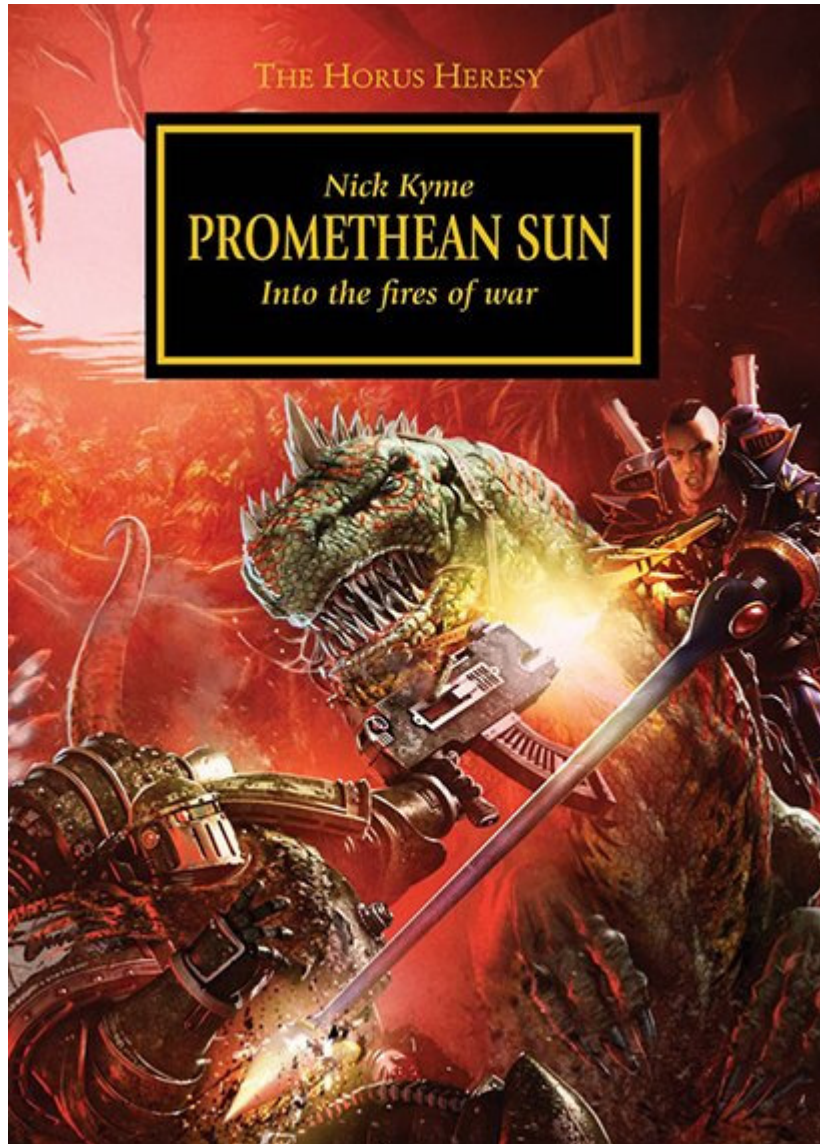


THE HORUS HERESY

Nick Kyme

PROMETHEAN SUN

Into the fires of war



The Horus Heresy

PROMETHEAN SUN

Limited Edition of 3000

Nick Kyme

(An Undead Scan v1.0)

For all true Promethean sons... burn, baby, burn!

The Horus Heresy

It is a time of legend.

Mighty heroes battle for the right to rule the galaxy.

The vast armies of the Emperor of Earth have conquered the galaxy in a Great Crusade—the myriad alien races have been smashed by the Emperor’s elite warriors and wiped from the face of history.

The dawn of a new age of supremacy for humanity beckons.

Gleaming citadels of marble and gold celebrate the many victories of the Emperor. Triumphs are raised on a million worlds to record the epic deeds of his most powerful and deadly warriors.

First and foremost amongst these are the primarchs, superheroic beings who have led the Emperor’s armies of Space Marines in victory after victory. They are unstoppable and magnificent, the pinnacle of the Emperor’s genetic experimentation. The Space Marines are the mightiest human warriors the galaxy has ever known, each capable of besting a hundred normal men or more in combat.

Organised into vast armies of tens of thousands called Legions, the Space Marines and their primarch leaders conquer the galaxy in the name of the Emperor.

Chief amongst the primarchs is Horus, called the Glorious, the Brightest Star, favourite of the Emperor, and like a son unto him. He is the Warmaster, the commander-in-chief of the Emperor’s military might, subjugator of a thousand thousand worlds and conqueror of the galaxy. He is a warrior without peer, a diplomat supreme.

As the flames of war spread through the Imperium, mankind’s champions will all be put to the ultimate test.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

The Salamanders

Vulkan - Primarch

Numeon - Captain, 1st Company and leader of the Pyre Guard

Varrun - Pyre Guard

Atanarius - Pyre Guard

Ganne - Pyre Guard

Leodrakk - Pyre Guard

Skatar'var - Pyre Guard

Igataron - Pyre Guard

Heka'tan - Captain, 14th Company

Kaitar - Battle-brother, 14th Company

Luminor - Apothecary, 14th Company

Angvenon - Battle-brother, 14th Company

Tu'var - Battle-brother, 14th Company

Oranor - Battle-brother, 14th Company

Bannon - Sergeant, 14th Company

Gravius - Captain, 5th Company

Venerable Brother Attion - Dreadnought

The Death Guard

Mortarion - Primarch

The Iron Hands

Ferrus Manus - Primarch

Gabriel Santar - Captain, 1st Company

The 154th Expeditionary Fleet

Glaivarzel - Imagist and iterator

Verace - Imagist

Imperial Army

888th Phaerian - Army division, including cadre of overseers and discipline-masters

Of ancient Nocturne

N'bel - Black-smiter of Hesiod

Breughar - Metal-shaper of Hesiod

Gorve - Plainskeeper of Hesiod
Rek'tar - Hornmaster of Hesiod
Ban'ek - Tribal king of Themis

Other

“The Outlander”

*“I don’t understand. You raised me. You taught me how to hunt with spear and bow.
I lived in your house and worked in your forge.
Yet you ask me to believe that I am not your son?
So who is my father?”*

—Vulkan of Nocturne

No one saw him die. The jungle just came alive and took him. Soundlessly, the trooper was simply gone. His slayer moved as a blur, blending with the shadows until it was lost in the heat haze. Scant light penetrated the dense leaf canopy above. Men, shouting and panicking in a tightly packed column, went for their lamp packs. It was stifling in the heady gloom. Heat thickened the air, but the troopers' bodies cooled with growing fear. Stabbing light beams sent night-beetles scurrying for dark hollows. Vine serpents hung inert in mimicry of their namesakes in the hope of being overlooked. If only the men could play dead like that and the predator would pass... Flat leaves, that were not really leaves at all, heaved and pulsed but there was no sign of the monster. Cries of panic subsided, usurped by a quiet tension as the jungle swallowed voices and stole the soldiers' resolve. The discipline-master of the 888th Phaerian Imperial Army held up a clenched fist.

Still. Stay still... and listen. If we listen, we will live.

His brocade and jacket seemed incongruous amongst his bare- and barrel-chested charges. Phaerian death-worlders were brutish, slab-muscled men used to deltas and trackless swamps. Skulls jangled on their bandoliers, the rictus mouths clacking as if in amusement. Camo tattoos striped their pugnacious faces but couldn't hide their fear. This was supposed to be their element.

Hearts beating in two thousand chests made a louder clamour than the entire jungle in that moment. The forest held its breath.

Lifting his puniter-stave, the discipline-master was about to order the advance when the cyber-hawk perched on his shoulder shrilled. The warning was too late. As if exhaling again, the jungle opened its maw and the discipline-master disappeared. One moment he was there, the next he was gone. Just like the trooper. They were being picked off.

Snap fire from a dozen rifles chased the hole left by the discipline-master but the trail was cold before the soldiers had time to realise they were aiming at nothing. Order went with him, Army overseers powerless to prevent the two thousand-strong infantry group from unleashing carnage with their auto-carbines and scatter-locks. Hot las and solid shot spat out in all directions as the men vented their fear until their mags ran dry. Sections of Rapier and Tarantula gunners added heavier firepower to the barrage. The thick jungle in the immediate vicinity became a mulched flatland in under a minute. Electro-goats and vox-amplified orders bellowed at ear-bleeding volume eventually brought the madness under control.

A dumb quietude fell, undercut by heavy breathing and nervous whispers.

The cessation was brief.

Out of the darkness came monsters. Vast beasts, their ululating cries louder than any augmented overseer, crashed into the column of men killing Phaerians by the score. On one flank, the line bent and broke as hulking, scaled things with horned snouts armoured by bony carapace drove into it. The first Phaerians to die were ground to paste, whilst those that came next were thrown into the air or gored to death. Other beasts, smaller but still many times larger than a man, bullied in

alongside the hulks. Saurian like their larger cousins, but avian in nature and aspect, they cantered and sprang amongst the shattered platoons, rending with dewclaws. With their coherency so brutally broken, the scattered Phaerians were easy meat. Hooded riders snapped off shots with long and alien rifles, their conical helmets gleaming pearlescent white.

From above, a shriek split the air and a second later the leaf canopy was broken by a flock of winged lizards. A lucky burst of rapier fired chewed up the membranous wings of one, sending rider and beast into a fatal dive, but the rest of its kindred reduced the jubilant Army gunners to a visceral mist.

The air was thick with blood and screaming as the tattered regiment consolidated into the clearing they'd made. Not so much a column now, the slowly diminishing circle of bodies offered feeble resistance to the aliens and their scaled beasts. It was no place for a last stand and soon the Imperial Army was running again, back through the darkness. Branch tendrils came alive, snagging wrists and ankles; sucking bogs opened up to swallow men whole. Insect hordes rallied, filling mouths and ears as the entire jungle animated to repel the interlopers.

"Forward for Terra!" an overseer began before his throat was speared by an alien lance. Its bearer shucked his body free with a desultory jerk before rearing over a band of wounded Phaerians on its saurian steed. The meaning in the alien's glowering gaze was clear.

Death to intruders.

It charged. A reverberant war cry shot through the jungle like lightning, calling its rider kindred, and in moments the Phaerians were engulfed by a stampede. The crack of scatter-locks and auto-carbines was brief and ineffectual. Rear rankers, far enough from the fighting to not yet be skewered, crushed or shredded, just ran. These men, these death-worlder brutes, wailed as they scrambled through the heat and the mire. Winged beasts, let loose in the rein, dived on prey at leisure, picking off morsels wherever they appeared, all to the grim satisfaction of their eldritch masters.

It was a massacre, the humans a flesh feast for the coldblooded saurian monsters.

High above, the forest was an ocean of fire. Leaves of red and ochre filled the swollen canopy like veins of blood rippling on water. Hunting pterosaurs were visible darting through the unseen fissures in the solid orange sea.

A voice echoed in the darkness of a ship's belly.

"They have engaged the Army vanguard, my lord."

A large figure near the back of the hold breathed in the scent of ash and cinder. Somewhere behind him, the last embers of a ritual fire were slowly fading. Brazier-flame lit his eyes as he looked up. In the gloom, he appeared as scaled and saurian as the monsters in the jungle below.

Abyssal deep, his reply was emphatic.

"Send in the Legion."

* * *

A heavy engine throb forced its way into the jungle. Below, where the chaos played out and the reaping of human life went unabated, a few surviving Phaerians looked up. As if by some unseen hand, the canopy parted to reveal the slab-sided base of a gunship. Its boarding ramp was down and the darkness within the Stormbird's belly lit up with a host of fire-red lenses as its occupants concluded their oaths of moment.

The first of the warriors hit the ground with a thunderous boom. Chain-blade whirring, the giant in forest-green levelled his bolt pistol.

"Rally! For the freedom of humanity and the glory of Terra!"

Like thunderbolts striking the earth, he was joined by others, armour-clad crusaders bearing the symbol of the snarling drake on their shoulder guards.

We are fire-born.

They roared as one.

"Vulkan!"

He had fought the eldar before, though not like this. Attached to the 154th Expeditionary Fleet, he'd been charged with fighting off piratical raiders, an entirely different alien breed to the jungle-dwellers. They had been succubus horrors, draped in leather and festooned with charnel blades. Emerging from space as if an autonomous part of the void had detached itself from the whole, the raiders had gutted two frigates before the XVIII Legion intervened and repelled them. Nocturneans called them "dusk-wraiths". They were phantoms, soul-thieves, and he hated them with all the ingrained cultural memory of his people.

Heka'tan had not crossed blades with the dragon-riders before this battle. These forest-bound aliens were not as technologically advanced as their cousins but they were still eldar. And they were fast.

"Cutting left." The warning vocalised through his squad's comm-feed also displayed as an icon in his retinal lens. His bolt pistol was still scanning, spitting out semi-auto at an enemy so fleet of foot his targeter couldn't keep up. Foliage split apart under the barrage.

"Burst fire."

The Legionaries stopped aiming and focussed on areas instead. A furious combined salvo brought down the rider and three of its kindred.

Heka'tan saw Brother Kaitar kneel and daub a finger of ash down his shoulder guard from the smouldering remains of one of the fires littering the clearing.

"Unto the anvil, captain."

Heka'tan smiled behind his faceplate and gave Kaitar a curt salute. He opened up the company-band feed.

"All of the 14th. Advance."

Multiple Stormbirds had broken through the forest canopy bringing warriors of the XVIII Legion to relieve the beleaguered Army. They consolidated quickly and methodically, Vulkan's sons as exacting as their father when it came to warmaking.

Several squads from Heka'tan's company came together and a wall of bolter fire lit up the jungle, chasing back the darkness and chewing up trees into kindling. The eldar vanguard withered before it. Pterosaurs took flight, spearing through gaps in the

leaf canopy, calling out vengeance. A blockade of stegosaurus emerged from behind a fleeing screen of raptor riders in an attempt to impede the Legionaries.

With clipped battle-sign, Heka'tan brought up a division of heavies.

Capacitors powered from a soft drone to a hard thrum as the conversion beamers reached fire-ready status. A crackling *foom* rushed from the aiming nozzles as the energy weapons sliced foliage apart to detonate with purpose against the stegosaurus. An explosion engulfed the beasts leaving nothing behind but wet bone chunks.

Two fingers snapping forwards in a quick *chop-chop* motion brought up the bolters again. Heka'tan led the line, holstering his pistol as the Salamanders took control of the battlefield. Slowly, the resolve of the Army units was returning. The appearance of the Legiones Astartes had emboldened them as they marched implacably through the shaken Phaerians.

Heka'tan glowered at an Army overseer who was trying to restore order in his platoon.

"Bring your men with me, soldier."

The overseer gave a sharp salute at the captain. "For the glory of Terra and the Emperor!" He turned to bellow at his men with greater vigour. Across the jungle expanse, Salamanders were wrangling control of the Army units and clearing a path. With the Legion as spear-point, the Army would move behind them in support.

Despite the death of the stegosaurus and the multiple defeats being inflicted across the two-kilometre stretch of jungle where the Salamanders had touched down, the eldar were tenacious. From the backs of their lizard-steeds, riders put up a whickering salvo of rifle fire. Pterosaurs executed lightning attacks on the Legionaries until they'd lost too many to the Salamanders' bolters. A baying stegosaurus stomped defiantly until a missile burst tore it open. As the beast died, it rolled over and crushed a pair of raptor riders.

Against the Legiones Astartes, the hit and run tactics of the eldar were blunted.

As they advanced, the jungle ahead of the Salamanders began to change. Branches entwined together, leaves and vines thickened to form a union. Within minutes an arboreal impasse had grown in front of the Legionaries. Through the retinal lenses of his battle-helm, Heka'tan could still detect multiple body traces from the enemy where they waited in the gloom. The faster-moving elements of the eldar force were already circling again. Raptor packs bounded across his peripheral vision in a colourful heat blur while pterosaur kindreds found perches in the highest trees from where they could launch an ambush.

The icon of Fifth-Sergeant Bannon flashed up alongside targeting data on Heka'tan's left retinal lens as the captain opened up a channel.

"Hell and flame, brother."

An affirmation symbol flashed once before the entire Salamander front line withdrew and fell back to suppressing fire protocols.

The Army overseer whose platoon was joined to Heka'tan's squad took this as a cue to drive the rallied Phaerians forward until the Legionary stopped him.

"Not yet," he said, holding the human back.

"We are ready to die for the Emperor's glory, my liege!"

“And so you shall, human, but step forward now and your death will serve no cause at all.” Heka’tan gestured with his chainsword at movement within the Salamanders’ ranks.

Sergeant Bannon brought six flamer squads to the front of the line.

“Hell and flame!”

His cry was answered by a pulsating wave of superheated promethium. The jungle shrivelled in the conflagration. On the flanks, incendiaries went up where the circling raptors made contact with the chains of frag grenades laid by Salamander Scouts operating unseen at the fringes of the battle zone.

Drop-ships filled the sky now, the flames savaging the jungle reflected on their metallic underbellies. Blackened tree stumps and crisped plant-life broke apart in the downdrafts from the Stormbirds’ descent thrusters. Ash laced the breeze. Everything burned.

Heka’tan’s gaze was drawn skywards as the firestorm raged. One ship, apart from the others, had yet to disgorge those within its hold.

“Father is not joining us.”

Gravius had noticed the primarch’s absence too.

Heka’tan’s fellow brother-captain was close enough to see him eyeing the smoke-wreathed heavens. His 5th Company was advancing alongside. Over four hundred Legiones Astartes to tame a simple stretch of jungle—the word “overkill” sprang to mind.

Heka’tan replied on a closed channel. “He’ll come soon, Gravius,” he said. “When he’s needed.”

But the lonely Stormbird’s ramp stayed shut.

In the ship’s hold, the heat was beyond human endurance.

The warriors within didn’t sweat. Their breathing was even in their scalloped, draconian armour. Their steady exhalations made the air redolent with the tang of sulphur.

One warrior stood apart from the rest. A serrated halberd was clasped in his gauntleted fist. Sharp dragon teeth half the length of gladii ran up the sides of his battle-helm which was held in his opposite hand. Though the deck rumbled violently with the force of the Stormbird’s engines, he remained statue-still. A crest of lava-red hair like a blade cut his bald scalp into two perfectly even hemispheres. He kept his head bowed as he addressed the giant towards the back of the hold.

“The Legion has taken to the field. Do we engage, my lord?”

The abyssal voice answered, “Not yet. Hold, as the anvil tempers them.”

Breath fogging the air through his mouth grille, Heka’tan checked his armour’s autosenes. Temperature readings were below freezing. Hoarfrost crystallising the ravaged trees made him discount a system malfunction. Ice and snow were extinguishing the fiery purge. Reacting to the assault, Bannon pressed harder and ordered his battle-brothers to open up their flamer nozzles. Hot light flared briefly but the creeping frost intensified, slowing pegging the flames back.

Promethium burned quickly. Sergeant Bannon couldn't sustain the firestorm much longer before a reload was needed. By now, frost-rimed leaves and snow-dusted trails flecked with frozen pools supplanted the fire-blackened wasteland created by the flamers. Blasted trees became crystal sculptures, wizened plant fronds were transformed into ice-bladed fans as an eldritch winter swept impossibly over the jungle. Behind the aggressive cold front, the thaw came just as swiftly. From under the snow, leaves were reborn anew. Fresh buds poked from the ash, growing from saplings to fully fledged trees in moments. The tropical heat was reasserted and the destruction wrought by the Salamanders largely undone.

There could be only one explanation Heka'tan knew of.

He hissed into the feed. "The aliens have psykers nearby. Seek them out."

Hunting the witches proved unnecessary. They emerged from the forest coursing with green lightning. A bolt struck a Legionary in the chest, announcing the psykers' presence. Tiny ripples of energy arced from the impact point as Brother Oranor quivered in electro-shock. Before his smoking armour-carcass hit the ground, his squad responded. Bolter explosions blossomed and dissipated against a psychic shield warding the eldar as the Salamanders vented their rage impotently. The twelve-strong coven psy-crafted in tandem, aggressing and defending alternately. Invisible kine-shields bloomed ephemerally with incandescent missile strikes. Flamer bursts flared against the psychic wards in lurid, oily colour, but the witches were left unscathed to unleash tendril-lightning into the Legionaries that split battle-plate with ease.

Above the roar of the storm, Heka'tan listened hard.

"Singing, brother-captain?" asked Luminor, his Apothecary.

Heka'tan nodded slowly. He saw a bare-headed witch amongst the coven. Indeed, her lips were moving with the foul canting of the song.

"It is sorcery. Close your senses to it."

Brother Angvenon was at the captain's opposite shoulder, and gestured with the bladed sarissa on his bolter. "Something is happening..."

Too late, Heka'tan saw the danger.

"Fall back!"

Spewing from the ground, a great tangling thorn snared the Salamander vanguard as the eldar used their witchery to turn the jungle against them. The supporting Army units were choked and crushed. Heka'tan lashed out with his chainsword, but the mechanism was quickly fouled and overwhelmed. The snagged teeth churned to a halt. He struggled against the binding strands but the roots and vines lashed around his limbs and pulled. Corded muscle in his arms and back bunched with the effort of trying to escape. He reached for the Army overseer but he and his men were quickly smothered. Their crooked fingers went into spasm as they died and then disappeared completely as the jungle consumed them.

A subtle change in the witch's siren song caused the serpentine roots to contract further, pulling down weapons and dragging on limbs. Though they fought it, the Salamanders were getting sucked into the earth like the human soldiers before them.

"Turn!" Sergeant Bannon rotated his flamers to engage the living jungle but all six squads were enveloped before they could release what was left of their fuel canisters.

The entire front line of the Salamanders was entangled by the choking and crushing vegetation, stalling the assault.

The whooping cry of the raptor riders cut through the air, followed by the deep droning of stegosaurus. Shadows of pterosaurs wheeling and diving from above flashed across the Salamanders' armour.

"Fight yourselves free! Retaliate!" Heka'tan broke a wrist loose and sketched a line of explosive bolter fire into the clinging morass. His honour guard did the same, chainblades and gladii hacking at the possessed foliage.

Ahead of him, he could hear the eldar returning.

This time, they were not alone.

A low bellow shook the ground under Heka'tan's feet. He paused in freeing his sword-arm to follow the source of the sound. From the arboreal depths, a pack of massive alpha-predators joined the reinvigorated eldar assault. Three times the height of a Legionary, heavily muscled with taut sinews and scaled hide, the carnodons were immense. Not as bulky as a stegosaurus, they exchanged mass for killing speed and a pair of deadly saw-toothed jaws. Cold intelligence blazed in the monsters' eyes, the eldar riders on their backs as imperious as feral jungle kings.

The predator pack broke in front of the rallying eldar, easily outpacing the smaller raptors and cumbersome stegosaurus. Even the pterosaurs, their riders circling the field like carrion-eaters, were reluctant to attack with the carnodons so close.

Ensnared, Heka'tan knew the Salamanders would take heavy losses. On the right flank, he saw Venerable Brother Attion rip free of his arboreal bonds and counter-charge one of the alpha-predators. The dreadnought slugged it with his power fist, releasing a spray of blood from the monster's snout. He tried to bring his heavy bolter to bear but the beast battered it down with its claw and the barrage chewed up earth instead of flesh.

Seizing the carnodon's neck with his power fist, Attion held its snapping jaws at bay as he attempted to wrestle it down. The pistons in the warrior's legs strained against the beast's ferocious strength. His helmeted head, not so unlike those of his brothers, showed no hint of emotion, though the retinal lenses glowed in simulation of a Salamander's fiery gaze and the servos whining in the mechanisms feeding power to his arms betrayed the struggle that was playing out between monster and man-machine.

Attion released a spit of flame from a shoulder-mounted weapon and for a moment he had the upper hand, before the carnodon's massively thick tail whipped out and swept the Salamander's legs from under him. Attion lost his grip on the creature's throat and fell.

Behind his faceplate, Heka'tan's eyes widened. He'd never seen a Dreadnought downed so easily. They were warriors-eternal, honoured with interment in a potent suit of monstrous battle armour. Before Attion could retaliate, the monster had clamped its jaw around the torso section that housed the venerable warrior's atrophied body and squeezed.

Oaths of moments and scrolls of parchment were severed by the creature's razor-sharp fangs and loosed on the heady breeze. Decades of honourable deeds, promises of valour and loyalty kept, disappeared in moments. Impossibly hard adamantium buckled and creaked under the incredible pressure being exerted by the carnodon.

Fissures ran up the torso section, widening to cracks as they met Attion's helmet. All the while, the eldar rider looked on with hard-faced detachment. The Salamander's sepulchral refuge was torn open. Beady, feral eyes regarded a Legionary awash with blood-flecked amniotic fluid. The carnodon emitted a bellow to express its prowess and hunger. Red-rimed fangs were exposed in a brutal snarl presaging Attion's fate. He had fought during the Unification Wars and had been amongst the first of the Eighteenth to be born on Terra. It was not a fitting end for such a warrior.

After it was done, the carnodon lifted its ruddy snout, not yet gorged with the small morsel Attion had provided. The monster's rider lifted its power lance, summoning the others.

Heka'tan's struggles redoubled.

Bannon's flamers were the next to bear the brunt. Several Legionaries were crushed underfoot upon impact with the carnodons, their battle-plate dented and scraped by claw marks. Another was bitten in half, the beast tossing the warrior about like a rag before the torso parted.

Superhuman blood and viscera rained down on the dead Salamander's battle-brothers, invoking their anger. The same beast went for Bannon but the sergeant had his chainblade free and gouged a ragged line along the carnodon's nose. Shed scales fell with a gushet of the monster's blood, anointing his small victory. Bannon tried to shift his body to defend against another attack but the root bindings slowed him enough for a second beast to rip off his arm. Bannon fought on with his bolt pistol, bleeding profusely and screaming defiance at the monsters.

Heka'tan was watching, still half-pinned by the jungle, when the sergeant's voice crackled over the comm-feed. His breath was ragged and speech didn't come easy for him.

"We're done for, captain..."

The lesser saurians were coming, picking off the injured, snapping at each other as they fought for dominance and for kills.

The flamers were already being butchered. Seven of the monsters roamed amongst them killing and maiming. As soon as the lesser raptors reached them...

Heka'tan clenched his teeth. Bannon was lost.

"Go with glory, brother. You will be remembered." The captain would make certain of it. His account to the iterators and imagifers would leave out no detail of the sergeant's heroism.

Bannon gave his last reply. "In Vulkan's name..."

A blistering firestorm erupted across the jungle a few seconds later. Carnodons and the more eager raptors were engulfed by it as Bannon's men detonated their flamers. The blaze swept across the front line, bathing the Salamanders in a cleansing fire, reducing the strangling roots to powder.

Of the entangled Army units in the vanguard, there was no sign. A few Salamanders lay dead or seriously injured, some half submerged by the earth.

Heka'tan shouted into the comm-feed. "Avenge them!"

Debris from the burned vegetation swathed the battlefield in sepulchre-grey. Heka'tan and the survivors powered through the dirty snowfall of drifting flakes. Ahead of them, where the flamers had given their lives, seven barrow-like mounds

stood upon the killing field. They were only dormant for a few seconds before each one collapsed in a deluge of displaced ash. Singed but very much alive, the carnodons emerged from the ash mounds and gave a collective roar as they charged the Salamanders rushing to meet them.

Only a few of Bannon's flamers had perished in the firestorm. Many, though blackened and burned, got to their feet and joined their brothers. Salamanders were a tenacious breed but it would take more than a stubborn refusal to die to defeat the monsters.

Heka'tan's rallying shout became a scream resonating with the sound of his chainblade. Targeting matrices within his battle-helm aligned over one of carnodons on a direct collision course. This was the pack leader, the one that had killed Attion. Gathering momentum with every massive stride, it carried an amount of force equivalent to a battle tank. Its fangs were as long as Heka'tan's chainblade and could shred his battle-plate with the ease of a power axe. No man, not even a Space Marine could hope to stand against such a monster...

But then Vulkan was so much more than either.

The primarch landed in front of Heka'tan like a scaled god. His battle-armour was ancient and inviolable, fashioned by his own hand. Dragon heads and fiery iconography wrought from rare quartz made it ornate and unique. Overlapping plates of deep sea green, scalloped at the edges, promoted a reptilian aspect. One shoulder guard bore the head of Kesare, a beast he had slain long ago. The other was draped with his mantle, a scaled cloak of near-impregnable firedrake hide. Behind the snarling faceplate of his drake-helm were eyes as deep as lava chasms, the heat of their intensity rising off the primarch in a palpable aura. Drake cloak flaring with the engine wash of the Stormbird above, he brandished his forge hammer and a crackle of caged lightning ran up the haft.

When he spoke it was like the shifting of the earth, as if his voice possessed the power to demolish mountains.

"I am Vulkan, and I have killed fiercer beasts!"

The carnodon slowed. Doubt flashed in its eyes.

The eldar upon its back shrieked a clipped command. Its tattooed face was bare and showed all of the alien's hate for the intruders.

Baring its fangs, the monster rallied and opened its jaw wide for a killing lunge.

Squaring his massive armoured shoulders, Vulkan gripped his hammer two-handed and swung. He was fast, faster than anyone wielding such a weapon had any right to be, and it took the eldar and its mount by surprise. The impact was spectacular. A grisly fusion of bone chips, brain matter and blood exploded where the carnodon's head had been. A tremor rippled from the blow, pushing Heka'tan and the onrushing Salamanders to their knees. It fed outwards in an expanding Shockwave hitting the other carnodons, who reeled and careened into one another before crashing to the ground. The darting raptor packs were flattened. Riders tumbled. Momentum carried the beheaded monster in its death throes, carving a deep trench in the earth that became its grave.

Vulkan ignored it and drove at the monsters that still drew breath.

Seven warriors armoured in drake scale, bearing blades and bludgeons each unique in design, joined him.

He roared to the Pyre Guard, "Slay them!"

The hammer hand swung again. Three more times, lightning erupted from the god-weapon, equalled by the tally of carnodon bodies left broken and dead upon the charnel ground.

Inspired by their liege-lord, the Salamanders cut the rest apart.

Glory-fire burned in Heka'tan's blood. To fight upon the same field as the primarch was a singular honour. He felt emboldened and empowered. The anvil had broken some, but he was alive and tempered into unbreakable steel. By the time it was over, his throat was hoarse and his heart sang with the litany of war.

He caught Gravius' eye across the shattered corpses of the aliens.

"Unto the anvil, brother."

Heka'tan saluted. "I told you he would come. Glory to the Legion."

"Glory to Vulkan," Gravius replied.

The last of the eldar fled, swallowed by the jungle.

Heka'tan watched them go. His gaze went to Vulkan. How often had the primarch saved his sons from certain destruction, turned the tide and fought on when all had seemed lost? The Salamanders were one of the smallest Legions but they had served the Great Crusade with pride and honour. Heka'tan could not imagine a time when it would not be so. Vulkan was as stalwart and unshakeable as the earth. He would ever be their father. No feat would ever be too much for him, no war too great that he could not triumph.

His heart swelled.

"Aye, glory to Vulkan."

Numeon was pulling the blade of his halberd from the skull of a dying stegosaur. "We should pursue them, my lord. Varrun and I can ensure they do not return," he promised with a feral look. He'd removed his battle-helm and allowed the heat of the jungle to prick at his bare, ebon skin.

Vulkan held up his hand without meeting his champion's eye. "No. We'll make our landing zone here and consolidate. I want to speak to Ferrus and Mortarion first. If this campaign is going to succeed, and there still be a planet left to bring back to the Imperium, we must work together. The earth here is rich and will yield much for the Crusade, but only if it isn't tainted by the war to bring One-Five-Four Four to compliance."

It was a cold, methodical way of differentiating a world. It meant the fourth world to be brought to compliance by the 154th Expeditionary Fleet.

"I do not think they see it that way."

They were standing apart from the rest, with only the mute Varrun within earshot. Around them, the battlefield rang with cold, sporadic barks of bolter fire as xenos survivors were executed. More distantly, the Army units were being recalled by discipline-masters and an impromptu audit taken of their numbers.

Now Vulkan met Numeon's gaze. "Speak your mind."

"The Fourteenth treat us with contempt and the Tenth as minor Legionaries. I see no coalition between them and the Salamanders, at least not one that comes easily."

“We cannot isolate ourselves, Numeon. Mortarion is simply proud. In us he sees a force as implacable as his own Death Guard, that is all. Ferrus is a friend to this Legion and to me, but... well, let us just say my brother has always had a zealous streak. It sometimes clouds his mind to anything but the creed of the Iron Hands.”

“Flesh is weak.” Numeon’s lip curled as he repeated the doctrine of the X Legion. “They mean us. *We* are weak.” The champion’s demeanour suggested he wanted to prove otherwise but the Iron Hands were far from a reckoning, off towards the eastern peninsula of One-Five-Four Four’s primary desert continent.

Vulkan interrupted. “They mean anyone who is not of the Tenth. It is just pride. Are you not proud of your Legion?”

Numeon saluted sharply across his breastplate. For a Salamander, he carried the rigidity of one of Guilliman’s own sons quite convincingly. “I am fire-born, my liege.”

Smiling, Vulkan raised his hands to show he’d meant no disrespect to the veteran.

“You have been in my Pyre Guard since the beginning, Numeon. You and your brothers met me on Prometheus. Do you remember?”

Now the dutiful warrior bowed. “It is forever ingrained in my memory, lord. It was the greatest moment of the Legion to be reunited with our father.”

“Aye, as it was for me. You of all the Firedrakes are pre-eminent, my first-captain, my equerry. Do not take the words of the Tenth to heart, brother. In truth, they only desire to prove their loyalty and worth to their father, as we all do. Despite his gruff exterior, Ferrus has a great respect for his fellow Legionaries, especially the Eighteenth. You burn with the passion and fury of the Salamanders.” Vulkan returned a feral grin, evident in the tone of his voice. “What is the coldness of a Medusan mind compared to that, eh?” He clapped his hand on Numeon’s shoulder but the primarch’s bonhomie was fleeting. “Earth, fire and metal—we of the Eighteenth are forged strong. Never forget that.”

“Your wisdom humbles me but I have never understood your temperance and compassion, my lord,” Numeon confessed.

Vulkan frowned as if about to impart some hidden truth he had always harboured when his expression changed and hardened. He broke eye contact.

Numeon was about to question again when Vulkan raised his hand for silence. The primarch’s gaze was penetrating as he looked into the trees around them. Though Numeon could not discern what had suddenly got his father’s attention, he knew Vulkan’s sight was keener than any of his siblings. The tension in Vulkan’s posture that had transferred to his Pyre Guard quickly ebbed when he relaxed again.

He gestured seemingly at the air. “Show yourselves. Have no fear, no harm will befall you.”

Numeon cocked his head in confusion. His red eyes flared at the first of the humans emerging from the forest. He brandished his halberd in front of his primarch protectively. Odd that he hadn’t detected them.

“Be at ease, brother,” Vulkan counselled, approaching the terrified jungle dwellers. They had come from hidden places deep within the trees, stepping out from shadowed boles or lofty nests. Some appeared from the earth itself, emerging from subterranean refuges. Tribal tattoos marked their faces and their bodies were swathed in apparel made from fire-baked bark and the stitching together of leaves. Though

they had the aspect of beasts, they were definitely human. And only now the battle was over did they choose to show themselves.

Vulkan took off his helmet, a snarling drake's head with an immense flame-like crest. Honour scars described a long legacy of heroic deeds upon a face the colour of onyx, which also possessed a softness belied by the primarch's fearsome appearance. "See?" he said to a boy-child brave enough to stand his ground. "We are not monsters."

Confronted by the giant, diabolic primarch, the boy's terrified expression suggested he thought otherwise.

Behind him, the other humans of his tribe cowered.

Though he kneeled, Vulkan was much taller than the child. The primarch stowed his forge hammer on his back and came to the boy with open palms to show he wasn't holding a weapon. Around him, the rest of the Pyre Guard had gathered. Numeon had summoned the others with Promethean battle-cant, known only to the Firedrakes, and they all watched apprehensively.

Sworn to protect the primarch, they were warriors apart. Terran-born, they did not always fully appreciate the earthy sentiments of the Nocturnean culture in which Vulkan was raised, but they knew their duty and felt it in their genhanced blood.

Emboldened by the curious boy, more human refugees started to appear from out of the jungle. Hundreds joined the few score that had come initially. After a brief, stunned silence they were wailing and moaning piteously. Their words were hard to make out but one kept being repeated over and over. *Ibsen*.

So this place had a name after all.

Vulkan stood up to survey them and the liberated humans backed off instantly.

"What should we do with them, my lord?" asked Numeon.

Vulkan regarded them a moment longer. There were many hundreds now. Some of the Army units had already begun trying to corral them, while remembrancers swarmed throughout the landing zone, documenting and interviewing now that the area was deemed safe.

A woman, perhaps the brave boy-child's mother, approached Numeon and began babbling and crying. The native's language was some bastardised blend of eldar-speech and proto-human word forms. Nearby xeno-linguists within the invasion force were struggling to discern meaning but made assumptions that, while distressed, the people were pleased to have been freed from the yoke of the aliens.

She scratched at the Pyre Guard's battle-plate and he looked as if he was about to forcibly remove her when a glance from his primarch stayed Numeon's hand.

"It is only fear. We have seen it before." Vulkan gently pulled the hysterical woman away from his equerry. Touched by the primarch's aura she calmed enough for an Army trooper to take her away. A little farther away, a picter flashed as one of the remembrancers recorded the moment for posterity. "You."

The man quailed as Vulkan addressed him. "M-my lord?"

"What is your name?"

"Glaivarzel, sire. Imagist and iterator."

Vulkan nodded. "You will surrender your picter to the nearest discipline-master."

"S-sire?"

“No one must see that we are saviours, Glaivarzel. The Emperor needs us to be warriors, to be death incarnate. To be anything less would endanger the Crusade and my Legion. Do you understand?”

The remembrancer nodded slowly and gave his picture to one of the Phaerian discipline-masters who had overheard the exchange.

“When this war is done, you have my sanction to come and speak with me. I will tell of my life and the coming of the father. Will that be sufficient recompense for the loss of your images?”

Glaivarzel nodded then bowed. For an iterator, he had abruptly lost the ability of speech. When he’d been ushered away, Vulkan turned back to Numeon.

“I have seen fear,” he told him. “On Nocturne, when the earth split and the sky cried tears of fire. That was real fear.” He swept his gaze across the tribespeople as they were slowly moved away. “I should see suffering.” His face became hard and unyielding. “But how can I feel compassion for a race whose hardships do not nearly compare to those endured by my own people?”

Nonplussed, and for want of something better to say Numeon replied, “I am not from Nocturne.”

Vulkan turned from the disappearing refugees. A sigh escaped his lips in what might have been an expression of regret. “I know... So show me then, Numeon, how are we to liberate this world and ensure its compliance despite the feelings of our brother Legions?”

A gruff and belligerent voice provided narration to a sweeping hololith image of a desert continent. Clutches of hard grassland and spiked vegetation were scattered across the sparse landscape. Overhead, the glare of a forbidding sun bleached the sand white. Monuments and domes made of baked brick rose up out of the dunes. A cluster of these structures encircled a massive menhir sunk into a natural depression. Here the sweeping image stopped and magnified. Runes described the outer surface of the menhir, which was smooth and alien in design. Faintly glowing crystals, akin to giant oval rubies, were set at precise intervals and interlinked by swirling knot lines emanating from, and interwoven within, the core runes.

“The aliens draw their psychic power from these nodes.”

The image blinked out and a hololith of the Tenth primarch replaced it.

Ferrus Manus was a metal giant clad in jet-black power armour. His homeworld of Medusa was an icy wasteland echoed in the chilling silver of his pupil-less eyes and the glacial coldness of his knife-scraped flesh. Vulkan’s brother went unhooded, displaying defiantly a battle-worn face framed by black hair that was closely-cropped to his scalp. Ferrus was a furnace constantly stoked; his anger was quick to rise and slow to abate. He was also called “the Gorgon”, allegedly on account of his steely glare that could petrify those it fell upon. A less fanciful explanation arose from his planet’s namesake and a tie to a Terran legend of ancient Mykenaea.

“Our augurs have detected three such nodes in existence across the surface of One-Five-Four Four on the desert, ice plain and jungle continents—”

A low and hollow voice interrupted. “Our mission is known to us, brother. We have no need of reiteration.”

A second primarch entered the war council and stood alongside Ferrus Manus, although the two were many leagues apart at opposite ends of the planet. It was a strange juxtaposition, one wrapped by arctic blizzards, the other bathed in the glow of a fiery sun. Mortarion of the Death Guard was tall and thin but his presence, even via hololith, was undeniable.

“What I want to know is why we three are here to take this world, three Legions attached to the same expeditionary fleet—what makes it worthy of my attention?”

The self-proclaimed Death Lord had a grim aspect. His gaunt, almost skeletal features were reminiscent of a mythic figure recalled from archaic lore. He was the reaper of souls, the harvester of the dead, the thing that all men dread as it comes to claim them in the night hours, shrouded by a funereal cloak as grey and ephemeral as life’s final breath. Mortarion was all of these things and more. While the Night Lords employed fear as a weapon; he *was* fear incarnate.

Ashen, glabrous skin was suggested behind the grille that masked the lower half of his face. A cloud of vaporous gas encircled his head in a pallid miasma, the captured fumes of lethal Barbarus, and was exuded from the confines of his stark war panoply. Shining brass and naked steel clad his form. Much of the detail was obscured by the flowing grey cloak that pooled voluminously over Mortarion’s angular shoulders like smoke, but a pitiless skull was still visible upon the breastplate. Poison censers ringed his towering form like a bandolier of grenades. Like his armour, these too carried the caustic air of the primarch’s homeworld.

Vulkan stooped to grasp a fistful of earth. Brandishing it to the other primarchs, he allowed the soft loamy soil to drain through his gauntleted fingers.

“Earth,” he uttered simply. “There is a seam of valuable ore, gemstones too numerous to count beneath its surface. I taste it in the air and feel it under my feet. If we force compliance of One-Five-Four Four quickly we can preserve it. A protracted war would see any potential geological bounty significantly reduced. That is why, brother.”

Ferrus spoke up, the irritation in his voice obvious, “And it is why the nodes must be tackled simultaneously and upon my order.”

A tired sigh rasped from the Death Lord’s lips. “This posturing wastes valuable time. The Fourteenth must cover more ground than their fellow Legions.” Mortarion unclasped his mouth grille to grin at the Gorgon. It was at once a mirthless and forbidding gesture, not unlike the rictus mouth of a skull. “And besides, Vulkan and I know who is in command. There is no need to feel threatened, Ferrus.”

Fraternal rivalry existed between all the primarchs. It was a natural consequence of their shared genetic origins but the Iron Hand and the Death Guard felt it more keenly than most. Each prided himself on his Legion’s endurance but while one looked to steel and machinery to overcome weakness, the other valued a more innate and biological resilience. As of yet, the virtues of both remained untested against one another.

Ferrus folded his arms, silver like flowing mercury, but did not bite at the obvious lure. “Is your task over-difficult, brother? I had thought the natives of Barbarus to be of sterner stock.”

Mortarion's eyes narrowed and his grip on his massive scythe tightened. "The Legion leaves death in its wake, brother! Come to the ice fields and see for yourself how war should be conducted."

Unable to cool his molten core any longer, Ferrus snapped. "Your ravages are already known to me, Mortarion. We must leave some of this world intact if it is to be of use afterwards. You and your kind may thrive in a toxic waste but the settlers who follow us will not."

"My kind? Your own Legion's progress is as slow and flawed as the machines they covet. What of the desert, is it won?"

"It is intact. Any warmonger with Legiones Astartes at his call can unleash destruction, but your tactics are extreme. One-Five-Four Four will not become a barren, lifeless rock under my charge."

"Brothers..."

Both turned in mid-dispute to regard Vulkan.

"Our enemy is without, not within. We should reserve our anger for them and them alone. We each occupy three very different theatres of war. Different approaches are needed and each of us must be the judge of that. Our father made us generals, and generals must be allowed to lead."

Mortarion smiled thinly.

"Temperate as ever, brother."

Vulkan chose to take that as a compliment.

"But Ferrus is also right. We are here to liberate and make this world compliant, not turn it to ash. One hell-planet lives in my nightmares—I have no desire to add another to it. Lighten your hand, Mortarion. The scythe does not need to fall so harshly." He turned to Ferrus Manus. "And you, brother, trust in us just as our father did when he charged us with bringing humanity back from the darkness of Old Night."

Ferrus glared, slow to concede the point, but then nodded. The embers of his anger still burned. Where Vulkan was as the earth, solid and grounded; the Gorgon was volatile like an arctic volcano on the constant verge of eruption. He calmed reluctantly.

"You have a lyrical soul, Vulkan. I wonder should it not be a little harder."

They were of a similar cast, the Iron Hand and the Salamander. Both were forgesmiths but where Vulkan valued beauty and form; Ferrus Manus was chiefly concerned with function. It was a subtle but telling difference and one that left them a little divided sometimes despite their close friendship.

"Other than enlightenment, what else have you found in the jungle?" asked the Gorgon.

Vulkan gave his report. "My Legion has encountered the eldar. Few in number, they employ ambush tactics and have slaved saurian creatures to their will. There are also witches amongst them. Our Army cohorts have been diminished and my sons have taken minor casualties but we are closing on the node."

Giving only the slightest indication of displeasure at the news of Legionary deaths, Ferrus added, "We too have fought creatures on the dunes, chitinous sand-

burrowers and giant hela-lizards. The eldar ride them as we would ride a jetbike or speeder.”

Offering his own account, Mortarion said, “I severed the neck of an ice-serpent abroad on the tundra, and there are shag-hided mastodons bent to the aliens’ service.”

Vulkan asked, “Do you think the beasts are all native to the planet or did some arrive with the xenos?”

“It hardly matters,” said Mortarion. “They may have been created through the means of some aberrant alien technology.” His amber eyes glared. “All I need to know is where they are.”

The primarch of the Iron Hands considered all of this as he tried to build an accurate picture of the war zone. “These eldar are not as technologically advanced as some I have fought.” He scowled. “It makes me wonder how the indigenous population here was so easily enslaved.”

“We found some humans living within the jungle continent,” said Vulkan. “A few thousand so far, but I believe there are more. I did not see warriors in their tribes. I suspect they are a simple people in need of our protection.”

“Regardless, it is the eldar we must concern ourselves with.” Mortarion’s tone became dismissive. “There are natives on the ice plains too, but my attention is fixed elsewhere.”

Contempt for the weakness of the humans exuded from the Death Lord’s every pore. Vulkan felt ashamed that his own feelings towards the jungle dwellers were not so dissimilar.

“For once, I am in agreement with my brother,” said Ferrus. He turned to Vulkan. “This world has been infiltrated utterly. No corner of it, however remote, is clean of the alien’s taint. Until that is no longer the case, we cannot afford to have our purpose divided. Be mindful, brother, but let the humans look to their own protection. That is all.”

The hololith faded, indicating that was an end to the conversation. Vulkan bowed his head to Ferrus’ order and found himself inside an Army command tent with Numeon waiting patiently at the threshold.

“What news?” Vulkan’s mood was sour.

The equerry saluted with all the starched formality he was known for and took three steps into the tent. “Advance Army scouts have found the node, my lord. They are transmitting coordinates as we speak.”

Vulkan was already walking from the tent and into the open. Phaerian troopers at guard outside hurried out of the primarch’s path. “Ready the Legion. We march at once.”

Numeon followed in lockstep. “Shall I summon the Stormbirds?”

“No. We go on foot.”

Outside, some of the Army cohorts were building pyres stacked with the alien dead. Curiously, small groups of natives ringed the edges of the vast fires sobbing into one another’s arms. They had lost everything, their lives and their homes, and were caught up in a war they didn’t understand.

Numeon had said he was compassionate. All Vulkan felt was alone. Even amongst his brothers he felt isolated, save for Horus. A close kinship existed between

them. There was something very noble and selfless about the Warmaster. He fostered loyalty in those around him like no other. Charisma bled off him in an almost palpable aura. Perhaps that was why the Emperor had chosen him and not Sanguinius to be Warmaster. Vulkan saw him as an older sibling, one whom he looked up to and could confide in. He wished dearly that he could speak with him now. Vulkan felt his humours out of balance and he longed for Nocturne again. Perhaps the long war had changed him. His expression hardened.

“We will burn the eldar out.”

As he watched the twisting smoke tendrils rise into the sky, Vulkan was taken back to a time before he knew of stars and planets, and of the warriors in thunder armour who were destined to become his sons.

Strong hands worked the fuller, drawing out the glowing orange metal and shaping it to the black-smiter’s will. There were calluses on those hands, testimony to the long hours spent toiling before the flame. Rough fingers gripped the hammer’s worn haft as it rose and fell, beating the fire-scaled iron until it made a taper. The black-smiter added a second taper to the first and the metal became a point.

“Pass me the tongs...”

As tough as cured leather, the black-smiter held out a bare hand. Beneath the soot, it had a healthy tan from time spent tracking the Arridian plain for gemstones. He took the proffered tool and clamped it around the spear-point. Steam erupted in a hissing cloud as the hot metal touched the surface of the water in the drum. It reminded the son of Mount Deathfire, snoring loudly in her sleep and choking the sky with her smoky breath.

“She is the heart blood,” his father had told him once. He remembered he was barely a year old and already taller and stronger than most of the men in the town. Standing upon the mountain’s flanks they had watched her vent and spew her wrath. At first the boy had wanted to flee, not out of fear for himself—his will was as iron in that regard—but because he was scared for his father. N’bel had quietened the boy with a gesture. Holding his palm flat against his chest, he bade his son do the same. “Respect the fire. Respect her. She is life and death, my boy,” he had said to him, “Our salvation and our doom.”

Our salvation and our doom...

Such was the way of things on Nocturne.

In the old tongue it meant “darkness” or “night”, and it was every inch the benighted world but it was the only home he had ever known.

After a few moments, the billowing steam from the sundered metal ebbed and N’bel lifted it out of the water drum and presented it to his son.

It was still incredibly hot, the glow of the forge not yet faded.

“See? A new tip for your spear.” He smiled and the old smiter’s face creased like leather. There was a rime of soot around his soft eyes and his thinning cheeks were powdered with ash. His scalp was shaved and there were branding scars on the bald pate. “You’ll kill plenty of sauroch on the Arridian plain with it.”

The son returned the old man’s smile. “I could have done it myself father.”

N'bel was cleaning his tools, smacking off the fire-scale and brushing away the soot. It was dark in the forge, all the better to see the temperature of the metal and gauge its readiness. The air was thick with the scent of burning and thickened by the heat. Far from oppressive, the son found the conditions invigorating. He liked it here. He felt safe and a measure of solace he couldn't emulate anywhere else on Nocturne. His father's tools hung in racks upon the walls, only hinted at in the gloom, and lay upon benches and anvils of all sizes and shapes. The son had strong hands, and here in the forge and workshop was where he could put them to best use.

N'bel kept his eyes on his work and didn't notice the son's brief reverie. "I am a humble black-smiter. I don't possess the skills of the metal-shapers nor do I have the wisdom of an earth shaman, but I am still your father and a father likes to do things for a beloved son."

The son frowned and approached the old man tentatively. "What's wrong?"

N'bel kept cleaning the tools for a short while longer before his arms sagged to his sides and he sighed. He set the hammer down atop the anvil and looked his son in the eye.

"I know what you have come here to ask me, lad."

"I..."

"You don't need to deny it."

The pain at his father's discomfort was etched on the son's face. "I'm not trying to hurt you, father."

"I know that, but you deserve the truth. I am just afraid of what it will mean when you have it."

The son held N'bel's shoulder and cupped the older man's chin. It was like a child's in his immense hand and he towered over the black-smiter.

"You raised me and gave me a home. You will always be my father."

Tears welled in N'bel's eye and he wiped them away as he broke from his son's embrace.

"Follow me," he said, and they walked to the back of the stone forge. For as long as the son could remember there had been an old anvil sat in the gloom there. It was shrouded in a leather tarp that N'bel ripped away and cast to the floor. Rust colonised the surface of the massive anvil and it shocked the son to see such disrepair. N'bel barely noticed as he braced his shoulder against the ruddy metal side. He strained and the anvil scraped forwards a fraction. "I didn't raise a giant of a son just so I could still do all of my own heavy lifting," he said wryly. "A little help for your old man?"

Ashamed he'd just been looking on, the son joined him at once and together they moved the great anvil aside. He barely felt the weight, the strength in his arms was incredible and extended to every muscle and sinew in his body, but the simple act of working together with his father was soul-enriching.

N'bel was sweating when it was done and wiped a hand across his brow. "I'm sure I used to be stronger," he gasped. The levity was shortlived as he pointed to a square recess sunken into the floor. "There..." It was thick with soot and dust, but the son realised at once that it was some kind of trap-door.

"Has this been here all the time?"

"I bless the day you came to us," said N'bel "You were, and still are, a miracle."

The son looked at his father but he gave nothing away. He knelt down and felt around the edges of the square depression in the floor. His fingers found purchase and in a feat of strength that no other man in the township could manage, the son lifted the great stone slab into the air. Despite its weight, he set it down carefully and then stared into the dark passageway it revealed retreating back into the earth.

"What's down there?"

"Ever since I've known you, you've never shown fear. Not even the drakes below the mountain gave you pause."

"I fear this," he admitted openly. "Now I'm faced with it, I'm not sure I want the truth."

N'bel placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. "You will always be my son... always."

He took his first steps into the darkness and found a stone stairway underfoot that clacked loudly with his every footfall. As the son went deeper the edge of something hard and metallic began to resolve out of the blackness.

"I see something..."

"Do not fear it, lad."

"I see..."

Echoing through the walls of the forge, a low reverberant bellow stopped the son's next faltering step. It was a warning. Up in one of the town's watchtowers a horn was being blown. Even deep within the forge, N'bel and his son heard it.

Relief swept through the son as he abandoned the darkened hollow and returned to the forge's gloomy light above.

"Truth will have to wait," he said.

N'bel was scowling, reaching for his spear, his favoured hammer already tucked into his tool belt. "Dusk-wraiths."

Every tribe on Nocturne had its legends about them. They were the night-fiends, the stealers of flesh, the dark spectres, a waking nightmare brought to life when the skies became as crimson and the clouds boiled overhead. Few who'd seen them had lived and even those rare individuals were forever broken by the experience. Horror stories given form, they were alien slavers who stole people from their homes and earned them away on their ships into the endless dark. None who entered that place ever returned.

The son snarled. "Are we to be forever hunted?"

"It is the anvil, that is all," said N'bel. "Endure it, be tempered by it and become stronger."

"I am already strong, father."

N'bel gripped his son's shoulder. "You are, Vulkan. Stronger than you know."

Together, they ran from the forge and out into the town.

A sanguine sky reigned over Hesiod and rust-rimed clouds billowed and crashed in the bloody heavens. Ash and smoke laced the breeze and a pregnant heat lay heavy on the air like a mantle of invisible chain.

“Hell-dawn, when the ash banks break and the sun burns,” cried N’bel, pointing to the sky. “It heralds the blood. Every time at this inauspicious hour they come.”

In the town square there was a panic. The people hurried from their homes, clutching what meagre belongings they could to their chests, clinging to their loved ones. Some were screaming, afraid of what they knew was coming and terrified that this time they would be dragged into the endless dark.

Breughar, the metal-shaper, had emerged out of the throng and was trying to restore calm. He and several of the other men were shouting for the rest of the people to take refuge. The horn bayed on, driving the fearful to an ever greater frenzy.

“This madness must end,” breathed Vulkan, appalled at the terror now seizing his tribe. These were a strong people who endured the ravages of the earth when the ground split and the volcanoes cast fire and darkness into the sky. But the dusk-wraiths, the fear they evoked was beyond reason.

As his father went to help Breughar and the others, Vulkan ran across the square to a vast pillar of rock. It was the burning stone, where the earth-shaman went to meditate when the sun was at its zenith. It was unoccupied at that moment and Vulkan scaled the sides of the monolithic stone without slowing to reach the peak in seconds. Crouching on the flat plateau, he had a good view of the lands beyond Hesiod.

Dark, orange-flecked smudges marred the horizon line where distant villages blazed. Oily smoke cascaded into the sky from where they’d been put to the torch and their inhabitants burned alive. Nomadic sauroch drovers fled as their herds were butchered. Dactylid carrion-eaters turned lazy circles, black against the blood-red sky, waiting for any morsels the dusk-wraiths might leave them.

The drovers were oblivious to the creatures. They were running for Hesiod’s walls but Vulkan realised grimly that they’d never make it.

Behind them the dusk-wraiths taunted and shrieked. Their bladed skiffs hovered above the plain, jagged silhouettes against the red of Hell-dawn. Though he was too far away to hear it, Vulkan saw one of the drovers cry out as he was pinioned by barbed nets before a half-naked warrior-witch impaled him on her spear. Others, tall, lithe creatures wearing segmented armour the colour of night, cast javelins from the backs of their machines as they revelled in the hunt.

When they were finished with the nomads and the villages, they would come to Hesiod.

Vulkan clenched his fists. Every Hell-dawn was the same. When the sky was shot red with blood, the shrieking would begin and the dusk-wraiths would come. No man should be hunted, not like that. No son or daughter of Nocturne should be made to suffer as the drovers would. Life was hard enough. Survival was hard enough.

“No more.”

Vulkan had seen what he needed to.

He leapt off the rock, landing in a crouch. N’bel ran to him, breathless with his efforts of rushing the weak and the vulnerable to safety.

“Come on. We must hide too.”

Vulkan’s face was stern as he rose to his feet and looked down on his father. “While we hide, others suffer.”

N'bel gasped a reply. "What choice do we have? We stay and we all die."

"We can always fight."

"What?" N'bel was nonplussed. "Against the dusk-wraiths?" He shook his head. "No, son, we would be butchered like those herds out on the plain. Come!" He seized Vulkan's arm but was shrugged off.

"I will fight."

All around them, the people of Hesiod were disappearing into secret alcoves and subterranean caves below the town. It would be the same across all of Nocturne. At Themis, Heliosa, Aethonian and the rest—the seven chief settlements of the planet would flee to their hollows in the earth and close their eyes to the nightmare. There they would stay while the dusk-wraiths ransacked and slaughtered, destroying everything they had fought and died to create.

"No. I'm pleading with you now. Hide like the rest of us."

Vulkan walked away, headed for the forge.

N'bel called after him, "Where are you going? Vulkan!"

He went inside the forge without answering. When he emerged he had two stout smiting hammers slung over either shoulder.

"The blood of these people may not flow in my veins but I am still one of them, I am still of Nocturne. And I would see it tortured no more."

Faced with the fury of his son's righteous anger, N'bel's despair turned to resolution. He hefted his spear.

"Then I won't let you stand alone."

To object or deny him would be to insult his father and Vulkan was not about to do that. Instead, he nodded and an unspoken understanding passed between them. Though they might not share the same blood, they would always be kin. Whatever was below the trap-door in the forge, it would not change that.

Together they walked to the middle of the square and stood facing Hesiod's gates.

Beyond, the shrieking of the dusk-wraiths grew louder.

"I have never been prouder of you than I am right now, Vulkan."

"When this is over, I want you to seal the trap-door shut. I never want to know what is down there."

"I do not think we will get the chance, son," N'bel turned to him, "but if we live through this, what about your origins? Don't you want to know where you came from?"

Vulkan glanced down at the cracked, volcanic earth. "These are my origins. This is where I was born. It is all I need to know, father."

Out of the corner of his eye, Vulkan saw Breughar. He carried his two-handed hammer across his brawny chest and the torcs knotted in his thick beard clanked as he moved. Until Vulkan had arrived in Hesiod, Breughar had been the largest and strongest man of the town. He'd accepted the change in status with a grace and nobility that Vulkan had never forgotten. The metal-shaper nodded to N'bel as he took up his place alongside them.

"You are the best of us," he said to Vulkan. "I will set my shoulder to yours, kinsman."

Breughar was not alone. Others were coming from their hiding places to stand in the square too.

"My shoulder to yours," said Gorge, the plainskeeper.

"And mine," added Rek'tar, hornmaster.

Soon there were over a hundred Nocturneans, men and women both, clutching spears, swords, their forge hammers and anything else that could be used as a weapon. They were a people united, and Vulkan was their foundation rock.

"We hide no more," said Vulkan, and drew his hammers across his body. His gaze narrowed to a point fixed upon the gate. Like a blade held against the forge flame he fashioned his anger into a weapon he could wield. Too long had they been prey. Now they would rise...

Like a voice cut off abruptly at the source, the shrieking ceased.

Silence persisted for a moment, haunted by the distant mewling of mauled sauroch cattle or the pleas of dying drovers fallen just short of sanctuary.

It wasn't long before their tormentors appeared.

Clad in shadows they moved with a perverted grace, scaling Hesiod's border like slivers of night. Drenched in almost palpable cruelty the dusk-wraiths crouched on the summit of the wall cackling to one another, baring their teeth and flashing the silver of their savage blades in torturous promise. Leather-clad witches, their long hair festooned with razor edges, carrying serrated spears, wicked falchions and other sharp instruments Vulkan could only guess at the purpose of, were the first to cross the threshold.

With feline surety they landed on all fours, rolling up on two legs in a sinuous swaggering motion that suggested their incredible arrogance and sense of superiority. Their eyes were alive with lustful anticipation of the kill, and just the smallest mote of amusement at the defiance of the human cattle in front of them.

Their slow advance into the square was intended to make their prey quail. Beside him, Vulkan could feel the other warriors' tension. He also saw the pack mentality in the dusk-wraiths' formation. It put him in mind of the leonid, the alpha-hunters that stalked the Arridian plain. These creatures, these pale-skinned, androgynous things possessed none of the majesty of those great maned beasts.

Vulkan's lips curled into a sneer, "Soul-shrived ghost-walkers; that is all you are."

He stepped forwards.

"Return," he bellowed. "Return to your ships and be gone. You will only find steel and death waiting for you here, and cattle no longer for your culling knives."

One of the witches laughed. It was a chilling, evil sound. She said something to one of her kin in the barbed dialect of the dusk-wraiths and a lesser male snarled obediently. His eyes were tarry pits that narrowed as they settled on Vulkan. With a shrilling cry he raced at the Nocturnean who had dared to defy the slavers. He was fast, like a lightning-adder.

Vulkan told the others, "Stay back," and rushed to meet the dusk-wraith. The creature held his jagged knives behind him, leading with the angular point of his jutting chin. He wore no battle-helm or mask, but a serpent tattoo was painted on the left side of his face.

The distance between the combatants closed in moments, and just before the clash the dusk-wraith shifted his line of attack and blurred around Vulkan's flank intending to gut him from his blind side. But Vulkan had seen the feint coming. Unclouded by fear, his battle instincts were honed to a monomolecular edge that the slaver could not possibly have accounted for.

He blocked the blow meant to cripple him with the haft of his hammer and brought the other one down on the witch's skull. A stunned silence fell over the crowd, both Nocturnean and dusk-wraith, as Vulkan pulled his weapon from the gory smear he had left behind.

He spat on the corpse then glared at the female witch.

"Not wraiths at all, just flesh and blood."

The witch smiled, her interest and her ardour suddenly piqued. "Mon'keigh..."

She licked her lips then blended back into the shadows. Before Vulkan could come after her, the gate to the town of Hesiod exploded in a storm of splinters and fire.

Vulkan was engulfed, reduced to a dark and hazy silhouette as the fire rolled over him. Shielding his eyes, he knew he would not die and stepped from the conflagration unharmed. That alone gave the dusk-wraiths aboard the skiff pause as it confronted him through the ragged gap in the wall.

Warriors, the ones in night-black armour, spilled around the edges of the skiff, eagerly brandishing hooks and blades. Vulkan snapped a dusk-wraith in half as it swung at him then crushed another with a blow from his fist.

Behind him, he heard his kinsmen attack as the people of Hesiod fought back against the slavers that had plagued them for centuries.

Vaulting over a horde of warriors, their blades cutting harmlessly through air, Vulkan landed in front of the skiff. Fingers like iron bolts dug into the lamellar nose of the machine as the Nocturnean turned it over. Screeching slavers fell from the tipped vessel before Vulkan tossed it aside like an unwanted spear. The battered skiff rolled over the ground before erupting in a ball of fiery shrapnel.

Two more came in its wake, the first harbouring a cohort of warriors. At the orders of its driver, the skiff accelerated to ramming speed intending to impale Vulkan on the spiked prow. Timing his jump to perfection, he leapt onto the floating barge at full pelt and raced up the vehicle's plated snout like it was the shallow flank of a mountain crag.

The warriors came at him, spitting hell-shards from their rifles or lunging with jagged blades. Vulkan smashed their attacks aside and was amongst them, hewing with his hammers.

Hatred fuelled his every swing, together with a determination that the cycle of torture and fear would end here at this very dawn. He tore loose the command throne of the skiff's driver, the warriors a broken mess behind him, and threw it at the third vehicle.

An energy blossom flashed as the improvised missile struck a protective field surrounding the last skiff, but Vulkan hadn't slowed and was charging through it. Skin burning as he passed through the energy shield, he landed on the deck of the vehicle and faced off against a cadre of warriors. They looked brawnier than the others and toted bladed glaives that crackled with unnatural power. Each wore a

face-plate as white as alabaster in stark contrast to the visceral red of their ornate armour. The ghosts glared at the interloper imperiously. Behind them, the slaver-lord looked through the jagged eye-slits of a horned helm. A rasped utterance through the fanged mouth grille unleashed his warriors.

One of the ghosts advanced silently and swung his glaive, but Vulkan dipped from the blow that left a blazing trail in the air behind it. A second glaive jabbed at him and this time Vulkan swatted it down into the skiff's deck plating, but was left with a smoking haft in his hand. Another blow reduced his other hammer to ash as he was forced to parry again.

Rising from his seat, the slaver-lord snarled his displeasure at the Nocturnean's continued existence.

With their enemy disarmed, the ghosts' arrogance overflowed and they prepared to finish him.

Vulkan growled with contempt. "I need no weapons to kill the likes of you."

In a devastating display of speed and brutality, he took the bodyguards apart. Impaled and beheaded by their very own blades, Vulkan threw their shattered remains over the side of the skiff and into the melee below.

Levelling a finger at the slaver-lord, he promised, "This terror ends with your life."

The dusk-wraith pulled a glittering sword from the scabbard nestled next to his throne. A dark mist coiled from the blade and pricked at Vulkan's nose. A hollow, hacking sound escaped from the slaver-lord's lips. It resonated through the mouth of his monstrous fright mask. It was laughter.

Vulkan then noticed a needle-like gauntlet on the dusk-wraith's other hand. He pointed it at the Nocturnean in mocking symmetry of the threat he'd just received.

"Paaaiin..." he hissed.

Even with superhuman speed, Vulkan couldn't reach the slaver-lord before he unleashed the gauntlet weapon.

"Son!"

N'bel's voice rang out above the clash around him. Instinct told Vulkan to reach out with his open hand. A subtle change in the breeze suggested something moving through it. His senses alive to everything, Vulkan's fingers closed around the worn haft of a smiting hammer and plucked it blindly from the air. It left his grip a split second later, spinning towards the slaver-lord then splitting his ugly mask before the thought had even entered his mind that he was doomed. His face cloven in two, the slaver-lord dropped his sword and toppled off the end of the skiff.

Vaulting down to the square, Vulkan set about the other dusk-wraiths without slowing. He was of the killing mind, a warrior spirit flaring within that both terrified and excited him. Seizing a passing dusk-wraith he crushed its head to paste within its helm. Another he broke apart upon his knee. A third, fourth, fifth... Vulkan battered them with his bare fists as all the terrors the slavers had committed against Nocturne over the centuries were repaid in violent and bloody retribution.

The battle was over swiftly.

Unprepared for such stern resistance, the remnants of the dusk-wraith raiding party withdrew before they were utterly destroyed. Frenzied with battle-lust, only the

witches lingered. There was one amongst them who had a last knife to stab and twist before she was done.

She was at the opposite end of the square, dancing around the spears and swords of the Nocturneans, leaving decapitated bodies with every turn and pirouette. Vulkan's eyes became hate-filled slits when he found the laughing witch.

That anger turned into panic when he saw who rushed next into her killing arc.
"Father!"

Vulkan was much more than human. He possessed strength, speed and intelligence greater than any man, it was how he knew he was different to his kith and kin, but even he could not reach N'bel before those murderous knives.

Cursing his earlier wrathful abandon for losing the hammer with which he'd killed the slaver-lord, Vulkan clenched his empty fists. The only man he had known as father was about to be butchered while he looked on. Every step across the blood-soaked square felt like ten leagues as the witch's blade circled and flashed... carving... hypnotising... deadly.

Tears of fire blurred the Nocturnean's sight, the scene unfolding before him framed by a crimson haze. It would be forever scarred into his memory.

N'bel lifted his spear...

...the witch would cut him open and spill his guts...

Her eyes flashed and her gaze met Vulkan's across the carnage. Even in the act of murder she exuded arrogance. He would remember those eyes, dagger-thin and filled with a sickening ennui. They would haunt him, though not in the way he thought...

N'bel was hopelessly outmatched. His spear thrust was already travelling wide even as the shimmering falchions sought out his vital organs... but the blows never fell. With a roar, Breughar threw himself in harm's way. To the metal-shaper's immense credit, he parried one of the blades and it carved a heavy wound along his forearm that drew a scream from the burly tribesman. With the second blade his fortune faded and it sank deep into his belly, ripping free with a terrible sluurch of rent skin. Breughar's innards slopped onto the ground in a steaming pile of offal. For a moment he stood transfixed by the realisation of his own death, then he fell and was still. Blood pooled beneath the body, expanding in a ruddy mire that touched N'bel's feet. Dazed and prone from when the metal-shaper had thrown him aside, he could barely lift his arms to defend himself.

Amused at the human's pointless heroism, the witch closed on N'bel but Breughar's sacrifice had bought Vulkan the time he needed. Mountainous and filled with righteous anger, the Nocturnean was upon his enemy.

"Face me!"

She recoiled like a snake as Vulkan came at her, fists swinging. The witch was hard-pressed to avoid the blows and could fashion no riposte. She back-flipped and wove and twisted until there was enough distance between them to taunt him and then flee. The rest of the witches were dead or dying. She alone escaped the massacre.

Outside the shattered walls of Hesiod, a tear opened in the fabric of reality. Endless darkness beckoned from inside the tear and the screams of the damned

echoed in the breeze, promising hell and torment for all who entered. It swallowed the witch last of all before shuddering closed behind her, leaving only the scent of blood and the chill of near-death.

It was over.

Hell-dawn ended and the Nocturnean sun rose to its zenith.

N'bel met Vulkan at the gates. The black-smiter was still shaking but he lived.

"Breughar is dead."

An unnecessary fact. Vulkan had seen the man die.

"But you live, father, and for that I will be eternally grateful."

His voice still trembled with an undercurrent of the rage that had consumed him during the fight. His chest heaved like a bellows, drenched in alien blood.

"We live, son." He put his hand on Vulkan's arm and something about the feel of those old and calloused fingers calmed the Nocturnean, siphoning the tension away.

"Such hate. I felt it, father. It touched me as sure as I can feel your hand upon me now."

He turned to face the old man, his eyes ablaze like balefires.

"I am a monster..."

N'bel didn't recoil, but held Vulkan's cheek.

"You are a true Promethean son."

"But the fury..." he looked down. "The way I killed them with my bare hands..." before meeting his father's gaze again. "I am not a black-smiter, am I?"

The people of the town were gathering. Despite all the death that muddied their streets, the mood was exultant. Vulkan was being hailed as a hero.

N'bel sighed and in it, all of his latent fears about losing his only son were borne away. "You are not. You are from up there."

Vulkan followed his father's outstretched hand to the hot sky above.

The sun burned down like a single glowering eye, wreathed in smoky cloud. Vulkan closed his eyes and allowed the heat to warm him, N'bel's voice distant in his mind.

"You came from the stars..."

The edifice resembled a stone menhir Vulkan had seen worshipped by debased and primitive cultures. Such backward religions were beyond compliance, and the Salamanders had burned entire worlds corrupted by graven beliefs. Here, on One-Five-Four Four, it represented a nexus of the enemy's power, but would be torn down just the same. Something about its presence unsettled the Phaerians who were lashed into obedience by the discipline-masters and driven on into the cracking guns of the eldar.

On the orders of the primarch, the Legion had burned the jungle all the way to the psychic node. Like wildlife facing a natural forest fire, the eldar and their beasts had fled before the blaze. Vulkan's edict was absolute, his advance pitiless. Even when confronted by the human refugees caught between the hammer and anvil of the war, he didn't relent. All he saw were pale echoes of the noble people of his own beloved world, the hardships of the jungle-dwellers as nothing compared to the harsh plight of Nocturne. In his darker moments, he wondered if he actually despised these sorry

humans for allowing themselves to be conquered and wondered if his supposed compassion had evaporated. As the land burned and the sky choked with smoke, he acknowledged it was the presence of the aliens that had affected his mood. That and the remembrances of their ravages from his old life before the starships had come.

War was unmaking; it went against everything his old father had taught him in the forge. Vulkan valued craft, the sense of transition beforehand and permanence afterwards. It brought quietude to his troubled and lonely soul. His true father, he who had crafted Vulkan to be a general, needed a warrior, not a black-smiter. A warrior was what Vulkan would be.

Standing on a vast ridge that jutted clear of the jungle expanse, Vulkan took consolation from the fact that with the destruction of the node the need to linger on One-Five-Four Four would pass and he could put thoughts of his homeworld behind him more easily.

Ibsen. That was its name. If it had a name and not a number, it had a heart. Did that also mean it was worth saving? Vulkan pushed the question aside as if it were a piece of clinker from the furnace.

Though he was surrounded by his Pyre Guard and the two Legion companies looking down on the unfolding battle, Vulkan was very much alone in his troubled mind.

Numeon spoke up, interrupting the primarch's thoughts. "They breach the outer threshold of the aliens' domain. I expected a more concerted defence, I must admit."

Several of the Pyre Guard muttered in agreement. Varrun nodded, the servo-grinding of his armour joints articulating his response.

There were other Salamander captains nearby, and they too felt as the Pyre Guard did. Either the eldar were a spent force or they were holding out for another reason.

Pensively, Vulkan watched.

Unlike the ambush in the jungle, here the aliens were arrayed in number. Beneath their verdant cloaks that blended with the foliage around them, they carried fierce repeating bow-casters and long rifles. Vulkan watched as a discipline-master was shot through the eye and a reddish plume of brain matter vacated the back of his skull. Another quickly took his place and the Phaerians' heavy-handed push continued.

The eldar used heavy weapon batteries too, more manoeuvrable than those employed by the Army cohorts on account of their anti-gravity platforms. Stuttering las-beams and incandescent plasma bursts reduced the men rushing from the jungle fringes into a grimy red paste. Two-man Rapier turrets and tracked Tarantula guns replied with a harsh staccato of solid shells as the heavy weapons exchange continued.

The overseers and discipline-masters had formed the feral Phaerians into their Army cohorts. Thick blocks of muscular and tattooed men advanced in formation, scatter-locks and auto-carbines tearing up the gloom with their combined muzzle flare.

On the opposite side, crouched behind clumps of ruined alabaster, the eldar unleashed an equally fierce response and the air was stitched with further las-beams and solid shot. Bodies fell on both sides, spun by heavy impacts or simply dropped

by kill-shots only to be crushed underfoot by the troops behind them, and the death rate increased as the firing lines closed.

A temple surrounded the menhir. It was an aberrant thing engraved with alien sigils that mimicked the one Ferrus Manus had shown Vulkan via the hololith. The desert node was the only one the Imperium had managed to get a look at before their augurs were permanently disabled. But this one was slightly varied. The runic elements on the flat sides of the menhir were in different configurations. It was language in some form. With time and proximity to the sigils, a dedicated study would unlock its secrets. Vulkan harboured no such desires. He only wanted to destroy it.

He turned to Numeon.

“When the Army cohorts are fully engaged and the bulk of the eldar drawn off, be ready to launch our assault on the node. If we attack decisively and quickly we can destroy it before too many lives are surrendered to the meatgrinder.”

Numeon’s voice was gravelly through his battle-helm. “You think the aliens will lose heart once we’ve brought down their obelisk?”

“The only reason they’re here and not withdrawing to the forest where they can employ their preferred tactics is to defend it. That motivation ends with the destruction of the node. Our opportunity is close. We must just be patient.”

Vulkan’s eyes scanned the outer defences. The temple walls were ceremonial, not designed to withstand any form of concerted attack and certainly not one from the Emperor’s Angels of Death. He perceived rookeries in the upper towers, partially occluded where the jungle canopy had encroached upon them. Pterosaur-riders lurked there in arboreal nests, waiting for the Legiones Astartes to engage. Hidden in the penumbral dark of the forest, he also detected mounted raptor-beasts. The eldar were keeping their assault troops in reserve. He didn’t doubt that they would encounter more witch-psykers too. It was imperative that they neutralise the objective swiftly before the enemy could channel the node’s power.

The first ranks of the Army had gained the outer temple defences and were fighting hand-to-hand. Phaerians were brutish men who fought like savages against the eldar’s graceful lethality. Even so, the Army grunts had numbers, and skill was worth little pitched against such odds. An eldar wearing a mottled green cloak shot a man at close range, punching his heart muscle through his back and spine. Switching from his rifle, he drew a blade on another that flashed like quicksilver and released a crimson spray from the Phaerians throat. Three of his comrades ganged up on the alien, and he was borne down beneath the weighted butts of their auto-carbines. Others died equally grimly: stamped to mulch by Army-issue boots, beheaded by alien mono-wire, gutted on bayonets or slashed apart by falchions. Phaerians moved in packs, shoulder to shoulder; where the eldar roved as solitary killers, finding partners briefly before breaking apart again to seek fresh enemies. It was almost primitive in its brutality.

The bloody tableau unfolding on the battlefield washed over Vulkan. Overwhelming force was not drawing the eldar into a full attack as he’d hoped. But as he regarded the melee dispassionately, he did see the slightest thinning in the aliens’ defences as they began to stretch.

“They are holding back until we are fully committed,” said Numeon, as if reading his primarch’s thoughts. The equerry had just noticed the secreted saurian troops in the lofty arbours and foliage around the temple.

Vulkan’s fiery gaze narrowed to ember-like slits. “Then let’s give them some encouragement. Release the 5th and 14th companies, the Fire-born.”

Heka’tan was not a prideful captain. The ambush in the jungle had cost the 14th more Legionary blood than he was comfortable with, but he was pragmatic like all Salamanders and knew this was simply war. Losing Sergeant Bannon was a bitter blow—he had fought alongside Bannon for over a century and the flamer division was virtually destroyed by the charge of the carnodons. It had been split and redistributed around the other squads. It seemed strange to have specialists scattered around the 14th but Heka’tan couldn’t deny the tactical flexibility it offered.

His fellow captain of the 5th, Gravius, had sustained losses in his company too. Like Heka’tan, he was humble and understood his place in the war. Even so, when the primarch’s order came down from the ridge, Heka’tan clenched his fist in anticipation of some vengeance. He knew that Gravius would be doing the same.

Crouched at the edge of the battling Army cohorts, Heka’tan turned to Kaitar.

“The anvil calls us, brother. Lord Vulkan would see our wounded self-esteem restored in the tempering flame of the forge.”

Kaitar nodded as he racked the slide on his bolter. On his shoulder guard, he’d inscribed the names of Oranor and Attion in black ash.

“This shall be their requiem.”

“For all the absent dead,” Luminor added, crouched at the captain’s opposite side, his white Apothecary’s plate stained with Legion blood.

Heka’tan’s command squad was gathered about him. All were humble, self-abnegating warriors but like their captain they welcomed the opportunity to avenge the fallen.

“Into the fires of war,” Heka’tan promised, then raised Gravius on the comm-feed.

“The 5th are readying as we speak,” the other captain uttered. “I will take them into the enemy’s flank. We move on your order, brother-captain.”

“Then consider it given, Gravius. Glory to Vulkan,” Heka’tan replied.

Kaitar turned and roared to the others, signalling for the forward squads to march. “Glory to the Primarch and the Legion!”

More than two hundred voices replied as one. “Fire-born!”

Flamers broken up amongst the divisions came forward in the ranks to lay down a curtain of fire before the advancing 14th. Heka’tan led them slowly at first, cutting down the eldar with methodical bolter bursts. He’d kept his big guns in reserve, and as the eldar drew off some of their forces to counter the threat, the captain gave the order for them to shoot.

Missile contrails clouded the air and thick conversion beams hummed powerfully as sergeants unleashed the might of their heavy divisions. To counter the barrage, the eldar released their pterosaurs and the winged reptilians dived towards the bigger guns at the back of Heka’tan’s formation. Heavy bolters struck up next and the air

was filled with their blistering shells. Flung javelins fell in a piercing torrent but most were destroyed before they struck Legionary bodies. Flying saurians were chewed apart by the fusillade, but more were descending from their rookeries.

The sergeants of the forward squads kept them moving, firing from the hip. A massive squadron of raptors appeared on the flank, their riders brandishing power lances and spitting curses at the Emperor's warrior angels. Dreadnoughts lumbered forwards to intercept them. Attion had been alone when he fought and was killed by the carnodon, but now an entire unit of the armoured monsters was coming at the raptors.

"Disrupt their flank attacks, venerable brothers, and break up the aerial sweeps from their flyers," Heka'tan's voice rang down the feed.

"In Vulkan's name!" they responded together as they clashed with the eldar riders.

The distance to the temple was closing. Heka'tan revved up his chainblade, whispering an oath. His command squad were locked in beside him. He opened the feed again. "Heavy divisions withdraw into the forest. Captain Gravius—we are about to engage."

The reply came swift and eager. "We are the hammer, Captain Heka'tan. Become the anvil and let's see them broken."

"It shall be done," Heka'tan promised. The hellish kaleidoscope of close combat was almost upon them, "Salamanders. Bring them down!"

From the summit of the ridge, Vulkan watched the 5th and 14th companies attack. It prompted a flood of eldar to uncloak and join the battle. In a matter of moments, the defenders of the psychic node had swelled with foot soldiers and saurian-riders.

"They've drawn out the eldar reserves," said Numeon. The eagerness for combat in his voice was obvious and spread to the rest of the Pyre Guard.

Atanarius gripped the haft of his double-bladed power sword as if strangling an enemy; Ganne's gauntlets cracked noisily as he clenched and unclenched his fists; Leodrakk and Skatar'var swung their power mauls off their shoulder guards and into ready positions in unison. Only Igataron was still, but then raw aggression bled off him in waves anyway.

Vulkan felt it too, but coaxed the embers of his belligerence a little longer before choosing to release it.

Numeon crouched near the edge of the ridge, the pommel of his halberd staved into the ground to support him. "I see none of the larger beasts amongst their number."

There were none. Vulkan had found no evidence of carnodons hidden in the jungle depths. "Apparently, they are wary of our strength."





Salamanders Legion

Of all the mighty Space Marine Legions in the Emperor's service during the Great Crusade it was the Salamanders who, despite their relatively low numbers, boasted the largest quantity of flame divisions. During the conquest of planet One-Five-Four Four, the 154th Expedition, Vulkan's army had six full flame divisions, with three of those held in reserve. It is the proliferation of such weapons that predicates or suggests the XVIII Legion's preferred tactic of 'eye-to-eye' warfare, which is ideally suited to a jungle theatre.

Phaerian Army Divisions

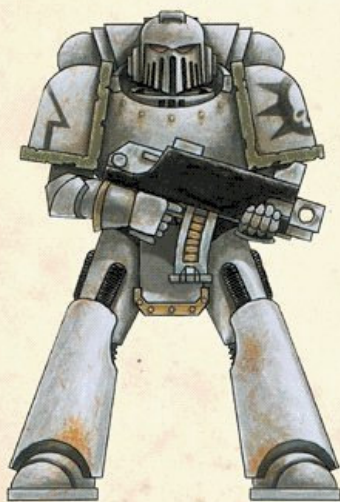
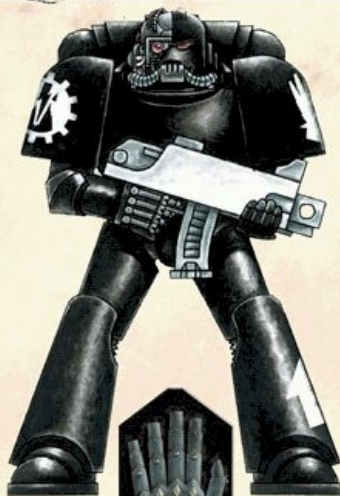
Phaeria is a moon-sized death world in the Segmentum Solar. It appears on very few galactic cartographs on account of its diminutive size. An arboreal planet of desolate highlands and sweeping forests, it is a harsh and inhospitable place that breeds a brutal, almost feral, human native. Such warriors were exemplary candidates for the Imperial Army and thus the majority of the planet's population was thrust into service at the inception of the Great Crusade to provide vital support for the Emperor's Legiones Astartes.



Salamander Mantle

Prior to being reunited with the Primarch Vulkan, the Salamanders Legion did not wear their iconic scaled mantle into battle. This affectation was adopted later in honour of Vulkan slaying the mighty firedrake Kesare, the skull of which he wears upon his shoulder guard. As well as giving the warriors of the Legion a fearsome reptilian aspect, the mantle is also naturally fire resistant and enhances the XVIII's reputation as being true fire-born. It was also during this period that the Salamanders began to adopt some of the strictures of the Promethean Creed, again as a result of Vulkan's influence, which extols the virtues of self sacrifice, self reliance and endurance.





Iron Hands Legion

Scattered but unsubstantiated reports exist concerning the role of the Iron Hands Legion and Primarch Ferrus Manus during the occupation of planet One-Five-Four Four. The X Legion fought on the world's primary desert continent, known locally as 'Krovach'. Remembrancer ██████ alleged the primarch (referred to as 'the Gorgon' in her iterated slates) was incommunicado for several hours during the advance and that this resulted in the Iron Hands being the last to complete their objectives. Upon his return, the primarch was single minded enough to complete his mission in a timely fashion, but the events leading up to his reuniting with his Legion remain a mystery.

██████ postulates that ██████ eldar ██████ was responsible and this ██████ waylaid the Gorgon ██████

Symbol of Ferrus Manus

The literal 'Iron Hand' symbol is the mark of the Primarch Ferrus Manus. While obviously borne on the armour of the X's Legionaries and their vehicles, this motif (or at least aspects of it) was also commonly emblazoned on those Army divisions serving under the primarch as part of his battle group. In the case of the forces arrayed on planet One-Five-Four Four this included the 144th Cohort of the Degovark Proto-Industrial and Medusa's own 'Iron Tenth' of the Sorrgol Clan. This tradition may or may not have come about after the primarch reportedly presented an Iron Hand icon he'd snapped from a Legionary banner to the Anatolian Brigades for being the first to breach the gates to the inner furnaces of the Terawatt Clan.

Death Guard Legion

Of the forces on planet One-Five-Four Four, the Death Guard, led by Primarch Mortarion, was almost exclusively Legionary. Whether this is a consequence of the XIV Legion's disdain for weakness and human frailty is a matter of conjecture only. What is a matter of record is the utter sundering of the arctic plateau of the planet (referred to locally as 'Skaane') and the systematic demolition of any and all installations and settlements in that region. Mineral harvesters sent in the aftermath of the invasion would later report that this area contributed less than 0.5% of the total geological yield of the entire planet as a direct result of the Death Guard's punitive actions.



Numeon stood up again. Varrun was behind him, sharpening the edge of his gladius, but did not offer a hand to the equerry. No warrior of the Pyre Guard would ever insult another by doing such a thing.

“You mean *your* strength, my lord.”

“My strength *is* our strength, Numeon. We are one, the Legion and I.” Despite his inner feelings of estrangement, this much Vulkan knew was true. Save perhaps Horus, who had his Mournival, all of the primarchs trod a solitary path. It was just the primarch of the Salamanders felt it more acutely than his brothers.

He was surveying the battlefield intently when his expression changed from one of aloof detachment to satisfied vindication.

A cadre of eldar had emerged into the open.

I've been waiting for you...

When he spoke, his deep voice was full of threat, presaging violence.

"Now we strike."

Numeon turned to the others, brandishing his halberd like a rallying standard. "Pyre Guard. Embark!"

Supported by its landing stanchions on a patch of scorched earth behind them was a Stormbird. Its idling engines quickly built to loft speed and the vessel took off just as Vulkan and his inner-circle warriors got aboard. The other companies on the ridge would stay in reserve and could only watch as their lord took off.

The embarkation ramp was still closing when Numeon voxed the pilot from the hold.

"Lock assault vector on the node. Missile batteries and—"

Vulkan stopped him. "No. We do this hand-to-hand. Put us down at the edge of the node. I want to crack that thing with my hammer personally."

* * *

Jamming his chainsword into the eldar's guts, Heka'tan bellowed for his warriors to drive on. "Advance 14th! Vulkan is watching you."

Vulkan is always watching. As the anvil tempers us, so too does the primarch.

A welter of gore erupted from the corpse as he tore the blade free, and he was quickly pressed into defending against another attack. An eldar with an ornate sword struck at his guard. Sparks flared from the clashing weapons as Legiones Astartes aggression met alien finesse, but Heka'tan's blood was up and he dispatched his foe with a close-range burst from his bolt pistol. Scorch marks blighted the forest green of his vambrace occluding the lines of arterial blood staining much of his armour. It was war's baptism and he embraced it with a shout of triumph as he sought out another foe.

This was where he wanted to be, in the thick of battle, eye to eye with the enemy and taking eldar heads. Heka'tan originated from Nocturne, he knew the terror of the slave raids; he had lived through them as a boy. Though his apotheosis had altered his memory of those torments, the intrinsic enmity remained. These were not like the slavers, their anima was different, but they were of the eldar caste so Heka'tan's contempt felt justified.

A spit of flame spewed to his right flank, warming his pauldron and burning up a clutch of eldar snipers intent on evening the odds. He didn't slow. Momentum was everything. It was inexorable, methodical, and exacting as an avalanche. Gravius was fully committed too; Heka'tan had heard the shouts of the valiant 5th as they'd closed for the kill. In truth, the near defeat in the jungle had wounded them both. The chance to excise those feelings in the fires of war was the greatest boon his primarch could have granted them.

Hammer and anvil, brothers, the words resounded in his mind, let us show them that Salamanders are not easily bowed.

The melee was intense, a sweeping chaos of bloody images. Burning alien flesh was redolent on the breeze, mixed with the stale aroma of their reptilian mounts. Grunting and baying, they were finding the Legion a tougher foe to overwhelm without their massive carnodon cousins or the intervention of their witches...

...Until a lightning storm erupted around the psychic node and four enrobed figures stepped forth. Heka'tan was close enough to see it happen through the press of warring bodies. It was as if they'd been carried on the lightning itself, invisible passengers riding the eldritch energy, and merely let go of its arc. They embarked to set foot on the earth as any man would step from a ship. Bolts of verdant green still coursed over the arcane sigils covering the psyker's trappings in the wake of teleportation. As three witches stood sentinel around the node, a fourth came forwards.

Though the eldar were an androgynous race, Heka'tan could tell that this one was male. He wore no helm but sported an array of sigilic tattoos upon his pale and imperious face. His long hair was swept back, tied up with a runic clasp that ran around his temples in two half-hemispheres that each terminated with a ruby-like gemstone at his forehead. It had the effect of a crown and once again the Salamander was struck by the sheer decadence and arrogance of the aliens.

Unlike the others, he wore viridian robes shot through with cerulean blue. He parted the ensemble to draw forth a glittering runesword of unimaginable beauty. The weapon was psychically linked to its bearer and the blade crackled actinically as witch-fire filled the eldar's eyes.

A growing void expanded slowly around him as the other aliens backed away.

Heka'tan soon found himself with clear ground between him and the warlock.

Kaitar, Luminor and the rest of the command squad were in sync with their sergeant's orders before they were even given.

"In Vulkan's name, kill that thing!"

They charged together. The warlock watched them come, his blade held in a swordsman's guard position. He wore the leggings and tunic of a warrior-ascetic, festooned with runic iconography and arcana. Moments before the clash he tipped his head in what might have been a salute.

Heka'tan's first blow cut air and fouled in the ground, churning earth as the warlock weaved aside. Kaitar fared better but his gladius was repelled by the flat of the eldar's sword. Luminor snapped off a half-clip from his bolt pistol but the shells detonated harmlessly from a kine-shield impelled by the warlock's open palm. A blast of force put the Apothecary on his back, and Brother Tu'var threw himself in the way of the eldar's sword to save him from the subsequent sword strike. The runic blade penetrated the Salamander's guard easily, snapping Tu'var's gladius, cleaving into his armour and sinking up to the hilt in his chest.

Tearing the blade free, the warlock spun and cut open Angvenon's plastron and fed a jag of lightning into the blow, spinning the Salamander and launching him off his feet. Battle-plate smoking, Angvenon tried to rise, but fell onto his front and stayed down.

“Break him!” snarled Heka’tan, taking another swing. His world had condensed to this one fight, the rest of the battle a dim and bloody blur around him. This was the anvil, he realised, the moment when he would overcome and rise or capitulate and fall.

It was like three warrior-knights fighting a dancer as the eldar dodged their clumsy blows whilst attacking with rapid thrusts of his rune sword.

Heka’tan refused to give in.

I am Legion. I am a warrior born.

The warlock had reduced three of the Emperor’s Angels to oafs wielding lumps of noisy metal and that rankled at Heka’tan. He swung again but cut at shadows. Bringing up his pistol he pulled the trigger, but was hit by a barrage of lightning from the warlock’s clenched fist. Warning icons sprang into life instantly across the captain’s retinal display. Pain suppressors went to work in the same bio-mechanical reaction, keeping him on his feet. The bolt pistol was overloaded and exploded in his fist, showering Heka’tan with hot shrapnel. He was only dimly aware of the spasms jolting his muscles but knew he was injured when his vision started clouding.

“Fire-born!” It was as much a yell of defiance as it was a cry for reinforcement to the others.

Kaitar and Luminor closed in, robbing the warlock of a killing blow. The view was narrowing, made worse by his battle-helm, so Heka’tan tore at the release clamps to discard it.

It clattered to the ground and the smells, sights and sounds of the alien jungle staggered him before his genhanced senses could compensate. He still carried his chainsword, buzzing belligerently in his hand. One of Bannon’s ex-flamer division appeared in Heka’tan’s peripheral vision and he shouted to him above the din.

“Legionary! Hell and flame!”

A swathe of burning promethium swept over the combatants.

Kaitar fell, buffeted by the blast and on fire, while Luminor shielded himself with his forearm. The warlock thwarted the flame storm with another kine-shield, but as he threw up one defence he lowered another. Heka’tan leapt through the blaze with his chainsword in a two-handed grip and brought it down savagely as he landed.

A feeble, choking sound emanated from the eldar’s gullet as he swallowed a metre of churning blade. All the wards and sigils protecting the alien were broken, his preternatural swiftness undone in a single brutal moment. He glared at Heka’tan who glared back, his eyes alive with a vengeful crimson glow. Pain should have slowed him, taken him out of the fight, but the sons of Vulkan were tenacious, just as their father had taught them to be.

He came in close, teeth locked together in half grimace and half snarl. “Salamanders fight as one!”

A goblet of acid spit seared the ashen cheek of the eldar as Heka’tan visited a final insult upon him before the light in the alien’s eyes dimmed and he died. Wrenching his blade from the corpse, Heka’tan prepared to fight on.

Ahead of the Salamanders was the node, but the warlock had bought the others in his coven enough time to tap into its power. A coruscation of energy was rippling between the three witches as if the stone was feeding and enhancing their abilities.

Heka'tan had time to lift his chainblade in a rallying gesture before a lightning whip struck out from the node. The eldar coven channelled it, a bending crackling bolt of energy that ripped Dreadnoughts off their feet and flattened Salamanders. It swept across the Legion in a wave, leaving electrified and scorched battle-plate behind it. The eldar still engaged in the melee were struck too, the shimmering beam was indiscriminating, and Heka'tan realised then just what they were willing to sacrifice to protect the node. Mercifully he and his command squad had been spared from the first bolt but a second was already building.

Unleashed in a matter of seconds, the bolt would easily outstrip him for pace. It hurt like hellfire but still Heka'tan ran with all the fading strength in his body.

Engines screaming, the Stormbird drew closer to the lightning storm. A flash lit the darkened interior of the hold, revealing the forbidding form of Vulkan standing by the open side-hatch. It was drawn as wide as it would go and the wind whipped within the gunship, buffeting the oaths of moment pinned to the warriors' armour. Vulkan was stooped, eyes narrowed as he focused on the node. Its pointed tip was the focal point for the storm and the runes along its surface glowed in sympathetic union with the lightning. Even from above and at distance, it was monolithic. Destroying it would not be easy. The grip Vulkan had around his hammer's haft tightened.

Behind him, the Pyre Guard waited with barely fettered aggression.

Unleash us...

The primarch could sense what they desired as surely as he felt it in his own blood.

A crack of lightning surged past the side of the ship, clipping one of its wings, and the hold shuddered and pitched. Smoke trailed from the wound in the armour plate. It wasn't serious enough for the Stormbird to withdraw but they'd come about as far as they could without risking a crash.

Vulkan didn't even reach for a handhold. His body was utterly still, his intensity unbroken.

Slowly, the pilot brought them back on course and the node loomed again, several metres below and wreathed with crackling power. The witch coven at its foundation was ready to siphon its energy into another bolt. The devastation wrought by the first must have been egregious to witness on the ground and from above its destructive trail was all too plain to see.

It seemed strange for the eldar to protect the edifice with such vehemence when their tactics suggested an entirely different method of warfare. Here, by holding onto the obelisk, they exposed all of their weakness and mitigated their strengths. The suspicion of something unseen and unknown entered the primarch's mind, but for now he could not affect it, whatever it was. Instead, he concentrated on the thing he could do something about.

Vulkan crouched a little lower and waited until the Stormbird banked so the hatch was angled down towards the node. The hammer he bore was a weapon of his own creation. *Thunderhead* was its name. He'd fashioned it on Nocturne in honour of N'bel and his heritage. Captured storms thrashed within its ornate head, beaten into the metal through many long hours of toil in the forge. There was no other like it. No

Legionary could wield it. No man could even lift it. Vulkan alone possessed the strength and mastery to bend it to his will.

He donned his drake-helm and it mag-locked to his gorget.

“Do you know what comes after lightning, brothers?”

The Pyre Guard did not answer. Instead they readied their weapons.

Vulkan’s eyes flashed with inner fire.

“Thunder...”

He leapt from the hold.

Shrieking air whipped past Vulkan as he plummeted through the storm-wracked sky. He descended like a hammer-wielding comet, a roar of the firedrakes of Mount Deathfire on his lips. His salamander cloak flapped wildly behind him, as if the spirit of the beast it once belonged to had returned and approved of its master’s exultation.

A grimace formed on his face behind his helmet as the primarch reached terminal velocity. The wind became an ear-piercing whine as he descended through it. Surrounded by the tempest, he had never felt more alive than in that moment. He wondered briefly if Corax and Sanguinius felt the same elation as they soared through the heavens.

As he closed on the obelisk, Vulkan clenched his hammer in both hands and lifted it above his head. At the moment of impact, he smashed the arrowed summit of the obelisk like he was hitting the head of a nail. With a tremor of energy, the psychic node ruptured and shattered. Vulkan didn’t slow but kept driving through the ancient stone, following an almighty crack that spread through the obelisk’s core. Shockwaves throbbed outwards from the breaking stone, chunks of it pummelling the eldar who looked up at the falling rock and wailed from below before being crushed. Each successive energy pulse emitted from the destroyed obelisk jolted the now transfixed coven with greater and greater violence. The eldar witches had made themselves conduits for the psychic power in the node and now they were being fed every last residual trace of it. No mortal creature could withstand such a backlash of energy. Vulkan landed and the earth blasted outwards from his craterous impact. In synchrony with it, the witches died one by one. Their eyes burned and flesh melted until at last their skulls exploded and they collapsed, headless, to the ground.

Dust and fire surrounded the primarch in a churning pall. He was crouched on one knee, his hammer embedded in the earth. He stayed like that for several moments. His armour rose and fell as he breathed. The remains of the node collapsed around him. Great clefts of stone sheared away and broke into fragments. By the time it was done, Vulkan was encircled by a belt of shattered rock. The engraved runes had all been broken and their captured light bled away.

Already battered by the resurgent Salamanders, the eldar capitulated and fell back.

Victory cries extolling the Legion, the 5th and the 14th Fire-born, appealed to Vulkan’s pride as he heard them on the breeze. Beneath the snarling visage of his drake-helm, he smiled and was aware of someone approaching.

Numeon regarded his primarch from the edge of the devastation.

The rest of the Pyre Guard were just stepping from the Stormbird and cutting down the enemy stragglers.

“I didn’t think you would jump,” Numeon confessed.

Vulkan lifted his head and stood.

“It was an impulse.”

The equerry appraised the circle of broken node stone.

“I also thought it would be more difficult.”

Vulkan raised an eyebrow. “You think that was easy?” When he removed his drake-helm he was still smiling. Rolling his shoulders and then stowing *Thunderhead*, he turned his attention to the dead psykers. “Dabbling with sorcery has its own rewards.”

Numeon followed him as he walked beyond the circle and out into the emptying battlefield. “So it would seem, my lord.” He regarded the burned and headless eldar corpses impassively. “Hard to tell now, but I didn’t see their seer amongst the coven.”

Vulkan didn’t need to look, he knew. “The female was not amongst them, which is... *perplexing*.”

“She has likely already fled. They must realise this is a war they cannot win.”

“Perhaps, but then why fight it at all?”

The eldar were on the run again now, all attempts at a tactical withdrawal abandoned in favour of individual survival. They had nothing left to protect and so no reason to linger in a fight for which they were unsuited.

As with the previous battle in the jungle, the natives began surfacing with the cessation of hostility. They appeared moribund, even terrified by their liberators, and clung to each other for support. Some of the children amongst them were sobbing. A girl-child leaned down to touch a dead eldar’s finger until her mother chastened her and she shrank back into the gloom. Army units with attached remembrancers were already gathering the refugees together.

“Do they seem less than pleased to see us, Numeon?” Vulkan asked.

“I find it hard to differentiate their reactions from that of any human I encounter, my lord.”

Vulkan sighed, unable to be completely dispassionate. “They are scared, but of us, not of the aliens. I wonder if—” He stopped when he saw the bodies of the tribespeople amongst the dead. Vulkan’s brow creased with consternation. “I didn’t realise that civilians were at risk inside the battle zone.”

Army medics and field surgeons were dragging away dead natives along with the Phaerians. Most were men and women, but Vulkan saw children too amongst the slain. The cold face of a girl-child, clutching a wooden effigy, haunted the primarch for a moment. Were it not for the dark stain colouring her hemp smock, she might have been asleep. In repose, the girl-child’s face looked particularly innocent. Vulkan had seen horror like this before, after the raids and when Nocturne’s surface split with anger. He had witnessed bodies dragged from the rubble, choked by ash or burned black by fire.

“A warrior chooses his path. It is violent and the threat of death ever present, but these people...” He shook his head slowly, as if only just comprehending. “This was not supposed to happen.”

Numeon was lost for an answer. When Varrun approached with a hololithic wand, the equerry’s frown turned into an expression of relief. “Word from the Legions, my lord.”

Still distracted, gaze lingering on the humans, Vulkan took his time to respond. “Set it down,” he said at length, and Varrun impaled the wand into the ground and activated it.

Spilling out from a triangular apex of hazy light, an image of Ferrus Manus resolved itself.

Both Pyre Guard sank to one knee immediately in deference to the other primarch.

Ferrus Manus was still wearing his battle-helm and his armour bore evidence that he’d been in the thick of the fighting for the desert region. The gleaming plate was sand scoured and reflected the light of the sun behind him. He removed his helm and his silver eyes glittered like chips of ice.

Ferrus was typically taciturn. “Are the jungles won, brother?”

Vulkan nodded. “The eldar node has been neutralised. An easier fight than we first believed but with its share of blood spent to the cause. How fare my brother Legions?”

The primarch of the Iron Hands growled, “Still contested, but I shall not be denied. We encountered difficulty with our mechanised elements. Much of my force is on foot and the Army divisions are coping poorly.”

The Iron Hands mantra, *Flesh is Weak*, was almost written indelibly into Ferrus’ scowl. He respected humans but was also frustrated by their frailty.

Vulkan decided to change tack. “And what of the Death Guard? Has our brother lived up to his dogged nature?”

The answer came reluctantly. “Mortarion has levelled the node, though I question what is left for humanity to colonise. I fear he has turned the ice fields into a tainted waste and damaged much of the continent’s geology into the bargain.”

A crackle of interference marred the image for a moment. Distant explosions rippled behind Ferrus, but he paid them no heed.

“The jungle region borders the edge of the desert. I can divert some of my divisions to provide reinforcement, brother,” offered Vulkan when the hololith was restored again.

Ferrus’ crag-like coldness expressed exactly what he thought of that suggestion.

“Unnecessary.”

“Then your victory will be close at hand.” Vulkan tried not to make his tone consoling. That would only enrage his brother.

“The desert continent is vast, but it *will* yield to me.” Behind him, bolter fire chorused amongst the low *crump* of explosions that were growing increasingly less distant. Ferrus turned his ear a fraction. “We are engaging again. Consolidate your forces in the jungle and await further orders.”

The hololith blanked out with the severance of connection.

“Pride, not flesh, is weak,” returned Numeon with a resigned shake of the head.

Vulkan’s eyes were downcast, and he muttered, “You wouldn’t understand.”

Their father had sought to make them perfect, much more than human in every sense. Vulkan and his brothers eclipsed their Legionary sons with their greater strength, skill and intellect, but they also possessed very human flaws. To be one amongst so many sons made it difficult to attain a father’s love and validation. Pride, in one form or another, drove them all in its way. It created fraternal rivalry, too, and Vulkan wondered if it would ever become more than that.

“Lord?”

Numeon’s voice brought him back.

Across the battlefield, a Salamander was approaching. A sheathed chainsword sat on his back, and his gait betrayed some injuries. He bowed before his primarch, having already removed his battle-helm.

Salamanders meet eye-to-eye.

“Rise, Salamander.”

The warrior obeyed, standing and saluting against his plastron.

“Captain Heka’tan,” Vulkan asserted, looking down at the warrior, “of the 14th Fire-born. You are tempered, my son.”

Heka’tan’s armour was scorched and battered from battle. He’d also lost his sidearm and was favouring his left leg. His left eye was swollen and there were several deep gashes upon his forehead. The suggestion of an honour scar on his thick neck was visible just above the upper rim of his gorget.

“The anvil was indeed testing, my lord.” He bowed his head again.

“You’ve no need to be so humble. You are a captain and have shed blood for your Legion this day. We are victorious.”

Heka’tan didn’t look so sure.

Vulkan’s eyes narrowed. “You have something to tell me, Captain Heka’tan?”

“I do, my lord. We have found the Army scouts that located the node.”

Since the coordinates had been broadcast to the rest of the Imperial forces all contact had been lost with the advance reconnaissance sections.

Sensing the captain’s fatalism, Vulkan became solemn. “And they are dead.”

“Not all of them, primarch.” Heka’tan’s fiery gaze could not hide his apprehension. “There was a sole survivor, a non-combatant.”

“A remembrancer?”

“So I understand, my lord.”

“And is he unharmed?” It was almost as if Vulkan already knew the answer by the expression on Heka’tan’s face.

“Miraculously so.”

Vulkan broke eye contact to look into the distance where the pursuing Imperial forces were harrying the enemy deeper into the jungle. He purposely averted his gaze from the growing piles of dead natives. “Where is this survivor now?”

Heka’tan paused. “There is more.”

Looking back down, Vulkan’s blazing eyes were questioning.

“He says there is another node, much bigger and more powerful than the one you destroyed.”

A muscle spasm in Vulkan's cheek gave the only hint of his displeasure.
"Take me to him at once."

The remembrancer cut an unassuming figure. Dressed in plain robes of an obscure Terran style, the survivor sat on the ground with his eyes open and alert. It was only the fact he was surrounded by the bodies of the Army scout division sent to locate the node that made his presence in the jungle incongruous.

"You are the primarch of the Salamanders Legion?" he asked.

"I am." Vulkan approached slowly, bidding his Pyre Guard to wait outside the circle of the dead Army scouts.

It was an order that displeased Numeon and the others, but they obeyed nonetheless.

Vulkan looked around at the massacre. From the position of the bodies and how they'd fallen, it appeared the scouts had made a last stand. He shifted his gaze to peer deeper into the jungle.

"You were followed?"

"From the site of the fourth obelisk, yes."

"And you got as far as this point before the eldar caught you."

"Precisely."

When Vulkan looked back at the man, who seemed wise but somehow youthful at the same time, his eyes were penetrating.

"How is it they all died and you alone lived?"

"I hid."

Vulkan stared at him, trying to ascertain if what the remembrancer was saying was the truth.

The man seemed content to sit amongst the dead and hadn't yet moved.

"You don't believe me?"

"I am still deciding," Vulkan answered honestly. He stepped towards him.

Numeon's armour shifted before he warned, "Primarch..."

Vulkan held up his hand to cool his equerry's anxiety. The remembrancer's gaze flicked over to the Pyre Guard and back again.

"I don't think your bodyguards like me."

Vulkan was standing before him and looked down on the man. "They just don't trust you."

"That's a pity."

"What is your name, remembrancer?"

"Verace."

"Then come with me, Verace, and tell me all you know about this obelisk."

Vulkan turned and as he was leaving the site of the massacre he passed by Numeon.

The primarch kept his voice low. "Watch him closely."

Verace got to his feet and smoothed down his robes.

Numeon glared at him, and nodded.

There was something... *strange* about this Verace, but Vulkan wasn't threatened by him. After all, what threat could a flesh and blood human pose to a primarch? But as he was walking back to the Stormbird, Vulkan was reminded of a time when he'd met another stranger, one he'd known as the Outlander...

Vulkan knew his grip was failing. Even with his prodigious strength, he knew he couldn't hold on to the edge of the cliff with one hand and still cling to the drake hide with the other indefinitely.

It had been a magnificent beast of vermillion scale, thick and gnarled like overlapping shields. The firedrake's ribbed belly was taut with muscle, its jaws wide and powerful. The grumbling mountain had summoned it and the drake had answered, emerging from its lowest deeps.

The spear Vulkan had forged to kill it was lost to the lava chasm below him. Hours of crafting had been undone in an instant when the mountain's blood reclaimed the weapon; just as his life would be undone should he slip.

The sun baked his naked back but the heat of it was ebbing. Steam and smoke clouded Vulkan's eyes, filled his nose with sulphur and ash. Hours had passed since the volcano had erupted and tossed him over the edge. Only his superlative reflexes and strength had saved him, or forestalled his death at least.

Even Vulkan, champion of Hesiod and slayer of dusk-wraiths, could be destroyed by lava.

After the defeat of the slavers, word had spread quickly around the major townships of Nocturne. Within weeks, the tribal kings of the other six settlements and their emissaries had greeted the leaders of Hesiod and asked to meet the black-smiter's son who was rapidly becoming a legend.

As he hung precariously on the rocky precipice, Vulkan considered this would be a poor end for such a figure. He slipped and for a moment thought it was over. A sense of falling overtook him, but he reached out to salvage a desperate handhold on a lower crag. Dust and grit fell in a hard rain, beating against his body, but he held on.

Though his heart was hammering like a hammer upon an anvil in his chest, he tried not to breathe too deeply. This close to the lava trench, the air was a poisonous miasma thick with sulphurous alkalis. He could already feel the blistering around his nose and the skin of his throat. An ordinary man would have died long before now. It only enhanced the belief that he was not truly of these people, that Nocturne was not his birth home. Vulkan's father, N'bel, had said as much to him before the tournament. He had promised to seal the vault below the forge and did so, but he couldn't suppress the truth. Vulkan had asked him outright before the events began but the answer hadn't come. N'bel, stifled by looming grief, couldn't tell him. Perhaps now, he never would and Vulkan would be forever ignorant of his origins.

Fingers stiff as stone, his arm burning like all the fires of the forge were ignited in it, Vulkan thought about letting go of the hide. With both hands he could probably clamber up the rock face to safety. The bubbling, cracking refrain of the lava below seemed to urge him, or maybe it was trying to entice him to fall.

The last eight days had taken their toll, though. Vulkan didn't know what strength was left in his limbs. In truth, he could barely feel them anymore and had to

constantly fight a strange sense of weightlessness that threatened to loosen his grip unconsciously.

"You will not beat me."

He spoke the words aloud to galvanise himself.

The lava crackled below in what was beginning to sound like rumbling laughter.

It baffled reason how the pale-faced stranger had managed to match him through every trial. No one knew where he had come from, though some suspected he hailed from the nomadic tribes of Ignea. Vulkan doubted it. When he'd come into the town, this Outlander, as he'd come to be known, was wearing garb unfamiliar to any Nocturnean. From Heliosa to Themis, there were cultural derivations amongst the people of the planet but they shared common traits. The Outlander shared none.

His boasts were utterly audacious. Vulkan remembered the derision he'd caused when claiming he could best anyone in the town, even the champion of Hesiod, in the tournament. Out of respect, perhaps sheer disbelief, Vulkan had kept a straight face.

"Let him enter if he wishes," he'd said privately to N'bel when questioned. "The fool will either give up or lose his life to the mountain. Let the anvil decide."

Considering his current situation, those comments now seemed remarkably short-sighted.

Below him, the river of molten rock beckoned and thrust Vulkan back to his potentially fatal present.

How could he fail? What would his people think of him if this pallid outsider beat him?

Vulkan clung to the drake hide by its long tail. As it drifted in the hot vapours emanating from the lava trench he knew he had to sacrifice his pride for the sake of his life. He was about to loosen his grip when he heard a cry from across the craggy mountain summit.

"Vulkan!"

Peering through a thickening belt of smoke, Vulkan saw the hazy outline of the stranger in the distance. The Outlander was bounding over the rocks towards him. Over his shoulder was the largest drake hide Vulkan had ever seen. He blinked back the stinging sensation in his eyes, trying to be sure it wasn't just a mirage caused by exhaustion and the sulphurous air.

The hide in Vulkan's defiant grasp was huge, but this... this was massive. It easily eclipsed that of the Nocturnean and suddenly Vulkan's pride felt all the cheaper because of it.

Moving swiftly, the Outlander hoisted the immense pelt from his back and cast it into a vast lava pool that stood between him and the rocky outcrop where Vulkan was clinging on. Bridging the bubbling morass with the hide, the Outlander leapt across and landed on the other side. Rushing to the edge of the precipice, he thrust his hand down and seized Vulkan's wrist.

"Hold on..."

In a feat of incredible strength, the stranger lifted Vulkan to safety, drake hide and all.

Exhausted, they lay upon the barren rock for a time before the Outlander rose and helped Vulkan to his feet.

In the distance, the lava pool had claimed the Outlander's mighty prize.

"We can't go back that way," he said, with no hint of remorse.

Vulkan clapped the Outlander's shoulder, feeling some of his strength returning.

"You saved my life."

"If you hadn't clung on as long as you did I might not have been afforded the opportunity to do so."

Vulkan looked to the lava pool where the last remnants of the drake hide were gradually being consumed.

"You could have returned to the town as champion."

"At a cost of my opponent's life? What kind of hollow victory would that have been?"

Swollen flakes of ash were clouding the air and the breeze brought with it the stench of burning. It promised fire to come.

"The mountain is not yet done," Vulkan said. "It may erupt again. We should go back to Hesiod."

The Outlander nodded and the two of them began the long climb back down the mountain.

Celebration greeted Vulkan upon his return. The entire township, together with the chieftains and emissaries of the other six settlements of Nocturne, had gathered to witness the conclusion of the tournament.

N'bel was amongst the first to see his son back safely. Though he was not quite the hulk of a man he used to be, the black-smiter embraced Vulkan fiercely.

"You did it, boy. I knew you would." He turned, his arm sweeping across the buoyant crowd behind him. "All of Nocturne hails you."

The shouts of his name echoed loudly in Vulkan's ears. Tribal kings came forwards to greet him and bask in his reflected glory. Bellows of affirmation and fealty rang out alongside the vigorous applause of the throng. Only the Outlander was still and quiet, his gaze on Vulkan. But there was no judgement, no quarrel in his eyes. He just watched.

Ban'ek, the tribal king of Themis, came to the front of the crowd and bowed approvingly at the tournament champion.

"A worthy trophy," he said, gesturing to the drake scale hide still slung over Vulkan's shoulder. "You will look noble indeed with it as your mantle." Vulkan had almost forgotten it was there. "No," he uttered simply. Ban'ek was nonplussed. "I don't understand." Vulkan shook his head. "All of this, your adulation and acclaim, it is underserved." He took the hide from off his shoulder and presented it to the Outlander.

N'bel reached out to his son to stop him, but was waved away. "Vulkan, what are you doing?"

"To sacrifice pride for the sake of a life, that is true nobility." He met the Outlander's gaze and strangely found approval in his fathomless eyes. "This honour belongs to you, stranger."

“Humility and self-sacrifice go well together, Vulkan,” he replied. “You are everything I hoped you would become.” It was not the response Vulkan had expected, not at all. His face creased in confusion. “Who are you?”

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

Verace was sitting across from Vulkan, his face half swallowed by the shadows of the command tent.

Inside in the gloom, the primarch’s eyes were burning coals. It gave him an intensity most humans found difficult to look upon; most humans apart from the remembrancer in front of him.

“You don’t have a scratch on you.”

“Is that unusual?”

“For someone in a war zone, yes.”

“You are unscathed.”

Vulkan laughed in mild amusement and looked away. “I am different.”

“How?”

He turned to face the insouciant human, his humour deteriorating with his rising annoyance.

“I am...”

“Alone?”

Vulkan’s brow furrowed as if he was contemplating a problem to which he couldn’t see the solution. He was about to answer when he decided upon a different tack.

“You should fear me, human, or at the least be intimidated.”

Vulkan came forwards and clenched his fist just a hand’s width from the remembrancer’s face. “I could crush you for your insolence.”

Verace appeared unmoved by the apparent threat.

“And will you?”

The angry grimace of Vulkan’s face faded and he backed away to seethe. When he spoke again, his voice was thick and husky. “No.”

A strange silence fell between them, with neither man nor primarch breaking the deadlock. In the end, Vulkan said, “Tell me again what the obelisk looks like.”

The searching look on Verace’s face disappeared and he smiled before his eyes narrowed, remembering. “It is not an *obelisk* as such, but more like an arch as if it were part of a gate.” He described it in the air with his hands. “See? Do you see, Vulkan?”

“Yes.” His voice was not as self-assured as he’d intended. “What of the defenders? How would you gauge their strength?”

“I’m not a warrior, so any tactical appraisal I could provide would likely be of small use.”

“Try anyway.”

“I am curious as to why I am explaining this to you in person and not one of your captains.”

Vulkan growled, “Because they do not possess my patience. Now, the aliens’ strength...”

Verace bowed his head curtly to apologise. “Very well. The eldar are concentrated in number around the arch. Many more than were protecting the node. I saw... *witches* too and more of the reptilian beasts. The quadrupedal ones were the first to hunt us down. Rookeries fill the upper canopy, several times in excess of those I’d seen previously. There are larger beasts as well, though I had little time to study them what with all the running.”

“More comprehensive than I would’ve given you credit for,” Vulkan conceded. He shook his head.

“I confound you, don’t I,” said Verace.

“You escape a massacre unharmed and speak of your ordeal as if it were nothing. You address a primarch like you are speaking to a colleague in your order. Yes, your actions are unusual. There are bodies everywhere, not just soldiers but some of the natives too.” In the aftermath of the battle, Army scouts had discovered even more dead tribespeople who’d been caught in the vicious crossfire. The sight of the slain girl-child privately disturbed Vulkan still, and he’d ordered all of the native dead to be treated with the same care and respect as the Legion’s own.

“War does not discriminate, Verace,” said Vulkan. “Be mindful of where you are or it might be you we have to bury next.”

“She reached you, didn’t she?”

“Who?”

“The girl, the one killed by the indiscriminate war you mentioned.”

Vulkan’s face betrayed his discomfort. “These people suffer. She reminded me of that. But how did you—”

“I saw you glance at her when we were walking to the tent. At least, I assumed it was her that made you avert your eyes.” Verace licked his lips. “You wish to save them, don’t you?”

Vulkan nodded, seeing no reason to be evasive. “If I can. What kind of liberators would we be if the worlds we bring back to humanity merely burn? What fate for Ibsen then?”

“Poor ones, I suppose. But what is Ibsen?”

“It is... this world. Its name.”

“I thought its designation was One-Five-Four Four.”

“It is, but—”

“So you wish to save the people of *Ibsen*, is that what you mean?”

“Ibsen, designation One-Five-Four Four—yes, I just said that. What difference does it make?”

“A great deal. What made you change your mind?”

Vulkan frowned again. “What do you mean?” He was partially distracted by the sound of voices outside.

Verace’s intensity never wavered. “What made you think they were a people worthy of salvation?”

“I didn’t at first.”

“And now?”

“I don’t know.”

“Discover the answer to that and your troubled mind will rest easier.”

“I am not troubled.”

“Really?”

“I am—”

Numeon appearing at the entrance to the tent interrupted Vulkan’s reply.

“What is it, brother?” asked the primarch, masking his irritation.

“Ferrus Manus has arrived, my lord.”

Victory was closer at hand than Vulkan had suspected for the Iron Hands. Only moments after their last council, Ferrus had contacted him again, informing him of the Iron Hands’ success in the desert. Unlike his brother, Vulkan accepted Ferrus’ offer of reinforcement after he’d told him of the second larger obelisk in the jungle. It seemed to placate the Gorgon’s zealous mood greatly, and his earlier wounded pride was salved by the opportunity for his Legion to aid the Salamanders. Vulkan was sanguine, he had no need to prove himself or his Legion.

“I’ll meet him at once.” Vulkan retrieved his drake-helm from where he’d left it on a side console. He looked back at Verace as he picked it up. “We’ll talk again, you and I.”

The remembrancer remained impassive, giving nothing away. “I hope so, Vulkan. I sincerely do.”

Heka’tan’s 14th Fire-born stood shoulder-to-shoulder with divisions from the Iron Hands. The warriors of the X Legion were armoured in black ceramite with a white hand insignia emblazoned upon their left shoulder guards. Several carried augmentations: fingers, cybernetic eyes, entire skulls or bionic limbs to replace those lost in battle. They were a stern sight as cold and granite-like as their Medusan home world. But they were stalwart, and Heka’tan welcomed them in his ranks.

For once, his company was part of the second wave, arrayed behind the Firedrakes. Vulkan was a distant figure at their centre, surrounded by the fabled Pyre Guard. The rest of the Iron Hands, the elite warriors who called themselves the Morlocks, were with their primarch on the other side of the battlefield. Heka’tan had spoken briefly with their captain, an Iron Hand called Gabriel Santar, before a plan of attack was drawn up. The equerry’s bionics were extensive; both of his legs and his left arm were machine, not flesh. The effect initially dehumanised him for Heka’tan, but after mere minutes of talking with him the Salamander learned he was a wise and temperate warrior who fostered a deep respect for the XVIII Legion. Heka’tan hoped this would not be the last time he fought alongside the noble first-captain of the Iron Hands.

Heka’tan had heard the survivor of the Army scouts massacre had provided vital information in locating the eldar’s last node. As suspected, this node was utterly unlike the others. He could see it easily above the divisions in the front lines, a vast white stone arch that swept into the sky like a talon. In common with the psychic node Vulkan had destroyed, the arch was engraved with arcane runes and bejewelled with gemstones. It stood in the centre of an immense clearing, barren save for a dozen or so broken columns that jutted from the ground, the architecture of an ancient or forgotten culture. Even the jungle canopy had been stripped back to accommodate the arch, or rather had grown up in organic empathy with it. Massive

roots and vines, thicker than Heka'tan's armoured leg, entwined the plinth-like base and coiled all over the surface as if it had been dormant for many centuries.

Several lesser menhirs encircled the arch. Before each one stood one of the remaining witch coven. They were chanting, or rather... *singing*. Psychic energy played between them creating a circuit of crackling light that formed an iridescent shield around the arch.

Together with their psykers, the aliens had amassed the entirety of their forces in defence of this last edifice. Cloaked and armoured eldar were arrayed in ranks opposing the Imperium. Anti-gravity gun platforms hovered between the enemy cohorts, who were differentiated by the runic symbols on their faces and conical helms. A great herd of raptor-riders occupied one flank; a score of brutal carnodons anchored the other. The beasts champed and snorted at one another, pawing at the ground in agitation. Above them, the jungle canopy rustled with the susurrus of shifting membranous wings, and shrilled with the high-pitched bleat of pterosaurs. Slower moving stegosaurs lumbered into position, responding to the sudden presence of the Imperial forces. Heavy cannon were attached to their broad backs, managed by a crew of eldar inside an elegant howdah.

Having clashed with the aliens twice already, Heka'tan knew pitched battle was not where they excelled, but the Legion had broken their ambushes and the primarch had destroyed their node with a single hammer strike. Outmatched, they had little choice now but to stand and fight. Certainly, they were all willing to die in defence of this edifice.

Heka'tan could only guess at the arch's purpose. Allegedly it was a gate, although leading to where was unknown. He only knew his duty was to kill the aliens protecting it.

Still several hundred metres from the edge of the battle, the order to advance flashed up on his retinal display. As well as the 14th Fire-born, Heka'tan had several Phaerian cohorts in his charge, and gave clipped and immediate deployment orders to their discipline-masters. With the Army divisions mobilising, he had time for a last message to a friend.

"Bring the fires of Prometheus to them, brother," he said to Gravius across the feed.

"Aye, Vulkan is with us. I'll see you at the end, Heka'tan."

Heka'tan cut the link and turned to his command squad. Battered but still at full strength, the Salamanders looked ready for some retribution for the wounding they'd received at the hands of the warlock.

"Into the fires of battle, captain," said Brother Tu'var who'd survived the blade through his chest with typical resilience.

A salvaged bolt pistol sat in Heka'tan's holster to replace the one he'd lost. His chainsword still carried the stains of that battle. He lifted it into the air and cried out.

"14th Fire-born, on my lead... To the anvil, brothers!"

A farinaceous dust settled on the clearing, created in the wake of the barrage that preceded the Imperial attack. Churned earth, loosened and sent skywards by the continuous explosive impacts from grenades and heavy cannon, had formed a grimy emulsion with the natural heady atmosphere of the jungle. Tips of columns loomed in

the fog like broken islands floating on a dirty sea. Enemies and allies alike became spectral silhouettes in the mud-haze. Smoke from countless missile expulsions and venting rocket tubes drifted in lazy clouds, whilst lances of sunlight broke the leaf canopy above and turned grainy in the thickened atmosphere, only adding to the confusion.

It was no barrier to Vulkan. He advanced through the gritty miasma keenly, despatching foes with his hammer as they presented themselves. His Pyre Guard were arrayed around him and together they'd cut a bloody trail to reach the halfway marker. A tactical map overlaying one corner of his retinal display told him the precise distance remaining to the arch. So vast and sprawling was the alien edifice that it dominated the short horizon constantly, seen through an iridescent kine-shield. Icons identifying the rest of his Legion suggested they were making solid progress too, but the primarch and his praetorians had a definite lead. The Army divisions were faring less well.

Sustained auto-fire had mulched much of the jungle foliage into a mist that got into the lungs of the Phaerians and any of their leaders who weren't wearing rebreather masks. Between the screams of those brought down by the eldar's salvoes or assassinated by sniper shot, Vulkan heard men choking on the vaporised vegetation as they were pushed into the breach by their eager overseers.

With the cessation of the initial Army bombardment, the air was thinning again. A section of broken column resolved through the slow dispersal of settling earth particles. Architecturally, it was not unlike the node temple they'd encountered earlier and suggested a civilisation that pre-dated human colonisation had once dominated this world. Likely it had been the eldar, but in more halcyon times. Vulkan saw the bodies of the aliens strewn around its circular plinth. It was a grim reminder of just how much they'd lost in the dark millennia before the Great Crusade and man's pre-eminence in the galaxy.

That the eldar had lasted this long was testament to their persistence and courage. Any foe willing to try to resist the strength and power of two primarchs was worthy of respect, however grudgingly given.

What bothered Vulkan, as he'd torn into the aliens' ranks, was why they were so dogged when they faced certain annihilation. Flee and they would live. What did it matter if this world was lost to them? It was little more than a wild frontier world cluttered with broken remnants of stone that no longer mattered. Why would the eldar cling to it with such fatal determination? As before, the sense of something unknown sprang to the fore of Vulkan's mind, but he was unable to give his suspicions form or cause. For now, combat focused his mind, gave him a purpose that supplanted all other concerns.

From the initial weapons exchange, the battle had devolved into a series of closer skirmishes.

Revealed through the clearing fog, Army divisions were assaulting in force on several fronts with bayonets, knives and close-quarters gunfire. Sheer weight of numbers and the single-minded drive of their overseers and discipline-masters provided the men with small but increasingly significant victories. The eldar outmatched them one-on-one but their numbers were dwindling.

Divisions from both the Salamanders and Iron Hands were making punishing inroads, and the air was rank with the stink of reptilian carcasses. Both Legions were stolid and determined. Vulkan's sons attacked with a cleansing flame, burning the eldar back and crushing any survivors with a combined push, whereas the warriors of Ferrus Manus engaged the enemy with the same molten anger as their primarch, breaking the aliens with shock and awe. The Morlocks in particular were singular fighters, the equal of the Firedrakes, and Vulkan was glad to be fighting alongside his brother and his praetorians. Even still, he would not be outdone lightly.

Such was the ferocity of Vulkan and his Pyre Guard, a widening gyre of dead and broken eldar had formed around them. It presented a rare moment to pause, and in the brief respite, Vulkan looked for Ferrus. He wasn't hard to find.

The Gorgon fought without his battle-helm and was bludgeoning his way into the enemy's flank. *Forgebreaker* rose and fell like a metronome in his silver hands, crushing skulls and smashing eldar into the air with the hammer's every formidable swing. Zeal and fury radiated from his granite face as he drove the Morlocks relentlessly. Blistering fire flared between both sides but none of the Iron Hands slowed, let alone fell.

The kindred of eldar fighting them was soon overwhelmed and lethally despatched, but more enemies were coming.

Encouraged by the bloodletting, a pack of crimson-scaled carnodons snorted a throaty challenge. Their riders bellowed for the monsters to charge. The Iron Hands were still cutting down a few defiant stragglers from the eldar kindred when Ferrus Manus bellowed at them. Vulkan could read his lips and imagine his wrath.

"Finish them now!"

In his eagerness to end the fight quickly, a wayward blow from the primarch's hammer crunched through the side of a nearby column and sent it tumbling. Vulkan balked when he saw who was in its path.

Like a ghost materialising corporeally in the fog, the boy-child appeared from nowhere. His naked torso was drenched in sweat and someone else's blood, and he wailed blindly as he fled. As if sensing the sudden danger, the boy-child froze abruptly in the shadow of the falling column and could only watch his impending death approaching. He raised his arms feebly over his eyes.

Don't look, child...

Vulkan was running, leaving his praetorians behind him. It would not be enough. Without intervention, the column would crush the boy-child. He cried out, knowing that to even witness the death of such an innocent would forever stain his immortal soul.

Arrested from his battle frenzy by his brother's anguish, Ferrus turned and saw the danger.

"First-Captain!" he bellowed, and Gabriel Santar was there.

At his urging, the Morlocks drove on ahead of him to meet the carnodons with bolters flaring. Santar lagged behind and threw himself against the collapsing column. Using both hands, he caught the chunk of broken stone and held it. Servos in his bionic arm and legs whined in protest at the sudden strain they were put under.

He had enough strength spare to turn his head towards the terrified infant. His grey eyes churned with the turmoil of a captured storm as he glowered down at him. "Flee now!"

Screaming, the boy-child ran.

And as if heralding a flood, there were suddenly hundreds of the fleeing humans. Like leaves blown about on an eddying breeze, the frightened flock scurried in all directions and from everywhere at once.

"Terra and the Emperor," breathed Ferrus Manus, unable to comprehend the insane exodus.

"My lord..."

In spite of his cybernetics, Gabriel Santar's legs buckled to the knee and his elbows bent with the sheer immense weight of the column. The Gorgon was quick to relieve him, stowing *Forgebreaker* and hoisting the broken chunk of rock from his equerry as though it were little more than a bolter.

He roared to the Morlocks, who were seconds from hand-to-hand combat, "down!" and hurled the shattered pillar like a spear. The front carnodon took the brunt of the improvised missile, howling in agony as its forelegs were broken. It hit the ground muzzle first, trammelling the other beasts that tripped and blundered, losing the impetus of their attack. The Morlocks were quickly amongst them, Santar having rejoined their ranks.

Ferrus Manus glowered at Vulkan, his gimlet gaze singling out the other primarch easily in the throng.

"I suppose you're going to tell me to try not to kill them?" he declared through the feed.

It was easier said than done. Though the boy-child had reached relative safety, Vulkan saw hundreds fleeing in his wake. The natives were running loose all over the killing fields, heedless of the danger. Emerging from their nests and hidden places in a panicked mass, it was as if the humans had been displaced from a major settlement by the eldar war host. Either that or it was some desperate gambit on the aliens' part to try to disrupt the Imperium's inevitable victory.

Vulkan felt his wrath for the eldar renewed. Painful reminders of Nocturne during the Time of Trial, when fire rained from the sky and the earth cracked, flickered in his mind. He remembered their fear and the grim resignation that all they had striven for, when everything they had created was about to end. Perhaps the tribes of Ibsen were not so different after all.

Ibsen again. He saw this world through a fresh lens, but why?

Ferrus was right: flesh *was* weak but because he was strong, Vulkan was duty bound to protect them.

Whatever the cause of the frantic flight, the humans were at terrible risk. Entire families raced madly through the fading fog, screaming and wailing as a pervasive hysteria overtook them. Some even attacked the Army divisions in their desperation to escape, throwing rocks or beating them with their fists. None dared approach the Legionaries for fear of the consequences.

And if they'd carried carbines and rifles instead of sticks and rocks?

The tribal tattoos, the apparent ease with which they'd been conquered, coupled with the eldar's total infiltration—in spite of his empathy, Vulkan began to wonder just how far from the Emperor's light the natives had fallen.

Through the smoky bloom of a grenade detonation, a mother and daughter emerged unscathed. Vulkan saw them running; they were just a few metres from the primarch's position, then he noticed the unexploded shell in their path. The girl-child was already screaming when a second grenade, fallen from a dead troopers grasp, rolled up to the shell.

"Pyre Guard," Vulkan roared. "Shield them!"

The praetorians were catching up to the primarch but had reacted to the danger. Hot frag pierced the shell's casing and it erupted in a firestorm. Numeon and Varrun put their bodies between it and the cowering humans, crouching over them and wrapping their drake cloaks around them. The rain of fire and shrapnel vented to nothing without causing harm.

Numeon was shaking the dust from his helmet lenses when a tiny infant hand pressed against his plastron. He met the girl-child's curious gaze and was abruptly stunned.

Then they were gone, lost to the madness. The mother wasn't about to wait for another stray bullet or lurking shell to claim them. For Numeon, the moment of connection passed as swiftly as it had materialised.

Vulkan reached them quickly. "Thank you, my sons."

Both nodded, but Numeon's eyes went briefly to the fog the girl-child had vanished into.

"Protect them," said Vulkan softly, following his equerry's gaze.

"With our breath and blood, my primarch," Numeon replied. "With our breath and blood."

Vulkan opened the comm-feed. "Ferrus, despite their agitation, these are innocents. Be mindful."

"Concern yourself with killing the enemy, not saving the natives, Vulkan." The Gorgon scowled, but his face softened before engaging the carnodons. "I'll do what I can."

A band of iron was tightening around the eldar's defensive strongpoint. Vulkan knew if he continued to advance through the centre and Ferrus maintained his pace into the flank, their paths would meet. Together they would destroy the arch and end the eldar's occupation of Ibsen. He only hoped it would not take an unconscionable loss of human life to achieve it.

As of yet, nothing had penetrated the psychic shield emanating from the coven of eldar witches surrounding the arch. Vulkan had also yet to see the female seer who'd almost defeated his Legion back in the jungle. She was the one the eldar looked to for leadership. Despatch her and the aliens would be all but defeated. Victory was near. But something still gave the primarch pause. Above him, the jungle canopy was vast, dark and labyrinthine. Like his brothers, Vulkan had good instincts and harboured the sense that something watched him from those lofty arbours; something predatory. But his hesitation was not merely on account of that. Monsters he could kill easily enough. He'd been unsettled ever since speaking to Verace. The feeling was not one he was accustomed to, nor was the way the human had spoken to him, and yet the

primarch had allowed it unchallenged. Verace was hiding something. It was only now, his thoughts purified by the anvil of war, that he realised it. Stern of face, Vulkan resolved to get answers from the remembrancer.

For now, such truths would have to wait.

Through the haze, a small band of eldar emerged to attack the primarch. Their armour was different to the others, azure plated and more martial in aspect. Crested helms, more ornate in design than those of their ranger brethren, concealed their faces and from within the folds of vermillion capes they drew long angular swords. A low hum presaged a crackle of energy fed down the blades.

Vulkan signalled to his praetorians.

Several eldar kindreds had been drawn to the primarch to try and slow or even stop the obvious threat, but his retinue were killing everything around them.

“Pyre Guard... make it swift.”

Despatching the last of their enemies, they rushed ahead of Vulkan and into the eldar blademasters.

They weren’t alone. An ululating war cry announced a vast herd of raptors, powering through the dissipating fog. Energy lances dipping, they thundered towards Vulkan from the side. The blademasters, trading flashing blows with the Pyre Guard, had deliberately drawn off the praetorians.

“Cunning,” Vulkan muttered.

Facing off against the raptors, he hefted *Thunderhead*. “Those tiny spears cannot scratch me!” he roared, and smashed the weapon into the ground.

The earth... *splintered* under the incredible hammer blow, cracking and fragmenting outwards in an ever-widening crater. Through sheer strength, Vulkan projected the bone-shattering force into a massive earth tremor that radiated lethally towards the charging raptors. Chunks of dispersing rock spewed up from the ground in a brittle spume of grit and shards. The raptors screeched and faltered, rearing madly as the quake hit. Riders toppled or were swept from their saddles by the earthy deluge. Staggered, all but annihilated, the front rankers disappeared in the mud storm and were crushed by the momentum of the stampede behind them.

Hindered by the dead and dying, the survivors could only cry out as Vulkan rose to his haunches and sprang into them.

The eldar and their saurians didn’t last long. By the time Vulkan was done with the grisly work, the Pyre Guard had slain the last of the blademasters. Ganne had a savage dent in his battle-plate and Igataron had lost his helmet during the fight but otherwise the praetorians were intact.

“We are losing ground,” said Vulkan, seeing that Ferrus had killed the last of the giant carnodons.

Numeon gestured with his bloody halberd blade. “Scattered remnants are all that stand in our way, primarch.”

The equerry was right. The eldar were almost done. They’d fought tooth and nail against the Imperium, but with the destruction of the carnodons their resistance was at an end.

Only one feat remained before total victory was assured.

The monolithic arch stood unharmed behind the psychic shield, the coven of witches in place around it, their chanting uninterrupted since the battle began. Vulkan scoured their ranks, peering through the psychic energy veil, but he could find no sign of the female seer. Yet, the sensation of being watched from overhead persisted.

“She is here somewhere,” he muttered, turning his gaze from the enshrouding jungle canopy to the battlefield. “The aliens have one last card to play before this is over.”

By now the other Salamanders were close at hand. Even the Army divisions were nearing the outer boundaries of the arch. Ferrus Manus wasn’t about to wait for reinforcement. He was advancing on the coven. Vulkan turned to his retinue. “Come on.”

Though spirited, the last of the eldar defenders broke against the brutal determination of Vulkan and his praetorians. Maimed and mangled aliens lay cold behind them. Memories of Breughar’s death at the cruel blades of the eldar witch surfaced inexplicably in the primarch’s mind, stoking the flames of his violence further. He barely saw his enemies anymore. Their identities were lost to him, subsumed collectively into the face of the female slaver.

“Primarch.” It was Numeon who brought him back again, loyal, steadfast Numeon.

Vulkan gripped his armoured shoulder. “I’m sorry, my son, the fires of battle overcame me for a time.”

Numeon needed no explanation. “We are here.”

Luminous blossoms of energy flashed along the shield as the Iron Hands tried to crack it open. Bolter shells exploded impotently against the inviolable surface, whilst flamer bursts and heavier fire had similar effect.

Ferrus Manus swung *Forgebreaker* and the weapon rebounded harmlessly. Seeing Vulkan in his peripheral vision, he turned.

“Any idea how we bring this thing down?”

Vulkan looked through the transparent psychic membrane. Despite the continuous chanting, the eldar witches were beginning to show signs of fatigue. Sweat veined their pale, eldritch faces and they grimaced with extreme concentration. Their strength was fading.

He hefted *Thunderhead*, enjoying the feel of the grip and the sense of its power. “I was going to try hitting it over and over again until it cracks.”

Ferrus grinned, a rare sight on one so serious and taciturn. “It’ll be like breaking in a new anvil.”

He was about to swing again when a deafening screech radiated from above, shaking the entire jungle canopy for kilometres around. The earth trembled as the screech became a throaty, bestial roar. In that moment, the light died like a cloud obscuring the sun. At the threshold to the arch, a dappled light had fallen on the shield, lending it a brilliant sheen. It disappeared in an instant as something vast and terrible eclipsed it.

A noisome stench had filled the air, making it heavy and thick. Looking up into the benighted sky, Vulkan wrinkled his nose. It emanated from a monster. The massive shadow descending towards them was shaped like a pterosaur only much,

much bigger. Though it barely moved its membranous wings, the downdraft pushed the advancing Phaerians to their knees. Some stayed like that or sank further, huddling in foetal terror. The Legionaries stood their ground with the primarchs, appraising the beast coldly through their helmet lenses. A bleat of reptilian voices snapped at the air as a flock of smaller pterosaurs appeared from behind the pteradon's incredible wingspan.

Ferrus Manus levelled his hammer at them.

"Scything rain!"

The Morlocks released a bolter storm. Whirling and shrieking, the pterosaurs were torn apart. Several stray bursts exploded against the thorny hide of the giant pteradon, which only maddened the beast further. It was gnarled and old, like some monster of myth made flesh. Myriad scars stitched its leathery torso and a vast horn, dark with age and blood stain, jutted from its bony snout. Talons, as long as the primarch was tall, curved from rough-hided toes. Umber-coloured scales, thicker than any battle-plate ever forged, scalloped its back and limbs, while a long prehensile tail ended in an axe-headed barb.

Impressive as the monster was, Vulkan's attention was drawn by its rider.

"There you are..."

The female seer had bound this creature to her will and saddled it. Incredibly, she needed no hands to ride the monster and carried an eldritch staff in one and a glittering rune-blade in the other. Garbed for war, her intent was obvious as she glared at the two primarchs.

Vulkan removed his drake-helm, wanting to meet the monster eye to eye, and his face curled into a snarl. "We must kill this thing, you and I."

A primordial roar drowned out the Gorgon's reply, showering its enemies with hot saliva and reptile stink. Men quailed. Some soiled themselves and fled. The Legionaries opened fire. Brass bolter shells erupted like fiery blooms across its ribbed belly. The beast rose to its haunches, wings splayed like some saurian angel, and then slammed the membranous tissue together in a thunderous collision. A deep throb raked the air, carried by the dull boom resonating from the point of impact. A tempest was unleashed upon the Imperial forces. Phaerians and officers alike were flung back screaming, their innards pulped by the massive shock wave. They spun, doll-like, limbs flailing brokenly in the hurricane. Trees bowed, bent and ripped apart. Severed trunks and clumps of scattered foliage impaled tanks and flattened entire cohorts in the savage welter of debris. They resisted determinedly, but even the Legionaries were sent sprawling, a thick and dirty cloud spilling after them.

Ferrus grit his teeth, standing his ground with Vulkan. His rage was written loudly upon his face.

"I have no quarrel with that, brother."

An arena lay before them, of ragged tree stumps and flattened jungle flora.

A gritty patina washed over their armour and surrounded the beast like a low-lying, earthy fog. It glared at them, expressing its ancient hate and malice, dwarfing the primarchs utterly.

"Try again, monster," said Vulkan, dropping his voice to a predatory rumble.

He heard a low *whomp* of displaced air and registered a blur of sudden movement in time to slam into Ferrus Manus and bear him down. A scaled, gnarled mass whipped overhead as the pteradon's axe-bladed tail narrowly missed the Gorgon's exposed neck.

Vulkan was quickly up on his feet and moving. "Don't lose your head, brother."

Ferrus scowled. "Worry about your own. It'll take more than that to cut my flesh." He was moving too, making for the pteradon's blindside to flank it.

Its monstrous size and strength were formidable advantages, but with its enemies splitting up it couldn't bring them to bear against both. Emitting a reverberant screech, it went after Vulkan.

Hunting monsters was second nature to the primarch of the Salamanders. Nocturne was lair to many scaled and chitinous horrors. As a boy, Vulkan had slain them all. Even the drake he wore as his mantle was huge, but this... this was a *behemoth*.

He lost sight of Ferrus behind the pteradon's bulk, but stayed near to the beast to deny it its greater reach. The brackish reptile stench was potent close up. Mortal men would have gagged on its foul aroma but Vulkan had ranged the steppes of Mount Deathfire and endured its sulphurous vapours. This was nothing to him.

A hot chain of sparks flew off the primarch's armour as the monster caught him with its talons, before he turned and smashed *Thunderhead* into its flank. Its scales buckled and snapped. The cracks in the monster's natural armour filled with blood, and a shriek of pain tore from its throat. A heady coppery scent dirtied the air further, and Vulkan knew he'd hurt it.

Keep moving. It was a mantra in the primarch's head as he chased along the pteradon's flank. *Stop and we die.*

No man could hope to face such a monster, let alone fight it. Primarchs were more than men, more than Space Marines.

They were like unto gods but even gods could fall.

As if hearing his thoughts, the monster came again. It lunged, and Vulkan narrowly avoided the razor teeth. He came up for a retaliatory strike, but the beast snapped at him again and he dropped his shoulder to dodge. It used its bulk to slam into him and Vulkan staggered before edging back.

Teeth as long as chainblades and drooling with saliva loomed in the primarch's eye line.

He swung *Thunderhead* in a narrow arc to loosen his wrist, readying to crush the monster's neck, when a clutch of roots spewed from the earth to trap him.

Vulkan snarled.

The witch was trying to even the odds with sorcery.

He tore his arm free but further serpentine bonds coiled around it, pinning him. Vulkan roared and the beast roared with him, sensing its meal was close. Widening its chasmal jaw, the pteradon was about to bite off Vulkan's head when it reared up in sudden agony. Swinging its leathery neck to peer over its shoulder, it screeched at a second assailant.

"Like I said, worry about yourself, brother..."

Ferrus Manus appeared from behind the monster, seen through the gaps between its massive limbs. He'd shattered a bone framing its wing membrane and leapt clear as it slashed at him belatedly with its tail. Shedding the root bonds, Vulkan punched *Thunderhead* into the beast's unprotected belly. Muscles ruptured and bones cracked, eliciting another shrill of bestial agony. A swipe of the pteradon's bladed wing claw prevented his follow up attack and forced him to retreat, while Ferrus Manus was kept at bay with stabbing thrusts of the monster's barbed tail.

Venturing in close again, Vulkan took a chunk of scale from its back. The two-handed blow left gore drooling between the knots and scars of its body like before, and he knew its formidable strength was ebbing.

"We're close!" he yelled.

Ferrus charged in to shatter the monster's standing leg. It screeched, stumbling in pain. A line of blood jetted across Vulkan's plastron as he caved in a portion of the pteradon's snout. It reeled before Ferrus sheared through one of its wings, leaving the membranous tissue ragged. Between them, the savage primarchs were tearing the monster apart. A bleat of panic escaped its throat, gurgling with the blood in its nasal cavity and mouth. The pteradon suddenly realised who was predator and who was prey.

It tried to flee but the primarchs were relentless, battering its wings with continuous blows and pounding its body like it was a carcass for tenderising. A flash from above presaged a jolt of lightning that struck Ferrus in the chest, winding him. He staggered and the monster was allowed to rise. Even though it was wounded, the hard beats of its wings were achieving loft. Another psychic bolt jagged down at Vulkan, but he evaded it and seized the pteradon's flank.

"There's no escape," he muttered, gripping the edges of the monster's scales and using them like handholds as the ground steadily fell away and he was borne upwards.

"VULKAN!"

Ferrus' shout was devoured by the wind rushing into Vulkan's ears. It whipped around him, whistling and screeching with the speed of the monster's ascent. Battered by the rigours of the elements, Vulkan gritted his teeth and clung on. Amidst the tempest engulfing him, he heard the tolling of metal on metal. The anvil beckoned.

Crushed against the beast's coarse flank, the world around him devolving into a shrieking blur, he knew he had to rise. When he pulled his hand free, the fingers of his gauntlet were rimed with gore from where he'd been digging in. Grabbing another armoured scale, Vulkan climbed. It was slow. Every moment held the threat of him losing his grip and being cast into arboreal oblivion below. Split branches fell like rain as they reached the forest canopy and surged through it. They scraped like claws across his face and for a few seconds he was blinded, his vision filled by parting foliage. Vulkan held on.

The striking of the anvil tolled in his ears.

After they'd breached the jungle roof, he was able to claw a little further up the pteradon's body and reached the bony nub of its foreleg. He fought the pressing sense of disorientation as all visual and auditory markers disappeared in the maddened ascent. Heavy wing beats throbbed painfully in his ears as direction lost all

meaning. There was only the need to hang on and the will to climb. The beast flew higher.

The sun still burned the sky, but it was wreathed in cloud as the monster rose, ever further into the heavens. It couldn't shake him. It barely had the strength to climb, so Vulkan only needed to bear the raging wind that pulled at his body and tugged at his fingers.

He dug in and ate up the slow metres to his prey. His mind retreated back to the lava chasm all those many long years ago.

It was another life.

Reaching the muscular join between the monster's wings, he found his enemy.

"Witch!" he called, bellowing to be heard.

She turned, looking over her shoulder. Her eyes flickered with psychic fire, and a bolt arrowed past Vulkan's face.

"You'll need to do better than that," he shouted.

She angled her staff at the primarch, releasing a lightning storm that scorched his armour and burned a scar down his cheek. Vulkan grimaced, but advanced undaunted. Each punishing handhold brought him closer than the last. Underneath his body, he could sense the monster tiring, hear its laboured breathing and feel its shuddering muscles as they reached the end of their endurance.

Unable to climb any further, the pteradon pulled up and levelled out, enabling the eldar seer to leave her saddle and stand upon its vast, muscular back. She confronted the primarch, feeding power into the blade of her sword.

Vulkan was on his feet. He drew his hammer, slowly and purposefully to allow the full import of what fighting one of the Emperor's sons meant to settle on the seer.

"Surrender now and it will be swift," he promised.

She ran at him instead.

Vulkan charged.

The primarch's footing was uneven across the monster's back but he reached the seer without stumbling. The rune-blade whickered like a viper's tongue, raking *Thunderhead's* thick haft. She struck again, scoring a pectoral armour plate. Vulkan swung but she sprang away from the death blow, impossibly agile, and landed perfectly on the pteradon's back. She lunged, aiming for Vulkan's heart. The thrust penetrated the primarch's guard but was turned aside by his armour. A crack presaged the breaking of her sword. The seer gasped at the psychic backlash, recoiling instinctively as the energy tore at her, clutching at a blackened arm.

Seizing her throat in his gauntleted fist, Vulkan bore the eldar witch down.

"This world belongs to the Imperium."

She'd lost her staff, dropped over the edge of the monster, and her sword was a smoking hilt she'd also cast aside. All that remained was her defiance.

She spat over Vulkan's armour, and there was blood mixed in with the phlegm.

"Barbarian!" The Imperial dialect sounded crude on her lyrical tongue. "You don't know what you've done..." Her pale lips were flecked crimson and the vigour in her eyes was fading. "If you destroy it... you will doom this world more than you have already."

Vulkan loosened his grip and was rewarded with treachery. A burst of psychic fire flared between them and he withdrew, letting the seer go. A second blast threw him off his feet and he was scrambling to hold on.

Panicking, the seer mounted the saddle and drove the pteradon into a suicidal dive. With a vertiginous lurch, Vulkan was falling and he reached out desperately for something to hold on to as he pitched over the pteradon's side.

She was chanting. Her lilting refrain unleashed spear-thick barbs from the forest below. Vulkan narrowed his eyes and he dug his fingers between the plated scales. Stomach flat against the pteradon's gelid hide, he weathered the debris storm that was suddenly bombarding him.

Descent was swift. The strain of it pressed against the primarch's body like a gauntleted fist slowly clenching. The beast was almost done, plunging like a stone. It penetrated the broken leaf canopy as if breaching the atmosphere of a foreign world, but there was no fire, no aura of re-entry heat, just wind and the ground rushing to meet them. As the monster plummeted, Vulkan's grip loosened. Inertia was dragging the scales he was clinging to, threatening to rip apart the sinews holding them together and tear them off.

The earth loomed, a flat and uncompromising expanse that only required gravity to pulp flesh and shatter bones. It seemed the seer was intent on killing them both. Vulkan hung on, hoping his superhuman endurance would see him through. Thirty metres from impact, the pteradon's survival instincts took over. Emitting a plaintive yelp, it tried to pull out of the lethal dive but was too late. Twisting its massive body in vain, the monster slammed into the earth.

Darkness fell as a huge pall of dirt was thrown into the air by the impact. Ripped free from the monster's back, Vulkan was thrown clear, but came quickly to his feet. He wasn't far from where the pteradon had ditched. The beast had borne the brunt of the fall and cracks emanated from its broken carcass. Its wings were tattered strips. The fleshy membrane was tougher than flak armour but its shattered bones had sheared through it like blades. Thick fluid drooled down its crooked snout, and the its neck was wrenched at an unnatural angle. Vulkan ran to it, knowing the seer might also have survived the fall.

She was struggling from the wreckage, obscured by a slowly settling dust cloud. Blood painted her robes and her leg was clearly broken. She glared at the primarch as he approached her, snarling through red-rimmed teeth. Summoning a nimbus of lightning, she raised her palm in a final defiant effort to kill him. Vulkan swung his hammer before the nascent psychic storm could manifest and took her head from her shoulders.

Blood was still spewing from the ragged neck cavity when the body finally caught up to the mind and the decapitated seer fell to her knees then onto her front. She was quickly surrounded by a gory pool of her own spilling vital fluids.

Ferrus Manus quietly regarded the alien head that came to rest at his feet.

"It's over, brother," Vulkan told him.

The Gorgon was pensive as he looked up.

"Victory."

Legion and Army divisions patrolled the battlefield, searching for the enemy. Wounded eldar were quickly silenced, while Imperial casualties were either recovered or granted mercy if their injuries were too severe. It was dirty work, war work, but it was necessary. Small bands of natives still roamed the killing ground, lost and seemingly afraid. Efforts to herd them together for medical attention and processing were met with hostility at first but gradually the tribespeople had submitted peacefully.

The death of the seer had effectively ended the resistance. The eldar were utterly broken, and would not return. Execution squads had already been dispatched into the jungle to hunt down the last of them. Ferrus Manus had done the same before leaving the desert and there was no doubt Mortarion had expunged all hostiles from the ice plains.

Army discipline-masters had the Phaerians set fires in the rotting carcass of the pteradon. Such a mass of meat and bone would take time to burn. Vulkan frowned as he watched the bolder, more ebullient troopers make mock triumphal gestures as they posed on top of its corpse. It was undignified. Disrespectful.

“What was it like?” asked Ferrus Manus. The Primarch of the Iron Hands was standing at his shoulder, surveying the aftermath.

Vulkan turned to face him. “What was what like?”

“Riding on the back of that beast. I never expected one of the Eighteenth to be so impulsive.” He laughed to show he meant no harm.

Vulkan smiled. He still hurt too much to laugh. “Remind me never to do anything like that again.”

He winced when the Gorgon slapped his back. “Glory hound.”

With the achievement of victory, Ferrus’ mood had warmed. His strength and courage were reborn in his eyes, and his Legion had helped deliver One-Five-Four Four to compliance. It was a good day.

They were standing before the arch. The psychic shield was down. Following its destruction, the eldar witch coven had burned violently like candles over-fuelled with oxygen. They resembled little more than charred corpses crumpled in front of the encircling menhirs now.

Ferrus nudged at the ash with his boot. “Thus is the fate of all foes.”

“They hung on long enough,” said Vulkan. He focused on one, a male whose skeletal hands were curled into claws. The warlock had raged at the end. “I still can’t fathom why they defended this place so vehemently.”

“Who can guess at the mores of aliens?” Ferrus sounded dismissive. “A better question is what is to be done about that.” He gestured to the massive arch, now denuded of its psychic defences. “Unless you want to leap from a Stormbird again and shatter it?”

The Gorgon’s humour was lost on Vulkan. He was intent on the arch. A gate, Verace had supposed.

But leading to where?

“I think destroying it out of hand would be a mistake. At least until we know its purpose.”

Ferrus’ levity frosted over and he grew serious. “It *has* to be destroyed.”

Vulkan was stern. "We may unleash a greater evil."

"What has got into you, brother?" asked Ferrus, his eyes narrowing.

"Something..." Vulkan shook his head. When his gaze went to the plinth beneath the arch, he saw a familiar face. "What is *he* doing over there?"

Ferrus grabbed Vulkan's arm to stop him from heading to the plinth. "We set charges and demolish this thing."

Vulkan pulled free and returned his brother's glare. "Indulge me, Ferrus."

The Gorgon scowled but let go.

When Vulkan reached the plinth it was deserted. Verace was gone. He walked the entire vast perimeter. There was no sign of the remembrancer, but he did notice a disparity in the runic pattern around the plinth.

He summoned the Pyre Guard, drawing his hammer.

"Do you see that?" he asked his equerry.

Numeon pulled out his halberd. "I do, primarch. An opening."

It was little more than a crack, an interruption in the runic formation around the plinth, but definitely a doorway.

The equerry nodded to Ganne and Igataron. "Open it."

The two praetorians sheathed their blades and pressed their shoulders against the plinth wall. Leodrakk and Skatar'var took up posts either side with weapons ready. If anything came from within it would die a quick death should it choose to attack. The doorway was a rune-carved slab, tall enough to accommodate the Legionaries and fashioned from the same stone as the arch. It ground inwards, stone scraping stone, revealing a shallow stairway leading into a chamber sunken *below* the arch.

"Lower your blades," said Vulkan.

The praetorians obeyed. Numeon and Varrun were the last to relent and eyed the shadows inside the plinth warily.

"What further horrors await us?" asked the equerry.

Vulkan was reminded of the small chamber beneath the forge, the one under the anvil that N'bel had sealed at his request.

"There is but one way to find out," said the primarch. "I lead."

Then he stepped through the doorway and was immersed in darkness.

"I have so many questions..."

"Answers will come, but some only in time. Many you'll have to discover for yourself."

They sat together, overlooking the Pyre Desert as the sun set over its hostile sands. It was a barren, harsh land but it was home. Vulkan had believed it so, anyway. Everything he had learned in the last few hours had changed that, or at least it had changed how he thought of it.

He turned to regard the face of the Outlander. It was at once old, yet young; wise, yet innocent. There was benevolence in his tone that suggested understanding, but also a weight to his bearing that was either caused by sorrow or the burden of some great knowledge. Fire blazed in his eyes, not like Vulkan's; this was a deeper furnace, a flame of will that would drive a great labour to fruition.

How much of this Vulkan perceived on his own and how much the Outlander conveyed to him, he didn't know. He only knew he was bound for the stars and a life beyond Nocturne. As the hot wind roiling off the desert plain warmed his face and the scent of ash carried on the breeze, he knew he would miss his world deeply. It saddened him to think of leaving it.

"And I have brothers?" he asked.

The Outlander nodded. "You have many. Several are already waiting for you, as eager as I am for your return."

That pleased Vulkan. Despite the unconditional acceptance of the Nocturne people, he had always felt alone. To know there were others of his true flesh and blood in the galaxy, and that he'd soon be reunited with them, was comforting.

"What will happen to my father, N'bel, I mean?"

"You need have no fear. N'bel and all of your people will be safe."

"How, if I am not here to protect them?"

The Outlander smiled, and the warmth of it chased away Vulkan's anxiety.

"Your destiny is a great one, Vulkan. You are my son, and you will join me and your brothers on a crusade that will unite the galaxy and make it safe for all of mankind." His face fell suddenly to melancholy, and Vulkan felt a sympathetic ache in his heart at the sight of it. "But you must leave Nocturne, and for that I am truly sorry. I need you, Vulkan, more than you know, more perhaps than you'll ever know. Of all my sons, you are the most compassionate. Your nobility of spirit and humility will keep your disparate siblings grounded. You are the earth, Vulkan, its fire and solidity."

"I don't know what you're asking me to do, father." It was strange to call the Outlander that, a man, or being, he barely knew and yet felt an undeniable connection to.

"You will. It pains me, but I will have to leave you all when you need me the most, but I'll try to watch over you when I can."

"I wish I knew what this all meant and what I am supposed to become." Vulkan raised his face to the sky and watched the burning sun as it scorched all of Nocturne beneath its pitiless rays.

"You will, Vulkan. I promise you, when the time comes, you will know."

A golden light suffused the Outlander, radiating from under his skin, as he cast off his disguise and revealed the truth...

* * *

Harboured beneath the plinth was a vast and echoing catacomb. Something drew Vulkan downwards as he descended the steps in a daze. What he found when he reached the bottom made his fiery Nocturnean blood run cold.

"What is this place?" hissed Numeon.

Strange sigils were daubed on the walls, alien in origin, and there were shrines sunk into alcoves dedicated to aberrant deities. A procession of crude statues, long-limbed and androgynous of gender, lined the edges of a subterranean passageway

that fed deeper into the complex. At the end of the passageway shadows were moving in the reflected glow of ritual firelight.

“A temple.” Vulkan’s voice was deep and thick with anger. He drew a gladius.

A susurrus of scraping metal followed as the Pyre Guard each unsheathed their own short swords. None would muddy their chosen weapons on filthy, graven priests.

“Tread quietly and in my wake,” Vulkan told them and began to move towards the flickering light.

A sick feeling took hold in the primarch’s stomach, something that had been growing ever since the boy-child from the jungle had confronted him. Insidious talons had sunk deep into him and were twisting at his resolve. He remembered the thoughts he’d had earlier when he’d considered what must have transpired on Ibsen before the Imperium had arrived to enlighten it.

How far from the Emperor’s light had the natives had fallen?

Vulkan reached the edge of another chamber. It was roughly circular, crudely hewn from the earth and packed with clay. There sigils were drawn upon the wall like before and totems placed at specific cardinal points around the room. In the centre was a ring of fire. A cadre of robed figures cavorted around it, chanting. It was the same lyrical mantras as sung by the female seer. Within the ritual circle, partly hidden by the rising flames, was a figure tied to a wooden column that supported the chamber roof. Runic symbols, alien symbols, were notched upon its surface too.

As Vulkan stepped through into the light, one of the priests turned. He was wearing a mask of some wretched eldar deity and a rune was cut into the flesh of his bared chest. Upon seeing the primarch, a shadowed giant with the glowing eyes of a daemon, the priest cried out and the chanting stopped abruptly. Screaming took over, and the drawing of jagged blades. It would be like trying to fight a Terran bear with a pin. Realising their only escape route was blocked, the worshippers fled to the back of the cavern and cowered. Some spat curses, but kept their daggers low so as not to provoke.

Numeon stalked forwards, a thin snarl escaping his lips.

“Wait!” Vulkan stopped him. The praetorians looked ready to kill the humans out of hand, but stood down and simply glowered at them.

“They never wanted to be saved,” said Vulkan, partly to himself. “They were *already* saved, but not by us—”

“Primarch, they are no better than the eldar,” snapped Numeon, still eager and in the slaying mood.

“I have been so blind.”

Sheathing his gladius, for there was no real danger here, Vulkan approached the ring of fire. What he saw tied up against the column within made him stagger.

There was a rattle of armour as the Pyre Guard went to their lord, but Vulkan’s upraised hand stilled them.

“I’m all right.” His voice was barely above a whisper. His gaze was drawn utterly to the figure, as the cavern seemed to shrink around him, pressing against the primarch with the weight of destiny.

It was the eyes that he recognised, for the body had long since shrivelled to desiccation and the vicissitudes of time had ravaged it.

He would remember those eyes, dagger-thin and filled with a sickening ennui.

A debilitating pain welled up in Vulkan's chest as old memories came back like reopened wounds.

"Breughar..."

Thoughts of the dead metal-shaper brought tears of fire to the primarch's eyes as he realised who he stood face-to-face with. She recognised him too, but her corpse-like face was incapable of expression.

"The slaver-witch."

Suddenly the battle in front of the gates of Hesiod did not seem so long ago.

The dusk-wraiths had been here, to Ibsen, just as they had tormented Nocturne all those centuries before. The horrifying truth of it fell hard and pitilessly. The humans worshipped the eldar because *they* were their saviours. They had saved them from the slavers, from their own dark cousins. And now they had tortured this one for some fell purpose, perhaps to ward off future incursions, or maybe it was to remove the terror from the myth. Either way, Vulkan's rage rose to the surface like a volcano moments from eruption.

He turned his back on the witch for the last time.

"This world is lost." He felt numb, almost stupefied. His breathing came quick and angry. His teeth clenched and so did his fists. He mumbled the command, "No one leaves this place alive," before becoming loud enough to cause a panic in the priests. "Slay them all."

Heart heavy, Vulkan walked away and left the sounds of slaughter behind him.

My eyes are open, father.

He knew what he must do.

On the hills overlooking the great runic arch, Vulkan watched the fires burn. Heavy landers were breaching the upper atmosphere in the distance, conveying the tens of thousands of Army divisions bound for the next warzone. Below, the conflagration was slowly consuming the entire jungle. Everything burned. This world would be razed to ash, its mineral seams mined to extinction and put to use for the furtherance of the Great Crusade. Ibsen had become a death world, it had become Nocturne.

"I sanctioned murder of unarmed men today," Vulkan said to the heat haze rippling off the blaze. It was incandescent, beautiful, terrible.

Ferrus Manus answered. "Better to cleanse this place and begin anew than leave behind a canker to fester." The Gorgon had come to bid him farewell until the next campaign. His Morlocks and the rest of his Iron Hands were embarked, only the primarch and Gabriel Santar remained.

"I know that, brother." There was resignation in his tone.

"You risk your men and you risk your life; you cannot save everyone, Vulkan."

"The nodes we collapsed, they were keeping that thing dormant." He gestured to the arch. "It's a gateway. I've seen them before, long ago. They lead to the endless darkness where only horror and torture await. I have done this, Ferrus. I have

condemned this planet to the same fate as my own. How am I supposed to live with that knowledge?"

"More worlds will burn before this crusade is done—innocent worlds. The galaxy is at stake, brother. What is one planet compared to that?" Ferrus snapped, betraying his anger and frustration at something he didn't truly understand. "Your compassion is a weakness. It will end up killing you."

Ferrus stalked away, his Stormbird ready to launch, and Vulkan was left to contemplate the raging flames.

He was not alone for long.

"Primarch, the ships are leaving." It was Numeon, come to summon his liege-lord.

Vulkan turned to the equerry. "Did you find the remembrancer as I asked?"

Numeon stepped aside, revealing a robed and erudite-looking figure. "I did, my lord."

Vulkan frowned. "That is not Verace."

"Primarch?"

"That is not Verace," Vulkan repeated.

The remembrancer bowed nervously. "My name is Glaivarzel, my lord. You offered to relate your life's origins to me so that I might capture it for posterity."

Vulkan ignored the human, his attention on Numeon.

"Bring me Remembrancer Verace. I will speak to this man later."

Numeon hastily dismissed Glaivarzel, but returned with a confused expression.

"Primarch, I don't know of whom you speak."

"Are you trying to vex me, equerry?" Vulkan grew angry. "Bring me the other—" He stopped. There was utterly no recognition in Numeon's eyes, none at all.

A stranger's words came back to him.

I'll try to watch over you when I can.

All the fury in him drained away. Vulkan held Numeon's shoulders as father to son.

"I'm sorry. Ready the ship. I'll be there in a few moments."

If Numeon understood what had just happened he didn't show it. He merely nodded and went to his duty.

Vulkan was left alone with his thoughts.

An ocean of fire was washing across the jungle. Its trees would blacken and die, its leaves would wither to dust. An arid plain would rise from a fertile land and a race would be forsaken to memory. He imagined the settlers that would come after them, the burgeoning Imperial landers brimming with people. It was a new world for the expeditionaries to inhabit, for pioneers to map and colonise. World One-Five-Four Four. It would not be easy for them.

The dusk-wraiths would return, Vulkan was sure, but the colonists would take up arms and fight them just as his people had. It would be a hard life, but a good and noble one. N'bel had taught him the importance of that.

As a primarch, he had come to Ibsen with his humours out of balance, his purpose blunted. He had wanted to save these people and though he could not, Vulkan had rediscovered a part of himself he thought lost. Compassion was seen as a

flaw to some. Certainly, Ferrus Manus thought so. But an Outlander had opened Vulkan's eyes and shown him it was his greatest strength.

"I will name this place Caldera," he said aloud, and vowed he would protect it with the same ferocity as Nocturne. It would not become just another compliant world, a number without a heart. Vulkan had taken much but he could give it that at least.

The flames of the conflagration were rising. Thick clouds of ash scurried across the reddish sky at the eve of a fresh Hell-dawn. Vulkan turned his face to the heavens and met the glare of the baleful sun. A Promethean sun.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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