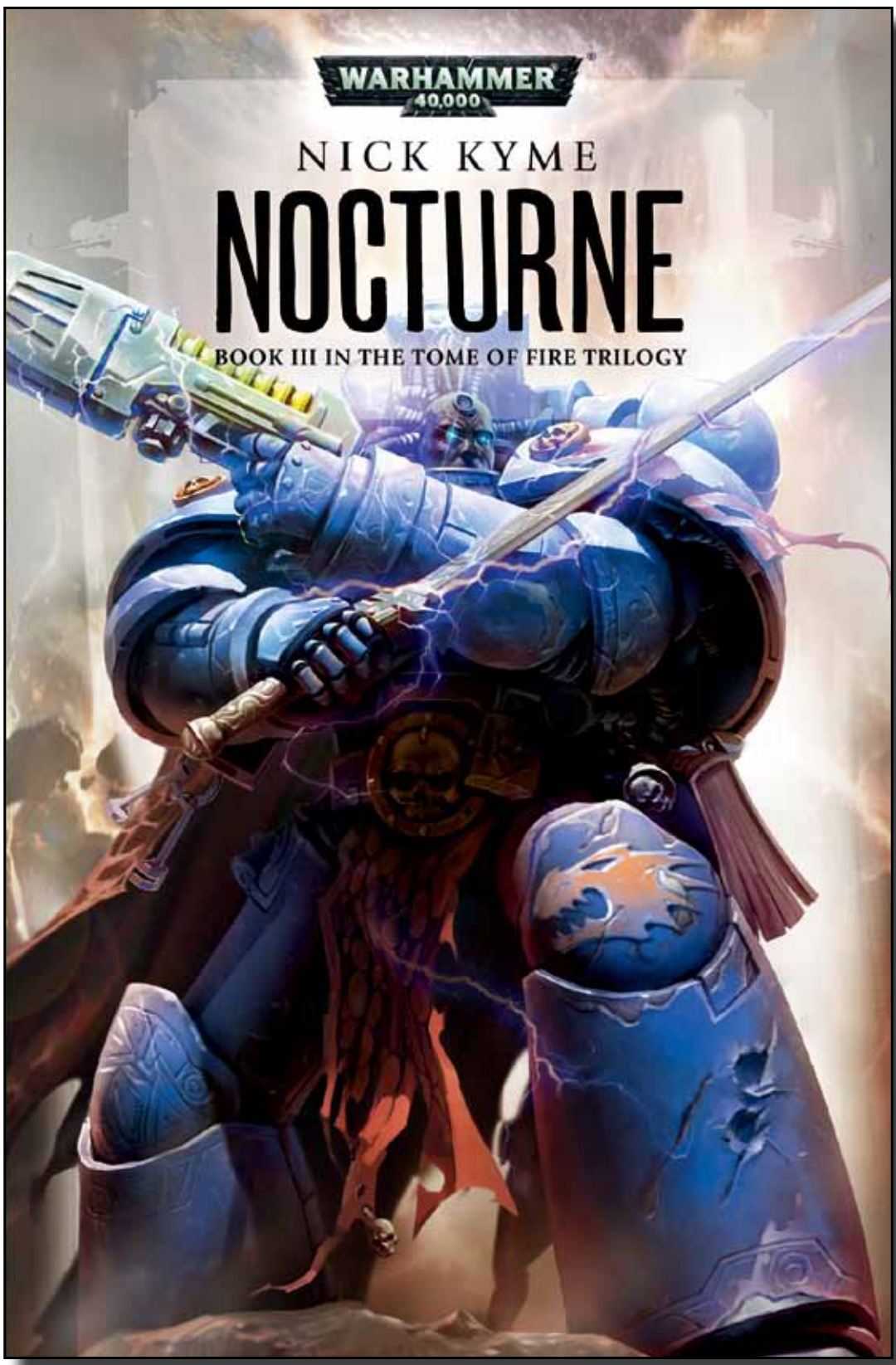


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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nick Kyme is a writer and editor. He lives in Nottingham where he began a career at Games Workshop on White Dwarf magazine. Now Black Library's Senior Range Editor, Nick's writing credits include the Warhammer 40,000 Tome of Fire trilogy featuring the Salamanders, *Fall of Damnos*, the Space Marine Battles novel and his Warhammer Fantasy-based dwarf novels and several short stories.

Read his blog at www.nickkyme.com

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JAGGING CLAW MARKS ravaged the interior of the Apothecarion's isolation chamber. Emek had put its inhabitant under with a potent blend of sedatives and anaesthesia. The doses were in extremely high concentrations in order to bypass the multi-lung's resilience to toxins. As an expert in Space Marine biology he was well suited to the task.

Divested of his power armour and other trappings, Emek's subject was crouched down in one corner of the chamber, sullen but dormant. A thick wall of ferrocrete with a single rectangular observation portal stood between them. As of yet, the Apothecary had been unable to draw any significant conclusions concerning Zartath's aberrant physiology. All attempts to make contact with his Chapter had also, thus far, been unsuccessful.

'I am a prisoner in this hole,' he growled, slurring his words only for them to become muffled by the armaglas.

Emek looked up from the data-slates and parchments scattered on the medi-slab in front of him. 'You recovered from that last belt of sedative much more quickly than the previous strain. I'll increase your dosage next time.' He went back to his studies.

'Release me,' Zartath snarled.

The light in the Apothecarion anteroom was subdued. Emek found the harsh surgical glare of its lamps painful and dulling them helped. The half-illumination hinted at medical paraphernalia – philtres, salving agents, coagulant-gels and other remedies – as well as a vast complex of corridors, infirmaries and surgeries where the Chapter Apothecaries could conduct their vital work. In the lower levels were the gene-banks where recovered progenoids from fallen Salamanders waited in frozen stasis. They represented the Chapter's future, its legacy after the warriors that once carried them were burned to ash and given back to the earth.

It was part Codex Astartes doctrine as laid down by Primarch Roboute Guilliman in ages past, and part Promethean lore as handed down by the tribal kings of ancient Nocturne. Rebirth and reincarnation were a core tenet of the Creed, the great Circle of Fire through which each and every Nocturnean, human or super-human, moved. A sacred flame was a means of providing transition, the earth the great cosmological forge to which the essence of the dead could be returned so that they might live on. Literal, puritanical, interpretations of the Circle of Fire hailed from Nocturne's ancient ages and were outmoded after the birth of Vulkan and the coming of the Emperor, but some still clung to the Old Ways. Veneration and remembrance were important.

Emek held on to a position of rationality and enlightenment. The ancient beliefs and prophecies were just that – archaic and no longer relevant. He wondered if his 'friend' beyond the armaglas thought any differently. The isolation chamber was only a small portion of the Apothecarion, one cell amongst many. Currently, Zartath was the only occupant.

'I will not be caged!' the warrior persisted.

Annoyed at the constant interruption, Emek glared and his still functioning eye flared brightly in the gloom.

'You were held prisoner on the Volgorrah Reef for six years. Who can really say what effect the tortures of the xenos, losing your battle-brothers like you did, had on your mind?'

Zartath bared his teeth. 'I am still a prisoner!'

Ignoring him, Emek went on, 'And then there is your mutation to consider...'

Little was known about Zartath, save that he was once a Space Marine in the Black Dragons

Chapter. It was amongst those ill-fated brotherhoods referred to as the 'Cursed Founding' – although such terms varied according to the speaker – that the Black Dragons had come into being. His physical deviancy was obvious. Bony growths jutted from his head and forearms. When Zartath was roused to anger, they would become like ossified blades punching straight through flesh and skin. The savaging taken by the isolation chamber's internal walls was evidence of that.

Despite the sedatives plaguing his system, Zartath was belligerent. It was part of the reason he was still incarcerated.

'Face like blackened coal and eyes like embers, and you speak to me of mutancy.' He sneered, showing off his needle-like fangs. 'Let me go, hypocritical dog.'

'There is also the matter of your heritage.' Here, Emek pressed against his barely veiled contempt. For was it not Ushorak of the Black Dragons who had infected Nihilan with his canker, and ultimately brought about the creation of the Dragon Warriors and the death of the Salamanders' beloved Captain Kadai? His vitriol passed quickly but Emek left room for a final bite. 'Let us not forget your mental state, either.'

Zartath stood, although he should not have been able to, and charged the armaglas. 'Release me!' The bone blades sniktd from his forearms. Soon the view into the isolation cell was occluded by raking claw marks and flung spittle.

Unimpressed, Emek nulled the chamber. The raging became mute and the observation portal turned to black.

'Beast.'

'He is,' answered the darkness, a chill entering the room along with the voice. 'A real vicious bastard, too. He held a blade to Sergeant Ba'ken's throat and would've cut it if he'd thought we meant him harm.'

Elysius stepped forwards into the wan light cast by the dulled lamps. 'But were it not for him, we all would have died in that place.'

Armoured in black battle-plate festooned with talismans of purity and devotion, including a holy relic of the primarch, Elysius was a Chaplain to his icy core. Since his visit to the Volgorrah Reef his frosty demeanour had thawed somewhat. He entered the Apothecarion unhooded, his battle-helm mag-locked to his thigh. There was a time when he would not have done so. Contrary to a once-held belief, Elysius was not hideous or war-scarred, horrifically burned or twisted in some way. He was handsome for a Space Marine; his skin was unblemished, his features strong and even.

Only his left arm showed evidence of permanent wounding. The limb he wore was artificial, a bionic replacement for the one he had lost on Scoria fighting the ork. During campaign, he would affix a power fist to that arm instead and his debilitating injury would be turned into crushing martial advantage.

Elysius gestured to the blank slab of armaglas. 'I can't imagine he has taken to examination well.'

'He hasn't.' Emek didn't bother to look up. 'It requires heavy sedation every time I must take a dermal bio-scan or extract a marrow sample. Caged drakes are easier to handle.'

'You are as stern as your predecessor, Brother Emek.'

The Apothecary continued to be absorbed by his data-slates. 'I am merely being prudent.'

'Are those his notes you are researching?' Elysius asked, though he didn't pry. He didn't need to. He knew Fugis had a dossier on Dak'ir. It was obvious the notes in front of Emek pertained to him.

The Apothecary stopped what he was doing to face his Chaplain.

'Yes. Combined with the regular examinations I must conduct on the Black Dragon, I have little time for distraction.'

'Like visiting the hell-pits at Themis, you mean?' There was no trace of accusation in the Chaplain's tone, no reproach. He was merely asking the question.

'I meant by unannounced visitors.'

'I know what you meant. You are spending overlong in the Apothecarion; you need to be back amongst your brothers again. Your meeting with Sergeant Ba'ken suggests you realise that too.'

Emek's retort had barbs. 'Are isolation and self-reliance not a part of the Promethean Creed?'

'Not when they are bent towards self-destruction.'

Scowling, Emek returned to his work but Elysus wasn't done with him. 'You have a patient, not a prisoner. Your treatment of him suggests an imbalance in your humours, brother.'

'Until he can be reclaimed by his Chapter or my assessment of him deems his stability, he is too dangerous to be on the loose.'

'I agree. It is your harsh judgement of our distant brother that I question, Apothecary.' The Chaplain maintained a carefully neutral expression. 'It wasn't Zartath aboard the Protean.'

'So we get to the truth of it at last,' Emek sneered.

'I am responsible for the spiritual wellbeing of this company. You expect me to ignore this shift in your demeanour?'

'I was once whole, now I am not. The anvil has tempered me and I shall bear its judgement with the stoic pragmatism of my Chapter. Is that what you want to hear?'

'I hear only your bitterness, brother.' Now Elysus showed his anger. 'On the Volgorrah Reef, in the Razored Vale as my brothers died around me, I felt a darkness encroaching. It was a malaise of the spirit, a tempering against which I was to be measured. I witnessed much horror and death there, but here I stand. As warriors we are made whole by our bonds of brotherhood, by war's purifying flame.' He gestured to his bionic arm. 'On Scoria did I not lose a limb to the Great Beast?'

Emek clenched his fists as the rancour poured out of him. 'But you can still fight. How can I return to battle?' He met Elysus's gaze and in Emek's eyes were pictured all of his faded hopes. 'This ague plagues me, Chaplain. I am a cripple because of it!'

'Don't let it consume you,' said Elysus, lowering his voice. Realising his arguments went unheeded he turned and stalked from the Apothecarion.

Emek watched him leave.

'It already has,' he muttered to the dark.