

**WARHAMMER**  
40,000

NICK KYME

# THE FIREBRAND

A SALAMANDERS STORY



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## THE FIREBRAND

A baggage train of Ignean nomads resolved through a cloud of skirling dust. Fifteen men and women with their beasts of burden in tow toiled through grey, undulating dunes. Two outriders mounted on sauroch-bulls ranged ahead of the main group trying to find safe passage for the rest, except there was no safe passage through the endless tract of ash and death.

Most were dressed in rags tightly bound around their limbs and bodies, sand cloaks to ward off the sun. Six guards, armoured in light flak, carried spears and carbines. Not there for the people, they protected the wagons and the hydro-oxygen coolers harboured under leather tarps, the life expectancy of the travellers expressed in litres. None of the Igneans went without rebreathers, though the equipment was crude and wouldn't last more than a few hours. Heat and thirst were the slow killers but there were many and entirely more aggressive ways to die out on the Scorian Plain.

Ba'ken knew of several and thought the nomads looked ill-prepared to survive any of them as he watched them from a high ridge of sun-baked rock. Below and all around him, the landscape was almost featureless, a veritable ocean of undulating ash-sand that stretched as far as a red horizon. Here the flat plain changed, growing into rugged mountains, the highest of which was a brooding, black colossus of intemperate humour. Mount Deathfire. How any man, even one such as he, could endure that fount of rage when fully roused was a question to which Ba'ken had no answer. Nor did he know the purpose of the stalwart Igneans attempting to brave it. This was the fifth such pilgrimage he had seen since entering the desert. He had heard talk from his brothers on sentry duty of considerably more.

Entire tribes, whole settlements, generations of Igneans.

He had yet to see a single one coming back.

The proud Nocturneans slogged through a nascent storm that was growing into a tempest. They weren't moving on or seeking refuge in one of the Sanctuary Cities as some did when the rigours of living in the desert beyond the void shields became too much. Rumours had compelled them to leave whatever safety and solace they had found on this most inhospitable world. They were pilgrims in search of a myth.

'Do you think he's really out here somewhere?'

'No,' Ba'ken told Va'lin flatly.

'The native Nocturneans must believe it, or else why would they turn out in such droves?'

Ba'ken turned his slab-like face to glower at the Scout.

'And they are fools for doing so. He's dead.'

Realising his error, Va'lin apologised. 'I meant no offence, brother-captain. My intention wasn't—'

Ba'ken turned away. 'Forget it,' he said, but he hid his grief poorly. Va'lin was an asset to the Seventh, remarkable in many ways, but possessed of a credulity that his captain was determined to train out of him.

If he could.

Ba'ken went on. 'Like all on Nocturne, they harbour the knowledge that death is seldom far away and seek meaning before it claims them. Weakness and desperation make them do it, not truth.'

A tower of ceramite and stony hard will, Ba'ken dwarfed the much slighter Scout. Thick pauldrons sat like chunks of smoothed granite on his vast shoulders. His muscled neck was cable-thick, taut sinews suggesting strength. Green armour plate, the hue of the Salamanders Chapter, encased his imposing frame and only made him more intimidating. Head shorn to a glabrous scalp, the rest of his features were craggy like a rockface. Physically massive, Ba'ken had been ideally suited to his former role as a heavy weapons trooper. Those days were ended long ago, and the now captain of the Seventh missed them, as he missed a great many things he had lost.

'I heard the Igneans raised some kind of shrine,' said the Scout standing at Ba'ken's opposite shoulder. 'Dozens die every day in search of it, and the ones who built it are no longer alive to tell of its existence either. Myths can be dangerous. They're the province of the gullible and desperate.'

Exor was much more pragmatic and a little thicker set than Va'lin. There was a hard streak in him that reminded Ba'ken of someone else he once knew, also now believed dead, although his brothers still searched. But there was no

arrogance. He was simply blunt, like a hammer. That too reminded him of someone, and he wondered where the Chaplain was at that moment. Exor believed in what he could see and touch, qualities Ba'ken respected. But Va'lin... Ba'ken had saved his life when the Scout was just a boy and not the transhuman he was rapidly becoming now. It felt like an age ago. During their trials, back in the time of dragon-strife, as some of the Chapter and the Creed were calling it, he had been exceptional. Then again, so had another and his legacy was still talked about darkly by some warriors of the Chapter.

Old wounds, Ba'ken reminded himself, were often slow to heal.

Both Scouts, not far from receiving their black carapace, were here on the Scorian Plain to heed a final lesson before going to the ranks of the Devastators.

'Eyes front,' Ba'ken told his charges. 'We are not here for pilgrims, and there is still much I can teach you before you ascend to full battle-brothers and join one of the battle companies.' He squinted through a monocular lens past kilometres of dirty smoke and acres of cloud washing low over the dunes, filling the deep canyon that sank into the desert before them with slate-grey. 'See here and attend,' said the captain. 'Aspirants fresh into the forge.'

Four figures could be discerned through the murk, fighting their way through a dark gloom many hundreds of metres below. Over fourteen had begun the trial. In truth, Ba'ken was surprised at how many had made it this far. He wondered if perhaps he was asking too much. Certainly, the inductions into Seventh Company had dwindled in the past few years. Humanity – his humanity – was getting in the way of clear thinking. Break them now, destroy them against the anvil and no bond would be formed, no room for grief later. If they survived, they were obviously strong enough to last as a Scout and go on to join the battle companies, where Ba'ken would no longer be responsible for them. But so few did, so few became Scouts at all. Was he building a stronger Chapter or merely insulating himself against further pain of loss? Ba'ken decided he would speak to Chaplain Elysus about it and seek his Chaplain's counsel.

'We are here for them,' Ba'ken said, putting his thoughts aside, then asked, 'Tell me, what do you see?'

He passed the monocular to Exor, servos growling in the captain's scarred power armour as if in empathy with its wearer. A mantle of drake hide fluttered in the wind behind him, pinned to his shoulder guards by gilded clasps. He noticed that Va'lin eyed the skin enviously.

Exor observed the scene instead, and gave a quick appraisal. 'They adopt formation. One ranging ahead, functioning as a vanguard...' He paused. 'A

leader gives orders. Another acts as rearguard, but they are not all in accord.'

'Your assessment?' invited Ba'ken.

Exor lowered the scope and gave it to Va'lin.

'They are in trouble.'

Ba'ken nodded slowly. 'This is one of the fire canyons,' he said, gesturing to the monolithic chasm, several hundred metres wide but filled with narrow gorges in some places and razor-edged crags. Even at distance, it was massive. And behind, far away to the north but still imposing, loomed the cyclopean Mount Deathfire. Without climbing tools the flanks of the canyon were unscalable; the only way to escape it was to pass through it. A walk of fire in all respects.

Lava channels threaded the canyon floor like pulsing hot veins, and where it dipped into shallow basins the lava pooled and caught fire. Smoke thronged the air in a choking fog, stinging the eyes and dulling all other senses until only instinct could be relied upon for guidance. Geysers spewed scalding steam in spastic fits and starts, the pattern of their expulsions unpredictable.

'Its savage geography is obvious,' Ba'ken explained, pointing to a rolling bank of cloud obscuring the canyon's summit, 'but its indigenous predators are not...'

Exor followed his captain's lead and found shadows prowling the smoke and fog.

'What are they?' The Scout's tone was inquisitive, not apprehensive. The shadows were hulking, easily twice the mass of the largest aspirant, and there was the suggestion of chitinous body plating, but they moved swiftly with the cloud and were gone from sight before it passed.

Ba'ken smiled. 'Monsters. And they crawl within the canyons like lice.'

Har'gaan shielded his eyes from the spit of flame erupting from a crack in the hard earth of the canyon. It was red like blood, sharp as all hell and hot to the touch. A place of death, a final rest for the dead.

How many have gone to their dooms in this dire place?

Illion was briefly obscured from sight and Har'gaan's heart quickened as he thought they had lost him to the fire, but the pathfinder emerged from behind a pall of smoke very much alive.

'Here,' he called, hurriedly waving the others on. 'A route through the fire chasms.'

Har'gaan grinned ferally. He had never met a pathfinder as gifted as Illion, or as fearless.

Smoke and flame were everywhere, yet Illion trod with the certainty and

courage of one who had lived his entire life in such places. Nocturne was harsh; it bred strong people, hardy people – they had to be – but the canyon was an extreme. He supposed for the vaunted warriors of the Fire-born, it was merely practice.

‘I am relieved,’ Har’gaan confessed when he caught up, clapping Illion on the shoulder. ‘The longer we stay here, the worse our chances of survival become.’ Both took a breather in the lee of an overhanging crag, waiting for the others. The air was harsh and hot, and stung the throat, but at least it was air.

‘Thought you’d appreciate the shade,’ said the pathfinder with good humour. Illion was the youngest of the aspirants but had a hawkish look that made him seem older. A ragged scar cut into the left hemisphere of his skull from when he had been maimed by a sa’hrk as a child. Some would grow weak from such an ordeal, retreat within themselves and be devoured by the harsh Nocturnean landscape. Illion had turned it into strength and a wariness that he wouldn’t be caught like that again. Har’gaan respected him for that.

‘I admit,’ said Har’gaan, ‘for a moment back there I thought the earth had claimed you, brother.’

Illion laughed, an utterly incongruous sound in the fire canyon. ‘Not yet. My tribe knows earth and stone. I reckon I could tread this path blindfold if needed.’

‘How are we not doing that already?’ A harsh voice cut in, Za’tenga making his presence felt. The noble son from Hesiod had a thin face like a dagger’s blade and it sharpened further as he jabbed a finger skywards, ‘Boast later, Illion, we are not alone.’

All three craned their necks towards a roiling bank of cloud above. Dense thunder pealed across it and there were flashes of crimson lightning that cracked between the sonorous booms like a refrain. Something flew within the fire-tinted smoke, occluded by shadow, revealed by the blood-red jags of angry light. It was winged and gave a deep, screeching cry that ululated throughout the canyon.

‘Sounds like a big one,’ muttered Kade. By the time the burly Themian reached them, he had removed the rest of his damaged carapace. It was acid-burned when a hydrochloric vent had erupted in their midst and nearly taken off his face. As it was, the tribal tattoo across his eyes survived, even if one of his comrades had not. Ven’gar had been standing next to him and died mouthing a silent scream as his vocal cords were cooked. Kade lived but now wore a burn across his muscular torso. An occasional grimace was the only betrayal of the barbarian’s resolute facade.

‘They’re carrion-eaters,’ said Za’tenga, letting his mind wander. ‘Feasters of

the dead. My first sight from the womb was of such creatures. Born in blood, I arrived in this world hearing their cries and the screams of the dying as they were picked apart.’ He scowled, as if the pain of it were still fresh. ‘Even as an infant, I can still remember it.’

Har’gaan reached out to him. ‘It’s all right, brother—’

Za’tenga recoiled, barking, ‘It is far from all right. They see prey before them. We are carrion now.’

‘I doubt they’ll have had a feast that’ll fight back as fiercely as us,’ said Kade, with a belligerent look. Other than in battle, the Themian’s eyes were cold fires that burned away all warmth and hope. His enemies in the tribe had seen that look. It was often their last sight, for Kade had never been defeated in ritual combat. No less than three leonid pelts hung from his trophy spike back in the city.

‘Give them a few rounds,’ suggested Za’tenga, letting a vengeful snarl curl his upper lip. He’d watched Runial carried off by one of the creatures as he had tried in vain to stop it from ripping his fellow tribesman apart. That was when the cracks in the aspirants’ brotherhood had begun. Za’tenga blamed Har’gaan for Runial’s death.

Har’gaan pushed down Kade’s combat shotgun, spoiling his aim. It was actually two weapons, liberated from fallen comrades, strapped and taped together to make a side-by-side. The others carried carbines and short hunting knives. Not enough to worry the creatures, but the Themian’s cannon would have made quite the mess of them.

Kade frowned, rippling the short strip of hair bifurcating his forehead, but didn’t protest beyond that. His comrades all had shaven heads, the sigils of their tribes shorn into them, down to the dark scalp. The melanochromatic defect common to all Salamanders was yet to manifest, though in time it would blacken their tanned skin to the colour of onyx.

‘We’ll bring them down on us,’ Har’gaan said, glaring at Za’tenga. His reddish irises seemed to flash with embers of anger. ‘You were born into war, but that doesn’t mean you understand it, Za’tenga. They’re circling because they are looking for us. Shoot now and you might as well send up a flare.’

Za’tenga’s retort was barbed. ‘Then what do you suggest? Let them stalk us, wait until we are vulnerable and carry off another like they did Runial? Or shall we cower here, under this rock, until the heat kills us?’

‘I don’t like either of those paths,’ declared Kade, ‘so we had best find another.’

Smoke was thickening in the fire canyon, and flames licking at the edges of Illion's discovered route were creeping closer.

Har'gaan choked back a wad of sooty phlegm before answering. 'We advance, reach the edge of the canyon. Illion has got us this far.'

Za'tenga scowled. 'You'll kill us all, Har'gaan. Then who will join the ranks of the Fire-born?' he said, and tramped off after Illion who was already on the move again.

Har'gaan didn't answer. He had noticed Kade looking at the smoke-wreathed summits of the canyon that flanked the party to either side.

'What are you staring at?' he asked, keeping his head low against the choking fog.

The Themian peered intently, but Har'gaan could not see what his keen eyes had picked out.

Kade's response was to prime his shotguns.

Har'gaan saw only smoke at first, but then he caught the flicker of something through the grey. Heat haze was spoiling focus but a slithering torso, long and segmented, appeared before burrowing out of sight. In the brief reveal, Har'gaan counted four creatures. They were moving down the canyon wall, digging right through it. He knew what they were and the thought chilled him despite the heat inside the fire canyon. Years ago he had watched a herd of sauroch moving through the Pyre Desert, their drovers wrangling the beasts from the back of grav-wagons. Eight men and fifteen sauroch died in minutes, dragged under the sand and devoured. Har'gaan had watched his uncle try to fight one of the creatures off. It coiled its viperous body around a sauroch first, crushing its ribcage, lungs, internal organs, and then bit off the man's arm before it took him screaming into the dirt and the dark. Har'gaan alone survived.

The drovers never returned to that same patch of desert again.

Serrwyrms, the creatures were called.

'Monsters,' Kade answered at last, snugging the cannon into the crook of his arm and raising the twinned muzzles.

Har'gaan shouted up to Za'tenga and Illion.

'Run!'

But his voice was eclipsed by tectonic thunder.

Ba'ken's grim humour faded when he saw Va'lin had not trained the monocular on the canyon wall as instructed. 'Va'lin,' he said.

The Scout seemed not to hear. He had the lens aimed at the distant horizon line

and the chain of volcanoes that towered across it. Largest of them was Deathfire, and she looked angry.

‘I see something...’ Va’lin began.

Ba’ken followed the Scout’s gaze. His eyes widened. ‘It’s a helstorm.’

Nocturne was a volatile world, the overbearing gravity exerted by its larger moon created an environment of tectonic fragility. Earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and pyroclastic storms were all common. Helstorms were amongst the worst of those devastating natural events. It was not the potentially world-ending Time of Trial but it was destructive, deadly to any caught without shelter, and it was happening. Now.

Deathfire vented spears of cloud and gouts of debris from the caldera at her peak. Heartblood, the life of Nocturne, was running down her flanks in runnels of fire. A sudden explosion shook the summit, rippling outwards in a shockwave. It began as motes of sand-ash, vibrating against one another and grew into a temblor several minutes later that trembled the earth beneath Ba’ken’s feet. In the same moment, a great spume of pyroclastic gas and smoke erupted as Deathfire roared into the flame-scarred heavens, nearly blotting out the sun. She was not finished, not nearly. She was merely warming up, fashioning an altogether more violent encore to the first refrain.

It hit seconds later, though Ba’ken and the others had to wait minutes to feel the effects, an immense quake that cracked the Scorian Plain in chasms, the fractures many and wide-ranging. Flame, intense and angry, spewed up from every fissure and the view down into the canyon was lost behind a sudden wall of conflagration.

Ba’ken sent the Scouts back. Hot hail was raining from the rapidly blackening sky, deadly to warriors only armoured in carapace. He grimaced as he opened the comm-feed in his gorget, pulling a chunk of rock from his vambrace and wincing at the burning line scorched across his cheek at the same time.

‘Forge Master,’ he said into the feed, attempting to raise the Techmarine monitoring their progress in the Prometheus moon far above Nocturne’s turbulent atmosphere.

Behind him the two Scouts were regaining their feet but stayed low and wary as the hail continued. They were right at the edge of its destructive fury.

Ba’ken stabbed out a finger. ‘Into the speeder,’ he said, gesturing to a squat, boxy vehicle hovering just above the desert floor on anti-gravitic motors. Exor was up and into the gunner’s seat to man the pintle-mounted heavy bolter. Only a step behind, Va’lin vaulted into the open-topped troop hold and strapped in. The

Storm-variant Land Speeder was designed for troop transport and could carry up to five easily, but Ba'ken had stocked it with equipment: phosphor flares, grapnels and rappelling wire, as well as spare ammunition and a modest weapons cache.

Enough for a rescue mission.

Va'lin began tooling up his webbing.

Another tremor, harder and louder than the previous one, shook the Scorian Plain. A column of fire soared from the mountain in a coruscation, tearing into the smoke and igniting the ash in the air. The effect was mesmeric as a chain reaction of blood-red flame rolled across the sky in a tsunami wave.

An echoing cry across the ruddy clouds answered. Helstorms were not only flame and ash; they disturbed the beasts of the deep desert, forced them to the surface, emboldened them even as the earth itself grew more volatile.

After a few tense minutes, Va'lin gestured to the sky. 'Incoming,' he warned, taking up a bolter and aiming along its stock as he pointed the weapon at the silhouettes moving amongst the clouds.

'Tracking engaged.' Exor brought the heavy bolter up, peering down its sight as he cranked the cannon to its highest elevation.

Something pierced the cloud... Sickle-bladed wings, a feral snout, blind but with deep nasal pits akin to knife slashes and gaping auditory canals like gills ridging its neck. Skin like dirty pearl took on the fire of the mountain and seemed to burn.

Exor unleashed a salvo but the creature pinwheeled, rolled and avoided every shell.

Va'lin's aim was better, firing into its predicted trajectory. The first bolt clipped it, staggering the creature, and the second and third took out its torso and blew it apart. Spreading cloud swallowed it whole, obscuring its fall to earth.

'More,' Exor warned, hitting the twin triggers.

Six more flyers plunged, wisps of smoke trailing off the razor-edges of their pinions.

They were carrion-eaters, not prone to attacking armed prey, but forced from the sky in panic.

Recoil from the heavy bolter made the speeder jerk, but its suppression systems absorbed the worst of it. Exor's second salvo was better. Combined with another accurate three-round burst from Va'lin, the sleek mantarids disengaged in search of easier pickings and clearer skies. The creatures flew under the worst of the storm, calling to one another, arcing and wheeling in a loose predatory

formation. Though imperilled, Nocturne's native fauna was always hungry.

'We've driven them into the canyon,' said Va'lin, his concern for the aspirants obvious.

Exor said, 'We don't know that.'

Chunks of stone were hammering down now, and the Scouts had taken what cover they could inside the vehicle. It too was taking hits, weathering dents.

Ba'ken climbed into the speeder. They were at the very edge of the helstorm's fury but still being peppered with hail. 'Forge Master,' he repeated down the feed, then a moment later shouted, 'Argos!'

A crackle of static presaged a response as Ba'ken took up the pilot's position and gunned the engines. After a guttural roar and a belch of flame the speeder was moving.

'Seismic data suggested you would have several more hours of dormancy,' a mechanical voice returned on the other end of the feed.

'She's just stirring in her sleep,' said Ba'ken, slewing the speeder into a wild turn to elude a piece of falling debris the size of his torso. He eased down the throttle, jinking again as a crack split the ground beneath and vented flame a second later, then boosted the engine to pull them out of the immediate blast zone. The storm was expanding.

Argos replied, 'From the readings I am getting, I would conclude she is having a nightmare, brother.'

Va'lin leaned forwards in his harness.

'There's no way the aspirants can survive in that.'

Ba'ken shook his head, muttering, 'It's the will of the anvil.' He pulled further out, trying to ride around the maelstrom of smoke, ash and debris. Heat was slapping against the sides of the speeder, crinkling the paint, warming the metal.

Va'lin hung to the speeder's rollcage, despite his burning skin.

'We cannot abandon them. We must—'

Ba'ken half turned, glancing sidelong at the Scout behind.

'The circle of fire burns, Va'lin. It is the Promethean Creed, life necessitates death. It is Nocturne, it is Fire-born.'

Some of Ba'ken's doubts resurfaced, the harshness of the induction into Seventh. He crushed them, poured on the power to get them clear.

In a few more seconds they were out of the worst of it, and the speeder's engines cycled down to a low vibrational burr. A lull in the helstorm, the briefest cessation in its fury, allowed a glimpse into the canyon.

Exor pointed over the heavy bolter's firing rail.

‘I think I see them...’ he said. ‘They are still alive!’

Ba’ken looked through the monocular, holding it one-handed whilst steering the speeder with the other. A pack of serrwyrms had got the aspirants’ scent – lathing the air with dagger-thin tongues, sniffing at the hot earth – and were closing. Lowering the scope, he re-opened the feed.

‘Argos, how long will this break last?’

A short pause, then the Forge Master replied. ‘Not long... Inloading seismic data to your scanners now.’

‘Read it,’ Ba’ken ordered Exor, nodding to an auspex mag-locked to the speeder’s control console. Releasing the heavy bolter, Exor interpreted the data inload from Master Argos.

‘There’s some deep subterranean activity developing,’ he said, gauging the spikes and fluctuations in tectonic motion displayed on the auspex screen.

‘Looks slow, but when it hits, the tremor will be potent.’

‘And likely collapse most of the canyon,’ Ba’ken concluded grimly.

Exor looked up. ‘We have minutes, no more than that.’

Even at cruising speed they had pulled ahead of the aspirants now, riding a high ridge with the fire canyon plunging down to the left.

Ba’ken could see the young warriors running even without the scope. Wounded but resolute, they were fighting hard to survive. Arkhan Land had designed the speeder to be fast but it couldn’t run that gauntlet. Not even the Dark Angels Ravenwing with their considerable piloting skill could do that. It was impossible. Ba’ken’s mouth hardened to a thin line, and he spoke through clenched teeth as he shook his head.

‘We can’t help them.’

Va’lin reached over, put his hand on Ba’ken’s shoulder guard.

‘Get me in front of them,’ he urged. ‘I know a safe route through the canyon, it’s imprinted on my memory. I can lead them out.’

Ba’ken was blunt. ‘No. This is the nature of the trial. Tempered against the anvil, emerging stronger, or crushed against it. That was the way with you, Va’lin, so shall it be with them.’

‘It’s certain death if we don’t intervene.’ Va’lin knew he was bordering on insubordination, but his conviction overruled it. ‘That’s not a trial, it’s an execution.’ He tried reason. ‘Fate, not weakness, has condemned these warriors. They’ve endured this far. Doesn’t the Promethean Creed also preach self-sacrifice? Let me help them, captain.’

Va’lin was already an expert at navigating the harsh terrain of Nocturne.

During the dragon-strife, in the defence of Hesiod City, he had displayed courage and tenacity too. Ba'ken knew he would only stop arguing when he got his way or his captain was forced to reprimand him.

The problem was, Ba'ken agreed with him.

In the end, the captain merely growled and yanked up the speeder.

As they burst along the ridge, Va'lin sat back and started to prepare for the rescue mission.

'I'll put you down near the lip of that low ridge, two hundred and thirty-six metres out,' said Ba'ken, scanning the pict-screen of the speeder's control console and reading the contours of the canyon.

Accessing his eidetic memory, Va'lin recalled the specific location. There was a sharp slope that dipped down into the canyon's basin, but he could rappel it quickly. From there, a short sprint of one hundred and fifty-three metres to a narrow aperture, where he would intercept the aspirants.

As Va'lin was getting equipped, Exor turned his head to speak over the back of the gunner's seat. 'Serrwyrms are weak under their natural carapace, and their eyesight is poor.'

'So I wait until I can smell them.'

Va'lin smiled, but Exor was stony faced.

'And they you. Once that snout has distended, give them something to chew on that isn't flesh and bone.'

'Your tactical acumen never fails to astound me, Exor.'

'And you are always surprising me with your recklessness, brother. Anyone would think you had something to prove.'

'I do.' Punching the release clamp of his belt harness, Va'lin stood up and gripped the speeder's rollbar. They were slowing down. The cleft in the rock that led to the low ridge was in sight. 'That Salamanders protect their own,' he concluded, leaping from the speeder. Sand and ash were kicked up where he landed, crouched on the desert floor. Then he was running.

Ba'ken watched him go, all the way to the ridge until he secured his rappelling wire and disappeared over the edge.

'Is he going to make it?' asked Exor, glancing down at the seismic returns coming through the auspex. They rippled like Doppler waves.

Ba'ken grimaced. 'If Vulkan wills it.'

Gunning the engines, he raced towards the end of the canyon.

Za'tenga took it as a bad sign that he could no longer hear the monsters behind

them. Billowing smoke, streaking down over the ridge line into the canyon dulled the senses, though. It was hard to hear much of anything through the violent rumble of the mountains, the roar of fire and the harsh rasp of steam venting from clefts in the ground.

The earth trembled beneath them, spitting out columns of fire, thronging the air with heat and the smell of burning. Za'tenga stumbled, losing his footing as a piece of rock speared up from the ground, the fragility of the canyon exposed by the seismic forces threatening to tear it apart.

Since the storm hit, the fire canyon had become even more hazardous.

Za'tenga cried out, 'Kade!'

It was tough to see the burly warrior. His outline rippled through a veil of heat haze, obscured further by the scudding drifts of ash. Za'tenga thought he saw him turn...

A hand seized his forearm, hauled him up. Har'gaan's soot-smeared face was determined.

'We stay together,' he told Za'tenga, who nodded.

'Gratitude, brother.'

'Come on, Illion is not far ahead. Kade too.'

Za'tenga couldn't see the pathfinder any more, he was lost to the encroaching darkness spewing from the clouded peak of Mount Deathfire.

His route through the fire chasms had evaporated with the arrival of the helstorm, its violent eruptions swallowing the narrow passages of rock Illion had identified in the swathes of lava. Adapting, they went around it, through a claustrophobic warren of roofless tunnels before emerging into a wider plain where the flames were not so fierce.

A shuddering crack, the sound of the earth being sundered, resonated right and left as slabs of rock broke away from the flanks of the canyon and crumbled down into a miasma of occluding, grey smoke.

Fissures became chasms, splitting apart in savage wounds to reveal the magma within.

One opened up in front of Har'gaan so he leapt over it, not breaking stride.

Za'tenga followed, strong and sure-footed, though he felt a twinge in his ankle from when he had stumbled and prayed it was nothing more than a light sprain. Injury now would be certain death.

'I thought you left him,' said Za'tenga, shouting up to Har'gaan.

'Left who?'

'Runial. I thought you left him behind and that was why he died. But you

came back for me.'

Har'gaan's reply was a little breathless with exertion. 'No more of us are dying here.'

'I was wrong about you, Har'gaan,' said Za'tenga. 'I'm sorry.'

If Har'gaan heard the other aspirant's admission, he didn't show it. Instead, he was looking ahead, trying to find the pathfinder.

'Illion!' Even a few metres away, Har'gaan's voice was muffled and distant.

An explosive roar hit the canyon like a god's hammer blow and they stumbled again.

'Kade!' cried Za'tenga, fearful to stay still for too long but wary about advancing blindly through utter blackness. Another burst of fire, an orange-red smear against the smoke, speared from the canyon floor.

Har'gaan was spun by it, limned in a ruddy glow. He staggered, tried to say something then collapsed to one knee. Flames were licking his arm and back. Still he tried to speak. Za'tenga realised he was actually trying to scream.

Diving on Har'gaan, he slapped at the flames, beating them down.

Tendrils of smoke were still rising from Har'gaan's body as Za'tenga rolled him over. He cried out in agony as he went onto his right side. The skin was blistered around his face and neck, his entire left shoulder burned black.

'Get up,' Za'tenga snarled, putting Har'gaan's arm around his shoulders. 'No more of us are dying, remember?'

Shadows were scurrying to the right and left, lingering at the very edge of peripheral vision.

'I see them too,' said Har'gaan in a pained whisper. At least that's what Za'tenga thought he said. With all the noise he just saw the other warrior's lips moving and guessed at their meaning.

Something darted in from the right, and Za'tenga swung around, triggering his carbine. Solid shot raked a black, glossy carapace at the same time a shell-burst peppered the creature's snout. It was sniffing the air, tasting burned flesh and human sweat, the copper stink of blood.

Za'tenga only got a glimpse, the twin attacks enough to keep the serrwurm at bay for a few more seconds. It was long, with segmented chitin encasing its back and torso. Low to the ground, it almost slithered but actually had six short legs, reverse-jointed and with long curved claws for burrowing. Earth or flesh, those claws would ruin either.

Not far ahead, Kade had reached another bottleneck in the canyon and was waving them towards it. He cranked the spent shells from his double shotgun

burst, the extra incentive that had dissuaded the serrwyrms.

‘I counted six whilst I was standing here,’ said the burly warrior, straining to see through the smoke. ‘But with all of this,’ he gestured to the grey miasma now smothering the canyon, ‘there could easily be more.’ He glanced at Har’gaan, how he leaned so heavily against Za’tenga, but said nothing.

‘Where’s Illion?’ asked Za’tenga, setting Har’gaan down against the flat wall of the narrow gorge. It was no more than six metres across, tight enough to defend, and provided a little shelter with its overhanging crags.

‘Not far,’ said Kade, holding his side.

Za’tenga saw the dark patch across his skin. ‘Are you wounded too?’

‘Just a scratch,’ he said. ‘We need to go.’ He pointed down the gorge, the end a mystery swathed in soot-black smoke. ‘It runs for another eighty metres.’

Za’tenga saw the danger. ‘And we don’t want to be down there when the beasts come again.’

Kade nodded. ‘Can he even walk, let alone run?’ he asked, gesturing to the stricken warrior.

‘I’ll bloody walk through that,’ Har’gaan snarled, but his pugnacity cost him as he went to rise.

Za’tenga caught him, put out a hand to let Kade know it was fine.

‘Don’t worry about us. I can carry him.’

Kade looked like he wanted to say something but decided against it.

With the Themian in the lead, they headed off down the narrow gorge.

Va’lin descended into hell. When he hit the ground, the heat was like a slap across the face. Fire and smoke were everywhere, rippling across the canyon floor, spewing across its crags, draping pitfalls in an impenetrable miasma of grey. Ash was falling like rain. It covered his shoulders and the top of his head, and flecked his armour. Va’lin let it. The natural camouflage might prove useful.

He took a few seconds to get his bearings. By his reckoning, the aspirants were south-east of his position, between two and three hundred metres behind him. He needed to move quickly. Seismic body blows were reshaping the nature of the canyon all the time. If fortune didn’t favour him, the landscape might be very different from the one he expected by the time he reached them.

Va’lin was on the move again when he detected his shadow. A pair of serrwyrms, broken off from the pack pursuing the aspirants, had discovered his scent. Deadly to Nocturnean natives, they would find a Scout of the Adeptus Astartes a much tougher prospect.

Not breaking stride, Va'lin kept the creatures in the periphery of his vision, content to let them roam and prowl. Unable to discern transhuman from human, the serrwyrm only perceived lone prey and began to close.

As they crept closer, slithering through the sharp rocks, Va'lin thumbed the catch off his pistol holster. He had a bolter too, strapped around his torso, but couldn't shoot it one-handed and run at the same time, plus the harder recoil might spoil his aim and he wasn't planning on missing.

'Wait until they can smell you,' he echoed some of Exor's advice from earlier.

As the first serrwyrm pounced, Va'lin turned and unleashed a three-round burst.

Muzzle flare lit up the shadow caused by occluding ash overhead. For an instant the creature was frozen in it, the last inexorable seconds of its existence captured in monochromatic chiaroscuro. That was before its head exploded, taken apart by mass-reactive fury. The torso followed, jerking as the head was struck, a ripple of hard kinetic bangs first buckling the natural carapace and then shredding it.

Viscera laced the front of Va'lin's armour in a trio of gory tracts. A fourth licked his face and he spat out the serrwyrm's foul, acerbic blood.

The second creature was more cunning and stayed behind the Scout, in his blindside.

Va'lin's hearing was acute enough to detect the rapid motion and disturbance that preceded an attack. He ducked, allowing the serrwyrm to pass over his body. Claws flailing, the creature managed to snag Va'lin's shoulder and brought him down.

It took seconds for the Scout to regain his feet, leaving the pistol where he'd dropped it and pulling out a monomolecular combat knife. He held it low, blade down, hooked up next to his forearm as the creature uncoiled and showed its own fangs.

As he glared the serrwyrm down, Va'lin got a good look at it.

Long-bodied, armoured in plate, it had a head like an arrow tip, albeit stitched with four rows of razor-pointed teeth. Emitting a low, reverberant hiss which could have been a warning or a challenge, its mouth unpicked itself and opened up like a fleshy bloom. Three tendril-like tongues, barbed at the tips, writhed within a purple and foul-smelling maw.

It hissed again, coiling and uncoiling, preparing to spring.

'Challenge accepted,' muttered Va'lin, and lunged with his knife.

He rammed it straight into the serrwyrm's mouth, grimacing as the poison

from its tongue-barbs flared nerves. It thrashed, gagging on a length of steel that Va'lin only pushed further until the buried blade punched out through the serrwurm's back. He yanked, dragging it along its spine, tearing open the rugged armour plating and spilling what was inside, out.

Done with the grisly butchery, he jabbed a phial of anti-toxin into his thigh and hurried on.

Stopping to retrieve his pistol, he returned the weapon to its holster and shook off a bout of vertigo. His metahuman resilience to poison was still developing, but he hoped the anti-toxin would boost his biology enough to overcome it.

It would have to, Va'lin told himself. Lives, and not just his own, depended on it.

Illion met the aspirants on the other side of the gorge.

From the expression on the pathfinder's face, Za'tenga could tell their situation wasn't good. Looking past Illion's shoulder, he could see why.

A tempest of fire rolled ahead of them, swathing the canyon and spitting out waves of heat that were already biting their skin. The tightest aperture through the flames revealed steadier ground beyond and another narrow gorge where they might find further shelter, but to reach it they would need to run a gauntlet only a fully armoured Salamander would survive. Even then, the ground was webbed with lava streams. One slip, a moment of ill-footing, and it would be over.

'Can we get through it?' asked Kade, glancing behind them to see if they were being followed.

Illion shook his head.

Har'gaan murmured something, but his voice was lost in the roar of fire. He spoke louder, his face etched in pain from the effort. 'How far have we got to go?'

'Looks bad for him,' said Kade, coldly appraising the burned aspirant.

Har'gaan glared at the Themian. 'I can still hear you.' He turned back to Illion, repeating, 'How far?'

The pathfinder was resting on his haunches, coughing up ash and smoke. He shook his head. 'Another four hundred metres, give or take.'

Kade grunted. He was the only one who seemed untroubled by the fire and darkness. 'He won't make that.' The Themian was referring to Har'gaan. 'I could carry him.'

'Then we won't make it, none of us,' said Za'tenga, adding, 'He stays with me.'

If those creatures are out there in the flames we'll need that cannon of yours to fight them off. You stand a better chance of achieving that unburdened.'

Another grunt from Kade. 'Agreed.'

Ahead, the fire tempest was thickening, the narrow avenues through it closing.

Illion ventured forwards. 'Let me try it first.' He ran on, was lost and then revealed again through the smoke.

Anxiously, the others watched and waited.

The pathfinder crouched low beneath the belt of smoke, keeping his body tight to stay away from the worst of the fire. He only got a few metres before the others heard him cry out.

'Is he dead?' Har'gaan muttered, biting back the pain.

Za'tenga was looking, but could not see the pathfinder.

Kade stood impassively, emotions unreadable. 'There.' He pointed a thick, meaty finger at a silhouette emerging from the darkness.

Illion was alive, but clutching his wrist. His right hand was burned, the skin black and blistered. Through gritted teeth he said, 'There's no way through that. Fire... too unpredictable.'

'So we're dead then.' Za'tenga was resigned.

Once again, Kade was unreadable but for a tremor below his right eye which betrayed his annoyance.

Illion shook his head a second time as he began to bind his hand with strips of cloth torn from his sleeve.

'I saw a cliff face. There was a path around the sea of fire, far enough at the edges that we won't burn.'

'You're certain we can endure it?' Kade was staring into the roaring flames and didn't make eye contact at first. When he did, his eyes spoke of the Themian's deep determination for survival.

It chilled Za'tenga despite the rising heat.

Illion nodded. 'As certain as I can be. I only caught a glimpse, but the path is treacherous.'

'I would be disappointed if it were anything other,' uttered Har'gaan, standing up without Za'tenga's help. 'Lead us then, pathfinder.'

Za'tenga gave him a concerned look, but Har'gaan waved it away.

'I can make the climb.'

He did not look convinced, nor did Kade.

Pulling his knife from the serrwurm's corpse, Va'lin wondered how many more

of the creatures he would need to kill before he found the aspirants. Together with the one festering in his wake, this made four he had killed since entering the fire canyon. A few stragglers roused to the surface by the quakes he could cope with, an entire herd might prove fatal. He needed to move faster but the air was thoroughly clouded with smoke now; it was a struggle to see let alone get a bearing. Weaponry was something else he had to consider. The last pair of serrwyms were caught unawares, gutted to conserve ammunition, but once the creatures realised there was another predator in their midst they might be more cautious, even gang up. They were hunting, but not for him. Following a trail left by their kin, Va'lin reasoned. That rationale brought some hope. The aspirants must be close.

If this rescue was going to succeed they would have to be. Conditions were worsening by the minute. Great sections of the canyon were shearing off and collapsing, sealing off routes but creating others. The tectonic shifts were often seen rather than heard, as the smoke occluded everything except for what was right in front of him. After every step Va'lin strained to hear the cracking of rock that presaged another landslide or chasmal split in the earth underfoot, that deepening report of thunder too sustained, too heavy to be the storm overhead. It was an ever-changing labyrinth filled with fire and smoke.

For the first time, Va'lin considered the fact he might have made an error. Even with a Scout's enhanced senses, navigation was proving difficult. Soon it would be impossible. If that happened before he and the aspirants were out of the fire canyon, they would all be dead. So much for reckless heroism.

Va'lin was not a Nocturnean, not by birth. He had become one, a colonist in many ways, rescued from the world of Scoria by Ba'ken and the Third Company. Those warriors had changed much in the intervening years between then and now. Many were dead, killed on Va'lin's birth-world or lost to the dragon-strife that came after. He had always felt himself inferior because of that, because he wasn't Nocturnean. His skin was not as dark, nor would it ever be, and his eyes would not burn as fiercely as his battle-brothers'. Va'lin had resolved that his spirit would have to blaze brighter to compensate. His deeds would have to be greater. But as he knelt by the serrwurm carcass, trying to draw breath, failing to get his bearings, he wondered at the folly of those convictions.

Doubt is the enemy of action.

Va'lin recalled the words from one of Chaplain Elysius's sermons, a mantra often echoed by his sergeant and captain. Despair now, falter even one step, and the fire canyon would claim him. No cremation in the pyreum, no ceremony at

Mount Deathfire. The Circle of Fire would be broken and Va'lin lost to the earth like ash carried away on a bitter breeze.

It could not happen that way. He could not believe he had been saved all those years ago to die such an ignominious death now.

Another tremor shook the earth.

Va'lin took it and rose up.

Ahead, flames crackled and roared in a fog of smoke and drifting ash that layered the ground in a false wintery shroud. White above, white below, like an artist's canvas that had no borders or end. As the ash rain continued to fall, coating Va'lin and his armour, he considered that soon he would be part of the endless white, subsumed into the fire canyon and never seen again.

Ask for forgiveness later.

That was one of Captain Ba'ken's favourite phrases. It meant that it was better to act in error than not act when action was required.

Surrounded by the white, action was definitely required.

Trusting to instinct, Va'lin hurried on through the farinaceous haze.

It wasn't long before he was rewarded for his boldness as a monolithic pillar, blackened by fire but still standing, resolved through the perfect gloom. Recognising the rock, Va'lin realised he had veered off course, but only slightly. The aspirants were heading north, and he had planned on intercepting them on a south-west heading. The rock was a nodal point, a milestone at which he could rally and strategise his next move. What was more, there were handholds and, about a hundred metres up, a short ledge where he could better survey the canyon. It rose above the cloud layer, beyond the grasp of the flames. A hard climb up a razor-edged cliff, but the vantage he would gain would be worth the effort.

It took several minutes for Va'lin to scale the flank of the pillar, the tectonic booms of thunder, the shifting of the rock his constant companions and a stark reminder of how close death really was. A single slip and it would all be over. Swinging up to the last handhold, Va'lin clambered onto the ledge. The storm raged overhead, splitting the clouds above with eldritch-looking lightning that formed shapes of monsters and daemons in his mind's eye. They were neither, and Va'lin shook his head to banish the apparitions plaguing him. As he stooped low to secure his footing and stabilised his centre of gravity, the reek of soot clung to his nostrils and made him gag. After hacking up a black, phlegmy gob, he peered into the smoke.

It was burning beyond the white of the canvas. A billowing grey sea, lit by

flares of fire, spread out in all directions. Where he caught the impression of a throbbing red-orange smear, Va'lin knew there was a lava chasm. Fingers of rock, not unlike the one on which he perched, stabbed up from the fog but were little more than sharp peaks gesturing accusingly at a careless sky. The aspirants could not have climbed them.

Reaching into his webbing, Va'lin took out a pair of folded scopes. He extended them, snapped on the activation rune and began cycling through the ocular settings. There was too much visible light to make night vision useful and thermal imaging would prove difficult given the waves of heat coming off the canyon, but with some adjustment Va'lin could at least penetrate the smoke layer. The rock formations below the grey fog resolved in a ruddy blur allowing Va'lin to trace a route through them. He found the bottleneck where he was originally going to intercept the aspirants below, but the route was blocked by a shelf of collapsed rock.

Va'lin cursed loudly. His task had just become many times more difficult.

He retrained the scopes, panning them farther back, trying to imagine the alternative path the aspirants might have taken. A vast lake of fire was burning in a wide basin that stretched the length of the canyon at one of its widest points. Temperature readings were spiking into the red zone of his scopes. There was no way they could have taken that route.

He went back farther still and after a few seconds found a narrow channel running up one side of the canyon to the west. It was a short climb up onto a ledge that looked as if it wound all the way around the flames until it reached the other side. If they were alive, that was where the aspirants would have gone.

Snapping the scopes shut, Va'lin secured them back in his webbing and was about to retrace his steps when something hit the tower of rock. It shuddered as if it had been smacked by a mortar barrage. Va'lin stumbled and fell into a deeper crouch so he didn't come off the ledge and plummet to certain doom on the crags below. The pillar trembled as a dull cracking sound presaged its collapse. A subterranean tremor must have dislodged it, compromised its integrity like a tree severed at its base. Even as he wracked his brain for an escape plan, the angle was shifting, tipping to the left as gravity exerted its will upon Va'lin's now precarious vantage point. He went against it, running up the ledge that was now a steep incline, getting steeper by the second.

Hurling himself over the edge that up until that moment had been the pillar's flat summit, Va'lin found whatever handholds he could, half scaling, half falling. He had not scrambled far when he lost his grip, the rock disintegrating in his

grasp, and he fell. Something sharp pierced his lower back as he bounced off the side of the pillar, and he cried out. Thrusting up a hand, he arrested his descent for a second before losing his grip again. He tumbled, pinwheeling as his axes became inverted and then righted themselves again.

Another hard jolt. Pain flared in his side. Part of his carapace armour was ripped off as his shoulder was raked against crags of jutting rock. He rolled, smacked against the crumbling pillar and tasted blood in his mouth, his world a kaleidoscope of smoke and fire. Briefly, he found some purchase under foot. Stumbling and staggering as the vertical plane he had scaled rapidly became horizontal, Va'lin tried to make what ground he could before even that disappeared beneath him and he was cast down into abyssal darkness and consuming flame.

Ba'ken saw the pillars collapse from the pilot's seat of the speeder. They had slowed to cruising speed and were coming around to the northernmost edge of the fire canyon at last, the one that faced Mount Deathfire in the distance. Over twenty kilometres wide, the edge of the slowly crumbling chasm had several exits that led into the deeper Scorian Plain beyond. With their instrumentation ruined by the storm, it would be impossible to know which, if any, Va'lin had taken.

'Something in the dunes, captain,' Exor said, pointing, failing to keep the alarm from his voice.

Ba'ken hadn't been looking farther out, his attention was focused solely on the fire canyon itself. Now he shifted his gaze, he saw what Exor had discovered.

He counted three bodies, barely visible, half buried in the sand.

Without a word, he pulled the speeder into an aggressive turn, belatedly muttering, 'Hold on,' as Exor was almost thrown from his seat and into the rollage above.

As they got closer, Ba'ken eased the throttle. The pitiable corpses were too slight, too small to be Fire-born.

'Pilgrims,' said the captain, uttering a quiet benediction. It was no more than he had suspected when none of the baggage trains had returned. Casting his eye farther still, he found the rest, not far ahead but their bodies were sunk deeper.

'They were fools,' said Exor, rueful.

Ba'ken replied, 'The earth will reclaim them and the Circle of Fire will turn.'

'Into fire and ash...' said the Scout, his voice trailing off with his thoughts.

'As we'll all become in the end,' added Ba'ken fatalistically, turning them

around so they faced towards the fire canyon again.

Close up it was impressive, almost god-like in its power and violent majesty.

Huge plumes of smoke, ash and fire were billowing from the mouth of the gorge like hot breaths exhaled by some monster of Nocturnean myth. The shattered spines of rock were its broken fangs, the canyon itself its belly, thrashing in its death throes. If Emek had lived, Ba'ken believed the Apothecary would have found something poetic about its self-destructive beauty.

The four aspirants were suddenly of much lesser concern. Somewhere in the darkness and conflagration was Va'lin.

'What could live in that?' asked Exor, the implication obvious.

Ba'ken answered with an order: 'Hand me the scope.'

Even with its enhanced magnification and visual filters, the captain could see little beyond the canyon's maw.

He dared not get too close, the speeder was already taking hits from the debris kicked up by the storm. Within its immediate radius, there was no way of telling where another quake might split the earth or if a giant tremor was about to sunder the entire canyon and consume it whole. He smashed his fist against the console making the seismic returns shudder, crackle out of focus and then fizzle back again.

Ba'ken opened up the comm-feed. 'Argos, how long will this helstorm last?'

There was a short delay before the Forge Master replied, 'Impossible to predict with any certainty. It could be hours or even days, but that is the nature of the trial and the anvil upon which would-be Fire-born are tempered.'

'One of my Scouts is in there. Va'lin.'

'The Scorian?' It was more of a statement than a question but Argos phrased it like one anyway.

'Yes.'

'There are no search teams, no reinforcements close enough to assist you in time, brother-captain.' Another statement as Argos did the only thing he really could, relate facts. His last comment was knowingly facile. 'You are on your own.'

Ba'ken laughed ruefully, 'We've been on our own since Isstvan, Forge Master. Every fire-born son of Nocturne knows that. Surviving on our own with our guts ripped out is what we Salamanders do best.'

'You have a certain way of expressing yourself, Sol.' Though he couldn't see him, Ba'ken thought he detected a rare smile in Argos's voice as he used the captain's given first name. It fled quickly as he gave his final statement.

‘The chances of Va’lin’s survival are minimal according to the readings I am seeing. So too your aspirants.’ Another pause, this time not caused by static but by the Forge Master’s desire to find the appropriate emotional response. ‘I am sorry, brother-captain.’

‘No you’re not, Argos, but the gesture is appreciated nonetheless. Ba’ken out.’ He cut the feed, let the speeder idle along in silence for a few more seconds.

‘I should not have let him go,’ Ba’ken berated. ‘A death sentence, he said it himself.’

‘Va’lin is the most resourceful warrior I know in the Seventh,’ said Exor. ‘If there is a way to make it out of the fire canyon, he will find it.’

The speeder came to a halt, hovering just beyond the storm’s edges and minimum safe distance.

‘And that is the problem, Exor.’ Ba’ken glowered and the hard crags of his face bunched together in a fist of black rock. He paused for a beat, thinking. ‘Phosphor-flares. Now. Stake them as close as you can and at every possible aperture out of that hell hole.’

Exor unclipped his gunner’s harness and climbed over into the speeder’s troop hold. A satchel of flares was slung over his shoulder when he touched down on the plain.

‘Plant them deep. Do it fast,’ snapped Ba’ken, watching the Scout go to work. ‘I’ll drive around, see if the view is any better farther along.’

As the speeder started up again, he snarled, angry. At the wastefulness of it all, at Va’lin, at himself.

‘Impetuous fool. If he does live through this, I’ll bloody kill him myself.’

Gunning the engines, Ba’ken drove the speeder around the other side of the canyon in the desperate hope of finding a way through.

Illion’s wounded hand made the climb more difficult. It was tough already but the pathfinder was determined not to let something as inconsequential as pain slow him down. His bindings, laced with morphia gel from his modest field kit, took the edge off but only so he wouldn’t pass out. Slight, perhaps; young, most certainly, Illion had survived against the odds – his facial scars were a daily reminder of that – and he wasn’t about to relinquish the life he had been given easily.

‘Which way?’ he heard the Themian ask from below.

Illion was barely holding on with both hands, so he nodded up to the natural causeway he had found in the canyon’s flank and hoped Kade would catch on.

He did. The Themian ate up the ground like a rathlyd, except where the lizard

would have employed its subcutaneous hook-talons, Kade used hands the size of spades to make his ascent. Prodigious climbing ability was not the only thing he had in common with that saurian species, Illion decided as he climbed up after the barbarian. The Themian was cold-blooded too. Yes, he had undeniable fire, the kind of focused rage and overconfidence that all great warriors possessed, but Illion reasoned he would find a fount of ice running through Kade's veins if he were ever cut deep enough.

The pathfinder was still considering that when he saw a brawny hand outstretched above him, offering aid. The grip around his good wrist that seized him a moment later was like a manacle of iron.

Kade hauled him up the rest of the way as if he weighed no more than a child.

'Good, pathfinder?' the Themian asked, crouched on haunches like girders of plasteel.

Illion nodded, grateful for the assist.

Perhaps he isn't cold as nuclear winter after all...

A few minutes later, Har'gaan and Za'tenga reached the summit.

Illion could perform very basic battlefield surgery but it didn't take a medicae to know that Har'gaan was in a bad way. The blisters on his back and shoulder were red-raw and seeping. Infection was almost certain, though the worst of it was obviously cauterised by the heat. Sweat, and not from the external heat, was beading Har'gaan's brow and his eyelids flickered. He was barely on the edge of consciousness.

A rough hand seized Illion's shoulder, the manacle becoming a clamp that bit down with iron fingers.

'We follow it, then where?'

Kade had entered a sort of catatonic survival mode. He was so calm, it was actually terrifying. They would need that impervious strength and resolve to make it the rest of the way out of the fire canyon.

Illion dared not make him wait for an answer.

He nodded. 'Follow the causeway,' he confirmed. 'In about thirty metres it hooks to the left and then angles downwards another ten or so. Keep flat to the wall and be mindful of your footing, the ledge is very narrow in places.'

'Then where?' It came out as a demand not a question. Kade's fists bunched around the stock of his combat shotguns but he had at least released his grip on Illion's shoulder. If not, he might have crushed his collar bone.

'Keeps descending, down into a shallow basin of rock, I think. Couldn't read it that well through the smoke.'

Kade regarded the pathfinder for a few more seconds, as if gauging whether he was satisfied with his guide's assessment. In the end he turned away and started off down the causeway. 'Follow, pathfinder,' he called behind him.

'Something has happened to him,' said Za'tenga in a low voice.

Illion nodded to the other warrior at his shoulder then asked, 'Har'gaan?'

Za'tenga was about to shake his head when Har'gaan staggered past them both.

'Come on,' he said, grimacing. 'We are not dead yet.' Har'gaan glanced over his shoulder, but his gaze went beyond the other two aspirants and he scowled. 'We need to move. Now.'

Illion turned.

Fear had spurred Har'gaan's limbs into a final desperate act of motion.

The aspirants were not the only ones seeking a way around the sea of fire. Three sinuous bodies, low against the sheer rock and climbing swiftly, followed them. The serrwyrm had caught up with their prey.

'Down!' Kade's shout was almost as loud as his twin shotgun blasts as a storm of shrapnel erupted from their mouths. The muzzle flare was brief but sharp, so too the lead serrwyrm's death scream as it plummeted off the fire canyon's flank with only half a head.

The big Themian racked another shell into the breech. He was stalking forwards along the causeway, the others flat against it, advancing on the creatures.

'Fight or die!' he roared, triggering the cannons again, this time at a second pair who were scaling down the canyon's summit from above.

Three las-carbines answered as the rest of the aspirants combined their fire to take down a third creature. Throughout the barrage, the serrwyrm slithered and weaved, and the fire canyon continued to break apart.

'We cannot stay here and fight them all off.' Illion had adopted a kneeling stance with the end of the carbine's stock tucked into his armpit, up into the shoulder to better absorb recoil. Every shot was accurate, he had some skill as a marksman, but the serrwyrm's chitinous armour was thick. Most of his shots were ineffective.

Behind him, Kade grunted.

'How many left?' he growled between shotgun blasts.

'At least three, but there could be more,' shouted Illion.

Za'tenga slammed home a fresh clip. 'Last one,' he said, reading off the dwindling ammo count. 'Not enough to fend them off. We need a different

strategy.'

'I would suggest running,' said Illion.

A few short metres separated them from the serr-wyrms now. Only the fact that the canyon was shaking so violently had prevented the creatures from springing at the aspirants, and bearing them down to feast upon.

'Agreed,' said Kade.

Before he turned, Illion caught the look in the Themian's eyes and perceived the cold survival logic there. From this point, whoever was the fastest would live. Stronger, uninjured, more sure-footed than the rest, Kade was in the best position.

But despite the pathfinder's expectations, the Themian didn't take the lead. Instead he went to Har'gaan who was barely holding himself upright against the trembling canyon wall.

'Go!' Kade barked at the others, 'I will carry him.' He heaved Har'gaan up one-handed, keeping his other hand free to fire the shotgun. His aim was wild but the large bursts compensated. 'Go!'

Illion ran, Za'tenga, who seemed reluctant to leave Har'gaan behind, in front.

'Don't look back,' he shouted ahead, but risked a glance over his own shoulder.

For the second time in almost as many minutes, Illion's expectations were confounded. He thought he would see Kade's back, the Themian manfully retreating along the causeway by degrees, Har'gaan slung over his shoulder like a sandbag.

Har'gaan wasn't slumped over Kade's shoulder. He was kneeling in front of him, the big Themian's arm around his neck. He was whispering something to him. That struck Illion as odd; he didn't think Kade was capable of whispering.

Just as he began to turn away, Illion saw movement. A savage twist, Kade releasing Har'gaan's limp body to the ground where he kicked it forwards like an offering.

Then he ran.

Illion fought every instinct to cry out Har'gaan's name for to do so would only seal his own fate. Something cold crept into his gut as he looked away at last, Kade leaving behind a feast for the serrwyrms after all. Before the Themian caught up, Illion gripped Za'tenga's arm. As instructed, he had not looked back but needed to be warned about what the pathfinder had witnessed.

'Keep your eyes ahead,' Illion hissed, as loud as he dared, maintaining pace with Za'tenga so as not to throw them both off balance. 'Har'gaan didn't make

it.'

Za'tenga almost turned out of shock but stopped just short. He stumbled but only a little, and kept his footing.

'What? How?'

Kade provided the answer, bellowing from close behind.

'Make haste. Our brother's sacrifice will only buy us a little time.'

Illion felt Za'tenga stiffen in his grasp. He let go, numb at what the Themian had done to ensure their survival.

'He killed him, didn't he,' said Za'tenga.

'Yes.'

They reached the first descent, scurrying on hands and knees through the smoke-choked causeway. The second descent was sharper. At the front, Za'tenga nearly fell but Illion grasped the strap of his chest armour and righted him enough so the aspirant could regain his balance.

'Gratitude, brother.'

'Just keep going.'

Shuddering cracks, the wrench of stone splitting apart pursued them like a vengeful spirit as the causeway and the entire flank of the canyon started to disintegrate.

'Move!' Illion almost screamed, his eyes on Za'tenga's back, feeling burning heat prickling the skin of his own. Lava crackled, the slow, deep snap of sloughing rock as it was dissolved in a glowing soup of immolation. A thick sheaf of the canyon wall slid away, crashing down amidst a rapidly expanding pall of smoke and blazing debris.

Illion was heading down, risking sure footing for a better chance of escaping the dissolution of the earth behind him. An ululating screech pierced the volcanic thunder and he stooped, not slowing, fearing a return of the mantarids. But the flyers were gone, fled beyond the storm and the hellish red clouds enveloping the canyon. It was the serrwyrms, burned away despite their chitinous armour. From his father Illion had heard of creatures on Nocturne, those of the low earth who could survive the lava lakes, even live in them, but serrwyrms were not that enduring. He gave brief praise to the Throne and Vulkan that at least one terror had been vanquished by another.

Now they merely had to survive the wrath of the mountain itself.

A second prayer of deliverance was quick to pass his lips.

After another fifty metres it appeared his supplication was answered when the aspirants reached a basin of ash and smouldering cinder, the pyroclastic leavings

from the volcano venting above.

Kade was last to arrive, defying Illion's hope that he had perished with the other predators. Behind him, most of the canyon wall had collapsed into a fresh sea of lava but the destruction had abated. Revelling in his survival, the Themian angled his head up to let the drifting flakes of grey-white touch his face. His laughter then was booming and terrible. As he looked down to regard the others, he looked like a ghost swathed in powdered bone.

'I snapped his neck,' he told them, the shotguns hanging by a strap over his shoulder an unspoken threat. There was no remorse in his expression, all the humour had faded too and a face of ice looked on at them. 'Har'gaan was a dead man walking. His sacrifice meant we could live.'

For a moment no one moved or spoke, despite the fact that any delay could mean their deaths, and the rumble of the storm persisted violently in the void they had left.

Za'tenga's teeth were clenched. His fist wrapped around the hunting knife sheathed at his belt. The carbine was dry, clutched by the stock in his other hand like a club.

Kade took a step forwards in a very deliberate, silent challenge. The hot coals crunched underfoot. He gestured to the knife Za'tenga was obviously thinking about drawing.

'Do you know where that knife was made, where it comes from?' he asked calmly, then without waiting for an answer, he continued. 'I shall tell you. It is Themian, from the City of Warrior Kings.' Kade bowed his head just slightly and his eyes seemed to darken. 'My city.'

Za'tenga pulled the knife a thumb width from its sheath, exposing the silver of the blade. It shone red against the flames as if already blooded.

In the end, Illion put out his hand and laid it on top of Za'tenga's.

'No, brother,' he told him simply.

It took a few seconds, but Za'tenga let go.

Kade didn't smile, satisfied he had convinced the other man to back down; he didn't do anything until Za'tenga's back was turned. Then he raised the shotguns.

'I only need you, pathfinder...'

Illion flung his knife. He threw it as hard and fast as he could, spinning it tip over hilt in little blinding circles of fiery silver.

Kade saw it late, not predicting that the pathfinder had the guts to turn and fight him. He cried, twisting too slowly as the knife found the meat of his thigh

and dug deep. A second later, the shotguns went off but Za'tenga had gone to ground and the blast only peppered air, not flesh.

'Murdering bastard!' Za'tenga was scrabbling to his feet, half slipping on ash and cinder. His wounded leg wasn't helping. With blackened knuckles, he gripped his knife hilt and yanked it free... Then stopped. Two barrels from a conjoined combat shotgun were staring him in the eyes.

Illion was halfway to them when he saw the moment and froze. He held out his hand, so did Za'tenga.

'Enough blood,' said the pathfinder, his tone pleading. 'Enough has been shed already. Why can't we all live?'

Za'tenga put the knife down. He did it slowly, careful to show Kade the blade.

'Only the strong will live,' said the Themian, 'the weak will perish against the anvil.' He looked down at Za'tenga's leg. 'And you are weakened, my friend.'

Kade looked up. 'I need only you, pathfinder.'

As the shot sounded, Illion closed his eyes tight. When he opened them again the Themian's body was a ragged, half-destroyed mess. Most of his legs were intact, the shell had hit him in the torso, pushing him back with the sheer force of the impact and then detonating inside his body. Internal organs, bone, it was hard to discern amidst the ruddy pile of viscera Kade had become. His head was several metres away, torn off his neck during the explosion.

Illion fought down an urge to vomit.

Za'tenga had already been sick all over the front of his fatigues.

Both turned to see a tall figure emerging from the smoke and drifting ash. The warrior looked battered, his armour broken and his trappings torn. He held a stocky looking pistol in his outstretched hand and his eyes were like two burning coals.

'Come with me and you'll live,' said the newcomer, looking past them. Illion turned to see several slithering bodies, just burrowed up from the earth.

But this time the serrwyrms were not hunting. They were fleeing.

Above, the mountain roared, unhappy the insects scurrying in its fire-wreathed canyons had survived its wrath. It vented harder, as if trying to redress the oversight.

'You know what this is?' Va'lin asked one of the aspirants whilst on the move, a hawkish-looking boy with an old scar across his face.

He nodded. 'A bolt pistol.'

'Very good,' Va'lin handed the weapon to him. 'Keep it close and shoot two-

handed. Try it in one and you'll dislocate your shoulder, at best. It's not meant for normal humans.'

Normal humans.

The expression had come unbidden and even though Va'lin's transhuman apotheosis was in its relative infancy he could no longer be classed as merely 'human'. The realisation was as chilling as it was empowering.

'It will kick,' he warned. 'Use it to kill those bastards if they get too close.'

The fleeing serrwyrms were shadowing them, trying to escape the fire canyon's fury just like their former prey. Shadows, all sinuous and fleet of claw, appeared sporadically through the ash drifts, a reminder that they were not alone.

'Are they still a threat?' asked the other aspirant. 'I thought you said they were running, like us?'

This one was taller, stronger, though not nearly as big as the Themian Va'lin had been forced to put down. He would have to explain that to Ba'ken later, why he had shot dead one of his fellow tribesmen. The other aspirant had the regal bearing of a noble; he was definitely from Hesiod.

A bark of fire ripped from the bolt pistol's muzzle and the lead serrwurm backed off.

'There's your answer,' said Va'lin, glad to see the slighter aspirant was still on his feet and still running.

'If they want to get ahead of us, they won't go around,' Va'lin told the other. 'They'll come through us with tooth and claw. Try running with a maimed leg or your guts hanging from your stomach.'

That silenced the noble. He carried a knife, Va'lin had nothing else to spare. His bolter was the last of his weapons that had survived the fall and he wasn't about to part with it. He doubted the boy could fire it and not cave in most of his ribcage with the recoil anyway.

Again, Va'lin was reminded of his enhanced physiology. Soon it would be strengthened further, by the black carapace and the fusion of flesh to power armour. That was if they could escape the storm.

Darkness was gathering thickly, the smoke almost impenetrable. Breathing was difficult, even for Va'lin. The aspirants suffered badly. In a few short minutes, they had lost sight of the serrwyrms. Dead or fled elsewhere, it didn't matter. The mouth of the canyon could be mere metres away, but they would never know. From his eidetic memory of its original geography, modified by what little information he had gleaned whilst crouching on the pillar of rock, Va'lin knew there were several routes out of the fire canyon. Even if, by some

freak of fortune, Ba'ken found the right one there was no guarantee they would see his signal.

Kilometres across, swathed in ever expanding black, they might as well have been in an ocean.

Slowing down, beckoning the others to do the same, Va'lin pulled three phosphor-flares from his webbing. When broken off at the tip, they burned magnesium-white and were the best chance they had of someone seeing them from beyond the storm.

'Can you throw?' he asked the Hesiod noble.

'With a javelin, at gnaw-squid in the Acerbian Sea. But yes, I can throw.'

Snapping off the end where it blazed in a riot of pellucid white, Va'lin handed him one of the flares and pointed to the east. 'As far and deep as you can.'

The noble was true to his word, the flare cutting through the smoke in a dazzling parabola, landing somewhere just beyond the sixty-metre mark where it continued to burn and became a beacon in the smog.

The other two flew farther, cast by Va'lin. One disappeared, swallowed by lava or simply plunged into a gaping crevice. The other flickered briefly and died.

'We follow yours, aspirant.' Va'lin nodded, indicating the wan magnesium glow in the distance. 'And hope for solid ground between us and it.'

'I am Za'tenga,' said the noble, holding out his hand.

Briefly they had stopped running. Not to catch a breath, for there was precious little of that remaining, but to try and get some kind of bearing. It was like running in the void with only the illusion of solidity beneath them to tell up from down.

Va'lin looked down at the aspirant's hand. It was bloody, soot-smearred and painfully small compared to his own. So used was he to only being with his battle-brothers, even as a Scout, he had forgotten some of the simple interactions that came with dealing with mortals. He clasped the human's forearm and held it firmly.

Za'tenga reciprocated. 'If we are to live or die here,' he said, coughing hard through his words but determined to say them, 'then I would prefer you to know my name.'

'Va'lin,' the Scout replied, releasing his grip.

Za'tenga half turned, 'And he is... Illion!'

The hawkish aspirant had collapsed, his lungs finally giving in to the soot and smoke.

Za'tenga tried to help his comrade before he too was overcome by the fumes.

Va'lin was impressed they had lasted this long. To have endured such a trial of fire and lived to almost the end of it.

He fell to one knee, his wounds getting the better of him or perhaps some latent effect of the serrwyrn venom his immune system had failed to fully neutralise.

'Vulkan...' he snarled, getting to his feet and staggering over to the aspirants.

He hauled them both onto his shoulders, carrying them like ammo drums for an autocannon.

'Don't let go,' he told them through a cage of teeth.

Weak beyond the facility to walk, both aspirants had enough presence of mind left to seize the straps of the Scout's armour with every last iota of strength they possessed.

The glow of the phosphor-flare was dwindling, but Va'lin was fading too. He tried to deny it but the fall, his wound, the endless smoke and ash were all taking a toll.

'I must endure...' Va'lin muttered, trudging weary steps towards the slowly dying light.

If he could just reach it, find a way out.

'Vulkan...'

The flare died, the last of its fire sucked away on the breeze and obliterated by thickening smoke.

He had been so close. Va'lin could almost see the edge of the fire canyon but now it was lost to him, so too his sense of direction. Like a drowning man in the mist, metres from a shore he couldn't see, Va'lin was lost.

He trudged on a few more steps as the last vestiges of his defiance bled from him leaving a well of pain, rage and anguish.

Throwing back his head, he roared to curse the heavens. 'Vulkan!'

Something blazed in the darkness, scarcely bright enough to see at first, let alone follow.

Va'lin squinted, dredging up every last mote of concentration and presence he had left.

The flare brightened. It became a surging flame, a firebrand guiding him towards safety.

'Ba'ken.' His mountainous captain had found him. In spite of all the odds, he had located Va'lin and come into the fire canyon to drag him out.

As he came closer, Va'lin could just about make out a shadowy silhouette through the smoke. It was beckoning, urging the Scout to move faster.

‘You may be able to haul two dead weights and still sprint across the Scorian,’ Va’lin muttered breathlessly, ‘but I am not fashioned like a slab of the mountainside.’

Every step he took brought him out of the grey dark. Smoke thinned, tectonic thunder lessened, left behind in the fire canyon’s death throes, the ash rain faded.

Vision dimming, the figure in front of him resolving in a green and blue haze before fading again, Va’lin slumped first to his knees and then fell forwards, gratefully kissing the earth. A different kind of blackness took him then, one born of exhaustion and pain.

‘Rest,’ he heard Ba’ken say in a voice that was not entirely the captain’s.

Va’lin opened his eyes and found he could breathe. Sitting up sharply, he went to his weapons, drawing his bolter, but he found no enemies nearby. Smoke thronged the air, tinged with orange and red from the still burning fire canyon. It had collapsed into a massive sink hole of lava and ash, but the worst of the helstorm was over and they were away from danger.

There was no sign of the speeder, Exor or Ba’ken. He was alone with the two aspirants.

Getting up to check on them, Va’lin found they were still unconscious but alive.

Standing from a crouched position, the Scout looked around. He was in some kind of shallow sand basin, the edges of which were delineated by stone totems etched in Nocturnean script. Channels of lava threaded the desert surrounding it and a strange katabatic wind, redolent of soot and ash, rolled around the landscape with the basin at the heart of this bizarre maelstrom.

‘What is this place?’ he asked himself.

Even with the absence of any other statuary or altar, Va’lin saw enough to know he was in a shrine.

His twin hearts produced a hard single beat that sent a tremor of realisation through his body.

Frantic now, he searched the entire basin. It was more than thirty metres across in all directions. At the approximate centre he found a sigil scorched into the earth. Though the ash drifts and dunes of sand spilled across the plains with great regularity, this patch of the Scorian remained untouched and unsullied. Belatedly, Va’lin realised the mark was not a sigil at all but a silhouette of a human body, a Salamander to be precise.

He knelt down, stretched out a trembling hand to touch the mark.

There was heat, a dense throb of heat but a coldness too in spite of it, endless as the stars themselves. Va'lin was no psyker, his training and relentless mental conditioning had revealed nothing of the warp within him, but he felt... a presence here. An undeniable sense of spirit and existence dwelled within that mark.

He stood up, looked around, surveyed the edge of the sand basin but could see no farther than the totems. Smoke surrounded them on all sides, occluding the desert beyond. It was like being trapped beyond time.

'Da-' he began to call, but then thought better of it.

Something was burning. He heard the crackle of fire, the snap of smouldering wood. Ahead, in place of one of the totems, was a firebrand, the one they had followed to this place which had led them safely from the canyon and saved their lives.

Va'lin was about to go to it when he heard Illion stirring. Za'tenga alongside him coughed up a wad of black phlegm and the Scout was reminded that the survival of the aspirants was even now not guaranteed.

For the second time, he hauled them up onto his shoulders. As he trudged from the shrine circle, pausing briefly at the flickering brand, scared to touch it should it be proven false and Va'lin's mind broken, Za'tenga muttered, 'Are we dead?'

'No,' Va'lin told him, eyes forward as they parted the veil of smoke. 'Not yet, at least.'

For several minutes, Va'lin walked through a grey miasma, not knowing where he was going but somehow assured he was on the right path. And as mist parts from the surface of a cooling lake, the veil thinned and they returned to the Scorian Plain. Over a shallow rise they found the speeder. Captain Ba'ken was standing in the pilot's seat, panning the length of the desert with his scope.

When he saw them, he dropped back down and the guttural engines revved hard. Within a few seconds, he and Exor were with them, rushing from the transport to take Va'lin's mortal burden and secure them in the troop hold.

While Exor provided what little medical attention they had packed with them in the speeder, Ba'ken stood with Va'lin a few metres from where they had set down.

'I thought the earth had claimed you,' he said without emotion, though Va'lin could tell he was holding back his anger and his relief.

'For a few moments back in the canyon, I thought it had too.'

A minute of silence passed between them with the dull throb of the idling Land Speeder the only sound.

‘You should not have lived,’ Ba’ken said. He was stating a fact, based on the evidence of his eyes and his knowledge as a captain of the Salamanders. ‘When that canyon collapsed, you should not have lived. It isn’t possible.’

Va’lin opened his arms. ‘And yet here I stand. Alive.’

Ba’ken’s gaze flicked to the back of the speeder where Exor was engrossed in his work.

‘I cannot decide whether it was recklessness or insane bravery,’ admitted the captain. ‘But they too will probably live,’ he turned to face Va’lin again, ‘thanks to you.’

The Scout bowed his head.

‘You are leaving my company,’ said Ba’ken.

‘Yes, brother-captain.’

‘And you will join the Devastators, along with Exor. Can I be certain you won’t be as reckless again?’

Va’lin opened his mouth to speak but Ba’ken raised his hand to prevent him.

‘No need to answer. I already know you will. In donning the black carapace you’ll become a battle-brother, one knuckled finger of two clenched fists.’

‘I will serve with honour and duty until death, captain.’

Ba’ken nodded but his thoughts had strayed to other matters as he turned away to face the now quiescent Mount Deathfire.

‘What happened out on the plain? Where did you go, Va’lin?’

The Scout looked up to find his captain looking straight at him.

‘I don’t know.’

He was tempted to try and retrace his steps, to locate the shrine for some kind of answer that made sense, but a part of Va’lin realised it would not be there, that hours of searching would not reveal it.

‘We were rescued,’ he conceded. ‘I was dying, and the smoke gathered so thick I couldn’t see. There was no way out and suddenly I saw it.’

‘Saw what?’

‘A firebrand. A flame to guide us out of the darkness and back into the desert.’

Ba’ken shook his head, denial and incredulity etched upon his features as if they had been chiselled there by Va’lin’s words.

‘I thought it was you, captain, come back to get us out, but it couldn’t have been.’

Ba’ken was staring, his mouth a hard line across his face as he clenched his teeth until the bone ground together.

‘Don’t say anything more,’ he told the Scout. ‘We’ll return to Hesiod, where

you'll be properly debriefed then the brander-priests will score you and prepare you for your apotheosis. That is all.' He turned away and marched back to the speeder, a cloud thicker than the smoke of the fire canyon upon his face.

Va'lin met Exor as he was stepping out of the troop hold.

They embraced briefly, one glad to see the other alive and well.

'I've made them comfortable,' said Exor. 'I assume you'll want to ride back with them.'

Va'lin nodded, regarding the two slumbering aspirants he had risked so much to rescue.

'Their life signs are good,' Exor went on. 'You saved them, brother.'

'No I didn't,' Va'lin replied, 'not really.'

Exor frowned. 'Are you all right?'

'I don't know, brother. Define "all right".' He looked at him, and knew it was the hollowness in his eyes that Exor reacted to.

'It is not unusual to be shaken after so close a brush with death.' But Exor knew that wasn't it. His face gave the assumption away immediately. 'Did something happen in the fire canyon?' he asked.

Va'lin nodded slowly, remembering but not understanding. The silhouetted figure holding the firebrand, its body clad in power armour. The shrine and the mark emblazoned in the earth.

'It was the place where he died, Exor.'

'What?'

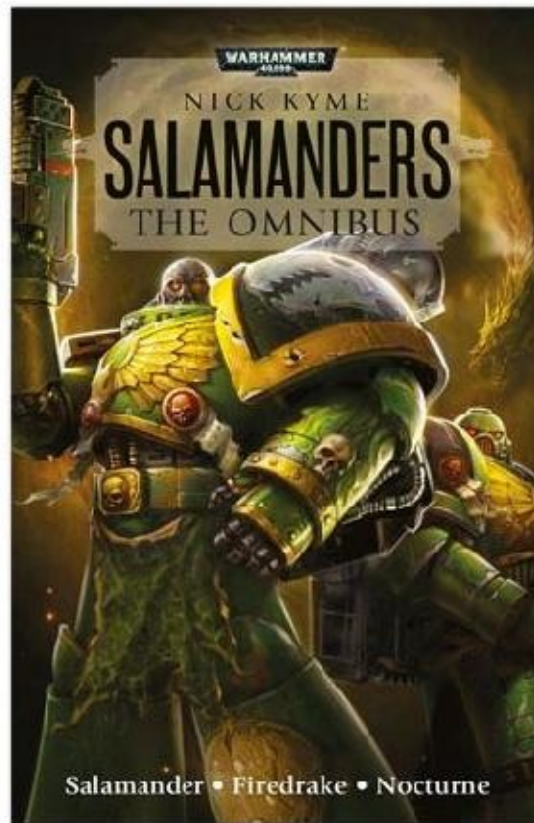
'Where he sacrificed everything for us.'

'I don't understand, Va'lin. What exactly did you see?'

'A miracle, I think. Come back from the dead.'

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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 series of Salamanders novels and short stories, the Space Marine Battles novel *Damnus*, 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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