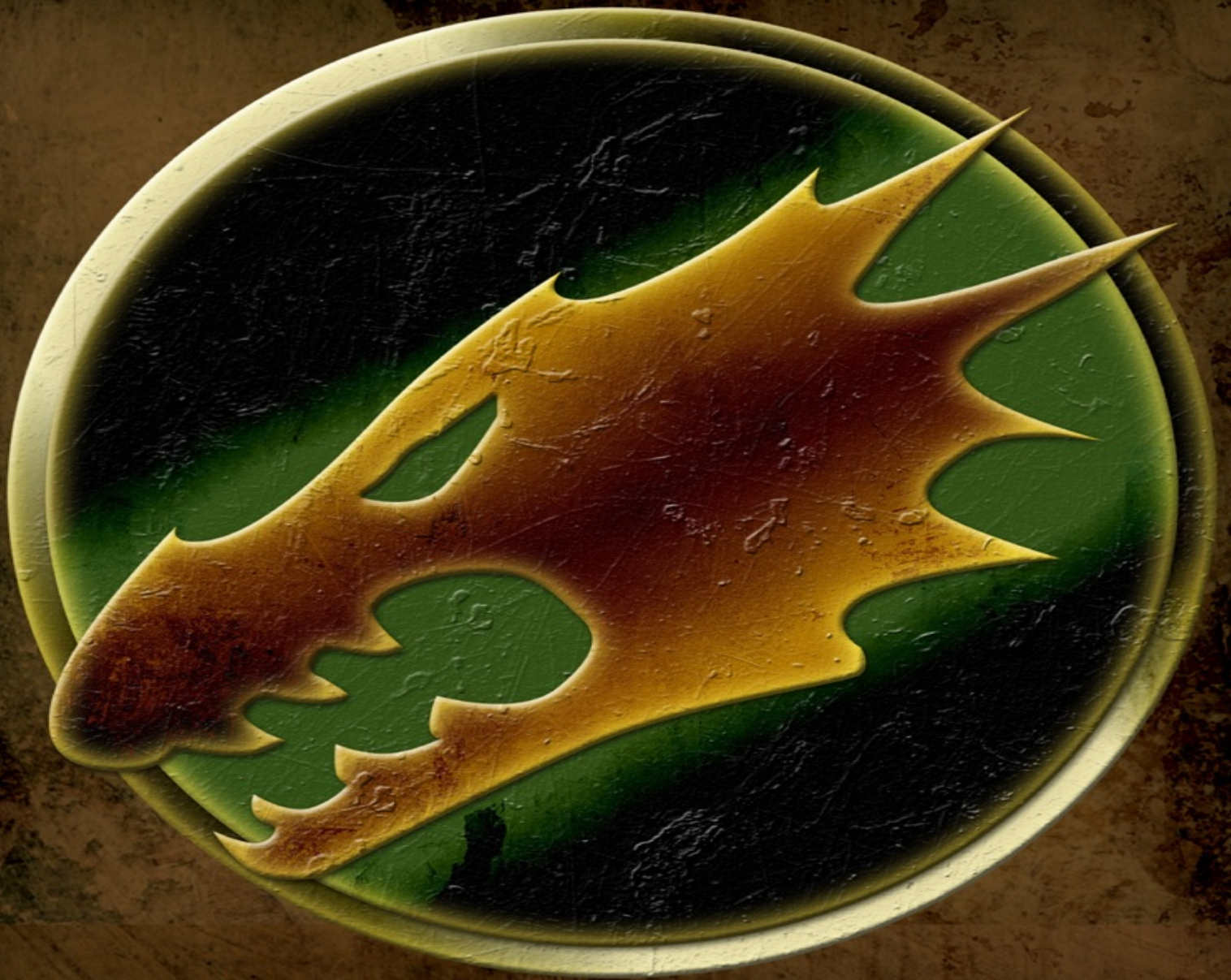


WARHAMMER
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NICK KYME

THE CAGE

A SALAMANDERS STORY

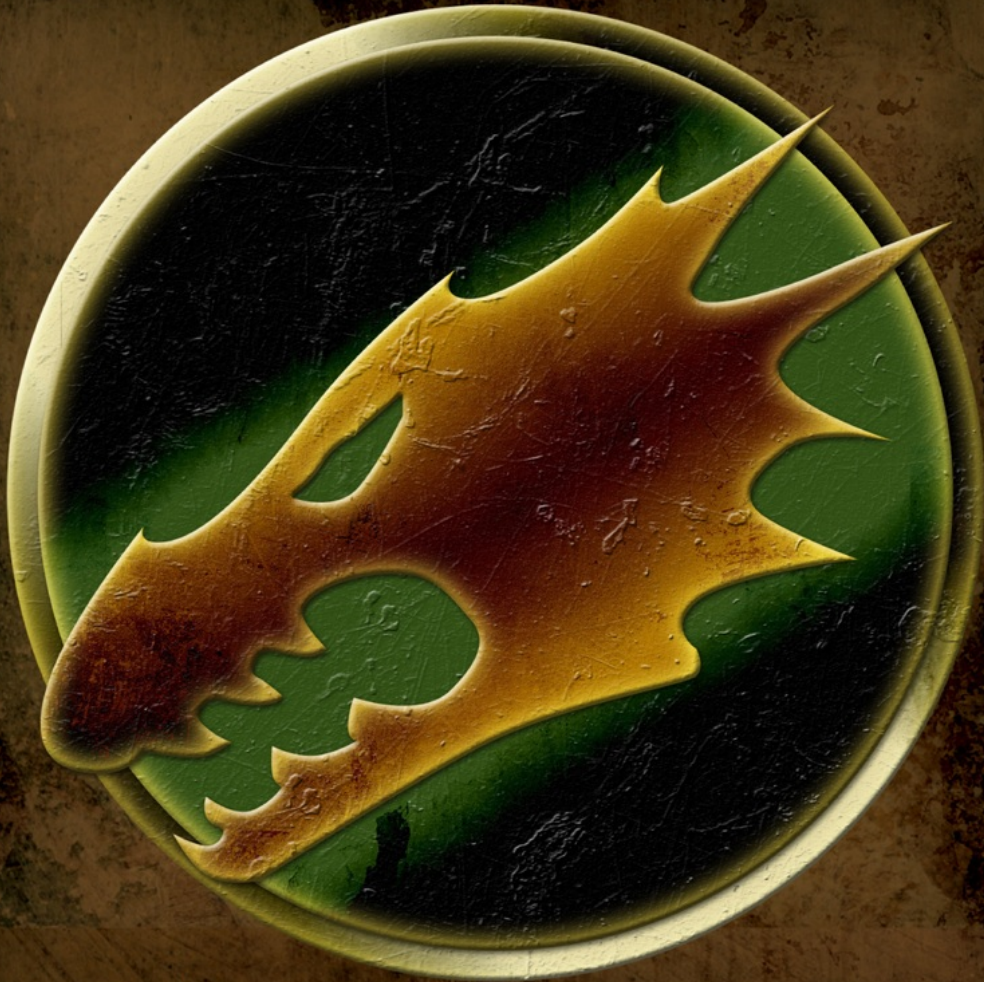


WARHAMMER
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THE CAGE

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THE CAGE

Inside the cage, the roar of the crowd was just a drone, throbbing against the warrior's temples. Within the cage, he was master, focused as a scalpel, deadly as a power glaive. In the cage, nothing could touch him.

Half-darkness and the iron bars of the cell's gate impeded the warrior's view of the mob, but he could smell their sweat, taste their fear and bloodlust as if they were standing right next to him. All that he could really see were shadows, cavorting, thrashing and brawling recklessly in anticipation of the spectacle to come.

'They have the taste already,' said Fargus from the other side of the cell.

'They've always got the taste,' the warrior replied in a deep, abyssal voice.

He hated them, the dirty crowd, but he hated himself more, and so he fought for their mutual pleasure and horror.

It was the same before every fight, and he had fought many. Rival gang lords often met here at the 'cross'. It was an arena, a monument to battle and blood. Not only that, it was a means of settling scores without the inevitable attrition of manpower that always came with a turf war. Over the months, the warrior had gleaned much about this place. It was ancient, very old indeed, and had existed since the time of the first colonists many years ago. And it was 'owned', if anything could be really, truly owned in the underhive, by two gang lords. Its currency was blood and spectacle, the more gruesome the better. Business, it seemed, was booming, for the hive bottom was teeming with would-be slaves or deadly beasts that they could shove into the pit. It was a bleak existence for the men and women forced to live it. Survival was the desire of most, or fame, of a sort at least. Few who became gladiators ever did so willingly. But the warrior was one of the exceptions.

Emerging fully from a state of combat meditation, the warrior became aware

of the others watching him. Like Fargus, they sat on the opposite side of the dingy holding pen, speaking only in whispers, though he heard them well enough.

‘It’s like his eyes are dead,’ remarked one, a youth called Drek. He was thin-faced, rangy, but with a whip-cord physique that made him fast and dangerous, especially if underestimated.

‘Coals without warmth. Embers of ice,’ said Fargus, revealing his overly poetic soul.

The warrior sneered. Sentimentality like that would end up getting the man killed, but then again, the stocky fighter with his balding, greying pate had lived so far.

Fargus was one of the oldest gladiators in the pit. Veterancy was reflected in his wargear, all leather and spikes, even a short tattered cape clasped to his shoulders. Fargus stood, leaning on his piston-spear, the weapon’s barbed head embedded in the earth. He did it to look nonchalant, but he actually used it as a crutch. Unbeknownst to all but the warrior, he was carrying an injury. Fargus might not survive his next bout.

The others were supposedly ‘hard men’. Some bore company tattoos of the Imperial Guard, others the Penal Legion. All carried Yugote’s totem, however. It was the mark of their owner. But they were dwarfed by *him*, by the silent warrior who had come amongst them and killed, and killed. Now no one would sit with him. They were afraid. That suited the warrior just fine.

Only Gort was larger, but then he was an abhuman: an ogryn, gene-bred or captured from some auxilia unit, it didn’t matter. Gort just wanted to fight. He never sat. The stools in the cell would not hold his weight, anyway. He paced, ever restive. But despite his massive size and bulk, the ogryn never came closer than ten paces to the warrior. That too was wise, and provided some evidence of a low cunning in the abhuman. The rest, including Ishtaro, Zuvius and Drek, who was too young to understand his fear and so had spoken up earlier, were all hivers. All they wanted was to escape.

The warrior had neither the heart nor the inclination to tell them that they were already dead men.

‘You’re next,’ grunted the gaoler, daring to approach the warrior. The gaoler thrust his chest forward, trying to assert his dominance despite a deficit of half a metre in height and a surplus of the same again around the waist. The fat man had a belt of keys fastened around his flabby stomach; the reek of his breath was a mixture of cheap alcohol and the half-rotted meat snagged in between his

stubby teeth.

You are an ugly scum-eater, Bellak.

The warrior nodded, not deigning to look at Bellak, though smelling him came without choice. It was pretence, all of this. No gaol here could hold him, no pit could confine him. If he wanted to, the warrior could kill Bellak, kill the other gladiators in his holding pen, enter the ring and then kill each and every living soul in it. This wasn't vanity or arrogance. It was fact.

Punishment kept him behind the bars; punishment and regret. The desire for spiritual and moral excoriation was a more effective prison than the iron bars and spiked-rimmed pit ever could be.

'Fortune favour you, warrior,' called Fargus from the other side of the holding cell.

Does he think his age will stop me from killing him if I decided to do so?

Wily old Fargus had recognised the supreme strength in the warrior and had, for the last few weeks, been trying to make a friend of him. But there were no friends in the pit, only opponents.

The warrior merely nodded to his fellow gladiator and took the short walk to the gate. Closer now, he saw the arena in full through the bars. Underhive dregs, a few twists and wretches too thin or addled by stimms to be any sport as fighters, were dragging out bodies and sluicing away the blood and guts. In a few more seconds they would be finished.

There was a lot of mess this time: it caked the walls and hung in ragged strips from the spikes. Some of it was ingrained, a patina of dark, visceral red that only a flamer stood any chance of removing.

Like the taint upon my honour...

The pit itself was fashioned of iron with crude, but still lethal, spikes protruding from the inside. Once it might have shone gunmetal-grey, but it had long since been colonised by rust and turned a dirty orange. All the better to hide the blood. It was roughly circular, with high walls and a mesh grate over the top. The mesh was electrified to dissuade escape attempts, but one gladiator in every ten tried and died when a hefty measure of the hive's power grid was fed through them. It stank of death, but the warrior found that perversely comforting. He understood death. It crouched upon his shoulder, leering at him and his enemies, gambling on which would meet it first. It was skeletal, it was red-raw crimson, it was cold and numbing, and it was his only ally in this place.

'Honour in battle,' said Fargus with a comradely bow.

Will he ever shut up?

‘This isn’t battle,’ the warrior replied, waiting next to the gate for his call to arms. ‘Not even close.’

Craning their necks, jostling with one another for the best view of the carnage to come, the crowd glared into the arena. They were a single entity now, a mob unified by a consumptive desire to witness death. From the warrior’s vantage point it was hard to see where the barbarism ended and civilisation began. He suspected he would have to climb far indeed to find it.

Unwashed, unloved, the crowd were as damned as he, only oblivious to the fact. Baying, brawling, jeering, they were no better than beasts. No, they were less than that and the warrior was content to wallow in moral turpitude with them.

‘They’re calling for you, Scar-borne.’

Bellak had followed him and was behind the warrior when he hawked up a greasy gob of phlegm. There was hate in his voice; hate and fear.

The warrior laughed, and he heard Bellak’s heart skip a tremulous beat at this impromptu display of emotion.

‘My name isn’t Scar-borne,’ the warrior said. ‘And you are a bigger and uglier fool than I first thought if you believe I’ll die out there today.’

Bellak snarled, but the threat was baseless. When the warrior glared down at the fat oaf, he backed off and activated the crank that would retract the gate into the pit.

Scar-borne... He supposed it was because of his face, the interlacing tissue damage that the surgeon had failed to fix, the burns over his skin that even the warrior’s enhanced physiology could not restore.

With a heavy *clank* the gate opened fully, retracting into a gap into the ceiling.

A weak light from some high-up phosphor globe shone into the centre of the arena, beckoning him. Another pit fighter, the previous victor, was standing at the edge, half swathed in penumbral gloom.

A chrono. He was gene-bulked, muscles rippling, strung together with rope-thick sinew and a slab-sided forehead that wouldn’t have looked out of place on a greenskin.

I have killed greenskins, many of them.

Industrial-grade plates were hammered into the chrono’s skin, the flesh pain-numbed to make wearing them bearable, and a pair of mecha-claws from a cargo lifter replaced his amputated arms.

In contrast, a plastek and studded leather jacket and greaves served as the warrior’s armour. He felt naked without his original war-plate, but that was long

gone, stashed far away from prying eyes and larcenous hands. An arco-flail hung loose in the warrior's grip where once he had held nobler weapons. But when he stepped out of the holding pen and into the arena, his grip tightened and a flash of energy rippled down the chain and the flail's spiked mace-head.

'You're big,' the warrior observed, moving to within two metres of the chrono. 'But I bet you're slow too.' He tapped the side of his head with his finger. 'If you know what I mean.'

The beast looked up dully through semi-closed eyes. Even slouching, he was easily a head and shoulders taller than the warrior. There was no trace of humanity left in that dead-eye stare, no sense that this thing had once been a man. He looked pained, the death-clock embedded in his forehead ticking down the seconds towards oblivion. A chrono had to fight. Make the kill, extend the time on the clock. Take too long and you die; lose and you die.

The warrior entered the cage again. He went in deep, lost himself to its protective confines, put all of his shame and disappointment outside it and became wrath itself. For the cage was not this arena, this place could not hold one such as he; the cage was inside, it was what he had made for himself. It kept things out, not in. The warrior glanced at the death-clock. Two minutes to expiration. In the upper stalls of the pit, the fight-master sounded the blare-horn to commence the bout.

'Time to die now,' gurgled the chrono. It was an effort for the thing to form that short sentence.

'You first,' the warrior replied as the beast charged.

Sheer size and intimidation had gifted the chrono his winning streak. Believe you are outmatched, that your opponent will destroy you, and he will. Every time.

The warrior used the chrono's bulk against him. As the beast charged, the warrior slipped aside, moving faster than his muscled frame might suggest. But even at over two metres tall, he was still dwarfed by the chrono. The beast slammed into the wall, skidding and slipping, metal underfoot screeching as his clawed boots dragged on the arena floor to slow him. Momentum did most of the damage. A spike punctured the chrono's shoulder, made him grunt in pain. He'd barely registered that his opponent had moved when the warrior was on him. A snap of energy and the arco-flail tore a cauterised lump from the chrono's torso. Mecha-claws lashed out in a one-two pistoning motion, forcing the warrior to jump back or be pulped. Instead they tore into the metal floor, slicing up rusted grille work and piping. A jet of super-heated steam burst from one pipe, speared

into the chrono's ugly face. He mewled, flesh burning, eyes stinging. Knowing he was in danger, death-clock ticking like some infernal metronome implanted into his skull, the chrono swung wildly.

The attack would have been laughable if it all weren't so tragic, the warrior slipping beneath the maddened blows and punching the spike at the end of the arco-flail's pommel into the chrono's jaw. Two-handed, the fighter pushed up with the spike. Blood jetted from the chrono's mouth, splashing on the warrior's back. It was hot, acidic. It actually burned. Ignoring the pain, the warrior pushed harder and felt the mecha-claws coming around to embrace him. Another push, and the warrior rammed the spiked haft through the crown at the top of the chrono's skull. The beast drooled, mecha-arms sagging, jaw lolling. He died, and a few seconds later the death-clock struck zero.

The mob roared, but the warrior stayed in the cage, to inure him from this existence he had made for himself. Every bar, every lock, he had forged with his mind. There was much to atone for, and when the others came looking for him, which he knew they would, he wanted to be ready.

Bellak was waiting for him at the periphery of the pit. The gaoler wouldn't step into it. He dared not take a step closer to the one he knew as Scar-borne, doused as the warrior was in caustic chrono blood.

Behind the gaoler, seen through the bars into the holding pen, the other gladiators had been watching. Fargus was closest and repeated the same nod from earlier. This time the warrior in the pit reciprocated the gesture and felt the slightest remembrance of an emotion he had once known but had tried to forget, because he believed he was unworthy of it.

Brotherhood.

Gort's raucous, deep-throated laughter broke up any reverie before it was given time to form. The ogryn was pointing at the chrono's ruined skull. Evidently he found the spectacle amusing. Drek, Ishtaro and Zuvius all carried the vicarious fervour of the warrior's gory victory. They called his name, punched the air, make overly macho gestures of defiance to the crowd and the gangers looking on. They were willing him to win. A bond, one he had no wish to form with them, was forming anyway.

He doubted they'd be so enthusiastic if they were facing him in the arena. Imminent death had a way of bleeding arrogance and humour out of a man.

Over a crude vox-unit mounted above the stalls, the fight-master formally announced the victory, inspiring further roaring from the crowd. When the next bout was then announced immediately afterwards, the warrior's attention was

forced back into the arena.

Three more chronos waited in the wings. The warrior could see them staring dully through the bars of their holding pens. An overseer stood in front of each one, ready to dial their death-clocks.

‘Winner takes his pick,’ said Bellak, gesturing to the pens, eager not to delay and anger the fight-master or the potentate gang lords who ran the pits.

The warrior growled, ‘I choose all three.’

Bellak sneered, held up three fingers to the fight-master who paused to look incredulously at Scar-borne before shrugging. The announcement over the vox was greeted with renewed and bloody excitement.

‘You’re a dead man,’ spat Bellak as the gate came down to protect him.

‘I died a long time ago, you worthless wretch.’

The warrior readied his arms, adding a trident to his arsenal that had been left behind after the last clean up, and waited for the horn. But it never sounded. Instead there was screaming and, just audible beneath it but getting steadily louder, the sound of gunfire.

Oblivious to what was happening, two of the three overseers released their chronos prematurely, having expected the fight to have commenced by now. The brutes lumbered slowly into the arena, weapon arms snapping, just as a spectator was hit by a stray bullet from above. The warrior watched the hiver spin, his blood fountaining aurally on to his fellow patrons, who shrieked and pushed at him. The body went back and forth for a few seconds; seconds that stretched into minutes as he toppled, dead, over the stalls and onto the mesh framing the pit. Several thousand volts went through the corpse, and it burned and blackened swiftly with a hungry fire. The dead hiver jerked like a fish left to suffocate on dry land, but this apparent life was only what the electricity coursing through his body was giving him. He was a big man, fat on waste-meats and roasted hive vermin, and when his bloated body tore through the mesh, leaving a large and gaping hole, several things happened at once.

Terror gripped the crowd, provoking a bout of pushing and shoving that saw half a dozen more patrons fall onto the mesh. They jerked too, but they also screamed as they burned. Gangers acting as enforcers on behalf of their leaders brought out automatic weapons; one, situated in a watch tower, even had a heavy stubber. Return fire ripped out into the hive darkness, muzzle flares flashing like stars.

Like a swell reacting to a storm, the crowd heaved up, caught between the fire exchange and the certain death of falling into the pit. One man, a vendor by the

look of his dirty smock, had the good fortune to fall through the widening gap made by the others. He only broke his leg and was about to thank the Throne for his deliverance when one of the loose chronos, reacting to the sudden presence, decapitated him with a pair of machine shears as the man was extolling his luck.

The other one came for Scar-borne. The warrior ducked a crazed swing, letting the beast's chain-blade embed in the wall. He neglected a killing blow and instead used the chrono like a step so he could vault through the gap in the mesh and join the fight above.

Just as he crested the rim of the pit, trying not to look at the charred remains stuck to the mesh with their own burnt skin and boiled blood, he heard Fargus below him. Sparing a quick glance, he saw that the gladiator had Bellak around the neck, strangling the gaoler with his chains. Bellak's guards were already dead, crushed to death by Gort by the look of their crumpled armour.

Ishtaro and Drek had found weapons and cut into Bellak as he mewled for mercy, silencing his plaintive screaming. Zuvius had gone ahead, taking up a fallen sabre and looting a stubber from one of the dead who had fallen into the pit.

Finished with the guards, Gort was sizing up the other chrono, the one that had killed the vendor.

Barring the ogryn, all of them wanted to escape. The sudden turf war, for that was what the warrior assumed was happening, had provided a distraction that now led to opportunity.

Above the pit, it was a bloody massacre.

Bodies lay everywhere; some shot, others crushed to death, gunfire raining all around them. The beasts had disbanded, transformed by the very real prospect of their deaths into a panicked herd. Detached from the mob, faces resolved through the carnage for the first time: Frightened men on their knees; a woman, hacking wildly with a stolen knife; a child too afraid to flee. Not all of them then were beasts. Not in this moment, anyway.

Staying low, the warrior scurried over the dead and dying, picking up a blade that he wielded like a dagger to replace his discarded gladiatorial weapons. Up here, they were cumbersome and a distraction, likely to get him killed. That's if the gangers wearing red hoods and crimson leather cloaks didn't slay him first.

A dozen of them, maybe more, were hurrying through the darkness, firing freely. A burst of auto fire chewed up a clutch of bodies a few centimetres from where the warrior was standing. It was a miss, but close. A range finder. Second burst would be better.

Acting on instinct, the warrior threw his sword. It took the ganger in the throat and dropped him. The red hood's comrades had seen him fall, but were busy taking on the owners of the pit and their hired guns now. A full-blown war was unfolding.

The warrior had seen the gang factions who betted on the pit; the red hoods were not amongst them and went toe-to-toe with muscleheads garbed in black leather and rough-looking men wearing heavy-duty grey factorum overalls. Whatever agreement these two gangs had made over the pit, the red hoods were not part of it. Blood, he who spilled the most of his enemy's, would decide the rest.

Moving fast, the warrior took up the red hood's gun. It was small in his meaty fist, more like a pistol, but the trigger guard was shorn off, so he could just about fire it with moderate accuracy.

Behind him, he heard Fargus and some of the other gladiators escaping the pit. They were merciless, turning on their masters and the interlopers alike.

Like predatory cats, Zuvius, Ishtaro and Drek roved through the crowd and the growing pall of gun smoke choking the air. Through snatched glances, the warrior saw them cutting down men and women. Zuvius was quick, efficient, trying to reach the edge of the pit zone and slip away into the deeper hive. Ishtaro and Drek revelled in the slaughter, taking their time.

That was what got Ishtaro killed. A spotter in the watch tower, a factorum ganger, picked out the fighter and had his sniper cut him in half with a heavy calibre rifle round. Ishtaro looked dumbstruck, as if he couldn't quite believe what his body was telling him. When his mind finally caught up, he was slumped down, awash with his own blood. The rifle round had practically sawn him in two. Drek knelt by the body, weeping. They had been brothers, actual brothers. Then there came rage, and here was where Drek was undone.

He gutted three men but, unlike Zuvius, neglected to make a run for it and went deeper into the mob, looking for more blood to balance the measure spilt from his brother.

Surrounded by the crowd, who had stopped fleeing and started fighting, he was ripped apart.

Unwilling to, or ordered not to, fire on potential future patrons, the sniper changed targets. The red dot flashed, sending out a grainy wave of crimson as it tracked through smoke and dust. The discharge that followed was swift and almost silent.

Realising that he was the target, the warrior ducked, ensuring that the bullet

only grazed his shoulder, cooking the skin with the heat of its trajectory. He sank low, searching for cover, but the battleground was flat around the pit and the crowd thinning out. The only ones that were left and not dead were the three rival gangs and the patrons bloodthirsty enough to want a fight. All were carrying weapons too.

Snatching up a piece of sharp debris, the warrior was about to fling it at the sniper in the tower when an explosive went off around the base. Three iron struts keeping the boxed nest aloft snapped and fell. The nest, the spotter and the sniper all went with them into the flames and the frag.

Scar-borne was on the move again. A musclehead who had just finished one of the red hoods came at him with an axe. The weapon buzzed, metal teeth whirring inside the blade. They were ruddy, slowed up by meat, but still churning. Red spray flecked the warrior's onyx-black skin. It was still warm.

The chain-axe came down and the warrior dived aside, leaving its teeth to chew up earth and corpse-meat. Then the warrior was rolling to his feet, still clutching the piece of debris, when a chain wrapped around the musclehead's neck and pulled him off balance.

'Strike him now!'

Fargus had the chain in both hands and was pulling hard. The musclehead was big, and his grunt of panic had roused three of his fellow gangers, who were rushing at them. The warrior plunged the debris piece into the musclehead's neck, severing the carotid artery. Leaving him to bleed, he ran on past Fargus, scooping up a fallen blade.

The three muscleheads drew as well, two with cudgels, but one also carried a sixer – a hand cannon, a six-barrelled pistol too heavy for most men to use effectively. It was equally deadly as a club and the recoil could shatter bone. The stopping power was not unlike a bolt pistol, only with less explosive lethality.

The other muscleheads parted as the one with the sixer squeezed off a shot. All three were gene-bulked, no doubt the gang lord's hardened elite, keen to ensure their master's investment didn't fly the coop.

'Down!' roared the warrior, hoping Fargus would hear him.

When did I start to care what happened to these scum?

Heat flared overhead, searing his bare back, but the sixer missed. The musclehead cracked off three more snap shots from the hip, but he was no gunslinger and the warrior was sidewinding now, zagging towards the three approaching gangers.

There was no fifth shot. Fargus lashed the shooter with his chain, taking the

pistol right out of his meaty grasp. To his credit, the musclehead snagged the chain, but Fargus was an experienced fighter and these brutes had grown lazy kicking the grok out of weaklings who couldn't pay their pit taxes. The gladiator used the forward momentum to rush the ganger, turning it into a flying leap. As he sped past the musclehead in midair, something flashed in his hand, and as Fargus landed in a crouch, a piece of metal was jutting from the ganger's throat. Gurgling once, the musclehead collapsed and died.

Any shock that might have gripped his cohorts was suspended by the fact that both men no longer had their heads, a dark slick coating Scar-borne's borrowed blade the only evidence that pointed towards his decapitation of both gangers.

Fargus admired the other gladiator's handiwork. 'Impressive. We'll need your skills out there.' He pointed to the outer darkness enfolding the pit zone, where the phosphor globes did not blaze and lawlessness such as this was a form of relative security. 'In the deeper hive, there are worse monsters than Yugote's thugs.'

'Then you'll have to kill them alone,' said the warrior.

Fargus looked nonplussed and spread his arms. 'Look around you, slave. The battle is over. We won.'

He was right. The red hoods were done; almost twenty lay dead, and half that number again in muscleheads and factorum men. The rest were scurrying back into the deeper hive, back into the lair of the monsters Fargus had talked about.

'This wasn't a territory grab,' said the warrior. 'It was a probing attack. The red hoods will be back.'

Fargus scanned the carnage nervously. The victorious gangs sent to harry the losers were on their way back. Those that remained were getting the crowd back into line. Not long before they'd turn their attentions to the two gladiators still in their midst.

'All the more reason to run,' urged Fargus. 'Come on!' He started jogging out towards the edge of the pit zone. He had a slight limp to his gait that the warrior knew would grow more pronounced the farther he had to run. And Fargus would not be able to run for long. Just like the death-clocks on the chronos, the old gladiator's time was running out.

'I'm not coming with you,' said the warrior, and not just because he knew Fargus would fail.

Fargus faltered and half-turned, disbelief souring his expression into a scowl as he saw Scar-borne heading back to the pit.

'You're going back? Why? At least out there we have a chance, and can

choose how and when we meet our end.'

'Fortune favour you, Fargus,' called the warrior genuinely.

'Come with me, Scar-borne. You'll die in that place.' His words went unheeded, spoken to the warrior's back.

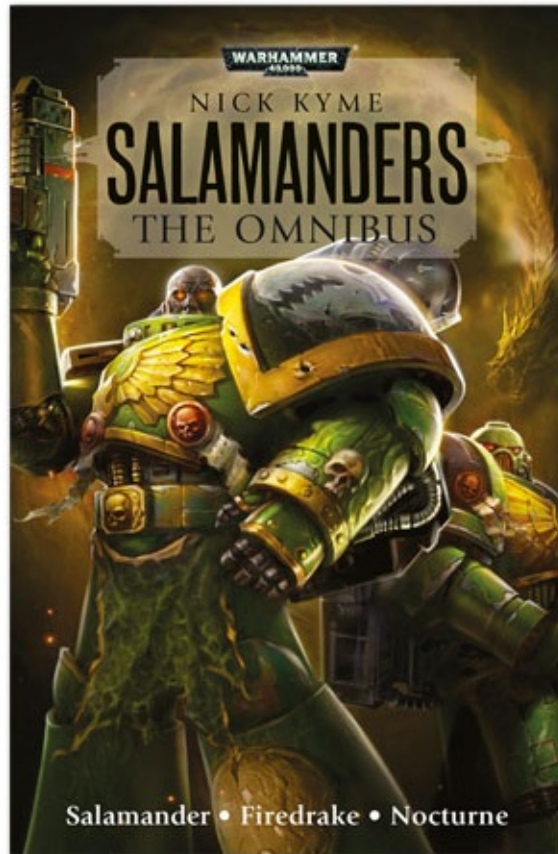
He climbed back down into the pit. Gort was dead, impaled on a vibro-spear, though he had killed the three chronos before succumbing to his many wounds. Hard to tell, but the warrior swore that the abhuman had a smile on his grizzled, ugly face. The warrior reached the gate to his cell, stepping over Bellak's butchered corpse. As he sat down, alone as he was before, content that he had done all he could to save the few worthwhile civilians in the mob, he smiled as Fargus's last words came back to him.

'No,' rasped the warrior. 'I'm already dead, and this is my own personal hell. And my name isn't Scar-borne,' he added as gangers from both factions returned and turned their guns on the pit, finding but a single warrior sitting dutifully in his cage, awaiting the next bout.

'It's Tsu'gan.'

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 series of Salamanders novels and short stories, the Space Marine Battles novel *Damnus*, 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.



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ISBN 978-1-78251-578-4

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