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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Author of the Soul Drinkers and Grey Knights series, freelance writer **Ben Counter** is one of Black Library's most popular SF authors, and has written RPG supplements and comics books as well as novels. 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, where he can sometimes be seen indulging his enthusiasm for amateur dramatics on the local stage.

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BROTHER CAIUS DIED first.

The walls folded in on themselves, revealing rows of teeth lining the inside of a vast bristling throat. Caius had been the slowest to react. The rest of the squad threw themselves into the alcoves along the tunnel, which each contained statues of Space Marines with their armour covered in the ornate chalice of the Soul Drinkers. Caius's leg had snagged on the spikes and he had been dragged down the throat as it rippled and constricted; the sound of grinding stone competing with the tearing muscle and bone.

Caius did not scream. Perhaps he did not want to show weakness in his final moments. Perhaps he did not have time. When the corridor reformed, Caius's vermilion blood ran down the carvings and no other trace of his body remained.

Borakis hissed with frustration as Caius's lifesigns winked out on his retinal display.

'Caius!' shouted Orfos. 'Brother! Speak to us!'

'He is gone, scout,' said Borakis.

Kalliax held his bolt pistol close to his face, his lips almost touching the top of the weapon's housing. He crouched in the alcove opposite Borakis. 'Repaid in blood shall every drop be,' he said, face set.

'First, your duty,' said Borakis. 'Then let your thoughts turn to revenge.'

'This place was a trap!' replied Kalliax. 'I should have seen it. By the hands of Dorn, why did I not see it? Some mechanism, something that should not be here, it should have been obvious to me!'

'If you think you killed our brother,' said Borakis sternly, 'then take that pistol and administer your vengeance to yourself. If not, focus on your duty. This place was a trap, but it was not placed here in isolation. It protects something. That is what we have come here to find.'

The sound of breaking stone came from the alcove in which Brother Laokan had taken cover. The remnants of the alcove's statue toppled into the tunnel and smashed on the floor.

'Speak, novice!' ordered Borakis.

'Through here,' said Laokan. 'This is a false tunnel. Behind this wall is another way.'

Borakis braced his arms against the alcove walls and kicked hard against the statue. The wall behind gave way and the statue fell into the void beyond, revealing a long, low space lit by yellowish muted glow-globes set into the walls.

'Follow, brothers!' said Borakis.

Kalliax and Orfos kicked their way through the false wall and followed the sergeant into the hidden space. They had not yet completed their transition into full Space Marines but their strength was already far beyond that of normal men.

Up ahead of Borakis was a chapel with an altar, at the far end of the long room. The ceiling loomed down low, hung with stalactites that had formed from water dripping down. The altar was a solid block of grey stone topped with a gilded triptych depicting Rogal Dorn standing in the centre of a battle scene.

Borakis took the point himself this time. Now he knew there was danger here, he had a duty to place himself in its way, for part of his duty was to see his young charges safely back to the Chapter.

On the altar stood a chalice cut from black stone, studded with emeralds. Borakis kept his shotgun levelled on the altar as he approached it. The scouts spread out behind him.

The altarpiece's rendition of Rogal Dorn was in gold with diamond eyes. Dorn was twice as

tall as the gilded warrior battling alongside him. The enemy were aliens, or perhaps mutants, humanoid but with gills and talons. Dorn was crushing them beneath his feet. It was a passable work. Dozens of higher quality could be found in the chapels and shrines of the *Phalanx*.

'Sergeant?' said Orfos. 'Anything?'

Borakis leant closer to the altar. The chalice was not empty. Something shimmered darkly inside it. In the dim light it was impossible to tell, but it looked like blood.

Blood could not remain liquid down here for the length of time the chapel had evidently been sealed. Borakis knew the smell of blood well enough. He put his face close to the chalice and sniffed, knowing his genhanced senses would confirm what the liquid was.

Borakis's breath misted against the polished stone. He noticed for the first time the thin silvery wires covering the chalice in a network of circuitry.

The warmth and moistness of a human breath made the filaments move. Expanding, they completed a circuit, wired through the base of the chalice to the mechanism behind the trip-tych.

Rogal Dorn's diamond eyes flashed red. A pencil-thin beam glittered across the chamber.

Sergeant Borakis fell, twin holes bored through his skull by the pulse of laser.

'Back!' shouted Laokan. 'Fall back!'

Kalliax darted forwards to grab Borakis's body by the collar of his armour and drag him away from the altar. The panels of the triptych slid aside, each revealing the veiny flesh of a gunservitor supporting double-barrelled autoguns. Green and red lights flashed over Kalliax as he tried to scramble away, hauling Borakis's corpse with him.

The autoguns opened up, the gunfire filling the chamber to bursting. Kalliax almost made it to the hole leading to the tunnel. His armour almost held for the extra second he needed. Bursts of torn ceramite, then blood and meat, spattered from his back as bullets hit home. Kalliax fell to the floor as a shot blew his thigh open, revealing a wet red mess tangled around his shattered femur. Kalliax dropped Borakis's body and returned fire with his bolt pistol. His face and upper chest disappeared in a cloud of red.

Laokan and Orfos broke back into the tunnel, its walls still wet with Caius's blood. Orfos saw Kalliax die, and he felt that same instinct that must have seized Kalliax – grab the body of his fallen battle-brother, carry him back to the Chapter, see him interred with honour alongside the rest of the Chapter's venerated dead. But Orfos choked down the thought. That was what had killed Kalliax. Orfos would leave him to be entombed in this place. That was the way it had to be.

The back wall was falling in, showering the altar with rubble. The gun-servitors, one with a gun arm hanging limp thanks to Kalliax's bolter fire, lumbered out of their hiding place towards the surviving scouts.

'Don't look back!' shouted Laokan above the gunfire, and pushed Orfos into the carved corridor.

The walls shifted again. Orfos made a decision with the quickness of mind that years of hypnodoctrination and battle training had given him. He could go for the entrance of the tunnel, to escape back into the valley. But Caius had died in that stretch of tunnel – Orfos knew that way was certainly trapped. That certainty did not exist for the other direction, deeper into the structure built into the hillside. It was not particularly compelling logic, but it was all he had.

Orfos broke into a sprint towards the darkness at the far end of the tunnel. Laokan was on his heels, and the racket of the gunfire was joined by the grinding of stone on stone. The tunnel was closing up again, the ripple of shifting panels accelerating towards them from the tunnel entrance. Chunks of Caius's body were revealed, tumbling around the vortex of stone. A severed hand, a battered and featureless head, Caius's bolt pistol warped out of shape.

Orfos was fast. In the tests after each surgical procedure, he had always been. The sergeants of the Tenth Company had suggested his aptitude was for the Doctrines of Assault due to his

speed and decisiveness of action.

Laokan was not so fast. He was a marksman. A trailing arm was caught between spiked panels and Laokan was yanked back off his feet. Orfos heard Laokan yell in shock and pain, and turned long enough to grab Laokan's boot, pulling his fellow scout free of the chewing throat.

Laokan's arm came off, bone and sinew chewed through. Laokan collapsed onto Orfos and tried to propel himself forwards, buying time for them both. Orfos grabbed Laokan's remaining arm and dragged him behind him as he carried on running.

Laokan snagged on something. Orfos hauled harder and dragged Laokan along with him, every nerve straining to keep his battle-brother free of the fate that had claimed Caius.

There was no light now. Even the scout's augmented vision, almost the equal of a full Space Marine's, could make out nothing but dense shadow.

The floor gave way beneath Orfos's feet. The lip of a stone pit slammed into the side of his head as he fell, and teeth cracked in his jaw. He was aware, on the edge of consciousness, of his body battering against the carved sides of the pit as he and Laokan fell.

ORFOS WOKE, AND realised that he had been knocked out. He cursed himself. Even if only for a moment, he should fight for awareness at all times. He had no bolt pistol in his hand, either. He had dropped his weapon. Borakis would assign him field punishment for such a failing. But Borakis, recalled Orfos with a lurch, was dead.

Orfos could still see nothing. He fumbled with the tactical light mounted on the shoulder of his breastplate. The light winked on and fell on the face of another stone Space Marine, far larger than in the alcoves above – twice life-size. Orfos read the inscription on the storm shield carried in the statue's left hand, a counterpart to the chainsword in its right. It read APOLLONIOS. Orfos recognised the trappings of a Chaplain among the weapons and armour of an assault-captain. Beside the statue was another of a Chaplain, this one inscribed with the name ACIAR.

'Brother,' said Orfos. 'Brother, what of this place? What have we found?'

Laokan did not reply. Orfos looked for his brother, who must have also been knocked out in the fall.

Laokan lay a short distance from Orfos, next to Orfos's bolt pistol. Laokan's body was gone from the mid-torso down, and trails of organs lay behind him in bloody loops. Laokan was face down, nose in the dust.

Orfos knelt beside Laokan's corpse. 'Forgive me, brother,' he said, but the words seemed meaningless as they fell dead against the chamber walls. 'I can pray for you later. I will, brother. I promise I will.'

Orfos picked up his bolt pistol and let the light play around the chamber. A third statue was mounted high up, above the lintel of a doorway framing a pair of steel blast doors. This statue, again of a Space Marine Chaplain, bore the name THEMISKON. Orfos recognised the chalice symbol on the statue's shoulder pad, echoing the statues in the alcoves above. It was the symbol of the Soul Drinkers.

Another crime laid at the feet of the Soul Drinkers – this death trap, laid out to claim the lives of good Imperial Fists. Orfos spat on the floor. Whatever holiness this place might have had for the Soul Drinkers, Orfos wanted to defile it. Whatever it meant to them, he wanted it made meaning-less.

Orfos looked up. The walls of a shaft rose above him. The carvings were probably deep enough to climb, but it would not be easy, and another fall might break a leg or an arm and render him unable to escape that way. He turned his attention to the door.

The metal was cold, drinking the warmth from Orfos's hands and face from a good distance away. A control panel was set into the stone. Orfos was not in enough of a hurry to press any of the buttons. He put a hand to the metal – it was freezing, and this close Orfos's breath misted in the air.

The doors slid open. Orfos jumped back, bolt pistol held level. Beyond the doors was darkness

- the light on Orfos's armour glinted off ice and played through freezing mist that rolled from between the doors.

Orfos stepped slowly away from the doors. 'Whoever you may be,' he called, 'whatsoever fate you may have decided for me, know that I will fight it! I am an Imperial Fist! Die here I may, but it is as a Fist I shall die!'

The doors were open. The lump of ice inside, hooked up to the walls by thick cables hung with icicles, shuddered. An inner heat sent cracks blinking through its mass. Chunks of ice fell away. Orfos glimpsed ceramite within, painted dark purple under the frost.

The ice crumbled to reveal a shape familiar to Orfos. A massive square body on a bipedal chassis, squat cylindrical legs supported by spayed feet of articulated metal. The blocky shoulder mounts each carried a weapon – one a missile launcher, the other a barrel-shaped power fist ringed with flat steel fingers.

It was a Dreadnought – a walking war machine. All the Dreadnoughts of the Imperial Fists were piloted by Space Marines who had been crippled in battle, who were kept alive by the Dreadnought's life-support systems and permitted to carry on their duties as soldiers of the Emperor even after their bodies were ruined and useless. The Dreadnought's sarcophagus was covered in purity seals and the symbol of a gilded chalice was emblazoned across the front.

Orfos's bolt pistol would do nothing to the Dreadnought's armoured body. The power fist could crush Orfos with such ease that the pilot, if there was one, would barely register the resistance provided by Orfos's body before his armour and skeleton gave way.

It would be quick. A Space Marine did not fear pain, but Orfos did not see the need to pursue it as some Imperial Fists did. He had made his stand. He had not run; he had done his best to keep his battle-brothers alive. His conscience was clear. He told himself he could die. He tried to force himself to believe it.

The Dreadnought shifted on its powerful legs and the fingers of the power fist flexed. Flakes of ice fell off it. The cables unhooked and fell loose, showering the chamber floor with more chunks of ice. Lights flickered as the Dreadnought's power plant turned over and the chamber was filled with the rhythmic thrum of it.

'All this talk of death,' came the Dreadnought's voice, a synthesised bass rumble issuing from the vox-units mounted on the hull. 'Such morbidity. I have no wish to disappoint you, novice, but you will not die here.'

Orfos swallowed. 'What are you?' he said. 'Why lie you here, in a place designed to kill?'

'Your obtuseness has not yet been trained out of you,' said the voice again. Orfos looked for some vision slit so he might glimpse the pilot inside, but he could find none. 'My tomb was built to ensure that none but a Space Marine could make it this far. So sad the Imperial Fists chose to send scouts to do the work of a full battle-brother. But you have made it, and I have no intention to see you go the way of that unfortunate brother who lies behind you.'

'That is an answer to only one question,' said Orfos. 'I asked you two.'

'Then I shall introduce myself,' said the Dreadnought. 'I am Daenyathos of the Soul Drinkers.'