

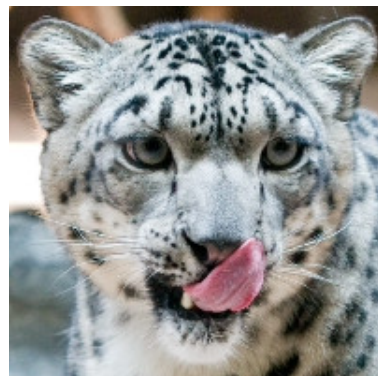


## Vulkan's Shield

An Salamander Audio Drama

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withdraw a fistful of burning coals. The others echoed him, Vek'shen and Shen'kar. Together, they

crushed the coals into dust and used the hot soot to anoint their armour.

'What is that?' remarked another warrior in the hold. This one was not a Salamander. He wore the

black ceramite of the Raven Guard. His left pauldron carried his Chapter's icon, a white raven with

outstretched wings. Where as Salamanders were onyx-black, the bare-headed Raven Guard was stark

white with eyes like tiny shards of jet. Together, they were a contrast in chiaroscuro.

Vek'shen had scribed the effigy of a dragon's head upon his forearm.

'Unguh'lar,' he said, 'The great drake slain in ritual combat whose mantle I wear.' The Company

Champion touched the scaled cloak draped over his back and carefully fashioned around his power

armour's generator. 'I carry this sigil to honour him and grant me fortitude in battle.'

'Yours is a savage culture, Nocturnean,' said another. The remark was directed at Kadai, who turned

to face the speaker.

'The Promethean Creed is not for everyone, Adrak.'

The Raven Guard stared through the dark lenses of his white battle helm. The bulky jump pack

on his back made him lean forwards in his grav-harness. It gave a false sense of earnestness that Sergeant

Adrak Vraver didn't feel. He and three more of his battle-brothers had hitched a ride on the

Fire-wyvern, pledging to aid Kadai in his extraction mission. The two went back a long way. Vraver

was a veteran of dozens of campaigns. Kadai had served in some of those in his two centuries and

more of service.

'And I suppose your stubbornness is kindled from the same embers?'  
 There was mirth in the Raven Guard's tone that Kadai couldn't see.  
 Outside, the explosions intensified. The interior shuddered constantly.  
 Metal groaned in abject  
 protest. They rode a storm of ordnance now.  
 'Not too late to go back,' Vraver added. 'Our battle-brothers are pulling  
 out, Ko'tan. This city is lost,  
 but the war is won. There's nothing for the Space Marines here. Let the  
 Guard flatten it.'  
 Kadai laughed, but it didn't reach his blazing eyes.  
 Perhaps that was true for the Raven Guard. Prosecuting a guerrilla war  
 behind enemy lines they  
 had crippled communications, sabotaged transport links and executed  
 several insurgent officers,  
 including the world's corrupt lord-governor. For Kadai, however,  
 the mission was not yet ended. 'Months ago, before undertaking  
 this mission,' the Salamander said. 'A neophyte remarked something  
 to me on the Cindara Plateau back on Nocturne. Do you know what he  
 said?'  
 Vraver relaxed his lightning claw in a gesture for Kadai to continue.  
 "'My lord," he began, "the Promethean Creed tells us that nothing is  
 above the sanctity of human  
 life, that we are Vulkan's Shield, here to protect the innocent and defend  
 the weak. But when I awoke  
 in the solitorium after seven months of endurance and solitude I found I  
 had become a monster..."  
 Kadai touched his skin, dragging the eyelid down a fraction to show the  
 red heat within "...How  
 then," he asked me, "can we be our primarch's shield if we look like  
 this?"  
 Fire-wyvern shook violently from another aerial bombardment, but  
 Vraver and Kadai didn't flinch.  
 From the cockpit, through the internal vox, Brother He'ken relayed that  
 they were closing on their

objective.

++Ninety seconds...++

'What was your answer?' asked Vraver.

Kadai spread his hands as if it was obvious, "'Because we must.'"

'As simple as that,' said the RavenGuard. 'I always admired your frankness, Ko'tan. You Salamanders

are such pragmatists, even when your very appearance betrays your ideals.'

Fire-wyvern's engines were screaming. The gunship was banking into a sharp dive. Kadai could feel

the inertia even in his power armour. Heavy cannon fire boomed through the hull, muffled slightly

by the gunship's armour.

++Sixty seconds...++

'It is because of what we are that we can be Vulkan's Shield. Triumph over adversity, self-sacrifice and

the capacity to endure comes from this.' He gestured towards his diabolic features. 'By being less

human on the outside, we are made more human inside.' Kadai touched his breastplate where a

symbolic flame was rendered in gold. 'The burning core of our righteousness and the belief in our

duty and all the Promethean Creed comes from within.'

++Ten seconds...nine...eight...++

Kadai donned his helmet. Like his armour, it was finely artificed. It depicted a snarling drake head,

its scales echoed in the captain's battle-plate.

The deployment ramp of Fire-wyvern opened slowly. Heat and sound rushed in. Having disengaged

his grav-harness, Kadai mounted the ramp first. Brother He'ken had brought them low. Thirty metres

down, fire wreathed Echelon City in a crackling veil.

The once regal avenues burned. Plazas fluttered with the charred remains of anti-Imperial propaganda

leaflets. Bodies of loyal citizens and cultists alike littered roads clogged with blood and rubble.

One structure remained. Blasted ruins filled with Chaos insurgency troops surrounded it. Three battalions,

over a thousand troops, moved into position. Their heavy gun emplacements had taken a toll

on the schola's marble walls. Columns were toppled. Statues of prominent alumni were beheaded

and defiled. Soon it would be no more. The SpaceMarines had arrived just in time.

A comm-feed in Kadai's ornate helm revealed that Navy ordnance would be unleashed from

sub-orbit in less than six point three minutes and counting. Only ash would remain afterwards.

He'ken drew them closer still. Heavy bolters from the Thunderhawk's wings and forward fuselage

raked a cannon battery wheeling around to get a bead. Simple brown flak armour and the

hoods of their debased cult availed them nothing. The heretics disappeared in a storm of blood

and debris.

Kadai unhitched a pair of krak grenades mag-locked to his belt.

The roof of the schola hove into view. It had been damaged and would yield with little force.

Kadai cast down the grenades, priming them with a three-second timer. Vraver loosed two more.

The detonation was fast and loud. In a cloud of smoke and flame, the schola roof collapsed.

Several young faces and the older visage of an abbot, peered up through the clearing dust at the

angels in the war-blackened sky above. Salvation had come.

'Tell me, brother,' shouted Vraver, readying to drop then engage the thrusters of his jump pack,

'this precocious neophyte, what is his name?'

Salamander met the gaze of Raven Guard briefly. Kadai's eyes flared, his emotion unclear.

'Dak'ir,' he replied, leaping off the ramp and into the schola below, 'Hazon Dak'ir.'the territory, goes with the territory”.