phobor was already leading an assault on the southern walls of Eidon City.

Petrok could hear the crack and volley of the distant fighting rolling across the gritty, green slopes, and he could see the smoke pall rising, three kilometres away. The white phosphor vents on the skyline continued to rasp and blur the amber sky with their primordial heat.

The staging post was all but empty. Half a dozen sculptural white awnings, discoloured slightly by months of exposure to the heat sear, swayed in the breeze. There were rows of smaller habitents made of a darker, coarser canvas, and stacks of munitions under netting in sandbagged dugouts. Several armoured vehicles

were parked nearby. They had been painted with a lime overcoat to mask them in the green landscape. Behind the main command tents, on the lee of the hill, rows of infirmary tents stood all the way down to the roadway in the valley. Petrok could smell the rot and disinfectant drifting up from them.

Guardsmen in the livery of the Leoparda saluted as the great Librarian approached, his quite formidable lexicanium a step behind, carrying the casket containing the Librarian's holy tarot deck on a padded, satin rest. Behind them came the bearer of Petrok's ornate helmet and the bearer of the power sword Bellus. Behind that strode two more bearers swinging censors and holding fluttering pennants of the Karybdis phratry aloft. And behind them walked four more, carrying the sacred Book of Lives in its litter-like hardwood chest. All the bearers were robed, hunched homunculus figures.

One of the Guardsmen pointed at the main tent. Petrok saw how he was trembling, his face pallid and dank despite the midday heat. Without speaking, Petrok advanced towards the tent. His bearers snuffled and growled sidelong out of their cowls at the Guardsman, making him dart back.

'Enough of that!' Rodos barked at them.

Inside the tent was a vast, round table, the surface of which was a glass plate illuminated from beneath by moving lights that showed the contours and arrangement of the city and the disposition of the troops. Guard officers stood around it, and they all looked up and stepped back solemnly as the distinguished warrior and his retinue entered.

'I am Petrok of the Iron Snakes,' he said, as if any here could not know who he was.

One, a Leoparda general by his sleeve bars, stepped forward. 'Major General Corson. Welcome, great sir. Your worthy commander has already begun his assault. He requests that you make your strategic assessment as soon as possible, so that—'

Petrok held up one huge, armoured hand. 'I am well aware of what my commander expects of me. Show me the dispositions.'

Corson led Petrok to the table. The Librarian looked down at it, his sharp eyes clicking as they took in every detail, every flickering unit light-point, every drifting rune. Those eyes fed the data back into his brain, his greatest weapon, where they could be composed, considered, analysed, dissected.

He smiled.

‘Master?’ Rodos asked, noticing the expression.

‘Three point fluid dispersal along two insertions. Typical of dear Captain Phobor. Just as he did on Tull.’

Rodos gazed at the tabletop for a moment, trying to discern the pattern. ‘I see,’ he said.

He did not, and Petrok knew it. Rodos had a long way to go before he would master the techniques of memory and comparison that allowed a great tactical mind to take in all battle assessments at a glance.

But the real reason Petrok had allowed himself to smile was not his immediate recognition of Phobor’s favourite tactic. It was a simpler thing. The table reminded Petrok of the strategium board where he had learned his craft long ago from his old, beloved master, Nector. It was a whimsy, but it pleased him to enjoy it. He had, as he liked to remind himself, a soul.

‘These here?’ he asked, tapping the table-plate with his fingertips.

‘Three battalions of Leoparda, in reserve.’ The major general’s voice was hollow and scared.

‘Why?’

‘Y-your brave captain wanted them... out of the way. He was quite insistent. He didn’t want them to... to...’

‘Confuse his aim,’ said a Donorian officer smugly from behind, clearly enjoying the Leoparda’s discomfort. Petrok smiled again. He could just imagine how Phobor had roared in here, accusing the Imperial Guard officers of weakness, cowardice, incompetence, and every other sin under the suns. They had failed to discharge the holy liberation, and Phobor would make them sweat now and repent in punishment details later. No wonder the camp was terrified.

There was some muttering in the officer ranks, and Petrok frowned, still looking at the table.

‘Silence!’ Rodos growled, noticing his Librarian’s furrows. Hush fell again.

Even the bearers had stopped their growling.

Petrok put his hands on the tabletop and leaned down, looking deeper, no longer making a tactical, forebrain assessment. He was reaching out with the darker, more profound parts of his mind. He was using his gifts to see beyond the now, into the when and the if, to sense the fortunes of the battle.

A chill fell on the tent enclosure. Frost formed on the tabletop glass around Petrok’s hands. One of the junior Guard officers fainted and was hustled away out of sight. The bearers began to murmur and bark, until Rodos quieted them with a savage look.

Petrok ignored them all. He was locked with the patterns of past, present and future. He was seeing behind reality, watching the way the structures moved and meshed.

It was... perfect. Phobor’s ploy had been entirely appropriate. The vanguards and support lines were placed correctly. Eidon City would fall within four hours, with minimal losses on their part. His report would convey little to Phobor except to bolster his confidence.

Except... something. Something small and awry. Something persistent and nagging. Like a tiny pebble lodged inside the cuff of a Terminator glove, niggling away.

What? *What?*

‘Master?’ Rodos asked.

Petrok stood back.

‘This,’ he said, pointing to one light on the eastern side of the illuminated chart.

Rodos consulted the key. ‘Damocles squad, master. Captain Phobor sent them round to ensure the foe would not break from the city when it fell.’

‘A sound move, but it troubles me. There is heavy fighting there.’

‘The chart doesn’t show it.’

‘I feel what glass and electrocrystal patterns do not. Damocles is in danger.’

‘They’re but one unit,’ said another Leoparda general, speaking up. ‘Surely the overall victory is paramount? None can be spared or freed from the main assault to support them. Losses are... inevitable.’

The general fell silent as he realised he had said too much.

Petrok looked up, but there was compassion in his eyes. He knew how hard the Guardsmen had been driven to conquer the superior foe, and he knew how bitterly Phobor had railed at these men.

‘You’re right, sir,’ he said. ‘Lives must always be secondary to victory. But I will not see Ithakan souls wasted where waste is unnecessary.’

He turned, abruptly, and tugged his great power sword from the sheath the waiting swordbearer held. The bearer started in surprise. The blade, great Bellus, glowed and hummed as it breathed air again.

‘What are you doing, master?’ Rodos asked.

‘What I must. Wait here. I will render my tactical survey to Captain Phobor when I return.’

Despite their fear and their awe of Petrok, the Guard officers began clamouring to a man. Phobor had left them with one task: to greet the great Librarian and speed his assessment to the frontline. Fear for their lives made them question the huge, armoured figure in the doorway of the tent.

‘Shut them up, lexicanium,’ Petrok said softly as he strode outside, beyond the baying chatter of the soldiers.

As the Librarian made off across the green rock, towards the white heat, he could hear Rodos shouting ‘Silence!’ over and again.

IN A GREEN ROCK defile on the eastern edge of Eidon City, washed by the stink of the phosphor vents so close nearby, Brother Andromak of Damocles squad cursed Eidon in the name of every spirit he could remember as he blasted away with his plasma gun. In reply, enemy shots whickered down the gully and blew one of the

biting-snake finials off the Chapter standard he wore over his shoulders: the snake crest, double-looped.

‘Back! Back!’ snarled Brother Pindor from behind, half dragging Andromak towards the cover of the gully wall. ‘There’s no way through there!’

‘You think I don’t know!’ bellowed Andromak, fussing at his hot weapon, replacing a feed line that was about to melt out.

‘Commander!’

Brother-Sergeant Priad heard Pindor’s cry over the vox-link as he sheltered from a blistering enemy salvo behind a green boulder.

He tried to make sense of the terrain and find some gaps in the enemy fire. Curtly, he called Calignes, Illyus and Xander forward. They made a few metres before a round tore through Xander’s shoulder plate and they dived for cover. Too heavy, too much!

Priad cursed. He’d rather be back home on Ithaka, hunting water-wyrm than caught in a dead end like this.

He had cursed too when Captain Phobor had sent them east to act as a guard in case any of the dark foe tried to break out of the city as it fell. Priad had felt Damocles had been cheated of sharing the victory. He’d wanted his squad to join the main assault.

Now they were sidelined and all but forgotten and none of them could have predicted the fierce fighting they would encounter. Priad couldn’t explain it. It was as if the dark ones had already recognised their defeat and were fighting to retreat east out of the smeltery city. Damocles was the only unit in position to quell the retreat. Splinter-fire lanced around them.

Apothecary Memnes was beside Priad suddenly, dropping into cover from the rapid dash he had made. The faceplate of his helm was burnt and dented by a glancing shot.

‘Memnes,’ Priad growled. ‘Explain this!’

‘I can’t, brother-sergeant,’ the elderly warrior replied gruffly. ‘We were meant to be a safeguard. So Phobor said. It feels like we’re meeting the main force of the enemy.’

Priad fell silent. He surveyed the blistering firefight through the enhanced optics of his helmet. None had fallen so far. Andromak and Pindor were buffered in the gully. Calignes, Illyus and Xander

were pinned in the open. Natus, Scyllon and Kules were ranged out behind the position he and Memnes shared.

A hail of gunfire rained down from the steep, stone slopes of Eidon City before them.

Apart from local vox-traffic between the members of the unit, communication was down, drowned out by the static of the erupting phosphor vents. Even through his respirator, Priad could smell the heat-stink of the fire wells.

They could no longer even tell how the main assault was going. Perhaps Phobor and his squads were strewn dead across the western bulwarks of the city. Perhaps they were alone.

Priad slowed his breathing to clear his mind. He looked across at Memnes, and though he saw nothing through his visor lenses except Memnes's buckled faceplate, he could sense the old, wise face beneath it, the compassion, the support.

You will make the right decision. We trust you. Damocles trusts you, brother-sergeant.

Priad flicked out the data-slate from his thigh pouch and checked again across the detailed light map of the city's eastern approach. He studied the ground's swell, the access points, the fortifications. The Imperial planners had built it well.

And these dark eldar had taken it in a night.

Curse them! Damocles would do the same in an hour!

He slid a stud on the side of the slate and overlaid the structural data. It showed the density and thicknesses of the rock walls, the hard points and pilings of the defences. It betrayed the actual physical weaknesses of the land and buildings they fought for.

Something... something...

There was indeed something. Priad switched the overlay back and forth, matching and rematching. According to the old charts, there was a section of the east wall built of compacted rock shards rather than ferro-concrete as an expediency during construction.

Priad felt his palms dampen with anticipation inside his gauntlets. He rolled onto his backside, his shoulders against the rock, and began to copy the data from the slate into a vox-message

for Andromak. Dark eldar splinterfire stitched the green rock around him and covered Priad and Memnes with a fine, lime green dust.

‘Andromak!’ Priad rasped over the helmet vox to the squad’s standard bearer. ‘Open your data-link and stand by to receive!’

Andromak responded, a clipped atonal bark over the metallic vox. A red light on Priad’s armour cuff glowed darkly to show that the link was open, and Priad sent the vox-pict.

‘I see it, brother-sergeant!’ Andromak’s tinny voice came back. ‘You want me to hit it?’

‘Count of four, Andromak. You have the plasma gun. Bring that wall down at its weak point. Damocles, stand ready to go on five. As soon as Andromak lays in, move out and follow through.’

His voice was a robotic, emotionless growl through the comm, but the other Marines’ voices responded as one, unfaltering. Even Apothecary Memnes, who was right beside him.

Priad checked his bolter and his lightning claw. The claw sizzled in the dry air, hungry for blood. Priad prayed to the lost soul of Brother-Sergeant Raphon to watch over Damocles from his place high up in the Lost Heavens where the oceans surged forever, and the Emperor knew each man’s name, and the wyrms rose eternally for the Great Hunt.

Let us be sharp and true and fast as a harpoon, Priad thought. Raphon, help us take the foe as we would a wyrm rising from the seas, without flinching, without balking.

Make our thrust the victory thrust.

Priad made the count.

On four, Andromak swept up out of cover and sent a blazing blue spear of plasma energy down the gully with pinpoint precision. Green rock exploded in a vomit of flame, brighter and louder than the white heat crisping and fountaining along the horizon.

Damocles moved. The Space Marines broke from cover, firing as they went, gunning up at the walls.

Smoke washed across them.

They made ten metres, twenty.

Then Priad saw the wall. It was unbuckled, unbroken, still standing despite the oozing, molten burn Andromak's plasma gun had inflicted upon it.

The dark eldar, invisible in their positions above, renewed their fire.

A splinter shot clipped Scyllon's leg and spun him down.

Kules faltered as glancing shots whipped around him.

Natus went down, crying out, as his left arm came away raggedly at the shoulder in a spray of fire and blood and armour shreds.

'Cover! Cover!' Priad yelled.

They fell into cover, Memnes dragging the crippled Natus into safety behind a rock. Enemy shots filled the air around and over them, or chipped and shattered the rocks they clung behind. Crystal dust and weapon smoke washed across the approach.

Twenty metres. They had made just twenty metres, and still the wall stood.

The available cover was so slight that Priad was forced to lie face down in the green dust. He turned his head sideways and saw Illyus lying on his back next to him. A smoking hole had laid Illyus's visor open, and blood was dribbling out. Illyus had lost an eye and a cheek to a rebounding splinter round. Priad crawled over, pulling out his medical field pack, spraying jets of wound-sealing skin-wrap into the helmet hole. Illyus was still conscious. His fortitude was astonishing, even for a Space Marine. He mumbled some poor joke to his brother-sergeant, though half his face was gone.

Priad could smell blood. He thought it was Illyus's until he realised that was impossible. He glanced down and saw the raw, black-edged hole in his thigh. A splinter round had punched right through his armour and through the meat of his leg. There was no pain. Adrenaline was washing the agony away – that, and the augmented systems of his body.

Later, there would be pain, but that was not his chief concern. He hoped his Astartes physique would be enough to fight the venoms and filths with which the Dark Ones coated their weapons.

But the wound had self-cauterised. He would not bleed out, at least.

‘I smell the blood of a hero,’ said a voice through the vox-link. ‘Who’s that? Who speaks?’

Priad rolled over, daring more volleys of enemy fire from the fortifications above.

‘Who?’

There was a figure behind them on the green rockside: an Iron Snake, tall, bare-headed, swathed in a cloak, stalking forward, oblivious to the rain of fire that doused the ground around him but miraculously left him unharmed. He held a sword aloft, a power sword that sang like the shrill keening of a water-wyrm.

Petrok! It was great Petrok himself!

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.

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