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ONLY ASH REMAINS

NICK KYME



A SALAMANDERS SHORT STORY



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by Nick Kyme

The mag-lev descended in slow, jerking spasms and groaned in machine-like cadence against the weight of three hooded figures riding on it, struggling to bear them despite the regular shipments of ore and freight it carried to the Deeps.

Emitting a high-pitched squeal, the lifter stopped dead, stranding the figures in abject darkness halfway to nowhere.

‘Get us moving,’ uttered the one standing in front. His arms were folded across his chest as he glared imperiously from within the confines of his heavy hood into the shadowy underhive below.

‘Immediately, sir.’ A second, loitering at the rear of the group, knelt down to examine the mag-lev’s protesting engine. There was a little smoke, even the flicker of flame. It briefly lit up the figure’s face, whose eyes flashed fire-red as if in empathy.

After a few seconds of tinkering and muttered imprecations from the second, the first spoke again. ‘How long?’

A hard strike with the flat of an armoured palm brought the engine sputtering back to life again.

‘Immediately, sir,’ answered the second.

The first hid a wry smile.

Descending again, it wasn’t long before the mag-lev was bathed in the low-grade phosphor lamps of the Deeps. Much like the upper world, the lower hive was heavily industrialised. But unlike the city above, order was far from certain, or even common, down below. Here, there were monsters. The three looked for one in particular. They had tracked it to this benighted place.

The shrieking mag-lev came to rest with a final lurch, booming noisily as it touched down. Five miles up to the surface, the sound carried just like it did throughout the Deeps.

Dregs stirred in their warrens, alerted by the sudden clamour.

It was to be expected. The three knew this and had prepared accordingly. For now, the dregs kept to the shadows, lurking at the periphery of vision, pretending to be anonymous.

Striding down a broad concourse, a steel-gridded gantry underfoot and a nest of steam-spewing pipes overhead, the three paid them no heed.

After several minutes and several hundred metres, a voice called out to them.

‘This area’s restricted.’ It had a drawl to it, as if even the owner’s voice was lazy.

The three turned as one to regard a bizarrely dressed human and a cohort of fifteen others. Every one of the gangers was armed with an array of weapons ranging from the mundane to the exotic. They all wore leather and coloured bandanas; the leader wore his around his wide-brimmed hat.

‘Move on,’ the first told him, keeping his hood low to cover his eyes.

‘Can’t do that,’ said the gang leader. His cronies had begun to circle. ‘Y’see, there’s a toll needs paying.’

The third, the one yet to speak since they had boarded the lifter, tensed to attack but the first held up a hand that stopped him.

‘We have no money for you. I advise you once more – take your people and move on.’

The gang leader was belligerent. He was also clearly an idiot.

‘Don’t want money, hulk,’ he said, referring to the first’s massive size. If it daunted him, the ganger didn’t show it. Perhaps it was his fifteen friends, or the fact that three of them were bulky chrono-gladiators, lumbering into the phosphor light. ‘We want your weapons, your blood and your organs. Hand ‘em over quiet, and I’ll make the transfer less painful.’

‘You have made a mistake,’ said the first, his two companions angling to each face a different aspect of the closing net of gangers. One protected the back of the other, and so the web of steel was forged.

‘You’re the one don’t appreciate simple arithmetic. Sixteen against three is bad odds.’

‘For you, yes,’ muttered the first.

‘Let me gut them!’ snarled the third, his voice an angry rasp.

The first looked about to protest, hand straying to the blade beneath his cloak, but then relented and stepped back.

‘Quick and quiet.’

The gang leader uttered a command word and the three chrono-gladiators

roared into action, arco-flails and electro-whips crashing.

Sweeping between them, low and faster than he had any right to be wearing full armour, the third cut off their arms in a welter of blood and oil. A bleating sound escaped the scarified lips of the gladiators, who collapsed and died from chronic blood loss, time still on their clocks.

Terrified, dumbstruck, it took a few seconds for the rest of the gangers to realise what was happening. The leader opened up first, his pump-action taking the third in the chest but scarcely stalling him. He balked when he saw what was beneath the cloak, but had no time to shout a warning when a long bone claw punched into his sternum and went right through his back.

The others did not last long. One or two got off a las-round. A bulky-looking ganger even managed to crank up his autocannon before it was shredded, and him with it. In just under nine seconds, all sixteen of the dregs were dead, their blood and viscera painting the Deeps.

When it was done, the first asked, 'What happened to quiet, Brother Zartath?' 'You also said "quick", Brother-Captain Agatone.'

Agatone sighed. If not for the fact that the ex-Black Dragon was a consummate hunter, he would have remained on the *Vulkan's Wrath* with the rest of Third.

'They were protecting something,' the second called from off in the darkness.

Agatone and Zartath joined him. 'What have you found, Brother Exor?'

The Techmarine didn't need to answer. It was plain to see, surrounded by rubble and months old debris, veiled in a thick patina of dust.

A gunship. It carried the winged lightning bolt insignia of the Marines Malevolent.

Agatone nodded to Zartath, who scurried inside through a ragged tear in the fuselage with the apparent agility of a spider.

It took a few minutes for him to reappear.

'Well?' asked the Salamanders captain.

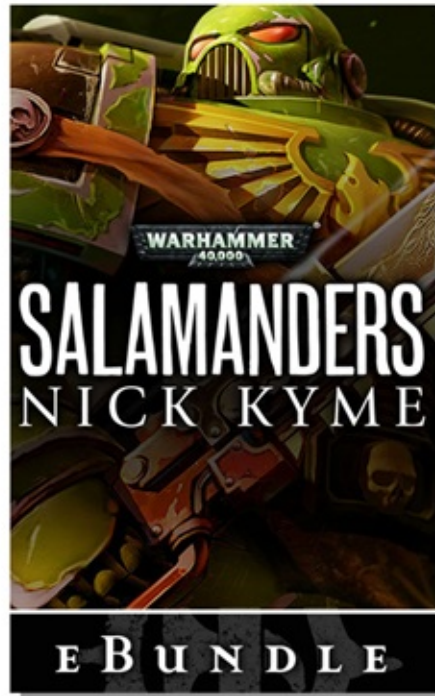
'Lots of bodies, all Malevolents. Looks like he killed them all.'

Agatone stiffened uncomfortably. 'And our quarry?'

Zartath shook his head. 'He's in the wind. Tsu'gan is alive, but he's not here. Only ash remains.'

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

NICK KYME is a writer and editor. He lives in Nottingham where he began a career at Games Workshop on White Dwarf magazine as a staff writer and journalist. Nick's writing credits include the Warhammer 40,000 Tome of Fire trilogy featuring the Salamanders, *Fall of Damnos*, the Space Marine Battles novel, his Warhammer Fantasy-based dwarf novels and several short stories. He has also penned several short stories for the New York Times bestselling Horus Heresy series. Read his blog at www.nickkyme.com



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