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THE PRIMARCHS

Edited by Christian Dunn

Created in the Emperor's own image, the primarchs had long thought themselves to be princes of the universe and masters of their own destiny – they led the Space Marine Legions in glorious conquest of the galaxy, and no enemy of the Imperium could stand against them. However, even amongst this legendary brotherhood, the seeds of dissent had been sown long before the treacherous Warmaster Horus declared his grand heresy. Gathered within this anthology are four novellas focusing on some of the mightiest warriors and leaders that mankind has ever known – Fulgrim, Ferrus Manus, Lion El'Jonson and the twin primarchs Alpharius and Omegon – and the roles that they may have yet to play in a war which threatens to change the face of the Imperium forever.

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Taken from *Feat of Iron* by Nick Kyme

DESCENDING INTO THE desert basin had not been easy. Hampered by the constant shifting of the dunes and the debilitating effects of the sand on their engines, much of the Army tank divisions and Mechanicum claves had foundered.

Tracks had mired near the tip of the decline, half-drowned in sinking sand. One battle tank pitched nose-first and rolled, bringing an entire column to a grinding halt. Even the bipedal walkers fared no better, and the broken skeletons of several Sentinels hit the nadir of the desert basin before any foot troops. Their burned-out wrecks were ignored by those that followed behind.

It therefore fell to stronger, more able, warriors to take up the mantle of battle.

'Bring them iron and death!' Gabriel Santar bellowed, a machine reverb in his voice, as he announced the attack.

A war host of Iron Hands answered, advancing in unison as a halo of crackling starbursts erupted from their weapons.

A horde of massive insect-like creatures wrapped in chitin boiled towards them and in its wake, scores of the cloaked warriors who had first sprung the ambush.

Eldar.

As muzzle flares lit, the heavy roar of cannon spoke and the hot air in the desert basin was chewed apart by brass-shelled fury.

Thick-skinned and ponderous, the first wave of chitin creatures was slow but resilient. Shell impacts rained against their heavy bodies, but did little more than indent flesh. They waded through clouds of explosive discharge from missiles and grenades without pause. Like their slighter kin they had billowed up from the desert in a welter of displaced sand and mournful nasal dirges. Humpbacked and muscular, as bulky as an Imperial battle tank, the beasts were impelled by an eldar kindred wearing what Santar could only assume were some form of mind-goad.

Such alien technology was to be abhorred, but the first captain knew these were not the true vanguard. Infinitesimal vibrations, growing steadily in significance, registered on his helmet's auto-senses as minute seismological anomalies in the basin's tectonic structure.

Earth burrowers tunnelled beneath them, closing on the line of Iron Hands fast.

A series of subterranean detonations presaged the attack, and as the Legiones Astartes advanced in stoic rows of black and steel ceramite, the creatures emerged from geysers of spurting sand. Swift and serpentine, so utterly unlike the ordered ranks of the Iron Hands, it was difficult to make out the precise nature of the abominations. Crackling discharge flickering off the barbed pikes of their masked riders was visible, as the desert drained off master and beast in a fragmenting veil. It was a form of cavalry, Santar realised, only the most debased kind.

Santar scowled, and the cliffs of his cheeks hardened into craggy bulwarks. He would see them wiped from the face of the desert.

A fusillade of small-arms fire and light ordnance erupting around him, the first captain led a company of Morlocks into the onrushing creatures with his lightning claw aloft. The sun glinted from the blades and made the dark metal of his armour gleam.

At range the elite warriors were formidable; at close quarters they were unstoppable.

The aliens seemed not to realise, but would soon be educated.

'Be as iron!' he roared as the eldar hit them.

A beast, its long torso segmented and armoured with a tough brown carapace, snapped at the first captain in an attempt to bite off his arm. Santar shrugged off the blow and cut its face open, spilling viscous green fluid onto clacking mandibles and many-faceted eye-pits. A second slash severed its razor-edged pincers with a roar of bionic automation that drew a high-pitched mewl of pain from the thing's puckered mouth.

Its rider, a sand-cloaked eldar in dun-coloured battle armour that was the mirror of the creature's natural carapace, brought its electro-pike to bear, but Santar cut the wretch down before it could thrust.

Servos in his mechanised implants screaming, lending enhanced strength to an already exceptional biology, Santar cleaved the head from a second chitin-worm as the first was still collapsing. Through the gore fountaining from the neck cavity he saw Captain Vaakal Desaan, who was leading the other company, eviscerate a third.

Beast and rider crumpled. Behind them, more were coming. They were skirting ahead of the larger, beetle-like monsters, their sand wakes just breaking the desert surface in rippling mounds.

At least four dozen enemy contacts registered on his retinal display. Faint heat signatures, baffled by the sand, suggested there were another four score still fully submerged. A host of dun-cloaked foot troops with anti-gravitic weapon arrays followed them and the air chimed to the shriek of their cannons.

A heavy barrage was coming off the iron-armoured Morlocks in response, their rattling combination bolter fire taking a brutal toll. Holding the centre of the war host, they showed no sign of capitulation. Fashioned of reinforced plates, with the barrel-like shoulder guards adorned by pteruges that overlaid the thinner and more dexterous arm greaves, their Cataphractii Terminator armour was near-inviolable against the alien weapons. Intended for frontal assault, a tactic in which the Iron Hands excelled, the armour made them giants. Hulking, implacable, they passed through a hail of heavy bow-casters, fusion blasters and shuriken cannon with impunity.

Little effort was expended in vanquishing the chitin-worms, their numbers decimated for no injury in reply.

'They have obviously not fought Terminators before,' Desaan said over the comm-feed.

Santar's reprimand was swift but light. 'Just kill them, brother. As efficiently as you can.' Cataphractii war-plate was rare amongst the Legions, but the Iron Hands boasted a great many suits, especially amongst the clan companies of the Avernii, the Morlocks. It was cumbersome, akin to wearing a battle tank bereft of tracks, but still retained all its resilience and stopping power. Santar revelled in the machine-strength it gave him. They all did.

The Iron Hands' blows fell like metronomes: precise, methodical and without profligacy or flourish. It was a functional combat doctrine, merciless and unrelenting. The eldar withered before it.

In concert with Captain Desaan, Santar pressed the advance. The thickly-armoured Morlocks were steam-rolling across the dune. Nothing escaped their wrath, which was punitive and absolute.

Renewed tremors jagged across the first captain's retinal display, indicating further tunnellers. Initially, he expected a secondary wave of the chitin-worms but realised his error as the vibration returns came back louder and more resonant.

'Stand and prepare to repel the enemy,' he barked down the comm-feed.

Both Morlock companies fell into line in perfect unison, weapons locked on the dead ground ahead of them. Their bolter storm abated, allowing the battered eldar to scurry back behind their ponderous barricade creatures.

Behind the pitiless lenses of his battle-helm, Santar's narrowed eyes promised retribution

upon those cowards later.

The Army ordnance had managed to find position at the cusp of the rise overlooking the basin. The gunners now had range and pummelled the mind-goaded chitin monsters anchoring the eldar kindreds.

The next wave, he knew, was coming.

'Show no mercy,' he said to his warriors.

Cracks webbed the base of the sand valley, swallowing the carcasses of dead chitin-worms and their slain riders, as a much larger strain of sand-burrower emerged.

Massive pincers married to a serpentine torso that ended in a whickering stinger gave them the aspect of the scoriad that Santar had heard the XVIIIth legionaries speak of prior to deployment on One-Five-Four Four. Apparently the beast was indigenous to their volcanic home world. It mattered little to the first captain; he just needed to know how to kill them.

A crackling line of bolter fire stitched across a scoriad-creature's midriff but the shells failed to penetrate, and exploded with little effect against its hardened exoskeleton.

One look at the barbed stinger and serrated claws attached to its ribbed torso, told Santar that these beasts could penetrate power armour. It was theoretically possibly they could wound the Cataphractii too. He decided to test it, but not before he had thinned the ranks a little.

Santar raised Erasmus Ruuman through his battle-helm's comm-feed.

The response from the Morlock Ironwrought was immediate.

'At your command, first captain.'

In his mind's eye, Santar painted a blood-red crosshair over the advancing scoriad-creatures.

And with our iron fist...

'Heavy divisions on this position,' he grated with machine-like cadence, relaying coordinates sub-vocally. 'Rapiers and missile launchers.'

A glance and a clenched fist from Santar to Desaan held the Morlock captain in place and also brought both Cataphractii companies to a halt.

Seconds later, a storm of ordnance lit the desert basin in magnesium white, so bright it almost overloaded the retinal buffers in Santar's battle-helm.

...we shall bring down such fury.