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# THE FLESH OF THE ANGEL

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**Ben Counter**

The stench of the alien was everywhere. It was a heavy, meaty stink, like heaps of butchered animal carcasses left for too long somewhere dank and underground. There was an artificial, chemical note to it too, the smell of the laboratory and the operating room. And underlying it all was an alien sourness that could never come from anything human.

Zameon Gydrael crouched beside the gnarled wall of hardened mucus that bounded the tunnel leading into the Nidus Tertiam. The xenos-wrought structure wound deep into the foundations of Phoenicus Peak, where once a monastic human sect had inhabited the cells and shrines. He could feel the warmth coming off the walls – nutrient fluid pumped through them, channelled to the lowermost reaches of the nidus. He could hear the scrabbling of claws far below, the low groaning of the structure settling, and the hiss of its unspeakable veins and arteries.

But the noise was nothing to the stench.

His olfactory receptors had been enhanced by the surgeons of the Ordo Xenos to pick out the spore-trails of certain creatures, and to recognise a whole catalogue of alien scents. The drawback was that Gydrael could not turn them off.

‘Gydrael here,’ he said into the kill team’s vox-channel. ‘I’m in position at the head of Nidus Tertiam.’

‘*In position,*’ echoed Thorne of the Iron Hands.

‘*I’m at Nidus Secundus,*’ added Hasdrubal of the Storm Lords. ‘*Ready to*

*do this, brethren. I'd burn this whole mountain range just to get rid of the stink.'*

*'There's movement on the lower slopes,'* said the kill team's leader, Sergeant Decurius of the Praetors of Ulixis. He was positioned on a mountaintop watching the main nidi of the breeding ground, where he could warn the rest of the team about reinforcements or despatch himself and the fifth member, Molgurr of the Mortifactors Chapter, to lend assistance if things went wrong. *'Quiet further up. Clear to proceed.'*

*'Acknowledged, brother,'* said Thorne.

*'About damned time,'* said Hasdrubal. *'I have gone seven moons without taking a head. My knife is angry.'*

*'Remember your mission,'* said Decurius. *'Do not give battle unless you must. You will have alien blood to spare on your hands before the night is out, Hasdrubal. Trust me on that.'*

*'I am advancing,'* voxed Gydrael. *'Fury and blood, my brothers. Soon this world will be clean.'*

The interior of the nidus was pitch dark, but Gydrael could see perfectly with his enhanced vision. The architecture of the monastery broke through the crusted mass of resinous matter that the xenos had used to build their nest. The mournful face of a female saint was almost buried in tendrils of alien secretion. Fragments of fallen chitin covered the floor.

Gydrael kneeled down and picked up a smooth, pale shard from the debris. It was a fragment of an eggshell, the curve suggesting it had been the size of a man's torso before it had broken.

*'They're hatching already,'* said Gydrael.

*'Then we must be swift,'* replied Decurius.

In the close confines, Gydrael holstered his plasma pistol and drew his broadsword.

At these ranges, the powered blade was a surer kill than a bolt of superheated plasma.

As he proceeded, the stench got worse, if that was possible. Below the upper level of monks' cells, the side of a chapel had been torn down to form the opening of a tunnel winding into the depths. A revolting slurping, sucking sound came from further down.

While most of his mind was concerned with the mission-specific details around him – avenues of approach, ranges, hiding places for a lurking

enemy – the rest of Gydrael’s perception was filing away the other information that came to him. It was a skill he had possessed even before he had become a Dark Angel, the ability to perceive and compartmentalise, and to recall afterwards everything he had seen. The Chapter had honed that skill well. It was one of the reasons that Gydrael had been selected for service with the Deathwatch.

The monks had lived lives of cruel denial. They served for decades before they earned the right to amputate their body parts in the name of the Emperor, denying themselves the very limbs with which they had been born, to understand better the sacrifice the Emperor had made of his physical body. The tale of the monks was told in the sculptures of limbless devotees and the harnesses and supports built into the stone pews that broke through the layers of hardened alien mucus. The small monastic community had existed on Kolagar for centuries before the sslyth had moved in, and in a few hellish nights the xenos had exterminated them and taken over their monastery.

Gydrael moved down through the tunnel and crouched by an opening into a huge chamber beyond. The bulbous shape of the cavity was like the interior of an enormous stomach. It had been carved into the rock of Phoenicus Peak, like a cyst that had rotted away the mountain stone, and the lower half of it was full of a foul grey-green biological soup.

The fluid was writhing. Gydrael’s vision focused on sinuous loops of muscle slithering in and out of one another, forming churning knots of scaly bodies. Clawed, muscular limbs reached from the mass, and here and there a head surfaced – noseless and snakelike, with a yawning, fanged mouth, eyes like flecks of red gemstone, and ridges of horned scales along the scalp and down the spine.

A yowling and roaring reached Gydrael’s ears. It was the noise of primal abandon.

The stench was heavy and musky here, an awful mix of decay and fecundity that overwhelmed the air filters built into his power armour and forced his body’s augmentations to leach out the toxins from the air.

On the shore of the pool, one of the muscular creatures disengaged from the mass and flopped onto the shore of congealed filth. It had a powerful, four-armed torso, and its lower half was a single long, thick tail. Its scaly body was covered in the sticky fluid and it gasped and contorted as it

pulled itself free. Others followed. Some in the mire looked dead, their bodies having given out. The surviving xenos slithered into side tunnels, leaving trails of noxious slime.

‘Confirm visual on the sslyth,’ voxed Gydrael. ‘This nidus has a breeding pool.’

‘*Have you been seen?*’ replied Decurius.

‘No,’ said Gydrael. ‘They see nothing in their state.’

‘*Skirt around it if you can. The hatcheries are likely below you.*’

‘With pleasure.’

Hasdrubal chuckled. ‘*Contain your lust, Dark Angel.*’

Gydrael did not give Hasdrubal the satisfaction of an answer. The Storm Lords were of White Scars stock, earthy and brutal, very different to the Dark Angels. The White Scars’ primarch, Jaghatai Khan, had apparently lent his Legion’s geneseed a certain crudeness of thought which successor Chapters like the Storm Lords had evidently retained.

Gydrael put a hand to the canister mag-clamped to the waist of his armour. It contained enough infectious material to kill everything in the breeding pool a hundred times over. The virus bomb was gene-crafted to the phylum of sslyth that had surfaced on Kolagar, and it would have wiped them all out within three minutes.

If there had been enough of it to spare, Gydrael would have done just that. The sight of the sslyth locked in their fleshly mire turned his stomachs. But the Ordo Xenos had produced barely enough material to arm the three virus bombs the kill team carried into the nidi around Phoenicus Peak. They had to be used at the right place, in unison, to create the cascading reaction that would wipe out the entire phylum.

‘I am advancing,’ voxed Gydrael.

As revolting as the breeding pool was, Gydrael filed away its obscenity in his mind. Every contact with the sslyth, no matter how unwholesome, armed him with more knowledge of how to kill them. Of all the lessons Gydrael had learned in the Dark Angels’ training halls on the Rock, the first had been the most important.

*Miss nothing.*

The creature lurking in the makeshift shrine, its four brawny arms holding a pair of swords and a rusted autogun, was the first alert sslyth that

Gydrael had seen since entering the nidus. It wore a harness of leather straps that clamped crude armour plates around its shoulders, chest and abdomen, and a necklace of fingers and dried-out eyeballs on a strip of leather was tied around its neck. With its muscular tail coiled underneath it, it reared up taller than Gydrael. He could see strips of purple-dyed cloth tied around its four biceps, embroidered with golden thread that seemed at odds with the creature's savagery.

The sslyth stood before the altar of the shrine, which was little more than a heap of battle spoils – severed heads, captured lasguns, a silvery nest of ident-tags, a bowl of human hands – set in front of a carved wooden idol. The sensor-pits along the sslyth's jaw line opened up as they registered the changes in air pressure and temperature that heralded Gydrael's approach. It was impossible for anyone to sneak up on an alert sslyth – many men of the Astra Militarum on Kolagar had tried.

The sslyth whirled around and hissed, opening its mouth wide. Twin crescent-shaped fangs glinted with venom in its upper jaw.

By the time it raised its autogun, Gydrael had lunged across the shrine and was within sword range. The Dark Angel brought his broadsword around in a cut to the abdomen – the creature instinctively blocked with its gun and the blade's power field lit the space up like a bolt of lightning. The sslyth spat and hissed as its weapon was reduced to a shower of metal shards.

The xenos howled, its tail propelling it towards Gydrael. It slammed into him with speed and strength, trying to close its jaws around his neck.

Gydrael didn't fend off the closing jaws. The fangs were blunted against the ceramite of his helmet and shoulder guard. The sslyth was too close for him to swing his sword – he reversed his grip instead, and rammed the hilt up into the sslyth's upper chest.

Gydrael had selected the broadsword from the vaults of the Rock when he had been chosen for the Deathwatch. He was his Chapter's contribution to the ancient pacts which bound the Space Marines to this solemn duty, and he had needed a weapon to reflect that. He had always favoured the broadsword pattern, with its wide, brutal sweeps, its absence of ornamentation and flourish, and the massive, decisive damage that could be dealt with a clean blow. The weapon had a blade of infinitite alloy and a gilded hilt, with a cut red gemstone the size of a man's fist set into the

pommel. It was that gemstone that now cracked into the sslyth's chest like the tip of a spear, shattering sternum and rib.

The sslyth was thrown against the pile of spoils in front of the altar. It let out a high, grating screech that seemed to shake the hardened secretions of the shrine walls. With his blade now free, Gydrael lashed out with a descending crescent blow that caught the creature in the armoured shoulder.

The broadsword sliced through, the power field giving it a keener edge than any mundane blade. It split armour, bone, muscle and organ, slicing all the way through to the sslyth's abdomen. The alien was bisected clean in half, the two sections of its body flopping to the floor in a flood of sundered organs.

Gydrael heard the slithering of more aliens approaching. He shifted his grip on his sword, holding it one-handed while he drew his plasma pistol.

'Brothers, I have encountered resistance,' he voxed.

Three more sslyth rushed in through the side tunnels leading off from the shrine. Gydrael shot the first one through the face with his plasma pistol, the shot blasting the contents of its skull across the wall behind it. The second sslyth had a sword in each hand and a lithe, rope-muscled look to it, faster and leaner than the xenos Gydrael had butchered by the altar. It darted around the defensive arc of Gydrael's sword, slicing out high with two blades and low with the others.

Gydrael had fought just about every form of enemy. Those he had not faced on the battlefield, he had engaged in simulated bouts with combat servitors, configuring their limbs to mimic any one of a hundred different species. Even so, the sslyth's four swords threw him off for a moment as he weighed up each of his guards and parries and found them wanting.

Gydrael abandoned the subtlety of the swordsman. He trusted in his armour instead, letting three blows ring off the plating over his thigh, shoulder and chest. The fourth strike was at his head – Gydrael ducked under it, pivoted on his forward foot, and brought the broadsword around in a vertical rising strike.

Two of the sslyth's hands thudded, severed, to the floor. The creature hissed, more in anger than in pain, as Gydrael focused on the third alien, which was lining up a shot at him with a boltgun.

The bolter it carried was larger than those sometimes issued to the

officers of the Astra Militarum. It was sized for transhuman hands, but was of an older mark than anything in the Dark Angels' armoury. The alien was strong enough to wield it, but it had none of the marksmanship of a Space Marine. The first shot flew wide and Gydrael lunged at the sslyth, ramming the point of the broadsword home.

These sslyth wore segments of armour salvaged from the Guardsmen of the Astra Militarum, sawn and hammered into shape and held in place by leather harnesses. They were no good against a powered blade. The armour split and the sword transfixing the creature through the stomach. Gydrael felt it sag as he withdrew the blade, knowing the alien's spine was cut through and it would be paralysed before it hit the floor.

The surviving sslyth still had a sword in each of its remaining hands. It leapt up against one wall, bunching its tail in a powerful coil beneath it, to propel itself into Gydrael. He felt the hum of the plasma pistol in his hand – it could punch through the side of a tank, but it needed a second or two to recharge between each shot. It was ready to fire again.

Gydrael shot the sslyth through the throat. Its head flopped forwards, suddenly attached only by a string of charred scales.

The sslyth with the severed backbone was flopping around on the floor, trying to reach the boltgun beside it with jerking, spasming motions of its hands. Gydrael stabbed the broadsword down and pierced it through the back of the skull, slicing through its brain stem.

'Cleared the resistance,' he voxed. 'The sslyth are aware of my presence.'

*'Don't tell me Zameon has the first blood,'* said Hasdrubal. *'You can have that one, Dark Angel. I'll bring out a heap of xenos heads you can only dream of.'*

*'Focus, brethren,'* said Decurius. *'If one nidus is alerted, the others will be soon. Hasdrubal, Thorne, stay alert.'*

*'Always,'* replied Thorne.

Gydrael studied the altar for a moment before moving on. The carving above the heap of spoils was of an obscene figure composed of mismatched body parts and orifices. It had a heavy, fleshy realism in spite of the crudeness of the wooden sculpture. In the centre of the sculpture's face was a sigil – a circle and two crescents. Gydrael had seen it before, carved into the flesh of maddened cultists or scrawled on the walls of defiled places of worship.

Gydrael picked the sslyth's bolter off the floor. Though it was a Space Marine's weapon it had a patina of filth and corrosion that no battle-brother would ever tolerate. It was a pattern that no forge world or Chapter armoury had produced for thousands of years, and its casing had once been decorated with golden scrollwork that was now peeling off.

'I see evidence of worship,' said Gydrael. 'Devotion to a warp power. To the Lord of Unspeakable Pleasures.'

Hasdrubal snorted. *'It is no surprise. The sslyth are predisposed to perversion.'*

'And they have had contact with the Emperor's Children,' said Gydrael.

*'Then their resurgence is no coincidence,'* said Decurius. *'The Emperor's Children hope to seed this world with them and undo all that the Astra Militarum achieved. That is why this phylum must be exterminated, brethren. That is why we are here.'*

Throughout the Vensine Sector, a massive upwelling of separatism, inspired and coordinated by the traitors of the Emperor's Children Legion, had gained a hold upon a dozen major Imperial worlds and almost a hundred lesser planets. The Inquisition suspected the Emperor's Children had laid the groundwork for the uprising for generations, planting deviant weaknesses in the bloodlines of the Imperial aristocracy and seeding populations with folklore and prophecy that spoke of a bloody revolution.

Heretic militias had seized planetary capitals. Saboteurs had scuttled Imperial battleships and assassins had murdered priests and lawmakers in their beds. The Emperor's Children themselves had been seen leading sermons that devolved into rites of excess and pain. Inquisitorial agents had been turned, obfuscating the full scale of the Traitor Legion's infiltration of the sector.

The Imperium's response was inevitable: a crusade that brought millions of Astra Militarum Guardsmen, dozens of ships of the Imperial Navy and a handful of Space Marine strike forces to the Vensine sector. Kolagar had been one of the first planets seized in a cruel and brutal campaign fought through its subequatorial jungles and across the steppes of its northern continent. The Astra Militarum had committed whole regiments to fighting the combination of corrupted native troops and cultist militias that infested the planet, and after a full year of fighting, Kolagar was

subjugated. Its hastily constructed airfields were converted into a staging post for campaigns launched against the nearby rebel worlds, and the planet became a link in the chain feeding men and starships into the front lines of what would become the Vensine Crusade.

Kolagar was supposed to be safe. It was supposed to be an example of the crusade's costly but inevitable victory. But then the sslyth, alien mercenaries who had plagued the sector for centuries as pirates and swords for hire, had struck from the jungle to ambush, mutilate and kill. The patterns and frequency of the attacks suggested more than a simple band of alien predators. The Ordo Xenos of the Inquisition took an interest, and its agents identified the three nidi around Phoenicus Peak as the source of the sslyth attacks.

Gydrael had wondered if the sslyth were there not just as opportunists and scavengers, but as participants in the Emperor's Children rebellion. The Ordo Xenos suspected the same, but investigating the xenos' motives was always secondary to their extermination.

It was no great surprise to learn the Emperor's Children were working directly with the sslyth, fostering in them strange new forms of worship and supplying them with weaponry. A threat on Kolagar, a world already supposed to be conquered, would distract the Imperial forces from expanding the Vensine Crusade and pushing back the heretics from the edges of their domain. It would tie up whole regiments in a campaign of extermination to flush out the resilient sslyth warclades one brood at a time, and turn the campaign's first victory into an unending cycle of massacre and reprisal.

But there was another way to fight the xenos.

Each nidus was too deep to be struck from the air, and too labyrinthine to be assaulted by a regular ground force. But one Space Marine, more than the equal of any sslyth and with the support of the Ordo, could reach the heart of the nest alone. And if he was equipped not just with gun or blade but with an infectious agent gene-keyed to the sslyth nervous system, he could wipe out an entire nidus.

And three such Space Marines, unleashing their virus bombs at the same time, could trigger a cascade that would infect the whole sslyth population of Phoenicus Peak and shatter the xenos presence on Kolagar.

It would be cause enough to exterminate so many xenos, of course, for

every Space Marine harboured a particular scorn and hatred for the alien. But to know he was striking at the plans of the Emperor's Children as well would make the operation a particularly satisfying fulfilment of duty.

Zameon Gydrael did not fight for the satisfaction of it. He fought because it was the duty of every Space Marine, of every human being, to strike back at the enemies seeking to bring about the end of the Imperium and the extinction of the human race. But even so, as he left the shrine in the knowledge that the Emperor's Children would rage at the loss of their xenos allies, he allowed himself a glimmer of anticipation of the victory to come.

*'Five heads!' crowed Hasdrubal over the vox. 'Five skulls I have taken to be cast into the flame! Ninety-five more and I will carry the jawbone of the last with me. I would wager the count with you, brothers, but you deny yourselves the joy of such things.'*

*'I've breached sea level,'* came Thorne's voice, ignoring the Storm Lord's boasting. *'The sslyth are buried deep. Minimal contact so far.'*

*'You're closing in on the nutrient nexus,'* said Decurius. *'Hold when you reach it. Gydrael, what is your position?'*

*'At the hatcheries,'* replied Gydrael.

*'Then the nexus will be a short distance below you,'* said Decurius. *'Deploy the virus at the same time, brothers, or the cascade will fail.'*

Gydrael was looking down at a chamber full of sslyth eggs. Each one was translucent, with the embryonic creature inside visible as it writhed and twitched in its nutrient fluid. That fluid was fed by the tendrils coiled along the floor and around each egg, drawing sustenance from the walls of the nidus and feeding it in.

There were well over a hundred eggs in the chamber. Several more chambers branched off, and others off them in turn – Nidus Tertiam contained tens of thousands of eggs, perhaps hundreds of thousands, each one a new enemy of the Imperium. The virus bomb would kill a good proportion of them instantly, but the infection cascade would wipe out every single one.

Gydrael had to pass through to reach a shaft three chambers away, leading downwards. He stepped carefully past the eggs, finding the floor spongy under his feet. He held his plasma pistol in front of him, taking care to

avoid disturbing the eggs and rousing the sslyth, but remaining alert for the other dangers he might be walking into.

The xenos guarded their eggs. With so many of them insensible in the breeding pool they had been slow to respond to Gydrael's presence, but the awakened sslyth would consider defending the hatcheries a priority. Gydrael was not surprised when he heard movement ahead, no doubt an egg tender who had to be eliminated or avoided before he could reach the nexus at the lowermost level of the nidus.

Gydrael backed against the wall and glanced into the next chamber.

The noise was coming not from a sslyth, but from a Space Marine.

Gydrael sighted down his plasma pistol. Power armour could turn most mundane blows, but a well-placed plasma blast would bore through ceramite. Gydrael sized up the shot even as his mind told him that something was not right.

Gydrael had been ready to face a traitor of the Emperor's Children. They had been rarely sighted and even more seldom fought by Imperial forces, but it made sense for them to be here to watch over their xenos allies – the sslyth were, after all, rarely beholden to any master for long without the constant threat of punishment. But he was not looking now at the polished purple and gilt colours of the Emperor's Children.

Instead, the Space Marine ahead of him wore black armour with a bare steel trim. He wore a tattered cloak of scaled sslyth hide over his armour, and Gydrael glimpsed the remnants of the Imperial Aquila on one shoulder guard. The symbol had been gouged and defaced.

*'I have reached the target,'* voxed Thorne. *'I'm holding position, but the sslyth are closing in. Move quickly, brothers.'*

*'Almost there,'* replied Hasdrubal. *'I have taken only four more damned heads. I'll claim a third of the final tally, brothers!'*

*'And you would be welcome to them, Storm Lord,'* said Decurius. *'Gydrael, report in.'*

Gydrael didn't reply.

He was watching the Space Marine slowly turn to face him. He wore no helm, and his face was long and drawn, with greyish skin and sunken eyes. He had the appearance of both extreme age and strength, with the sallowness of a greatly extended lifespan.

On his face was a charred handprint, running from the cheek to one

temple and the edge of his half-shaven scalp. A smile spread across his face as he looked Gydrael up and down.

Gydrael could have opened fire, but he knew the Space Marine would evade the shot and close in for the kill. Though he had never seen his opponent in the flesh, Gydrael recognised the heraldry of the enemy's armour, and especially the mark on his face. The memory of them rose from the regimented archive of his mind, throwing his carefully ordered consciousness into disarray.

'Well met, younger brother,' said the Space Marine with a smile.

Gydrael holstered his plasma pistol and drew his broadsword.

'Then you're not one for conversation,' said the Space Marine. 'A shame. I wait so long to see a familiar face, and they never want to speak of old times.'

'*Brother Gydrael,*' came Decurius' voice over the vox. '*Report. What is your—*'

Gydrael silenced the sergeant by cutting the channel link. Every part of him was focused on the figure before him.

'Well?' said the Space Marine. He drew his own weapon, a one-handed power sword with a long, slender blade. It was an archaic pattern that had fallen out of favour with the Chapter's officers long ago. The air crackled and spat around it as the power field activated. 'Are we going to do this?'

Gydrael's feet crunched through sslyth eggs as he charged. He didn't care about alerting the xenos now. A greater duty bore down on him, and its weight forced his sword-arm forward to strike.

His memories were churning. Normally ordered and obedient, now they swirled, fragments of them surfacing to break against his consciousness. One image that surfaced repeatedly, flashing in his mind even as he crossed the ground between himself his enemy, was a place of cold and dark, which had been burned into his mind...

It had been years ago, but it felt like decades. Centuries. Gydrael had revisited that place many times to rebuild those walls within himself, the fortress that concealed the truth even while the rules and philosophies of the Deathwatch were built over the surface.

That place was a chapel within the Rock, the fortress-monastery of the Dark Angels that floated through the void, an enormous fortified asteroid

riddled with chambers and tunnel networks. The chapel was a silent place far from the surface, a shrine to the Chapter's primarch Lion El'Jonson, large enough to contain a whole company of battle-brothers. There were only two in there now – Zameon Gydrael, and Interrogator-Chaplain Asmodai.

Asmodai rose from his knees, where he had been lighting the incense on the altar. The black stone image of the Lion stared down, approving of their secrecy. Asmodai wore the skull-like faceplate and ivory robes of the Interrogator-Chaplains – Gydrael had never seen him without them.

'Brother Gydrael,' said Asmodai. 'The coincidence of our meeting here is a fortunate one. There are words I would have pass between us, away from the ears of those you will soon fight alongside.'

There had been no coincidence. Asmodai had requested Gydrael's presence there, although his invitation, expressed in sideways and subtle language, would never have been openly acknowledged by either.

'Fortunate indeed,' he said.

'When you leave for the Deathwatch,' said Asmodai, 'it will be many years before you return to us. Our obligations to the Inquisition require us to give you over to Ordo Xenos command completely, and there is no telling where you will be sent or for how long. This will be the last chance we have to speak directly, and without observation.'

'I will stay a Dark Angel no matter what colours I wear,' replied Gydrael.

'I have no doubt of that,' said Asmodai. 'But I would be derelict in my duty if I did not satisfy myself that you understand what that means.'

'I know the matters of which you speak,' said Gydrael, 'and I know my duty. The Chapter demands it of us all.'

'And yet,' said Asmodai, looking up towards the stone face of the Primarch, 'I must hear it in as many words from you.'

'I will continue the search,' said Gydrael.

'The Fallen think they can hide,' said Asmodai. 'Every one of them is convinced he has found the perfect nest from which to plan his treacheries. But we have found our own ways to hunt them down. The Deathwatch is one of them. You will go to places the Dark Angels will be unable to search, to places where we are not welcome. You will be thrown against the foulest of xenos and the xenophiles who consort with them, but even while you fight with all the zeal for which we are renowned, you must

never forget what your duty truly is.’

‘I will be on the hunt until I die,’ said Gydrael. ‘And beyond, if fate wills it.’

‘Good,’ said Asmodai. ‘There is a reason you were chosen above all your battle-brothers when the Inquisition called on us to contribute to the Deathwatch. Your eyes are sharp and your mind is keen. That is our greatest weapon in the hunt for the Fallen. Go forth, Brother Gydrael, and bring us glory.’

‘I shall, my lord,’ said Gydrael, kneeling for a moment of prayer before the altar.

‘And brother,’ said Asmodai, as he turned to leave the chapel, ‘be sure to miss nothing.’

The Fallen.

No one could really understand what the Fallen were, save for a Dark Angel. They were not traitors, because traitors could be redeemed through sacrifice and made pure again in death. The Fallen could not be redeemed. Their crime was against the human race, not just against the Imperium – against the very concepts of loyalty and duty, not just against the Dark Angels.

His Chapter would never try to explain the Fallen to anyone else. Not the other Chapters of the Adeptus Astartes, not the Inquisition, not even the other members of the Deathwatch. It was a matter for the Dark Angels and their successors alone.

Gydrael charged after the Fallen, parrying a thrust of the power sword and driving his shoulder into the enemy’s chest. The warrior pivoted and Gydrael stumbled forwards, momentarily out of control.

The sword lashed up at him. Gydrael barely turned it aside. The impact threw him against the wall behind him and he crunched into it, fragments of resin raining down around him.

The Fallen lunged, leading with the point of his sword. Gydrael caught the blade against the guard of his own, the swords shuddering as their power fields intersected. Gydrael led the warrior past him into the wall, and the impact took his enemy straight through the partition of slyth secretions.

The two Space Marines were drawn through and into the space adjoining

the hatchery. It was a part of the original monastery, relatively untouched by the intrusion of the sslyth. False columns broke up the dark stone walls, and the arched ceiling was hung with cobwebs. Dust and detritus collected in the corners and the cracked paving slabs were discoloured with mould.

Manacles hung on the walls. A rusting framework stood in the centre of the room, of a size and shape for a human to be held spread-eagled against it by the restraints hanging from its crossbars. A trio of cages, each large enough to contain a man, stood against the far wall.

It was a chamber of punishments – or of meditation, where the monks of Phoenicus Peak had once brought themselves closer to their Emperor through pain. The Fallen steadied himself against the wall, jangling the length of rusting chain. Gydrael halted his fall by dropping to one knee, bringing the broadsword up into a solid guard.

He felt the weight of the virus canister at his hip.

Two duties pulled at Gydrael. His role in the mission was clear, and if he did not fulfil that role, the mission would fail. It was an easy decision for any Space Marine.

Any except a Dark Angel. He had a greater duty, one that superseded all others. One driven by the survival of the Chapter, of the Imperium, of the human race.

No one else would ever understand. Gydrael told himself that as he parried a speculative slash from the Fallen, circling around to put the restraining frame between himself and his foe.

‘I know what you are,’ said Gydrael.

‘Do you?’ said the Fallen. ‘Your mortal ancestors were not yet born when I learned the truth. What I have seen, you would have to dig through ten thousand years of lies to uncover. I think you know very little, younger brother.’

‘I am not your brother, Averamus,’ said Gydrael.

The Fallen smiled, distorting the scar on his face. ‘So, I’m famous?’

‘You have the Mark of Scorn upon you,’ said Gydrael. ‘Where the Primarch laid his hand as you swore your first oaths of loyalty, there the mark of your treachery remains. How many times have you sought to use synthetic flesh or bionics to mask it? But it always comes back. I have learned of Averamus, and how he fled from justice. The shame of your survival besmirches us all. I will clean it away.’

‘I had not credited my former brethren with so rich an imagination,’ said Averamus. ‘What fascinating tales they spin.’

‘Do not speak of them, traitor,’ growled Gydrael, sizing up Averamus. The Fallen was an expert in his sword form, and Gydrael had never trained against it – fast, slender blades like Averamus’ were long gone from the Chapter’s armoury. He had faced foes with similar weapons and fighting styles, but never a Space Marine.

The warrior grinned. ‘You do not know what treachery is.’

A cut to the head would be met with a slice to the gut. Gydrael might connect, but by the time his own blade hit home he would be disembowelled, even through his armour. A thrust could be turned aside too easily and answered with a close strike inside Gydrael’s guard. The broadsword could cut right through Averamus, but the Fallen was too quick to be caught in its arc.

‘You serve the Emperor’s Children,’ said Gydrael. He was buying seconds, goading the Fallen into defending his existence while he searched for a way to land the killing blow. ‘Are you just the nursemaid to the sslyth? Or did you broker their subservience to the Traitor Legion? You kneel to the enemies of mankind. I need no other definition of treachery.’

‘You have no idea what is happening in this system,’ said Averamus. The two of them were still circling, Averamus looking for his own way in past Gydrael’s broadsword. ‘You think I am a blind follower of those deviants? I will bring down empires of the warp that your kind never even knew existed. I will send the enemies of every human screaming into the abyss. I do it from the shadows, from the very throne room of those I will destroy. You can try to stop me, little brother, but I have been on this path for thousands of years and my will is stronger than yours.’

‘You lie,’ said Gydrael.

‘Maybe I do,’ said Averamus, ‘maybe not. But you are going to die here, so you will never know.’

Averamus struck first. He went straight through the framework in the centre of the room, scattering its rusted beams. Gydrael met him with a counter-stroke, aiming a sideways swipe at the Fallen’s torso. Averamus dropped and rolled under the blow but Gydrael had read the move, and aimed a kick that snapped Averamus’ head back.

The Fallen rolled with the blow, hooking an arm around Gydrael’s leg and

throwing him across the floor. Gydrael sprawled and the Fallen was upon him, the two wrestling now, too close to bring their swords to bear.

‘You cannot kill me,’ snarled Gydrael as the two grappled face to face. ‘Not while my duty is yet undone.’

‘I don’t have to kill you,’ said Averamus. He smiled again. The Mark of Scorn was livid red against his pallid face. ‘*He will.*’

Something huge slammed against the other side of the chamber wall. Stones dislodged and a clatter of rubble fell. Gydrael let go of Averamus and rolled away, bringing his sword up to ward off the opportunistic slash that Averamus aimed at his neck. Gydrael jumped to his feet and put two long strides between himself and his enemy, ready to face the second threat.

The wall of the chamber collapsed, spilling a drift of broken stone into the chamber. A massive, blocky shape stepped through, and Gydrael registered the purple colours of the armour plating, the gilded eagle’s wing worn in mockery of Imperial heraldry.

It was a Dreadnought of the Emperor’s Children.

It was easily twice Gydrael’s height. Both its arms ended in massive fists and the armoured sarcophagus was as impenetrable as a tank. The Dreadnought’s heraldry was of a quartered human body, depicted with loving skill on the frontal armour. The quartered corpse was rendered in sculpted gold on one leg plate, and again on the left shoulder unit. Through a vision slit in the middle of the sarcophagus came a sickly green glow, and those parts of the Dreadnought not covered in gold plate were painted in an obscenely sumptuous purple.

It looked as much a monument to excess as a war machine. The images of a profane feast were worked into the golden sculptures – plates heaped with human heads, chalices filled from the slit bellies of spitted bodies, bunches of severed hands and torsos hung like sides of cattle.

Gydrael’s mind dissected and filed away every detail as he sized up this new and enormous threat. Most men would only see the Dreadnought’s huge size and brutal crushing fists, but Gydrael saw it all.

*The detail you miss will kill you.*

*Therefore, miss nothing.*

‘Ancient Xezukoth,’ exclaimed Averamus. ‘I promised you a new plaything! And this one will take some real punishment before it breaks!’

‘Are you Ferrus Manus?’ said the Dreadnought, its voice a bass rumble blaring from the vox-casters mounted on its hull. Its power fists clenched and unclenched as its visual sensors focused on Gydrael. ‘No, I saw him beheaded by the Perfected One. Are you Guilliman? No, I saw his throat slit. But you are close enough.’

The Dreadnought advanced on Gydrael. It swung a power fist and Gydrael ducked it. The air was seared by the power field crackling above him. The second fist surged down and Gydrael rolled out of the way.

A dark chuckling came from the vox-casters. ‘Run!’ said Xezukoth. ‘Dance for me!’

‘Good luck, little brother!’ called out Averamus as he retreated from the chamber, leaving Gydrael facing the Dreadnought alone.

Gydrael could have pursued him, but he would not have made it halfway across the room with the Dreadnought at his back. He crushed down his fury, denying it full run of his mind. He would find Averamus and kill him. That duty had not disappeared – it still burned as bright and weighed as heavy.

But to fulfil it, he had to get past Ancient Xezukoth.

The Dreadnought wheeled and crunched through the rubble, seeking to run Gydrael down and crush him underfoot. Gydrael ducked back through the hole through which he and the Fallen had entered, back into the hatchery. Eggs crunched messily under his feet. The nidus was full of sslyth wailing.

‘I taste the fires of Isstvan!’ cried Ancient Xezukoth. ‘I know the colours you wear. You are the Emperor’s vermin! You are he who would deny the galaxy its perfection! Do you see my Lord Fulgrim watching? I shall make of you a work of art worthy of his notice.’

The sarcophagus was armoured too thickly for the plasma pistol to penetrate. The eye slit looked like a weak spot but Gydrael knew something of how the Dark Angels’ own Dreadnoughts were constructed, and the slit was no more than a decoration to hint at the human being interred inside the machine. Ancient Xezukoth, the crippled and evidently insane III Legion traitor inside the Dreadnought, was well protected and without an obvious weak spot to reach him.

*Miss nothing.*

The Dreadnought slammed a fist down, shuddering the floor. Gydrael

barely kept his footing, and had he fallen the other fist would have pounded down and flattened him. He could not fight like this forever, circling the crazed machine, giving and taking ground. It was piloted by a Space Marine, but it was still a machine. He would falter before it did. And he might cut at it a thousand times before it felt any ill effects – Xezukoth, on the other hand, only needed to land one blow to end the fight.

It charged at Gydrael, who was a split second too slow to get out of its way. It hit him at full speed and he held on to its sarcophagus as it barrelled forwards. Gydrael slammed into the wall of the hatchery and kept going as the encrustations shattered against him. The stone wall gave way in turn as the Dreadnought crashed through.

Gydrael rocked from a blow to the back of his head. He lost his grip and fell, tumbling beneath the Dreadnought, barely avoiding the machine's enormous feet. He forced himself upright, aware that his plasma pistol was gone – he still had his sword, but the pistol was somewhere in the wreckage of the fallen wall.

The sky was open above him. The Dreadnought had smashed through the hatchery and out onto the slopes of Phoenicus Peak. The tips of the mountain range rose all around like the spires of vast stone crown, spinning wispy clouds between them under an ice-blue sky.

Gydrael had emerged on a scarp above the tree line. Below, the lower slopes were covered with dense jungle. A host of birds had taken flight at the sudden noise and disturbance, and were wheeling in dark clouds overhead. Each valley between the mountains was a dark green abyss of choked and tangled vegetation through which the sslyth could slither and writhe, but which was near-impassable for a human soldier. The xenos had chosen their nesting place well.

The Dreadnought turned around, the stamping of its feet against the rock echoing around the mountain peaks. Gydrael could feel the injuries he had sustained – the salves dispensed by his armour had dulled them, but now they were catching up with him. A fractured skull. A wrenched shoulder. Cracked ribcage where the breastplate of his armour had buckled. He could still fight, but not for much longer. He would slow down and become less coordinated, but the Dreadnought would not.

He would not defeat the Dreadnought, not like this. The cut and thrust of

combat would favour the war machine over time.

There had to be another way.

The Dreadnought's decoration was covered in the imagery of debauchery. It was suggestive of a foul ritual of consumption. Before he had been interred in the Dreadnought, Xezukoth must have partaken of such feasting. The Emperor's Children were seekers of new and obscene experiences, as demanded of them by the worship of Slaanesh. It was through the profane feast that this one had found such experience.

And he still did.

Gydrael glanced at the front of the sarcophagus even as he ducked another blow and leapt back from another. Would this traitor forgo the ritual of the feast, just because he was locked inside a ceramite-plated war machine? Of course not. Nothing would stop him from slaking his foul desires. And outside the Dreadnought his nervous system would not function – he would be blind and deaf, and stripped of all sense of touch and taste. There was a way in. Xezukoth had to be fed.

He saw it then – a hairline seam in the gilding around the front of the sarcophagus. It described a square below the false vision slit, almost invisible among the sculpted visions of dismemberment.

'You are not Ferrus Manus,' growled the Dreadnought. 'You are not Guilliman. I know the winged dagger on your shoulder. You are the Lion! You are the shadowed one! Oh what joy, for I shall feast upon the flesh of the Angel!'

Gydrael would have one shot before the Dreadnought realised what was happening. As insane as he was, Xezukoth was still a Space Marine and he would still know when an enemy sensed a weakness. Gydrael put his head down and ran at Xezukoth, leaping up onto the front of the sarcophagus.

He wielded his sword one-handed, finding a handhold among the carvings with his other hand. He drew his sword back. It would be easier with a short blade, one designed to stab and punch, but his broadsword would have to do.

All the lumbering Xezukoth had to do was reach up and grab Gydrael with his great power fist, ripping him off and crushing him. Gydrael had only seconds at most.

Gydrael rammed the blade into the top of the section of armour. The blade slid into the seam, forcing it open with a burst of its power field. The

hatch sprang open, creating a square black mouth in the centre of the Dreadnought's front armour.

The opening was lined with metallic grinding blades, still stained and clotted with gore. A whole body could be forced into there, reduced to sludge by the grinders. It was through this that Xezukoth could be fed his ritual feasts, churned up and siphoned directly down his gullet. Gydrael drew back his arm again, and drove the whole blade into the opening.

He felt resistance as his sword stripped the teeth from the grinders. He rammed it home again and this time the blade slid all the way.

Gydrael knew well the feeling of muscle and bone giving way beneath his sword's blade. He felt it then as the sword punctured the flesh concealed by the sarcophagus. He felt organic matter parting, before the tip of the broadsword lodged in the power plant at the back of the war machine.

A strangled, gurgling cry came from the vox-casters. Gydrael felt a wave of savage satisfaction as he twisted the blade.

The Dreadnought sank down, hydraulics hissing. One arm fell impotently to its side, cracking against the rock of the mountainside. The other waved aimlessly before Xezukoth lost control of it and it fell limp and useless too.

Gydrael pulled the blade out. He dropped to the ground and the Dreadnought slumped to one side. Blood trickled from the hatchway.

Warily, Gydrael glanced around and reopened the vox channel.

*'Once more – I am deploying the virus!'* came Thorne's voice. *'Then I am falling back! We cannot wait any longer!'*

*'Deploying,'* Hasdrubal growled. *'Taste this, xenos filth!'*

Gydrael looked down at the virus canister hanging from his belt. A terrible howling was coming from the nidus, echoed from the other two nests around Phoenicus Peak. Every sslyth in the nest was awake, dragging itself out of the breeding pool or slithering from its burrow. Gydrael would not be able to re-enter and reach the nutrient nexus, and even if he did, there was little point. The virus had already been deployed elsewhere.

The cascade reaction could not be restarted.

*'I know you can hear me,'* said Gydrael, knowing that the dying Dreadnought's own vox-feeds would be picking up his voice. *'I will find you, Averamus. I have your trail now. I will find you.'*

There was no answer.

A figure emerged from the tree line, in the black armour of the Deathwatch.

‘I saw you,’ said Brother Molgurr. He wore the skull emblem of the Mortifactors Chapter on his shoulder guard. ‘You brought the war machine down single-handed. A fine kill, brother.’

Gydrael remembered that Molgurr and Decurius had been watching the area as the rest of the kill team executed their mission. They had seen the fight with Ancient Xezukoth, but Gydrael wished they hadn’t.

‘*I have a visual on you, Brother Gydrael,*’ voxed Decurius. ‘*Report. You have been silent for too long.*’

‘The traitor Dreadnought waylaid me. I could not deploy the virus.’

‘*Torment yourself later. Fall back to my position. Cover Thorne and Hasdrubal.*’

Molgurr led the way. Overhead the birds were still wheeling, the ruby-feathered flocks that had given Phoenicus Peak its name. The jungle they inhabited served as the perfect cover for the sslyth broods that stalked the Imperial forces on Kolagar, and for now, it would continue to do so.

‘I will find you,’ Gydrael murmured to himself.

And somehow, he was sure that Averamus heard him.

Many thousands of sslyth died in the assault on Phoenicus Peak. The two virus bombs wiped out most of the hatcheries and devastated the warclade that was using the mountains as its breeding ground and base of operations.

The virus did not achieve the pandemic levels required to wipe out the sslyth population entirely. The sslyth in Nidus Tertiam escaped the worst of the infection and so a segment of the population remained uninfected before the fast-killing virus burned itself out. They fled into the jungle, and Imperial intelligence lost track of them among the river ways and swamps of the Blackwine Delta.

The Deathwatch kill team was withdrawn from Kolagar. The task of exterminating the sslyth was given to the hard-pressed squads of jungle fighters drawn from the Astra Militarum’s death world veterans. The intelligence that the sslyth were allies of the Emperor’s Children was passed up the Imperial chain of command.

Men continued to die.

Gydrael watched the servitors on board the Inquisitorial cutter buckling down the sarcophagus of Ancient Xezukoth. The Dreadnought had been salvaged from the mountainside as the cutter descended to pick up the kill team, after helping to cover Thorne and Hasdrubal's exfiltration from the other two sslyth nests. The Ordos could have much to learn from the Dreadnought, and if nothing else, it denied the ancient war machine to the Emperor's Children.

'The crew say we're heading for the next deployment already,' said Brother Hasdrubal. The lightning bolt symbol of the Storm Lords was emblazoned across one shoulder pad, and Hadrubal's flat, brutal face was topped by a single braid of oiled black hair. He indicated the Dreadnought. 'Of all of us to claim such a kill, it had to be the Dark Angel. Your kind wouldn't crack a smile if you had Abaddon's own head on a plate. Me, I'd have this thing mounted over the gates of our fortress, after the Inquisition had finished their tinkering.'

'They are welcome to it,' said Gydrael. 'My Chapter will know of what I have done. It is among them my deeds will be weighed.'

'We left plenty of sslyth dead on Kolagar. If that doesn't get you crowing, we'll be after the greenskins on the Eastern Fringe next. Reap a tally of them, see how that loosens you up.'

'I do not fight for glory,' said Gydrael. 'I do my duty. I seek nothing more.'

'Everyone seeks something more than that,' said Hasdrubal. 'I can tell, Dark Angel. You're not as mysterious as you like to think. Keep it to yourself if you must, but there's something that drives you on. We all have it. Duty alone is never enough.'

'The traitor's corpse is stowed,' said Gydrael. 'I shall retire to my cell. I must meditate on the mission.'

Gydrael left the Storm Lord in the cutter's hold. The ship was small by voidfaring standards, but it still had enough space to give each member of the kill team a cell insulated from the din of the engines and the hubbub of the crew. It was here that each Space Marine saw to his wargear rites, reviewed his mission archives, and prayed. Gydrael's cell was simple and plain, as befitted a Dark Angel's humility. A shelf of battle histories and war-prayers shared a wall with an icon of the Dark Angels Primarch, Lion El'Jonson, crushing the Void Meridian uprising during the Great Crusade.

The opposite wall held dozens of weapons racked up, with combat knives of every size and type and three marks of bolter with maintenance and cleaning tools. A stand for Gydrael's armour took up one corner.

Gydrael knelt on the floor and took down one of the books, a volume of prayers to banish doubt, alongside reflections on actions in combat. He opened the book, and from the hidden hollow cut into its pages he took out a slender dataslate. He thumbed the activation rune and the screen lit up. He felt his injuries now – the ship's Apothecary had patched him up but his body would do the healing, knitting back together the torn muscles and bone during the voyage to the Eastern Fringe.

'Brother Zameon Gydrael,' he said into the device. 'Recipient, Master Interrogator-Chaplain Asmodai. My search has borne fruit. I encountered Averamus on the planet Kolagar. He was as the histories described. The Mark of Scorn was upon him. He was in league with the Emperor's Children, but they intervened before I could bring Averamus to justice.'

The dataslate would convert Gydrael's words into a secure data packet. It would then be sent to a relay station and further translated into a symbol string to be transmitted astropathically to the Rock. The Dark Angels' astropathic codes had never been breached. No one would know the message's contents save Gydrael himself, and Lord Asmodai.

'I broke my oaths to the Deathwatch,' continued Gydrael. 'The mission at Kolagar failed because of me. I pursued the Fallen instead of completing my objective. These are the duties I have to my Chapter and to my Imperium, and I was never in any doubt as to what path I would take if they came into conflict. But... I faltered. For a moment, when I saw I was facing one of the Fallen, I felt that shadow within me. I had to choose.'

'Many men will die because the sslyth were not wiped out on Kolagar. Men of the Astra Militarum, and others. I feel the guilt for those deaths within me, for it was within my power to stop them. But I shall crush that guilt down deep within me, and banish it. And instead, I choose to see their blood on Averamus' hands.'

Gydrael turned his helmet over in his grip. It was still grimy from the fighting in the nidus. Sslyth blood and scales clung to the black-painted plating. He slid off a gauntlet and vambrace – they were similarly filthy from battle. The smell of the sslyth clung to him.

'I ask an indulgence from my Chapter, Lord Asmodai,' continued

Gydrael. ‘When Averamus is brought to justice, if I still live, I shall be the one to execute him. For all that have died and will die by his hand, I would have vengeance on Averamus the Fallen. By my oaths to my Chapter and to the Deathwatch, and all the relics of the Rock, I would take his head. Sealed by the vox-print of Brother Zameon Gydrael, in the name of the Primarch and the Emperor Most High.’

Gydrael deactivated the dataslate and continued to remove his armour, lining up the segments on the floor of the cell. He took a polishing cloth and compound from the tools racked on the wall and began to clean the blood of the sslyth off his armour.

He murmured prayers to the armour’s machine-spirit, asking it to remain unbroken, as he settled in to a lengthy session of wargear rites.

It would be a long time before the true dirt was wiped away.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Ben Counter** is one of Black Library's most popular Warhammer 40,000 authors, with two Horus Heresy novels to his name – *Galaxy in Flames* and *Battle for the Abyss*. He is the author of the Soul Drinkers series and *The Grey Knights Omnibus*. For Space Marine Battles he has written *The World Engine* and *Malodrax*, and has turned his attention to the Space Wolves with the novella *Arjac Rockfist: Anvil of Fenris* and a number of short stories. He is a fanatical painter of miniatures, a pursuit which has won him his most prized possession: a prestigious Golden Demon award. He lives in Portsmouth, England.

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