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40,000

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A SALAMANDERS STORY



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Out on the Arridian Plain, life is hard. The weak do not last long. Generations ago, Themians, above all other Nocturneans, learned this lesson. Themians value strength. They breed only the hardest fighters. Hunting is in their blood, and no quarry is ever too deadly for their guile and their spears.

Like all landscapes, deserts evolve over time. Hunters must adapt or the distance between predator and prey will narrow, and their roles reverse. Such change is like the shifting of sand, often unseen and unheard until it is too late and its trap is already sprung...

Zen'de, from *Souls of the Earth*

There was blood in Ba'ken's mouth, blood and the hot tang of cinder. Around him, bones were stirring, barely clad in scraps of flesh, their rictus faces glaring. Black. Everything was scorched black and he was sinking in it, down into a mire of ash.

He had lost count of how many he had killed, drowning in a sea of bodies.

Lesser men might have cursed the lack of preparedness that had brought about this end. Lesser men might have capitulated.

Sol Ba'ken was Themian, as pragmatic as any fire-born son. He did not believe in what could be, only in what was. Forged in the City of Warrior-Kings, as a blade is upon the anvil, yielding was simply not in his nature.

He had gone into the desert looking for an answer, but had found something else, something... *tainted*.

Rising, despite his many injuries, Ba'ken clenched the hilt of his hunting knife and bellowed, 'Come, death! Come and let's see if you are worthy to claim my scalp!'

Death answered in the dry, rasping voice of the damned.

Sanctuary City of Hesiod, nineteen hours earlier

‘Are you sure this is wise?’ asked Fugis.

He addressed Ba’ken’s muscular, brawny shoulders and the cloak of drake hide hanging down over them. A thick-hafted hammer was strapped, crosswise, to his neck.

Fugis affected a mood of disapproval. He barely outmatched his brother’s height and width, despite being clad in power armour. His battleplate was the scale green of the Salamanders apart from his helmet and right arm, which were both white to denote his role as Apothecary. Unlike his bald companion, his hair was closely cropped, and he had a thin face not at all similar to the crag-like features that regarded him.

Sol Ba’ken was crouching down as he strapped a long Themian hunting knife to his calf. Unlike Fugis, he wore a light padded jerkin and tan fatigues. His arms were bare aside from a pair of torcs, and showed off the many branding scars from his years of service to the Chapter. They also hinted at the many grievous injuries sustained in that same cause.

‘I have to know, brother.’ His voice was deep, its cadence reminiscent of speaking into a chasm. He stood to adjust his belt where he had holstered his bolt pistol. ‘It’s that simple.’

Spare clips were tucked into pouches on his jerkin, and a hand flamer hung from a strap attached to the belt. Its spare promethium canister rattled as the large warrior moved. Upright, he almost stood eye-to-eye with Fugis but was the least diminished of both figures, even without armour.

Fugis scowled. ‘You even eschew your battleplate.’

Ba’ken smirked, the slabs of his cheeks and forehead realigning to shape the expression. ‘For a stroll across the Pyre? I was doing that with nothing but a loincloth and spear when I was still mortal and no more than a child. Did you forget that I’m Themian, brother?’

‘You have made the same pilgrimage every year since...’ Fugis trailed off, remembering the war on Nocturne and everything... *everyone* they had lost. ‘Why do you do it, Sol?’

‘I dreamed of him, Fugis. I could smell the fire that was burning him to the core. Over and over again.’

The Apothecary knew the danger of dreams, but a lecture wouldn’t change

Ba'ken's mind. They fell into brief, companionable silence.

The immense Sanctuary City gates, two towering slabs of finely wrought metal from the Hesiod forges, dwarfed both warriors. Ba'ken stood framed by the sun streaming through their open archway. The actinic reek of the void shields gave the air an acerbic bite, only recently powered down from the previous night. The carcasses of predators slowly putrefied at the periphery of Hesiod's walls. The flesh-skinners would rise soon to remove the stinking corpses, but for now the two Space Marines were alone.

'I doubt it will be simple, Sol.' Fugis looked out into the Pyre Desert. Shimmering heat haze was already rising from the dunes. It was early, the sun only just cresting the horizon, filling the sky with blood-red vapour clouds from the dormant calderas to the east.

'Do you even know where you are going?' Fugis asked. 'Five years and you have yet to find it.'

Ba'ken's gaze joined the Apothecary's, alighting on the horizon and the slow rising sun. At its zenith it would burn like a great, fiery eye. Hundreds died every day under its malevolent glare, those who forsook the protection of the Sanctuary Cities. The Igneans. Trust did not come easy to these nomads, especially where the seven great tribes were concerned. They were regarded as an underclass by the Thermians and treated as such. Rancour between these two Nocturnean factions, therefore, was inevitable.

'I know where he fell.' Ba'ken's reply bordered on melancholic.

He *wanted* to believe Dak'ir was still alive, but even after five years, or perhaps because of it, he had yet to convince himself.

'Rumours come from the desert that the Igneans have erected shrines to honour his sacrifice,' said Ba'ken. 'Some believe they still stand.'

'Lord Tsu'gan would have had them destroyed.'

'None save the Igneans can find them.'

'How then will you know where to look, brother?'

Ba'ken turned and rested a burly hand upon the Apothecary's shoulder. Fugis was several decades his senior – it showed in his world-weary cynicism and the skeletal cast to his weathered face – but the gesture was like a father placating a recalcitrant son.

The Themian smiled sadly. 'Emek is dead, and we three were once bonded like Nocturnean steel. I have to know if there is something left of him, and if it can be found out there in the desert. Vulkan will guide me.'

Fugis suppressed a flare of anger at his brother's blind optimism. 'Now you

sound like Elysium.’

‘It was actually Chaplain Ur’druk who suggested the ritual. I am honoured you think so, though, brother,’ Ba’ken replied, releasing his grasp. ‘You have been on the Burning Walk.’

‘Yes, and it was lengthy,’ Fugis replied, his mood darkened. ‘Sometimes I believe I should not have returned. Anyway, what about your charges?’

Ba’ken laughed, but his eyes did not soften.

‘The aspirants face their own trials. Besides,’ he said turning away, ‘I will only be gone a few days.’

Endless desert stretched before him, sackcloth black and veined with lava-bright chasms. It was ash and fire, and the formidable crags of mountains. Nocturne. Dactyls circled in the sky above. Ba’ken almost thought he could hear the dry leather snap of their wing beats and the plaintive cries of their young. It was a threnody for the foolish or the unwary that went into the desert ill-prepared for its perils.

Fugis tapped the vox-bead set into his gorget. ‘Signal me if you get into trouble.’

Ba’ken looked back, nodding gratefully. Despite his trivialisation of the journey, he knew the dangers. Most were invisible to the naked eye, and lurked beneath the sands or came with the ash storms.

‘You were right to come back,’ said Ba’ken and started to walk. He let the resounding thunder of the gates shutting behind him echo into obscurity in his wake.

Hesiod was gone. There was only the desert.

And Dak’ir.

There is fire, a great pillar of it surging into an onyx-black sky where bloody thunderheads boil and twist.

At the summit, a lonely figure sits enthroned. His feet and hands are bound. His mouth is locked in a silent scream.

The fire rises, and the false king who sits in damnation is consumed by flame.

Burning... Cloth and metal, flesh and hair, twisting and reshaped by the heat. The figure is reduced to bone, then bone to ash. The pillar sinks, the fire dies and only smoke is left behind.

A moment of silence passes. There is a spark...

A flame ignites, growing into a vertical conflagration as the pillar is restored.

At the summit, a lonely figure sits enthroned. His feet and hands are bound.

His mouth is locked in a silent...

Ba'ken let out a stifled cry. He awoke to find it dark, and the eerie chill of night fallen across the desert. He didn't remember digging the sleeping pit or slipping into deep meditation, and wondered if the dream had robbed him of the memory. Standing, the ash and sand fell from his body as he clambered from the pit. Its natural camouflage had saved him from the attention of the Pyre's night-predators.

The dawn was rising, a faint trembling of light and a slow return of heat that bled across the desert.

'Dak'ir...' Ba'ken uttered, so he would not forget his purpose, and headed east.

At first there was a squall of dust, eddying fast and growing in stature. It plumed against the horizon, framed by the sun that blazed down from its apex in a red ruined sky.

Crouched against a jutting crag of granite, Ba'ken watched the dust squall become a cloud. A silhouette formed, small at first but getting larger with every passing moment. He had no scope and a fog of sulphurous gas from a nearby vent was obscuring his vision.

So Ba'ken waited. He became still like the rock beside him.

After Hesiod, he had travelled east into the deep desert. East had taken him to the edges of the Pyre and into the Scorian Plain. Beyond that, brooding against a visceral red sky, were the fire canyons. From there he would search for the shrine and Dak'ir's last known sighting. Four times he had found nothing, but perhaps this time would be different. It was becoming a ritual. Though as prideful as any fire-born, Ba'ken knew even a Themian did not venture idly into Nocturne's wilderness. Not even with all the genhanced gifts of his apotheosis would Ba'ken risk that.

Nearly eight hours had passed since the dawn and the risen sun had lost none of its potency. Days were long and hot on the death world. They also seldom passed without incident. Ba'ken knew the paths. He knew how to avoid the worst hazards, but was also wise – the quietude of the desert meant a traveller was far from safe. The dust squall was a warning. Until it proved otherwise, Ba'ken gave it the same respect as any potential killer.

'I am here, brother,' he hissed into the warm breeze coming off the distant Acerbian Sea. 'If you live... help me reach you.'

No one had seen Dak'ir die; no one that could be questioned about it, anyway.

No body had been recovered. Only an *absence* remained. It was a void Ba'ken still felt five years later.

Burning, ever burning...

The smell pricked his nostrils, some false sense memory brought with him from the dream. Even upon waking it was vivid, as if clinging to him and hoping that some vestige of itself might find adhesion to an impulse, an impulse that would see Dak'ir found and restored to his brothers.

But the flesh scent on the breeze was not drawn from memory, it was real. Ba'ken was rising from his vantage when another of his senses intervened and he stopped still. Above the geyser-hiss of the vent and the crackling magma coursing beneath the Scorian crust, he discerned another sound. Sharp claws against rock.

Ba'ken turned quickly, drawing his knife and thrusting it violently into the creature behind him. Themian steel met scaled flesh and sank deep. With a grunt, Ba'ken seized the monster's throat and held it.

The sah'rk had been stalking him since he'd left the Pyre Desert and crossed into the Scorian Plain. Rare for one of the reptilian predators to hunt alone. Ba'ken gave it little thought, as he rammed a thigh length of steel deeper into its rangy gut. It struggled, jaws snapping, ignorant of its imminent death. Taking his hand from its throat to clamp around its mouth, Ba'ken held the sah'rk steady. Impaled, bleeding out over his fatigues and onto the ash underfoot, it only took a few seconds for it to expire.

When it was dead, he lowered the sah'rk down onto the ground so he could pull out his blade.

'The silent hunter,' he whispered. 'Not silent enough.'

Sah'rks were lean, but this one was especially malnourished, as if it hadn't eaten in days. For a predator that consumed by the hour, it had grown desperate to risk attacking a Themian hunter on its own.

Ba'ken resumed his vigil.

The silhouette had become a caravan, a rough-looking road-train drawn by a tracked rigger grinding across the Scorian Plain at speed. Ash spewed up in the convoy's wake, like grainy ocean surf. Flecks of disturbed cinder flashed like hellflies. Exhaust fumes joined the throbbing heat in a thick, oily cloud.

Sheathing his knife, Ba'ken drew his sidearm and left the crags behind. He kept low as he descended, moving quickly to outflank the caravan. Dust and haze was rising off the desert in grainy waves, high enough to obscure the warrior. Igneans were mostly peaceable, but they were nomads and not beyond

attacking lone travellers. Caution was wise. He didn't want to have to kill them.

Far from being threatening, the caravan was slowing down. Either the need for urgency had diminished or some other reason had seriously reduced its speed.

Ba'ken got fifty paces away before the rigger stopped dead.

Up close, the vehicle looked sturdy but battered. It was a hulk, ugly yet functional. Several of the armour plates ensconcing its vaulted cab and flatbed had hefty dents. The damage appeared to be old, but the scorch marks from the fire around its tail and lower chassis were not. Its treads were thick, steel-reinforced and in good condition. The engine idled, suggesting the reason for stopping wasn't a lack of fuel. Thick hoses ran from canisters sat in three trailers shackled behind the main rig to a combustion chamber, all of which looked dirty but undamaged.

Ba'ken surveyed his surroundings.

A dark horizon glared back, blood-shot and clouded with shadow. Arrow-sharp mountains shouldered into a hope-leeching vista of ash dunes, igneous crags and spikes of obsidian that jutted from the earth like glass spear tips. Shadows of beasts roamed in the distance, the drakes and their lessers. Their cries were muffled by the ever-present thunder of volcanoes that vented their displeasure with spits of lava-flame and gouts of pyroclastic cloud.

Ba'ken stood a little straighter at the sight. It never failed to awe. But he was alone in the desert with the vehicle. As he approached, his gaze roamed between the stalled rigger and the ash underfoot. This part of the Scorian Plain was barren and flat, but an ambush still might come from below. Pits were dug in the desert for more than just sleeping.

'Show yourself,' Ba'ken declared to the cab in a measured voice.

No answer came, apart from the shuddering of metal caused by the engine.

Ten paces away, he repeated himself.

'Show yourself.' Sterner this time, a warning implied.

The cab's screen was dark, reinforced plastek. It had taken a few cracks but still concealed the driver and passenger. Spartan living quarters behind this seating could be used as a hiding place.

Hot winds were blowing from off the Acerbian Sea and howled quietly across the dunes, bringing the stench of salt and sulphur.

Reaching the driver's side, Ba'ken aimed his pistol and wrenched open the door.

He found a male, unmoving. There was the faint scent of something spoiled, like rotten meat. The man was three or four decades old, he guessed. Ba'ken

found the age of mortals hard to gauge. The tattoos across his body were tribal and his attire suggested a drover or miner. His skin was leathern, not unusual for an Ignean, and there was a shallow cut above his forehead. Other than this minor injury, Ba'ken couldn't see the wound that had killed him.

He lowered his pistol.

Slumped alongside him, the dead man's passenger was female. She was a similar age and ethnic caste, with the same style of tattoos. Another Ignean. Husband and wife, Ba'ken assumed.

Looking around again, taking a few moments to listen for anything incongruous that might suggest a trap, Ba'ken then heaved both bodies out onto the desert. Only once they were out of the dingy cab and in the harsh light of the sun did he notice the faint discolouration around their eyes, nose and mouths. He dabbed a finger to the man's mouth and checked his vitals.

Definitely dead, and the substance on Ba'ken's finger was black ash.

Igneans were shunned by many Nocturneans as vagrants and disease carriers. Some Sanctuaries traded with the nomads but did so under strict conditions. Still, Ba'ken had never heard or seen of an Ignean contagion like this.

A sound from within the cab had him back on his guard, sidearm up and ready. It was faint, just audible at the edge of his augmented hearing.

With one last look at the bodies, Ba'ken climbed slowly and quietly into the cab. The stench of ash was redolent within; the quiet but insistent howling of the wind dulled. He'd missed the smell before, or rather thought it was just the ambient reek of the plain or from the drifts coming off the mountains. It was strong inside. Crawling up over the battered leather driving couch, Ba'ken stepped into the rear living quarters. He had to stoop and felt the metal walls touching his bare shoulders as he carefully searched through a host of accumulated junk. Tarps, mining equipment, containers, canisters for fuel – they were the belongings of the two slowly putrefying outside.

Pulling a ragged curtain aside, Ba'ken led with his bolt pistol into the back of the cab. The sound was sharper here, despite the attempts of whatever was making it to muffle the noise when it had heard someone enter.

Something broke underfoot and as Ba'ken glanced down, he caught a flash of movement. Small, scurrying, the vaguest hint of pale skin...

Moving with viperous speed, Ba'ken seized the figure by the scruff of its neck and hauled it out in front of him for a better look.

It was a child, tear streaks making clean tracks down her dirty face. She had been crying, sobbing into her bedroll as she mourned her parents.

The girl was only a little older than an infant, and dangled from Ba'ken's grip. Feeling it crunch underfoot, he noticed the thing he had stepped on was a small wooden figurine of an angelic figure clad in power armour. Ba'ken saw the image of the fire-born in its carved countenance. Inadvertently, he had broken one of its wings.

The child stared back at him as he met her gaze, terrified to breathe.

Warriors, Ba'ken could face. He could hunt and kill the countless predators of the desert. But a child...

'We don't have wings,' was all he could think of to say.

The rigger had over half its original fuel and the vehicle's engine was functional. Its tracks had left a trail, deep enough that the ash drifts had yet to hide it, though the two bodies had already acquired a thin, grey veneer.

'Are these your kin?' Ba'ken asked.

The girl was sitting in the shadow of the rigger. She had her knees tucked up to her chest and her arms wrapped around them protectively. Since Ba'ken had taken her from the cab, she hadn't spoken.

She nodded.

Ba'ken nodded too, for want of a better response.

'Well then...' he said, haltingly, 'I'm sorry.'

He should dispose of the bodies. Dactlyds were already circling overhead. They'd pick the corpses clean and leave their bones to bleach in the sun. No reason for the girl to see that.

'What happened to them?'

The girl didn't answer, instead tightening her arms.

Ba'ken drew his knife, intending to dig two graves, but she didn't flinch as he thought she might. She unclasped one arm to point at Ba'ken's hand flamer.

'Do you burn your dead?' he asked.

Another nod.

Immolation was common as a funerary rite on Nocturne. Many, including the Salamanders Chapter, believed in returning to the earth as ash and in the cycle of death and rebirth. It was called the Circle of Fire.

'You should look away,' he told her.

She didn't, watching morbidly as Ba'ken burned her parents to naught but charred bone. Smoke was still billowing through their ghastly open mouths and rib cages after he had finished.

'Nothing more to see now...' he said again, gently.

The girl held the image of her burning parents a little longer, until seemingly satisfied, before looking north. The trail went that way, but Ba'ken reasoned he could pick up the spoor to Dak'ir's shrine again once he had found out where the rigger and the orphan girl had come from. They had been fleeing something before whatever ague had infected the girl's parents had ended them. Igneans or not, it was Ba'ken's duty to find the truth of what had happened.

There were other rumours besides that of the existence of the shrine. Missing traders, not just nomads. Gun-cutters disappearing. Lost drovers, their entire herds too. Nocturne's hostile fauna was blamed, but some suggested something else was responsible. After the war, Lord Tu'Shan had ordered a purge of the deserts to chase down and execute any of Nihilan's renegades still at large. The effort was exhaustive and believed successful. But that hadn't stopped the rumours.

'I can't leave you here,' Ba'ken told the girl, towering over her like a black obelisk. Nor could he carry her. The child's skin would blister in the heat. Even wrapped in a cloak she would still expire from dehydration. A dark swathe had drawn across the sun like a shroud, but the Scorian Plain sweltered. She'd probably die. Raising Fugis on the vox was an unnecessary step. Besides, he had unfinished business with the desert. His red eyes blazed in frustration, but rather than be afraid of them the girl pushed herself to her feet and climbed back aboard the cab.

'That's decided then,' Ba'ken said to the empty desert, surprised at the girl's resilience. She seemed calmer since he had cremated her parents and assumed it was because of closure.

He was wrong, though.

The ride north was conducted almost entirely in silence.

Ba'ken had awkwardly tried to engage the child in conversation with more questions about what had happened but she acted as if she hadn't heard him, content to hold her wooden angel with its broken wing.

She'd laughed once, a sadly alien sound coming from her lips, when Ba'ken had squeezed his hulking body into the driver's seat. He had glared, annoyed at being ridiculed, but the girl had already gone back to staring at her wooden companion.

Only when the fire appeared on the horizon did she stop and look up.

It began as a glow, then came the scent of ash and the promise of heat.

The trail had led them to a valley, a shallow sloping gully that fed into a cavity

encircled by a high ridge of crags. A settlement sat in the basin of rock and sand. Smoke was pluming from the shells of vehicles, tents and prefabricated domes. It was burning, an amphitheatre of flame and unfurling smoke like incorporeal gonfalons. Its conductor, the arsonist, had yet to finish his fiery masterpiece.

Ba'ken brought the rigger to a halt a hundred metres or so from the blaze.

'Wait here,' he told the girl.

She was already gone, having climbed over the seat. The ragged curtain rippled in her wake. Needing to say nothing further, Ba'ken left the rigger.

Shimmering heat haze filled the valley, oppressive, vibrating with its sheer intensity. A silhouette, framed by the growing conflagration, moved about frenetically. Urgently.

Judging by his wire-grey hair and wrinkled skin, the arsonist was old. He wore the same attire, rough leather and coarse cloth, as the two Ba'ken had immolated with the same tribal tattoos and markings. There was no doubt in his mind that this place had once been the girl's home. The old man was burning it down.

Ba'ken called out, 'What are you doing?'

It looked like the old man was trying to spray accelerant, but drifting smoke obscured the details.

Ba'ken shouted above the crackle of flames. 'Turn! Make yourself known.'

The old man continued to ignore him.

A few metres from him, Ba'ken saw a dark stain matting the old man's hair coming from his ears. It looked as if he had done this to himself, destroyed his own hearing.

Right behind him now, Ba'ken clapped his hand on the old man's scrawny shoulder. The arsonist turned, faster than such an aged veteran had any right to, and doused the Salamander in fuel.

The old man yelped in sudden fear, seeing black skin and red eyes, before setting the devil on fire.

Flames seared Ba'ken's skin and he shut his eyes to protect them. His conditioning in the solitorium under the branding iron muted his pain but it still hurt as the fire hungrily ate up accelerant. Though resistant, he was not fireproof, and as he smacked the arsonist away with the back of his hand, he dropped and rolled to douse the flames.

He snarled, gritting his teeth through the pain.

'Vulkan's blood!'

Blinking away heat haze and the tendrils of smoke from his own near-immolation, Ba'ken made out the prone form of the old man, still dazed and

groaning incoherently from when the fire-born had struck him. Ba'ken was about to advance on him but stopped when he caught the suggestion of movement within the half-burned habitation. It was a large dome-like structure, a third of its hemispherical shaped open. Several tents and leather awnings served as annexes – a communal gathering place. It could harbour hundreds. This is what the old man had been in the act of burning down.

Heat pricked Ba'ken's skin, irritating the burned patches as he got closer and noticed the bodies. At least a hundred languished inside the communal dwelling, heaped together, a waiting pyre. It was a half-dome, a shelter more than a domicile, typical of Ignean nomads. Some were already burning, those near the edges where the fire was raging in earnest. A hand jutting from a mound of bodies trembled, fingers grasping.

Ba'ken railed at the old man, even though he was only half-conscious.

'Some of them are still alive!'

He broke into a run, plunging heedlessly into billowing smoke and flame, and began heaving at the dead to get to the one that yet lived. To his undisguised horror, others were stirring. Limbs writhed slowly in apparent torment, desperation overcoming whatever torpor the arsonist had inflicted upon them. All were victims about to be immolated in the name of an old man's madness.

Plague had come to this place, and it had driven this poor soul to lose his mind and with it the sagacity to tell alive from dead. Ignean customs were crude. Medicines used by the Sanctuaries were untrusted. Surely a cure could be found. The Chapter Apothecarion had the means. It must.

'Hold on... ' Ba'ken grunted with the effort of hefting corpses. Muscles in his arms and back bulged. Sinew corded his skin. Pulling the last body away, he crouched down to reach for the clawing hand, not knowing yet how he was going to save the others. A blank-eyed woman stared back, her face streaked with ash from the blaze.

'It's all right–' he began to say.

No longer pinned under the other bodies, she lunged.

Before she could strike, Ba'ken seized her wrist. The nails of her hand were like talons. She snarled, revealing black, oily teeth and gums. Fear or survival, instinct had driven the woman to attack him.

'Be calm.' Ba'ken had to fight against her strength. Holding her should have been effortless but a furious will enabled her. She lunged with her other hand, aiming it like a blade at Ba'ken's neck. He parried it aside with his forearm.

'Calm down,' he warned her. 'Don't make me hurt you.'

In his peripheral vision he saw something rise from the mass pyre. Then there was another, and another. They moved slowly, awkwardly. Ba'ken could hear their bones snapping back into place. It took him a moment to realise the old man must have broken them all. Their screams, their pain... that's why he had pierced his eardrums, so he didn't have to listen to the torture of his kin by his own hand.

The woman's wrist squirmed in Ba'ken's grasp. Only now did he notice it had no pulse.

Dry lightning ripped a wound in the sky outside, throwing a flash over the settlement and into the hab. It was like a photon discharge, painting the room and everything in it in bloody crimson.

Seven were on their feet. Five men, two women; though, their features were so degenerated it was hard to tell.

Throwing the first woman aside, seeing her for the threat she was and not the victim he supposed, Ba'ken adopted a fighting stance. In the few seconds it took for her to tumble across the other bodies, six more had risen.

'Merciful primarch,' Ba'ken breathed.

The old man fled for the rigger, screaming shrilly. A single word.

'Sengni!'

In *ordu*, the Nocturnean dialect used by Igneans, it roughly translated as 'arisen'.

There was no one alive in this place, only the dead. But the dead could not come back, not as they were. This was law, bound to the Circle of Fire.

None come back...

But the Igneans had, and they surrounded Ba'ken.

He pulled his hammer from off his back, counting almost thirty *sengni* now.

More were rising.

His first blow broke a collarbone. A jaw snapped as the hammer ploughed on through meat and skeleton. Dislodged teeth fell in a shower of bone. A cheek crumpled. A leg split as he swept the hammer in a low arc, close to the end of its violent parabola now. A ribcage detonated inwards.

One swing. Just one. Six were down, bloody and dismantled.

Ba'ken glared at the rest. Thirty had become fifty.

More were rising...

'Come on,' he growled.

The *sengni* swarmed. Ba'ken couldn't fend all of them off at once. They stabbed, bit and raked with talons and whatever they had clutched in their

misshapen hands. The six Ba'ken thought incapacitated got back up, jerking as their bones re-knit, though their flesh remained horribly deformed by the Salamander's attack.

Swallowed by a scrum of bodies, Ba'ken resorted to short, economical blows. The hammer's haft became a staff, a hand at either end as he used the power in his back and shoulders to give his hits strength. He used the hammer's head like a short ram in rapid, piston-like motions. He butted one sengni and saw the man's head snap back like he'd been shot. It failed to stop him. Nothing seemed to keep them down. The sengni had died once already, but wouldn't fall again. No fear, no instinct towards preservation. Such foes made a mockery of conventional tactics.

Rage consumed them, a desire to rend what was in their midst to blood and bone. Whatever contagion had affected them in this way, Ba'ken was immune to it and gave thanks to his enhanced physiology. The Igneans had no such protection.

As Ba'ken buried his hammer in the skull of one, acutely aware of the many minor injuries he had sustained, he heard the throaty rumble of the rigger's engine.

Weak halogen beams fought the gloom that had fallen with the sun's disappearance behind a belt of smoke and cloud.

Rather than fleeing as Ba'ken had hoped, the old man was driving the rigger *into* the hab.

Ba'ken remembered the girl. She was still hiding in the rigger. The engine noise rose to a scream.

'No!' The word came out as a plea that if Ba'ken could save just one life from this nightmare, let it be hers. But the old man didn't know. He only saw a sacred duty left unfinished, one he was willing to sacrifice himself for.

Light smeared Ba'ken's body as the rigger approached the threshold of the dome. Leaving the hammer lodged in the sengni's shattered skull, he drew his bolt pistol and fired off a burst. His first shot blew apart a torso as the swarm dragged down his aim. The second turned a head to mist. The third clipped the rigger's armoured frame, denting the plough-like plate that shielded the engine before the pistol was wrenched from Ba'ken's grasp.

Just his knife left, he had to think fast. He couldn't kill them all, and the sengni were strong and resilient. However, they were also little more than skin and bone.

Head down, Ba'ken barged through the throng like a bull-sauroch. He felt

skeletons breaking and the stinging irritant of wounds in return, but drove through it all to hit the front of the rigger like a battering ram. Metal buckled, deformed into the shape of Ba'ken's clenched fists.

He roared, pitting his Emperor-given strength against the engine's motive power and immediately felt the muscles in his limbs strain into knifing agony. His boots dug furrows into the earth until he found the right angle to resist and hold firm.

Blows rained down against Ba'ken's back, shoulders and neck. The sengni clawed at his limbs, his exposed flesh, adding to his legacy of scars.

The effort of holding the rigger at bay was draining. Mercifully, it abated after a few seconds as the old man got out. He had a knife, but it was unbloodied and Ba'ken could see no sign of the girl. Leaping mercurially from the cab, the old man proceeded to cut the rigger's fuel hose. Thick rubber made the task hard, but he managed to saw through the pipe and leave it gushing briny fluid. He was reaching for his igniter when the swarm overtook him.

Without the Salamander to occupy them, their wrath spilled out from the dome. To his credit, the old man didn't scream again as they tore him apart. It was the last thing Ba'ken saw as they bore him down too.

'Child!' he roared, beating his way to the surface of the horde. Instinct took over as he shattered bone and split skulls. He fought until he had forged a circle of dismemberment around him. Sinking to his knees, with the eerie sense he was still descending down amongst the dead into a fathomless mire of ash, he unsheathed his knife and bellowed his defiance.

The sengni answered with the dry cadence of the damned.

'If I have to rip every one of you apart...' Ba'ken promised, but knew he was tiring.

Behind the horde, through the gaps in their disjointed and malformed ranks, he saw the ones who had stayed down. Not sengni, just dead Igneans. Their bodies were flaming carcasses, smouldering in the air.

She had relaxed as soon as Ba'ken had burned them. The girl knew what plagued her kin, that her mother and father were beyond salvation. Only fire could deliver them from what happened next.

Ba'ken still had his hand flamer, but there were too many to douse. Fuel was spewing from the rigger's tank, washing down the gully and pooling at the sengni's shuffling feet.

But she was still inside the rigger.

As the clawed and wasted hands of the damned rose to smother him, Ba'ken

knew what he must do.

‘Vulkan forgive me,’ he whispered.

Snatching the hand flamer from his belt, he released a long plume of fire. It sprang out in a fierce and crackling tongue of heat and light, seemingly animate. When it touched the fuel, just the lightest caress, Ba’ken hunkered down.

Crouched so close to the rigger, the explosion felt tectonic. A firestorm swept from the fuel tanks as they ruptured and split apart across the length of the road-train. It drove hungrily through the sengni horde, a swift and rising conflagration that devoured flesh, cloth and bone.

There was no scream, no death cry. Dead men have no voices.

Only the roar of fire, so loud it was like silence in its sheer obliteration of all other sound, and a bruising heat.

Ba’ken felt it even through the aegis of his drake scale cloak. That and the mass of bodies smothering him had saved his life.

It was over quickly, though the smoke and flame ringing the settlement would linger afterwards. Brutalised like a pugilist who had taken too many hits, Ba’ken rose wearily amidst a charnel pyre of burnt corpses. The inferno unleashed from the rigger had ravaged the hab and everything in it. There was nothing left but ash on the breeze and the faint smell of cinder from the mountains. The bank of cloud broke, allowing visceral red light to colour the scene. It hardly needed to be made more gruesome.

Finding his hammer and pistol, Ba’ken stowed his arms, unable to avoid glancing at the partially destroyed rigger. The road-train was gone, shredded in the blast. Husks of canisters were left, little fires burning all around them. The rigger itself was slewed to one side, and partly caved in. Essentially a civilian tank, it had borne the brunt of the explosion but the interior was gutted, just a fiery black mess. Ba’ken’s chest felt hollow, despite his leaden heart. For a moment, the truth he had sought was forgotten.

Smoke from the blaze was being carried upwards on natural thermals and funnelled through the high crags. Ba’ken watched it rise, wishing it would return and obscure the wreckage of the rigger from his sight.

He turned, finding the resolve he needed to face a different truth than the one he had set out for from Hesiod. A burning, skeletal frame was all that remained.

Staggering, belatedly appreciating just how far he had been thrown by the blast, he made for the wreck. Thick grey palls occluded much of the rigger. Chunks of still-smoking shrapnel had embedded in the earth around it. Ba’ken reached out to touch one finding it still hot.

Nearby, he found something else. The sight of it was like a gauntleted fist clenching his stomach.

A wooden angel, one of its wings broken.

Ba'ken was a veteran sergeant. Many were the names upon his conscience, those who had died alongside him in battle, the innocents he had failed to save, the worlds they had lost as a Chapter.

Kadai, Emek... Da'kir.

Even the recollection of their names was painful. Brothers, fire-born. All gone.

But it would be the death of the girl that would burden him the most. Even now, staring at her burning tomb of steel and rubber, Ba'ken knew this to be true.

Many of the ignorant citizenry of the Imperium thought the Adeptus Astartes devoid of emotion, but they were not unfeeling. The innocent deaths lingered longest. Some never faded.

Ba'ken stooped to pick up the wooden angel. When he arose, a small figure was standing before him, emerging from her hiding place amongst the rocks and crags. She must have fled before the old man had got aboard.

Despite the horrors around him, Ba'ken laughed.

'Clever girl,' he murmured, rushing over before she collapsed in the heat.

Gently, Ba'ken scooped the girl up in his arms. She was small, fragile. And weak. But she was alive. Her small heart beat in her tiny chest, a reminder of his purpose.

'I see now,' he muttered to himself, looking at the girl, 'why you gave us wings.'

As she flitted in and out of consciousness, Ba'ken activated the vox. It took a few seconds for the signal to connect. Fugis had been waiting.

'*Did you find what you were looking for?*' he asked.

'Something else,' Ba'ken replied, his gaze travelling up to the ridge that overlooked the valley. 'A plague.'

'*Contagion? What kind?*'

'I hoped you might know. I had to burn the carriers. They returned, even after death.'

There was a pause as the Apothecary considered the implications of that statement.

'*Any survivors?*' he asked at length.

Ba'ken glanced down at the child.

'One. In need of medical ministrations.'

'*I'm on my way,*' Fugis replied, and severed the vox-link.

A canker had wormed its way into the Nocturnean desert, some remnant left behind after the war. It had ravaged the Igneans, turning them into something less than human. No ordinary phage did that.

Lost to thought, Ba'ken squinted at what looked like a figure standing at the summit of the ridge. It was hard to discern. Any definition was obscured by distance and roiling smoke. For a moment, the figure was eclipsed utterly and by the time the pall had cleared it was gone.

A trick of light perhaps?

Ba'ken suspected something more. There was much he didn't know, the answers he had wanted left undiscovered. Dak'ir's fate remained uncertain.

'Brother?' he whispered, but received no answer.

For the girl, if she survived, life would change. But she was used to adapting. Cradled in the arms of the onyx angel who had delivered her, she recalled how her tribe had come to the valley. Igneans were a transient people, seldom in one place for long. She didn't understand why, or know any different. The gulf between those of the Sanctuaries and those who lived in the caves out in the deserts had yet to resonate with her on a cultural level.

She knew the valley had not always been her home. Before that she had lived amongst the crags, and in sight of the fire canyons. Eastwards, her pilgrimage began at a shrine, a solemn sanctuary of deep and spiritual veneration. Here they had honoured him, the saviour, the Unbound Flame.

Dak'ir.

From the crags and amongst the squalls of ash billowing from the fire below, he watched.

During his long and devoted service, his master had dispensed much of his knowledge of the ether and the sorcerous means through which to bend it to one's will. The watcher was no psyker, but he knew rituals, those that had been taught to him. His blade was stained almost black with them.

A sacred purpose drove him, one that was years in the making that was finally ripening.

As his enemy caught sight of him, the watcher allowed the cloud to thicken before slipping back out of sight and into obscurity.

He recalled the old man's plaintive screaming.

Sengni.

'Arisen'.

Yes, he thought, much that had been seeded would arise. Virulent and unstoppable, it would sweep across Nocturne and hurt the fire-born where they were most vulnerable. Their people.

Imagining the desolation to come was a salve to his isolation and estrangement from Nihilan.

For the watcher was a dutiful hound: sadistic, insane but dutiful. Vengeance was worth any price.

And the thought of its enactment brought a smile to Ramlek's lips.

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Nick Kyme is the author of the Horus Heresy novel *Vulkan Lives*, the novellas *Promethean Sun* and *Scorched Earth*, and the audio drama *Censure*. His novella *Feat of Iron* was a New York Times bestseller in the Horus Heresy collection, *The Primarchs*. For the Warhammer 40,000 universe, Nick is well known for his popular Salamanders novels, including *Rebirth*, the Space Marine Battles novel *Damn*, and numerous short stories. He has also written fiction set in the world of Warhammer, most notably the Time of Legends novel *The Great Betrayal* for the War of Vengeance series. He lives and works in Nottingham, and has a rabbit.

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