

THE HORUS HERESY®

# THE GATES OF TERRA

*Nick Kyme*

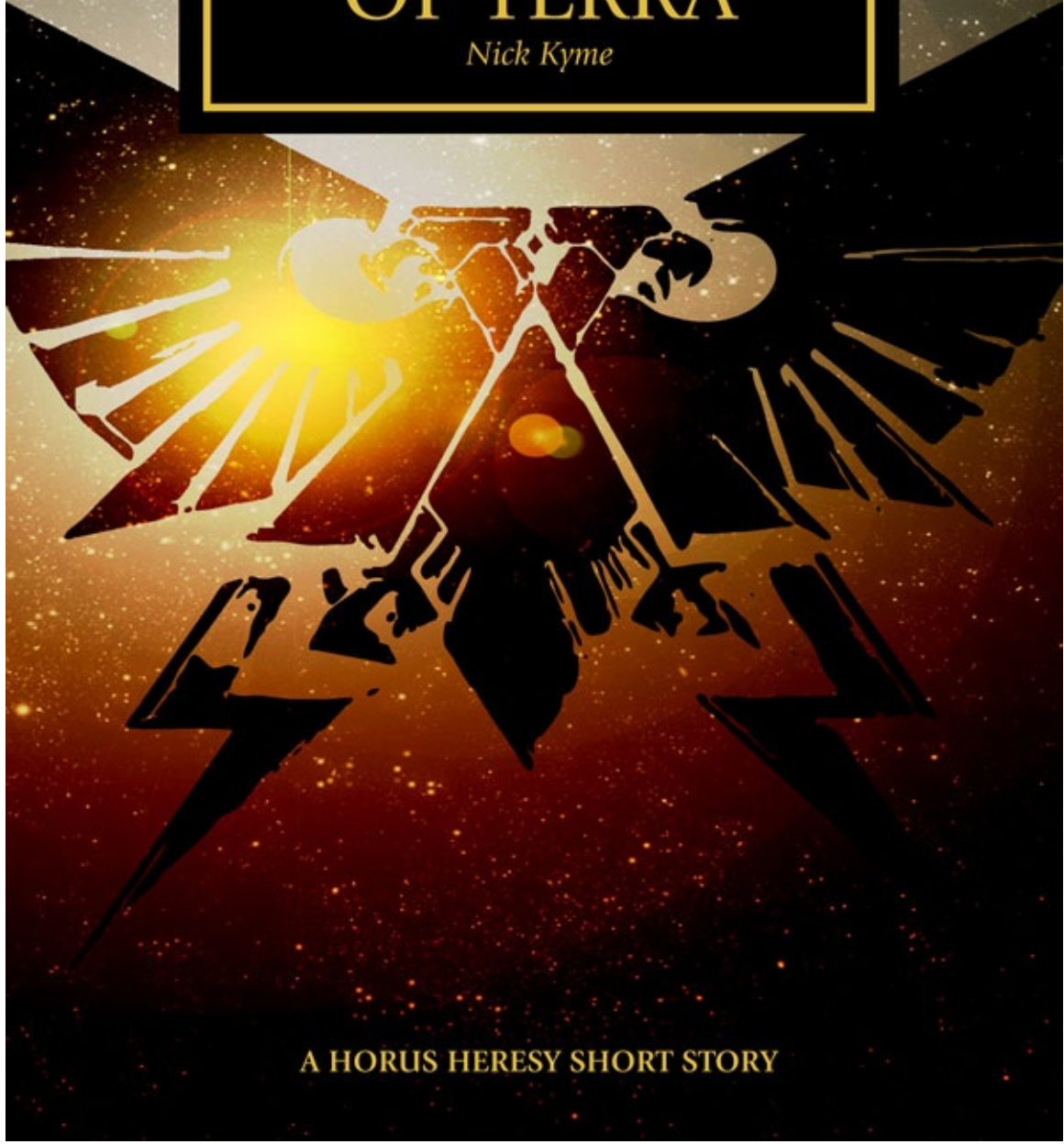


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*'We have not always seen eye-to-eye, you and I,' said one. He had a cultured voice, ageing but redolent with power. The cadence of a statesman or a political negotiator. In the ancient days of Old Earth, the Romanii Empire would have employed such men as spymasters. 'But here we stand fighting a war on two fronts, our purpose aligned at last.'*

*'Our purpose has ever been the same,' said the other. His timbre was much deeper and it put the first speaker in mind, as it always did, of a stone-clad vault. There was no compromise in his tone. It, like him, was solid and unyielding. And yet, the other was asking for just that. Compromise. 'It is our methods that differ.'* There was power here too, but martial rather than esoteric. He exuded strength, this one; strength and intimidation.

*'Immediacy versus longevity, the two need not be mutually exclusive. Wars are won with more than bolters and blades.'* He was just a man, the first speaker, a lesser being than the titan towering over him, but his presence was the equal of the other's physical stature. *'But we are in agreement?'* he asked, ensuring the warrior understood the precise nature of their compact. To do anything other could potentially undermine everything they sought to achieve in the breaking of their Father's law. *'Since Nikaea, things have changed.'*

*The warrior's silence suggested his discomfort at the plan, but he slowly nodded.*

*'We do this for the new Imperium,' said the first speaker. 'The ends justify the means. We are talking about survival.'*

*Again silence, then the slightest frown cracked the warrior's craggy countenance. He wanted to be away from this place, to be back at the walls where his unique gifts could be best employed. This praetorian was not one given to skulking in shadows and talking in whispers.*

*'Our first priority must be stopping the fleet from breaching our atmosphere. If we can halt them there, we can defeat them. Horus Lupercal might never reach*

*the walls. 'The first speaker narrowed his eyes, suggesting they both knew that was a very unlikely scenario.*

*'My brother...' It was hard to say, and the warrior's lips curled when he used the word. Atrocities beyond comprehension, fratricide on a terrible scale had soured respect and killed any bonds of brotherhood between them. Barely daring to admit it even to himself, the praetorian wanted Horus to breach the cordon so he could crush him against the gates. Gauntleted hands became fists, the jaw locked and words slipped through a portcullis of clenched teeth. 'He will reach the wall.'*

*'Then we must use every weapon at our disposal. To do anything else would result in defeat for mankind.'*

*The warrior exhaled, long and deep, as if all his misgivings and reservations could be expelled with a single breath. 'I am uncomfortable with this.'*

*'Of course you are. This is why I need your confidence. This is why it had to be only you that knew about it. We do not tread lightly over our Father's edicts.'*

*'He is not your father.'*

*'He is Father to all of us, lord praetorian, is he not?'*

*Meeting the statesman's gaze, the warrior's voice sank to an abyssal whisper.*

*'He must never know.'*

Something was seeping from his ear. It ran down the lobe and across his cheek until it touched the hard floor underneath him. Twisting and coiling inside his mind, faint echoes of its intrusion lingered in his psyche like the shreds of a half-remembered dream. Serpentine and insidious, it left a cooling trail in its wake. It was warm at first, and carried a metallic stink.

Like armoured shutters, Arcadese's eyes snapped open. Blood was seeping from his ear.

*I am wounded.*

But he could not recall any battle where he had sustained injury.

Clad in pitted battle plate, he knew he was a warrior, felt it in the slow returning strength of his arm, the martial instincts flooding his brain with action and counter-action, the pulse of adrenaline urging him to move.

*Legiones...*

Pushing up onto his knees, the split ceramite of his armour shrieked a warning and he felt the pain of his injuries anew. Agony flared down his side, white-hot and angry. He crushed it down, wiped the blood from his scarred face with a gauntleted hand and rose to his feet.

‘Report.’ His voice sounded alien, cracked and rasping from lack of use. Instinct compelled the word. It was all Arcadese had to go on. Stone walls, buttressed and adamantium-reinforced, enfolded him. This place was strange and yet familiar.

‘Holding, lord-captain,’ a warrior in cobalt-blue power armour replied. He carried the Ultima upon his left pauldron; the mark of Guilliman’s Legion, the same as Arcadese. This warrior was his company brother, but he could not remember his name.

‘Lieutenant...’ he managed, recognising the rank markings on his battle plate. ‘Help me to my station.’

‘At once, lord-captain.’

Thunder sounded within the confines of the fortress, booming from the two pairs of macro-cannons emplaced in the fortress’s walls far to the left and right of Arcadese’s command throne. Each was manned by a company brother, Ultramarines whom Arcadese should know but did not recognise.

Sitting down, the control ports of the throne jacking in to his armour, he tried to capture some sense of the reality around him, but it was indistinct. The ‘now’ of the moment was visceral, tangible, but possessed no context. Like pieces of an image resolving through a haze, Arcadese began to assemble the disparate elements of his situation.

*I have been wounded, he knew. A head injury.*

Through a broad vertical slit directly in front of him, a distant battle was being fought. Massed ranks of infantry and armoured columns ploughed across a killing field on a collision course with a slew of drop-pods, descending to earth on contrails of fire. Even with the limited view afforded through the vision slit, Arcadese had never seen so many.

*Not since Ullanor...*

And back then the spears of fire had been his allies, in days of glorious war when purpose was just and the enemy clear. Jealously and betrayal, the canker of deep-seated fraternal rivalry, had muddied all that.

Pain flashed again, but this was a relic, a phantom dredged from memory. Acutely, he was reminded of the crude bionics that supported over half his body.

‘Lord-captain,’ uttered the Lieutenant, standing ramrod straight to the immediate right of Arcadese’s command throne as he pointed with a gauntleted finger.

Arcadese followed and, as if it was being revealed to him for the first time, he noticed the bank of view-screens around the vertical slit.

On several of the display screens he saw the blue-green orb of Terra and knew then how close the war had come. They stood at the last gate.

‘The Warmaster’s vanguard has breached the outer Imperial cordon,’ Lieutenant concluded.

Events were moving swiftly, far quicker than Arcadese could comprehend at first. Gaps interrupted his sense of continuity, like he was part of the edited précis of a mission briefing; only, he was living the mission in that moment and had no recollection of the omissions.

*Head wound must be retarding my cognition.*

Mentally, he shook it off.

A fleet of starships crept onto the view-screen. Vast behemoths, swathed in metres-thick armour and cocooned by flickering void shields, they shrugged off the ineffectual enemy flak batteries with disdain. They moved slowly but relentlessly, as if snagged on the darkness of real space, but knifing through the void with keen inexorability. Weapon arrays flashed across their flanks, and forward-arc lances spat long beams of destructive fury.

‘All weapons, focus fire on the lead vessel,’ said Arcadese, voice grating but mind sharpening with the immediacy of threat. ‘Gunners one through four, alter trajectories—’ he checked the atmospheric position of the lead ship using the instrumentation at his disposal – like the view-screens, he had only just noticed the control console, ‘–to marked coordinates.’

Shrieking servos presaged the movement of the guns. Ammo-hoppers cycled furiously, pouring a ready supply of super-heavy shells into their vast mags.

A quartet of ranging targeting locks combined into a single reticule.

Despite his injuries, Arcadese braced his hands upon the command console and stood up, disengaging the control jacks in the process. Green monochrome shed from the bank of view-screens under-lit his war-ravaged face.

‘Fire!’

A dense wave of noise and the actinic stench of expelled munitions accompanied the cannonade.

Multiple hits registered against the front-arc shields of the lead cruiser. Voids already under assault from a shoal of allied frigates on intercept courses shimmered, flickered once and crumpled.

Sustained barrage from the macro-cannons ripped a line of explosions across the nose and underbelly of the cruiser, which yawed badly like a jack-knifed freighter on an oil slick. Slipping out of formation, it slewed across the other enemy vessels in the line. Unable to halt their brutal momentum, the other

cruisers collided with the stunned body of the stricken lead ship. Silent fire roared through real space, lighting a beacon that was devoured in seconds.

A moment later and the lead ship's reactor went critical, unleashing a nuclear flare as bright as star-death, consuming the vessels surrounding it.

It was the mortal spark of a flotilla, and brought a savage smile to Arcadese's features as he shielded his eyes against the flash.

Magnesium white was fading when a vox-unit built into the command console crackled and the voice of a warrior-king issued forth, cutting short the Ultramarines' shouts of victory.

*'Warriors of the Ardent Reef, this is Rogal Dorn. The Warmaster comes, knocking at our gates. You are the vanguard, your body its bricks, your blood its mortar. Hold fast for as long as you can. I honour you, each and every one, for your sacrifice. Praetorians all, your names shall live on into eternity. Man the last gate and do it with defiance in your hearts and a clenched fist. Give the arch-traitor nothing. Make him pay for every metre with blood. We stand as one, unified in purpose. In the Emperor's name and for the survival of Terra, hold.'*

Lord Dorn himself was watching, and Arcadese would follow his order as if it had been given by his own primarch.

Taking his attention away from the debris of the sundered vessels above, his gaze alighted on the battlefield below.

Infantry cohorts, each hundreds strong, had engaged the first wave of landed warriors. Even supported by a host of battle tanks, the traitor Legionaries were tearing them apart. An arterial flash of crimson against white-and-blue battle plate revealed the allegiance of the warriors battering at their doors, and Arcadese fought down a cold chill of despair at that knowledge.

'Berserkers let slip their leash...' he muttered.

Lieutenant seemed not to hear or care. Possessed of no anima, he was like a suit of armour.

A retinal display flicked down over Arcadese's eye from a command circlet he only just realised he was wearing, and he brought up the armoured face of each of the Ultramarines leading one of the Army cohorts.

Names eluded him; they were merely 'brother-veteran' defined by suffix, Alpha through Kappa.

'Withdraw and consolidate,' he barked into the feed, before distributing specific orders to each brother-veteran in turn. By degrees, the combined defenders began a fighting retreat, tightening their formation around the strongest remaining cohorts and allowing the others to form the rearguard. Tank

battalions were sacrificed valiantly to stall the advance of the enemy warriors, ripped to armoured husks in a cascade of incendiaries and sawed metal.

‘Intensify fire by ranks,’ Arcadese continued, assessing and reassessing the conflict through the vertical slit and view-screens. ‘Do not engage directly.’

Against the berserk warriors, keeping them at arm’s length was the only hope of forestalling a massacre.

*Hold fast for as long as you can,* the words came back to him.

Casting his eye skywards for a moment, Arcadese saw a flotilla of Imperial ships commanding the scrap of real space above. He turned to his gunners.

‘Bring ordnance down on the rear ranks, thin their numbers, and we’ll roll over what’s left.’

The macro-cannons altered alignment again and a series of pulsing reports rang throughout the fortress.

Through the vertical slit, Arcadese witnessed the hammering of the first enemy wave. It was split apart by the barrage, fading dust and smoke revealing the heaped corpses of warriors he had once called ally. Their deaths did little to salve the pain in his heart, but they bolstered the Army cohorts who massively outnumbered the attackers now. The ground battle turned into a stalemate.

‘Finely done, my lord,’ said Lieutenant. ‘The enemy are contained.’

His tone lacked personality, as if the response was merely programmed.

‘For now, brother,’ Arcadese replied.

The vox-unit crackled again before anything further could be said, warning of approaching vessels in the region of space over which they stood sentinel.

A glance at the view-screen revealed a much larger fleet. One vessel in particular stood out from the rest, leading the line.

*Vengeful Spirit...*

Horus’s flagship was immense, a jagged spike of black against black, bristling with guns and growling with the sentience of a barely caged beast. A host of other cruisers and monstrous capital ships surrounded it, but all were dwarfed by the Warmaster’s battle-barge.

This was the instrument of Horus’s will in the void, the darkling vessel that embodied his graven pact with Chaos and the promise of omnipotence should he deliver this last bastion of mankind to its Ruinous gods.

When it spoke, it did so in a roar with the sound of an array of guns powerful enough to kill worlds. The *Vengeful Spirit* issued a single word from the mouths of its many cannon, and that word was ‘doom’.

The Imperial intercept flotilla vanished in a hot storm of fire and silence,

blown away like ash on the solar wind. Real space throbbled with the violence of their destruction, sore and hurting with the wound inflicted upon it by Horus's flagship.

For once, Arcadese hesitated.

*How can we prevail against such unbounded fury?*

But he was an Ultramarine, and if he knew anything it was duty. He had a line to hold, for the Emperor, for Terra and all the many souls of mankind that would be sacrificed to thirsting gods should he fail.

'Cycle guns up. Rake the escorts, pick them apart. We'll snarl up the flagship in the dead hulks of its own fleet.'

The *Vengeful Spirit* was still too distant to fire on. At such extreme range, a ship that size with its armour and shields would shrug off the cannonade like an insect sting. Its outriding vessels were a different prospect. They had burned engines to sweep in front of the goliath flagship, like lesser predator-fish swarming around a leviathan of the deep. Arcadese wanted to create a graveyard of broken vessels for the *Vengeful Spirit* to wade through. Even if they could slow the flagship down that would be a victory of sorts.

'Sustained and heavy barrage,' he ordered. 'Do not cease fire until you run empty.'

The fusillade had lasted less than a minute when the fortress was hit by one of Horus's larger retinue ships. Arcadese was lifted off his feet in the resulting blast wave. Chips of rockcrete stung his face where they pierced skin and flesh. One embedded itself in his jaw but he ignored it. He rolled, vertiginously, failing to grip the edge of the command throne as he was smashed over it. Fire, smoke and noise filled his senses. Somewhere, he heard a choked scream.

*Gunner is dead.*

Up on his feet faster this time, Arcadese shook off the disorientation and peered through fading smoke to see his worst fears realised. A broken puppet of a warrior slumped half-out of his weapon harness, his body bifurcated along the waist. Most of the left side of his skull was crushed. His remaining eye stared from a bloodied face that had once been noble but was now horrific.

Lieutenant had vanished from sight in the hellstorm. Arcadese didn't know if the Ultramarine was alive or dead. Debris lay everywhere, wreathed with choking dust.

A chunk of fortress wall had collapsed inwards and the roar of battle outside grew louder with its absence. Charred-flesh stink and the acerbic tang of incendiary heat bled in on a turbulent wind.

After a brief cessation, the other guns resumed their barrage. On a cracked view-screen screen, its image intermittent and crazed with static, the vessel responsible for wounding the fortress was broken apart.

A fourth gun, still operational, lay silent.

The *Vengeful Spirit* drew closer, battering the shattered vessels aside without slowing. They'd have to target it soon, attempt the impossible and bring down or at least slow a ship that could rip apart their fortress and the asteroid into which it was hewn with a single, desultory burst of its guns.

Arcadese staggered over to the stalled cannon, hauled out the dead gunner and climbed into the firing harness.

A targeting crosshair overlaid his vision, its macro-zoom enabling him to pick out specific vessels powering through the void. Through the azure glow of the targeting matrix's filter, he saw a furious space battle unfolding. A number of immense Imperial Emperor-class ships had moved to blockade the route of the *Vengeful Spirit* and its personal vanguard. Star flashes, smudges of ultra-light, signalled the unleashing of their forward lances.

A large frigate was transfixated by several beams concurrently and exploded into a supernova, radiating heat-death in an invisible fog from its burnt reactors.

Lining up a cruiser wallowing in the sundered vessel's wake on his reticule, subconsciously aware of the ammo count to the extreme right of his screen, Arcadese gripped the firing triggers.

A steady staccato drummed through his body as the harness failed to fully dampen the recoil from the massive gun. No mortal could have used the macro-cannons; their bones would be reduced to splinters, their innards rendered to soup in a single salvo.

Arcadese endured it, revelled in the cathartic satisfaction of seeing a tear open up in the cruiser's aft. Drooling men and fuel, it slowed and fought for retaliatory firing solutions. Three more macro-cannons stitched lines of super-heavy shells into its flanks, burst open entire decks, collapsed towers and ripped open full sections of armour plating as the voids capitulated utterly.

'Bring it down!'

Arcadese was bellowing now, venting his frustration at the certainty that this was but a forestalling of all their deaths.

A rippling chain reaction broke the cruiser into several pieces, now little more than flotsam awash on a dark and uncaring ocean, a tomb of flash-frozen heretics cast to oblivion.

Tracking that sea of utter black, Arcadese found and locked on to another ship.

A snap-fired salvo collapsed a few shields, broke up some comms towers before a heavy grip on his shoulder pulled him away from the myopic universe to which he was a willing prisoner.

‘Our ground forces are failing, my lord.’

Lieutenant was still alive. Bloody-faced with a jagged line of crimson across his cheek that was bleeding onto his neck and riming the edge of his gorget, but alive.

‘I can take the gun, sir,’ he added.

Arcadese nodded, yanked up the firing harness to let Lieutenant in, and went to the command console.

‘How?’

Where only moments ago the battle was bogged down in a time-eating stalemate, now the traitors had regrouped, their forces inexplicably replenished. They were losing again. More than that, something else moved amongst the warring throngs. Red-fleshed with eyes black like darkest flint, a baleful aura exuding off their brawny bodies in a visceral steam, Arcadese had no words to describe these... *monsters*.

Entire phalanxes of men, those who had lost their Legionary captains, fled in the face of the horrors. Bolter fire swept them up, tore them apart like threshed wheat. Those loyal warriors still fighting were hard-pressed to last much longer before a full-scale rout saw the end to their resistance.

Arcadese engaged the comm-bead in his ear.

‘How many men do we have as garrison?’

Lieutenant answered perfunctorily.

‘Fifty Legiones Astartes and a hundred times that in Army auxiliaries. They await you in the lower deep, before the gate.’

‘I did not ask if...’ Arcadese let it go. Lieutenant wasn’t listening any more. His final words to Arcadese haunted him as he walked to the lifter plate that would convey him to the lower deep and the last defenders of the fortress.

‘It has been an honour to serve with you, my lord.’

The reply sounded hollow, even untruthful. ‘And you, Lieutenant.’

Shrouded in shadows, dust motes spiralling earthwards with the recoil from the macro-cannons, the lower deep was a vast and echoing space. In its centre, standing to attention in a pool of lambent light, was a square of over five thousand men.

Ultramarines officers stood head and shoulders above the Army soldiers, bolters locked across their chests. When the lifter plate touched down Arcadese

realised he was wearing his full panoply of war, including cloak and laurel. He perceived the warriors he was about to command to their deaths through the red retinal lenses of a battle-helm. Clasped to his left thigh was an ornate scabbard; on the right, holstered and fully loaded, was a bolt pistol. The command circlet was gone. A servitor-armourer that hadn't been with him when the lifter plate descended was by his side now and bowed humbly.

'Serf, my blade,' he said, holding out his hand for the servitor-armourer to place his sword in it.

The hilt felt strong, it lent strength to Arcadese's arm as he touched it.

'I know my purpose now,' he muttered to the creature, which backed away as Arcadese stepped off the lifter plate and into the fortress's lowest level. He didn't question, for nothing he could have asked or had an answer to would matter in the moments to follow.

Instead, he merely asked, 'Are you ready to make your sacrifice with me and die in the name of Terra?'

'For Throne and Emperor!' over five thousand voices replied in shouted unison.

Arcadese nodded and found steel in the eyes of every one of these warriors.

'Open the last gate,' he ordered, and the gates ground open noisily, letting in the light and the blood and the death...

Time... *slipped*. It had happened before, but this was the first occasion when Arcadese could remember it happening and notice it.

Five thousand had become five hundred, surrounded in the middle of the battlefield by a baying throng of beasts shaped like men and men shaping to become beasts.

*Daemons all...*

Such a curious, archaic word. Yet it felt apt.

In seconds, five hundred became fifty, so only Arcadese and his Legionary brothers remained.

*Wasn't I supposed to be one of the last?*

Aside from the Crusader Host, the rest of Guilliman's Legion was last reported to be on Calth. The incongruity of his unknown company brothers, the faces without names, the warriors bereft of diversity or personality, only just struck Arcadese in those final moments.

The stench of burning flesh assaulted his nostrils even through the grille of his battle-helm as the power sword slid from a traitor's chest; a second blow cut head from neck. A third blocked the thrust of another assailant. Churning teeth

met super-heated adamantium in a collision of sundered metal. A point-blank bolt pistol salvo took out part of the berserker's face. He fell and behind him loomed a creature wrenched from hell.

It flickered incorporeally, flitting between realities, preternaturally fast. It was rage, distilled and fashioned into bestial flesh. It was horned, and bayed with a resonant cry of promised damnation.

High above the battlefield, a shadow grew over the force dome that surrounded the fortress-asteroid in hermetic void-shielding. Slow-moving, it slid with a predator's ease across the canvas of space, eclipsing entire nebulae.

The beast before Arcadese was emboldened by the vast ship's presence and the suppressed despair of the Ultramarine who looked upon it and recognised the manner of his death.

As the first of the *Vengeful Spirit's* gun batteries opened up, birthing miniature suns against the atmospheric blister cocooning the fortress-asteroid, Arcadese still dared to believe they could resist. Power sword met stinking hell-glaive, releasing a shower of black sparks into the air as Arcadese parried the beast. He missed a second blow and felt agonising heat seize his body.

Laughing, the beast looked down and bade its enemy do the same.

Sulphurous breath washed over Arcadese in a burning fog as the daemon's mirth increased. Jutting from the Ultramarine's chest, a half-metre deep, was the hell-glaive.

Light was dying in Arcadese's eyes, the ring of cobalt he had forged around him from those fifty battle-brothers all but broken, just as another light was born overhead.

Opening up its awesome prow weapons, the *Vengeful Spirit* needed only to speak one final time before the force shield around the fortress-asteroid was overwhelmed.

Nucleonic fire rushed from heaven to meet him, bathing his world in pellucid white as Arcadese closed his eyes...

...only to awake again, drowning in darkness.

Blood tasted metallic in his mouth and he couldn't move. After a few seconds, Arcadese realised it was because he was strapped down.

Awareness was slow to come. His head itched, as if an insect swarm had run amok inside his skull, and his body was raw and tenderised. Judging by the solid walls, which only now resolved as he adjusted to the dark, he was being held in some kind of cell. On his back, as if in repose, it was difficult to discern much

more. Instinct suggested he was not alone, and he called out.

‘Where I am?’

Peripherally, he was aware of a presence behind him, but it was foggy, as if somehow veiled.

The presence behind him didn’t answer. Instead, an elliptical portal of light appeared, just visible if he peered down his face. Two figures, barely more than silhouettes, stood within its confines.

‘Who are you? What is the purpose of my incarceration?’ He’d been taken. Somehow he’d survived the nucleonic fire and become a prisoner of the enemy.

One of the observers was massive. Twice again as tall as Arcadese, he cast an immense shadow, black on black. Encased in hulking power armour, he emanated strength.

*Horus...*

Arcadese could not suppress a scowl or the snarl in his voice.

‘Slay me now, hell-kite, and save your time.’

It was the other figure – much slighter, much smaller and clad in long robes – that answered.

‘You are safe here, Brother Arcadese,’ he said, his tone cultured and stately.

‘Then release me.’

The armoured giant left the elliptical portal, disappeared somewhere into the background where Arcadese could not see him.

‘I cannot.’

‘I am a Legionary Captain of the Ultramarines, and if I am not a prisoner of war aboard this vessel you *will* let me go.’

‘You are not on a ship, Ultramarine.’

‘Then where—’

‘That is not important. The important thing is that you are on the verge of passing the trial and returning to active duty.’

Arcadese’s face contorted into an incredulous expression.

‘I have already done so, commanding a fortress as part of the Ardent Reef. I was just...’

His thoughts were clouding, hard to grasp and hold onto.

‘Are you? Is that where you’ve been all this time?’ asked the robed figure.

Incredulity became anger.

‘What is going on?’ He pulled at the restraints keeping him in a supine position. ‘And why I am strapped down? I died.’

‘Only in your mind, and the restraints are for your own protection.’

‘But how could you...?’ And like a lantern had been set ablaze inside his head, an ugly truth was revealed. ‘I am not alone in here. There is a psyker with me, one of us.’

‘One of *us*?’ The figure seemed not to acknowledge the disgust in Arcadese’s voice.

‘A Librarian,’ he stated flatly, consternation edging his tone. ‘Trawling through my memories, implanting scenarios... How else could you have muddled my thoughts, forced images into my psyche and made them seem real? What of the Nikaeen edict, what of the Emperor’s will?’ he demanded.

‘Things have changed. Necessity forces us into compromise and hard choices. We have to be sure. I hope you can understand that.’

Arcadese was finding it hard to master his anger and indignation. ‘Sure of what?’

‘Of your ability to make sacrifices, function under pressure and do all that is necessary to achieve your mission even if that meant losing the battle and your life. You have been absent from the frontline for many years. Even on Bastion you were merely a bodyguard.’

*Bastion... Heka'tan died there. The Salamander's face as he fell into the fire still haunts me.*

The robed figure continued. ‘The training had to be harsh in order to test you sufficiently.’

‘Is that why I’m bleeding,’ Arcadese asked, ‘and strapped into this chair?’

‘The “scenarios” provoked by the Librarian are potent, they have to be to seem real. A side effect is that they can, and often do, manifest physical symptoms sympathetic to the mental ones experienced. There is nothing here that does not serve the greater goals of the Imperium.’

‘Then why are you hiding in shadows?’

‘Darkness aids the process. Besides, it wouldn’t matter if I weren’t.’

‘And the attack?’

‘Has not yet begun, but the Warmaster’s fleet could emerge from the warp at any moment. We must be ready, so there was no time for endless training. Utilising the Librarian provided expedient answers.’

The scowl on Arcadese’s face suggested he did not agree, but he found he couldn’t maintain his anger. Unconsciousness was crawling at the edge of his vision again, as a sensation of weightlessness took hold.

‘I am sorry,’ said the robed figure with genuine regret.

‘For what?’ Arcadese answered groggily.

‘For what I have to do next.’

Arcadese passed out on the chair, eyes flickering as he returned to unreality.

The robed figure nodded to the Librarian standing behind the slumbering Ultramarine. The psyker had his hand poised over Arcadese’s head. A nimbus of crackling psi-energy played about the psychic hood he wore.

‘Thank you, Brother Umojen.’

‘Lord Sigillite.’

As he retreated back into the observation chamber, Malcador met the steely gaze of the armour-clad giant.

‘His mind will be cleansed?’ asked the warrior.

Heavy gears sounded through the metal and the lozenge-shaped mag-lift began to ascend the rail on a plate of anti-gravitic power. Slowly, it rose higher and the cell began to shrink revealing a second cell alongside it, and then a third, fourth...

‘I shall see to it personally,’ answered the Sigillite. ‘You should be smiling, lord praetorian. Arcadese will make a perfect commander upon the Ardent Reef.’

A hololithic image dominated much of the chamber that the giant warrior now approached and regarded. In grainy resolution, it described the slowly rotating orb of Terra and the thousands of defence asteroids which now surrounded it.

‘Even so,’ the warrior rumbled, ‘it will still not be enough.’

Malcador sighed, ‘No, it will not. In every projected scenario, Horus breaks the Reef apart.’ He paused before asking, ‘Are you willing to approve Captain Arcadese?’

The warrior exhaled a long and rueful breath. ‘Run it again,’ he said, turning from the hololith. ‘Run them all again.’

The mag-lift was still climbing. Hundreds of chambers were revealed, their subjects under psychic trance, each presided over by a Librarian from diverse Legions sent back to Terra by Captain Garro and his cohorts.

Malcador could feel the minds of each and every one, hear the distant psi-echo of battle in their thoughts. He had dreamed of the assault on Terra many times. And in every somnambulant vision it had never ended well.

‘As you command, Lord Dorn.’

Arcadese awoke to find blood trickling down the side of his face. He was injured, a head wound, but couldn’t recall any battle where he’d received it. A

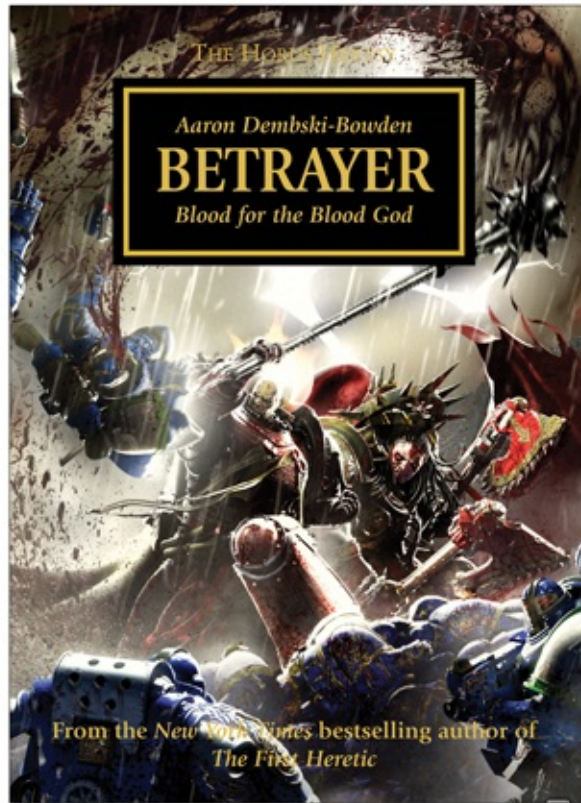
fortress surrounded him on all sides, and the rumble of cannon emplacements in the walls brought him out of unconsciousness.

Pushing to his feet, he saw a battle-brother he didn't know.

'Lieutenant,' he said, recognising the Ultramarine's rank markings, 'report.'

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

NICK KYME is the author the Tome of Fire trilogy featuring the Salamanders. He has also written for the Space Marine Battles and Time of Legends series with the novels *The Fall of Damnos* and *The Great Betrayal*. In addition, he has penned a host of short stories and several novellas, including 'Feat of Iron' which was a New York Times Bestseller in the Horus Heresy collection *The Primarchs*. He lives and works in Nottingham.



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