

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 the 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 Nocturn

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. Scarce 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 trooper's 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, 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 the 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 cyberhawk 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 and 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, the conical helms 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 bear re-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 scatterlocks and automatic 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 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

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. Nocturnal, they 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 on his retinal lens. His bolt pistol was still scanning, spitting out semi-auto at an enemy so fleet of foot that 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's 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 them. 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 firing 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 Legion's 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 stegosaur 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 opposi-

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 autosenses. 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. His 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 crystalline 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 into 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 kinetic 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 of 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. The 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 Salamander 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 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 sinew 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 as they looked at 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-rimmed 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 gush of the monster's blood, anointing his small victory. Bannon tried to shift his body to defend against another attack but the root binding 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 charred, 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, carried an amount of force equivalent to a battle tank. Its fangs were as long as Heka'tan's chainblades 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-armor was ancient and inviolable, fashioned by his own hand. Dragon heads and fiery iconography wrought from rare quarrels 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, Vulkan 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 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. It 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 son

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 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 into 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... we 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 Medusa 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 he 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. Honor 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 picter 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 a 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 in 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 by 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 yo

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 hands, 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.

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 flank 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 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 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 Arridic 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 on the side. He strained and the anvil scraped forwards a fraction. "I didn't raise a giant of a son just so he 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 mountains 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 an 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. They were a strong people who endured the ravages of the earth when the ground split and the volcano 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 land 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 the Nocturne. 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

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