

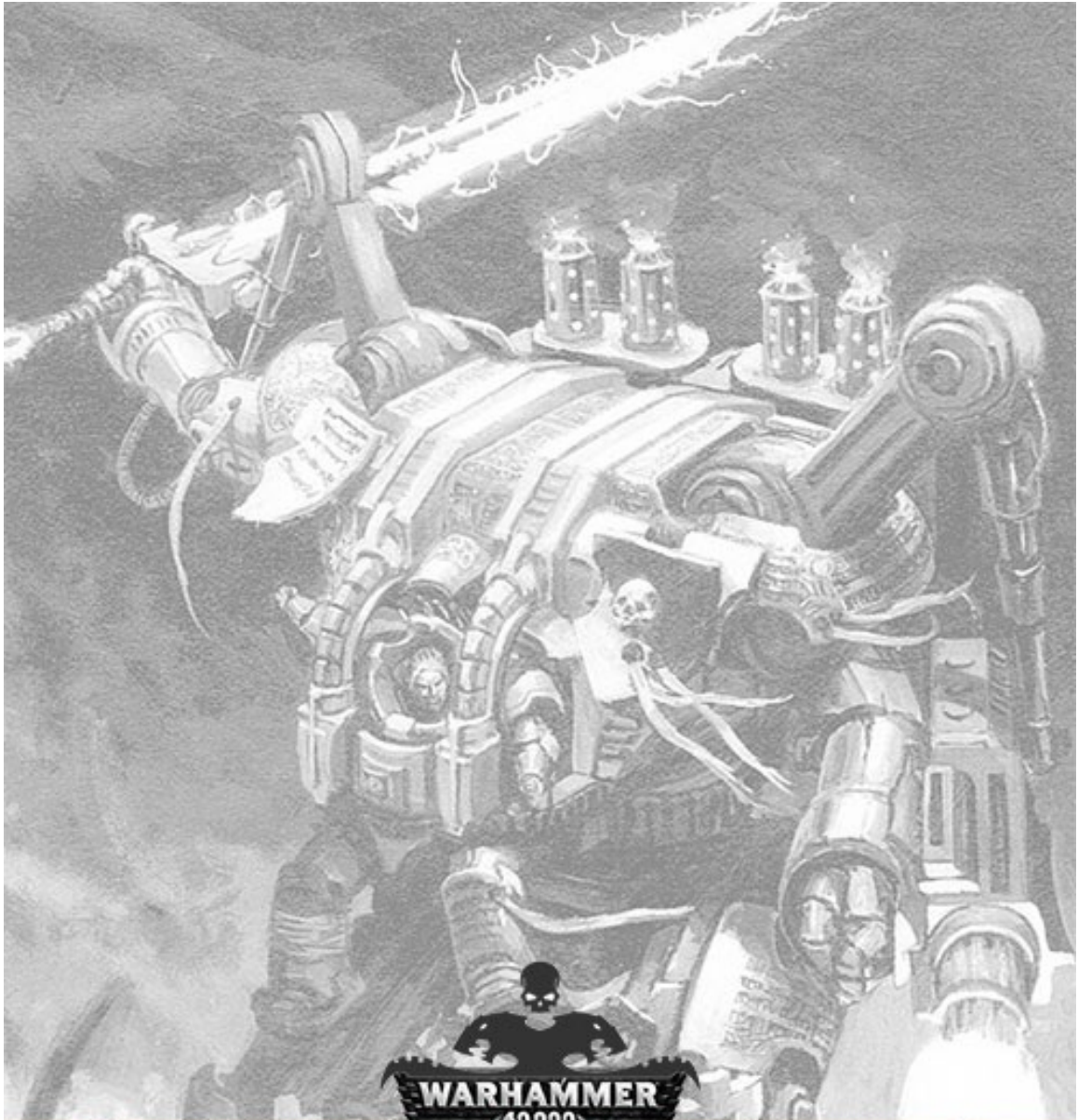
The cover art depicts a massive, heavily armored Dreadnought in a dark, cavernous environment. The machine is primarily grey and black, with glowing orange lights and a bright blue energy beam from its right arm. A red banner with a skull and the text 'SHIELD OF BAAL' is attached to its chest. The background is a dark, rocky interior with some debris and a bright light source on the right.

SHIELD OF
BAAL

WARHAMMER
40,000

DREAD NIGHT

NICK KYME



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v1.1
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I wait in the shadow of Saint Agathena for night to fall. At night, the beasts disengage. From my studied observations, I have determined that the darkness makes them more or less quiescent.

It does not, however, make them any less dangerous.

The collapsed amphitheatre is cold, and the place I currently inhabit is narrow. There is barely room enough for my shoulders and every time I move, the armoured guards scrape against stone.

There is blood here too; I smell it on the hot breeze coming from the east where the city of Vanarius once stood and the last great battle of this world was fought.

And lost.

The hunters I am hiding from do not seek out this blood. It is old and any violence that once imbued the ancient rock of this temple has long since faded. They seek different prey now, a beast that is their equal.

When the shadow of Leviathan came to this world, that beast found them.

A faint but insistent pulse thrums gently against my chest. It is the transponder Dagomir gave me. I have been following it for three days, ever since my brothers and I became separated. It was after Vanarius, after we lost this world.

‘Brothers find me...’

If I will it hard enough, perhaps it will become true. I seek a reunion with my fellow paladins but I must cross an ocean of damnation and torment to reach them.

The last light fades in the blood-bleached sky, setting like ink in water. It paints my silver armour in ruby red. I wonder if the light will rise again. It is my sacred charge to ensure that, that one way or another, it does.

I am Siegus Mortlock of the Grey Knights of Titan and this is my final testament.

With darkness shrouding the barren wastes beyond the temple, I ease from my hiding place into the former arena. It is a sandy, rubble-strewn plain that yawns open to the sky like a wound. As I emerge, my armour’s servos growling, I realise I am not alone.

It is humanoid, its flesh the colour of viscera and sizzling like cooking meat. Iron-hard skin clothes a muscular form standing tall on reverse-jointed limbs that end in hooves, not feet. It is horned, this foot soldier of the aether, and clenches a dark blade in its clawed fist. It snarls as it sees me, a long serpentine tongue lathing the air as if to taste my soul.

I mutter three canticles of warding, the words trickling from my lips in a strong and certain cadence. To show weakness of faith before a hellspawn of the warp is to invite death and the rending of your soul.

This one is not alone as it stalks towards me, snorting and braying as if it were a beast of nature and not some abomination. Seven others join it. They hunt in packs of eight.

I will show them they should have brought more.

Donning my helm, I let the optics normalise and adjust to the retinal display that overlays my vision. The force halberd in my fist resonates as I grip the haft. It is time to do the Emperor’s work.

‘I am the hammer,’ I bellow loudly in challenge. ‘I am the tip of his sword!’

The hunters come for me, quickly breaking into a loping run. Three peel off to the left, another three to the right. Two more remain in my frontal arc.

A hard *clank* of its loading mechanism indicates my storm bolter is ready.

I advance as my enemies advance, quickly overcoming inertia and driving

my body into a punishing charge.

‘I banish thee, daemons!’

The storm bolter roars and a tempest erupts from the muzzle, turning two of the hunters into mist.

‘Let His light incinerate!’

A sigil of daemon killing that burns as it touches cursed flesh is engraved onto every one of my silver-tipped and thrice-blessed shells.

Six daemons remain and I feel their strength ebb as I reduce their unholy number further. I swing around the storm bolter and unleash a second burst. They are wiser to its bite this time and two of the hunters avoid destruction by darting behind one of the amphitheatre’s ceremonial columns. The third reacts too slowly and meets the same fate as the other two I have just banished.

Six become five. As I come to the clash of arms, I hope the few I have killed turn the scales enough and that my steel and momentum will overcome what daemons still remain.

I lower my shoulder into the charge, colliding with the foremost hunter, and feel the resistance of warp-forged muscle and sinew. Nonetheless, I press with all the mass and augmented strength of my power armour. The daemon is lifted up, braying as I crush its ribcage, raking ineffectively with its claws, its dark blade failing in the air. The sheer force of my momentum carries the daemon further than the initial impact and it becomes a distant memory as I watch it catapult in my peripheral vision. Smoke rises from its slowly dissolving form.

Sparks rain from the haft of my halberd, the runes upon the blade flaring brightly as it comes into contact with the daemon’s sword. The blow from the second hunter is stronger than I expected, and it drives me onto my back foot. With a shout and the exercising of Emperor-given strength, I throw the beast back and carve it down the middle with my return cut.

Two more are despatched, but it has left me vulnerable to the two that remain.

First there is heat, agonising and pure as primal anger. Then comes the cold, bone deep and numbing. My left leg has a chunk of Chaos-wrought iron sticking out of it. Only the wardings on my armour have saved it from being completely severed.

A glancing blow jams the storm bolter mounted on my wrist as I level it to fire. The dull thunk of a fouled mechanism sounds almost like a death knell.

I barely parry the third weapon thrust. Its edge skids off the blade of my halberd and grates down the side of my war-helm. For a few seconds the optical feed crazes and cuts out. When it returns, I am already fighting blind, fending off the twin onslaught of the hunters. They attack intelligently, one inducing a defence as the other seeks to exploit a weakness in my guard.

The halberd becomes a blur in my hands, more a staff now than an axe blade. I am conscious of the fact that I am giving ground too easily, trying to prevent them from circling. Warning icons flash across my retinal feed as I take damage. The aegis of my armour is keeping me alive but it is not inviolate. Neither am I.

Like a third heart beating in my breast, the transponder gives off a steady pulse and I am reminded of the duty to my brothers. I must find them and reach salvation.

But I am tiring, still weary from the last great battle. Something about this world, it is hampering my ability to heal. It could be the poison in the air or the overwhelming taint now present on this world. It does not matter. The fact remains that I am dying. Determination and willpower have got me this far but they will not avail me here...

'We die together, hellspawn,' I promise them, eliciting a cruel smile from both that parodies a uniquely human reaction. The perversity of it turns my mind towards righteous wrath.

Knowing it will be suicide, I am about to thrust my force halberd into one of the daemons and expose my defence when I catch the faint echo of something scuttling against a stone arch above me. There is a momentary pause in the melee as the daemons also detect it before a horde of chittering, chitinous creatures spill down from the arch. Diminutive but numerous, they swarm the hunters, biting and stinging as they bring them down. I feel them scratching and clawing at my armour, but it is tougher than daemon flesh and I endure where the hunters do not. I behead one and impale another through the mass of smaller creatures, the hunters' screams damning me in a language I understand but would never utter.

With the last daemonic corpses denaturing before my eyes, the fight becomes a brawl as I stab, bludgeon and stamp free of the horde, their vile alien blood gumming up my servos and riming my armour in a heliotrope crust.

I smash my gauntlet against a ceremonial column to clear my jammed storm bolter and am rewarded with the hard metal report of shells slotting into my weapon's twin barrels.

'Machine-spirits be praised...'

The storm bolter speaks again, and its words send the chittering swarm creatures to their deaths.

It is over in seconds, the aliens clustering on instinct and tactically inferior to the daemons. Their demise drains my clip and I slam the last remaining reload into the empty breech with an ominous clack.

In spite of the darkness, the skirmish will almost certainly draw others to the arena. I leave quickly, making egress through a gaping fissure in the boundary wall.

On my retinal feed there is a topographical representation of the region. Flashing dully in the lifeless monochrome rendering is the locator-signal of the beacon linked to my transponder.

On foot, it will take me almost an hour to reach it.

Shadows deepen beyond the amphitheatre's border. They hiss and whisper and harbour the grunting calls of beasts as they are stirred from slumber. The very landscape undulates, reshaping and twisting, and I realise not all of it is 'land' and what little earth remains will be forever changed.

I make haste and hope there are enough of us left to reach salvation.

It was a fortress once. Buttressed walls wrought into a high escarpment of rock, I can see why Dagomir would have chosen this place to take refuge in. As I stand before it, I look up at the razor wire that crowns the summit of a single, lonely tower. There are gun emplacements, murder slits, a redoubt raised around the foundations. It was formidable... but now the gate lies open, a forbidding invitation.

Alone and standing before the shadow of this ferrocrete colossus, I cannot linger. With little choice, the transponder pulse now drumming out what feels

like a warning, I make for the entrance.

Inside, the signs of what fate may have befallen my brethren are no better than the ruined gate through which I entered. Psychically, the atmosphere is deadened, though I detect a pressure against my skull that threatens from afar. Not the spoor of my brothers. It is something else. Not a daemon, either. I would know if I felt one. This is altogether unique and wholly disquieting.

Engaging the prey-sight filter of my retinal lenses, I venture into the darkness and soon find myself travelling downwards.

At the end of a broad stairwell, I discover the fortress catacombs, ancient beyond my reckoning. I make out baroque columns in the shadows and the glaring statues of long-dead lords. Some stand upon daises, clad in stone finery, while others are wrought into the lids of tombs in grim repose.

I also find corpses.

Dagomir is amongst them, eyes wide but sadly dead. I am heartened at least to see his force sword still clenched in his unyielding fist.

‘Ave Imperator, brother,’ I mutter, the tremor in my voice betraying my grief. ‘Only in death...’

Unlike the others, he stands upright, having wedged his body into a narrow alcove that now holds him fast.

Merek has been impaled. A long spear of dark iron is thrust through his chest. Terrowin lies supine, apparently unwounded until I notice the burnt out sockets of his retinal lenses. Radulf is on his knees, staked by swords to the stone flags where his blood has pooled. His beaten posture prompts a pang of sudden sorrow in me.

Others have been felled in similar fashion. I recognise them all, Leofrick and Berinon, Argonus and Longidus. I have to still my temper to stop from crying out in ambivalent rage and anguish.

My brothers are fallen around the catacombs, and none shall be borne to the Dead Fields, for there are none but I to carry them. The only salve to my grief is that a great reaping lies scattered around them. Daemoniac forms lay cleaved, more hunters and tallymen, hounds and the shattered remains of winged furies. Whatever evil now permeates this place, it is strong enough to prevent

daemonic dissolution.

It is almost too much to endure and I fall to one knee, the weight of my force halberd a heavy burden. I had hoped some would have survived, but I know now I am the last of us. The last knight of Titan on this world.

I rise – perhaps it is the eyes of my dead brothers upon me that force me up – and approach Dagomir. As soon as I touch his face to close his staring eyes, a hololith hazes into being, projected from the Justicar’s armour and triggered by my presence.

‘Here then marks the end,’ utters Dagomir’s monochromatic simulacrum. He is battered, bloody, and his armour badly rent. ‘These are my parting words for any Grey Knight who yet lives on this world. If you are seeing this, I am slain and our brotherhood stands defeated. Nothing could have prepared us for what we face here. We are the grist caught between the monsters of two worlds.’

The image flickers and for a moment I fear it will fade before Dagomir can impart his entire message but the machine-spirit endures and the Justicar goes on.

‘A last hope still exists. The salvation of a hundred million souls. My brothers...’ he says as a locator signal flashes up on my retinal display and my transponder is repurposed by a data-burst hidden in the hololith. He continues, ‘only you can reach salvation now. Ave Imperator, and may the Bell of Lost Souls ring out for all of the Em–’

The image flickers and dies at last, a fitting omen perhaps.

Several leagues lie between this sundered fortress and the salvation Dagomir spoke of. Alone and injured, my fate appears sealed until the faintest shaft of light, penetrating through the crack in the stone above, although from what source I cannot fathom, alights upon a statue glowering at me from the near pitch dark.

As I draw closer, I recognise it – Brother Sedric, our Librarian. Dried blood cakes his upper lip, his nose and ears. I do not need to be a psyker to recognise the mind-death. It grieves me to see him slain as I raise my eyes to meet his but the armature clad around him is the divine providence I need to achieve Dagomir’s mission.

A Nemesis Dreadknight stands before me, an immense skeletal armature

that encases Sedric's body in an unyielding adamantium frame. It is a relic, armoured and armed with the deadliest weapons of our order. In the hands of a worthy paladin, it is capable of killing greater daemons. I must use it to cross the barren lands to salvation.

Muttering a benediction, I release Sedric from his cage, catching his falling body and gently bearing it to the ground. There is nothing more I can do for him or the rest of my slain brothers, so I climb aboard the Dreadknight in Sedric's place and see if I am worthy of it.

I lock the stabiliser harness over my shoulders, and as I grip the twin stick controls in either fist I feel the charge of the plasma reactor waking. A sense of invulnerability fills my heart, despite the odds levied against me. Both weapon mounts are functional and I dry spin the gatling barrels in a self-indulgent moment of belligerence. On the opposite side, attached to an immense adamantium power glove, the dulcet burning of my incinerator's ignition flame is a whisper of the vengeance to come.

With a grunt of effort, I set the giant armature in motion, each slow and heavy footfall drawing cascades of dust motes from the settled stone.

As I set my sights on the stairwell, the chittering I had heard in the arena returns. I am wrenched from thoughts of grief and vengeance and reminded of what comes for me.

I take three steadily more confident steps as the sound intensifies, detecting scuttling against the spiral stair that drills down into the catacombs where I await.

A deluge of tooth and claw erupts from the mouth of the stair, spilling over the steps in a cataract of pale, carapaced bodies and clacking mandibles.

With a bellow, I unleash the gatling silencer. It is the daemon's bane but will serve well enough to vanquish these creatures, whose forms are mutilated by my fusillade.

'Back unto whatever pit whence you crawled, filth!'

I spit the words, though my prey will not hear them above the roar of the cannon. With one foot thrust forward, I release the incinerator to wash the flagstones and the remains of the xenos beasts with purifying promethium.

'Lo! Such is the fate of all abominate creatures! Burn in righteous fire!'

I step into the blaze, heedless of its flame, and grind the xenos into offal.

More are coming – I hear them shrieking and baying from the summit of the stairwell. They sound like larger beasts, the masters of these dregs.

I snarl and mount the landing, my armature still wreathed in fire as I climb.

A beast surges at me. Reverse-limbed, hooped and chitin-laden, it stands almost to my waist. Its head is large and bulbous, plated by organic armour, and two of its four arms end in arcing bone scythes. The monstrosity would dwarf even a son of Titan but I am clad in holy armour and catch its frenzied attack, seizing the creature's throat in my power glove.

I fend off its raking claws, the Dreadknight more than their equal.

Two more of the beasts come bounding for me, armed with long, ossified blades. I eviscerate one with a burst from the gatling mount, simultaneously shredding the creature clenched in my fist. Its flung corpse is a missile that trammels the third beast. It has barely regained its footing when I immolate it.

As it dies screaming, I advance, knowing that haste must be my companion now. At the stairwell's summit, I meet a swarm of lesser creatures. The act of slaying them is not unlike wading knee-deep into a diseased ocean. As I despatch them, the distant throbbing in my skull, the psychic siren-call, grows ever louder. Another alien caste, I am sure of this now.

I breach the gate, the killing almost metronomic in its regularity. Xenos blood has turned my armour a viscous purple hue.

In my wake, I leave behind a massacre and a growing horde hunting down the last living mortal of this damned world.

Night still holds but there is blood and violence on the air that has woken both beasts. Images assail my mind, of great tentacles unfurling, of a deep and fanged maw gaping to swallow the world. I feel the collective consciousness of both the alien and the daemonic pressing against my psyche, slowly thinning the membrane between sanity and madness.

I hear them clashing over distant, broken cities, feeling the malevolence of their gaze fall upon me.

'I am Mortlock!' I roar at the hills that writhe in the manner of something sentient. 'I defy the will of dark gods! I defy the xenos! This world is not yours to claim!'

On the breeze, I swear I can hear laughter.

With my weapons auto-loaded, I set off at a brisk pace. Less than a few hours of night remains and I still have far to travel. The transponder guides me, its thrum insistent, desperate. By the dawn, I must reach salvation else all will be lost.

My last hope, and the last hope for this world, sits upon a barren crag of rock. *Salvation*. Though I cannot see it, the transponder in my armour tells me it is there. My armature is battered, the incinerator gone, ripped free in a previous encounter, and the gatling has long since run dry. I have my faith and my will alone. It must suffice.

The nascent light of the last dawning of this world is just breaching the final vestiges of night. Exhausted, grieving and near broken, I urge myself to one last effort.

Nearby, I can hear the crash of the oceans... before I realise there are no oceans left.

The great tide of abominations, daemonic and alien, has reached me.

I turn and see them, sweeping, baying, shrieking and killing. In their murder lust, they have not forgotten me. I suspect I am a trophy to them, something to be savoured, a symbolic victory.

I shall deny it to both.

I barrel up the scree slope of the crag, kicking up dust and rock. I fall to my knees in the armature, scrambling now with power gloves digging into the dirt, scratching for purchase so I might stand and at least meet my end on my feet.

The tide washes up to the foot of the crag. As I look back, I see the rock I crawl upon has become an island in an ocean of monsters. Still, they bite and gnaw at one another. A vast daemonic lord with great, ragged wings is locked in a deadly duel with an immense alien tyrant. Overhead there are flocks of furies and flying xenos engaged in aerial battles, and all the while the swarm creeps closer.

‘Salvation.’

It is the second to last word I will ever utter. I see it inscribed upon the metal outer casing.

The device looks innocuous enough. A lozenge-shaped capsule, it is barely half the size of my broken Dreadknight. I disengage the harness and fall from the armature, its use expended now. Finding my helmet stifling, I wrench it off and let it fall. Foulness assails me, the tainted air of this world. Crawling, I reach the edge of the device, aware that the horde is coming.

The overwhelming chatter of their voices is deafening, their foul musk suffocating, but my will holds and as I release the panel and key in the manual activation sequence, all I can hear are the words of my Grand Master, giving benediction before battle. All I smell are the votive candles of my brotherhood's chapel back on Titan.

In my mind's eye, I am standing in the Dead Fields surrounded by a legacy of heroes.

I am Siegus Mortlock of the Grey Knights of Titan and this is my final testament.

Judging from the device's control panel, it has misfired, its arming mechanism thwarted by some twist of fate, but I can realign its machine-spirit.

As I feel the first daemonic breath upon my neck, as the psychic presence that has been oppressing me since the fortress emerges from the horde in all its alien horror, as the dawn rises and bathes my wounded body in the light of a bloody sun, I speak the last word that will save this world from damnation and ignite the bomb.

'Exterminatus...'

There is light... There is glory... There is—

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 Salamanders novels, including *Rebirth*, the Space Marine Battles novel *Damnos*, 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.