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# KILL HILL

DAN ABNETT



AN IRON SNAKES SHORT STORY



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(Fifteen Years Later...)

*by Dan Abnett*

Priad of Damocles, of the Iron Snakes of Ithaka, is clad in slate grey armour, one shoulder marked with a blue coiled snake upon a white field.

Iron Snake. Indomitable. Relentless.

The hour is approaching. The final hour. The ending of the fight. The end of the undertaking. The skin of his armour is crazed with a million tiny nicks and gouges, scratches and grazes.

The place is called Bar'ad Atyok. In the voice of the greenskins, this means Kill Hill. It is the highest peak of the western continent of the world Koram Mote. Priad of Damocles, of the Iron Snakes of Ithaka, knows this for a fact. He knows it because there is not one place, not one single, lonely part of the western continent of the world Koram Mote that he has not been to, measured, cleared of enemies, and conquered. He knows Kill Hill is the highest peak because his armour's visor display tells him so, to eight decimal places. It is sixty-one metres higher than Osh Tarr ('Blood Summit'), and a mere seven metres higher than Bar'ad Onkgrol ('Marrowbone Hill'). It is demonstrably, *technically* the highest peak on the western continent of the world Koram Mote, and that is what matters.

Screamer vox-signal to Ithaka Beacon: *Extraction point, highest geo-feature/western continent.*

Greenskins await in the slipline of the rocks as he ascends. Another day on Koram Mote. More to kill, ever more to kill. Another day on Koram Mote. Except it is the last day.

Priad of Damocles, of the Iron Snakes of Ithaka, still carries his boltgun, though it has been dry of rounds since the seventh year of the undertaking, the pod-dropped ammo-hoppers finally emptied. It is too beautiful and precious a

weapon to leave behind. Priad bears his power sword, and his automated claws. They still function. He had fashioned a lance too, but he left it behind last night, rammed through the gizzard of a greenskin warboss on the lower slopes of Bar'ad Atyok.

As good a place as any to leave it.

The first of the greenskins rush him, howling rage. They are all spittle and slack, trembling lips filled with rot-peg teeth, their animal bulks painted with ochre, chalk and woad. Spears and cleavers rip at him. More tiny marks on the patina of his armour.

He has been here for fifteen years. Fifteen years. Still the greenskins haven't learned they cannot kill him. They will not *ever* kill him. If he stays any longer, the highest peak on the western continent will be the mound of greenskin corpses he has stacked up.

He meets the first, braced, armour joints locking to withstand the collision, clouts it aside, greets the second and decapitates it. Its lungs are still exhaling a war cry, and air slaps and farts out of the severed throatpipe as it pitches away.

Blood droplets in the air.

The third. A dull steel axe-head sparks off Priad's shoulder guard. His lightning claws find a throat and chest, and fork through the flesh as if through wet parchment. A fourth. His sword takes off an arm, and the axe it is holding. Priad kicks, his amplified blow casting the maimed greenskin down the slipline scree, head-over-heels. He catches the axe out of the air. It is still spinning and falling, slipping from the dead arm that is also still spinning and falling. He is moving so fast, it is as though time has slowed down to wait for him, as though the greenskin left the axe in mid-air for him to take, as if the air held it for Priad like an obedient servitor.

He catches the axe, turns it, buries it in the face of the fifth. Blood spray. On, on up the slope.

Priad of Damocles, of the Iron Snakes of Ithaka, has been here for fifteen years. To the human mind, that is a great chunk of a lifetime. To an Imperial Guardsman, that would be a long and heartless tour in hell.

To Priad, it is an undertaking, a period of occupation, a duty. Onerous, perhaps, grueling even, but in the end just another mission notch on his service history, just another action to while away a life that will be functionally immortal if violent death does not claim him.

He looks forward to seeing Ithaka again. He looks forward to the surroundings of Karybdis, the fortress moon, the Chapter House. He looks forward to seeing

his brothers in Damocles Squad. He looks forward to the Rite of Returning. These are the only consolations he permits himself, the only comforts for the vestigial humanity he allows in a mind that otherwise has been a focused weapon for fifteen years.

He looks forward to speaking to another soul for the first time since the undertaking began. The silence has been long. He looks forward to cleaning and mending his armour, to polishing out the million scratches, to servicing his boltgun, to sleeping for a term, more fully than the half-rest periods he has eked out with his cataleptic node so that he cannot be taken by surprise.

Fifteen years. *Hold the greenskin clans at Koram Mote, said the Chapter Master. Keep them occupied. Focus their attention. Stem their numbers. Buy us time to range Battlefleet Reef Star against their base worlds, and purge them.*

*How long will it take to manoeuvre the fleet into position?* Priad asked.

*Not long. Fifteen years.*

Entirely reasonable. For a moment, Priad had been concerned that it might be a significant length of time. Great Petrok's two centuries spent holding Ankylos might have become tedious by the end. Steelmen are less entertaining to hunt than Greenskins.

He's reaching the summit. One of the suns is coming up in the south. The light is yellow, sidelong. He sees a bright speck, like a low star, to the west. Running lights. Inside his visor, a chime sounds and an icon illuminates.

Two minutes out. The last two minutes of fifteen years.

There are greenskins on the summit. He has become a myth to them, a monster, hunting and killing them across the western continent for fifteen years. They want him dead, but they cannot *have* him dead. He cuts one in half with his sword, punches the face off another with his claws. A warboss looms, twice Priad's size, laughing like an ogre, a grunting infrasonic boom, axe side-swung to chop.

Huge, but just so slow. Priad of Damocles, of the Iron Snakes of Ithaka, leaps over him, drops in behind, cuts through a tree-trunk spinal column with his sword, cuts throat blubber as the warboss sprawls, vast body no longer working. Priad lops the giant, bloodied hands aside as they spasm and grope at him.

He delivers the killing blow.

'Ithaka!' he cries, the first word he has said aloud in fifteen years on Koram Mote, and the last.

The Thunderhawk powers in, hanging overhead, settling down onto Kill Hill, ramp open, thrusters screaming.

The fifteen years are done.

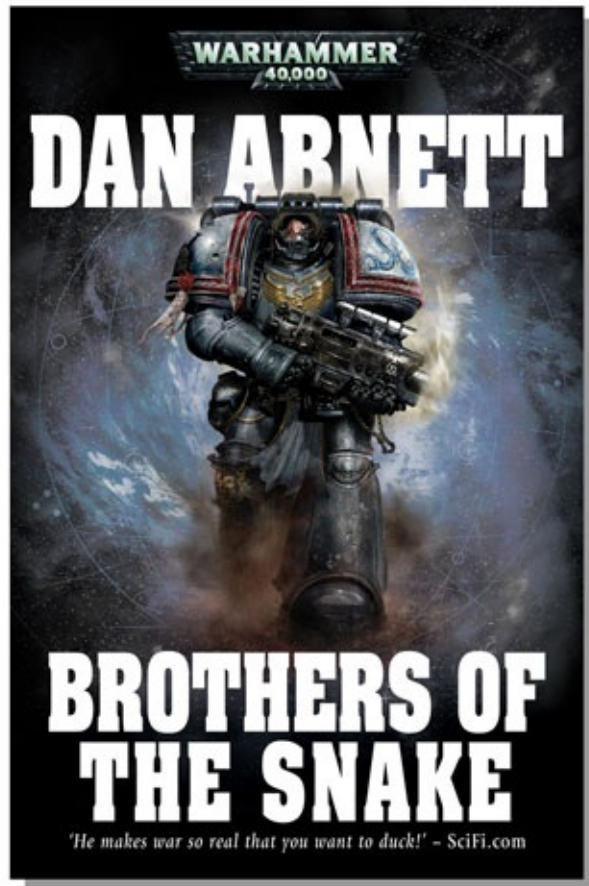
He wonders what they will have him do tomorrow.

## 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 Eisenhower and Ravenor trilogies. His previous 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, and comics for major publishers in Britain and America. He is also the author of other bestselling novels, including *Torchwood: Border Princes*, *Doctor Who: The Silent Stars Go By*, *Triumff: Her Majesty's Hero*, and *Embedded*. He lives and works in Maidstone, Kent.

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