

# THE BLEEDING CHALICE

A Warhammer 40,000 novel by Ben Counter

LONG YEARS HAVE PASSED since the Soul Drinkers Space Marines were declared ex-communicate and many Imperial agents have been despatched to destroy this once loyal Chapter. Sarpedon, the stoic leader of the fallen Marines, has become hellbent on finding some way of curing his battle-brothers of the cursed mutations inflicted upon them. After numerous false trails and dead ends, he has stumbled upon the most tentative of leads which promises them a final redemption in the eyes of the God-Emperor. But can they stay alive long enough to prove their loyalty?



*Ben Counter* has made several contributions to the Black Library's *Inferno!* magazine, and has been published in 2000 AD and the UK small press. An Ancient History graduate and avid miniature painter, he is also secretary of the Comics Creators Guild.

*The Bleeding Chalice* can be purchased in all better bookstores, Games Workshop and other hobby stores, or direct from the BL website and GW mail order.

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### *From THE BLEEDING CHALICE*

THE SKY HAD turned dark over Eumenix. The whole hive world was locked in a perpetual twilight, lit only by the weak orange glow of the heatsink exhausts and the flickering, dying lumospheres that were winking out one by one as the planet died. Over Hive Quintus, home to a rapidly decreasing population of almost a billion, it rained greasy ash as the pyres of the dead begin to tower over the looted palaces of the nobles. The hive city's screams could be heard for kilometres around – wailing sirens of Arbites riot control tanks, the shriek of collapsing tunnelways as hordes of citizens tried to flee the latest hotspot, roars of explosions as looters tripped booby-traps or overladen tramp shuttles crashed on takeoff from makeshift pads.

And the smell. Burning, certainly – it could hardly be otherwise when fire was the only thing that could keep anything clean any more. And spilt fuel. And panicked sweat. But there was something else, sweet but caustic: a smell that made noses wrinkle and eyes water. It seeped the entire city from the pleasure-galleries to the underhive, to the endless maintenance warrens and the gold-plated halls of trade. It seeped out into the barren wastes between cities. Even in the wilds outside the city, those who tried to flee by land could smell it, and just before the seething pollution flats claimed them they knew it was the stink of death. And not just the ordinary death that wandered Hive Quintus constantly – this was the stench of the plague.

Some had called it the white death, or the underhive pox, or spirit rot. The doctors who tended to the city's ailing

aristocracy invented long, complex High Gothic names for it. But by the time old Governor Hugenstein had succumbed, his body a mass of seeping welts, along with his family and most of his staff, it was known simply as 'the plague'.

No one knew how to cure it. Everything from full blood transplants for the super-rich to folk remedies, devised when the city was young, were tried and failed. In desperation, the people looked for a cause – and scores of innocents were burned as pox-spreading political agents or witches. By the time the pyres of plague dead broke the city's skyline, even being uninfected was a death sentence. But no one could tell where the infection came from. And trying to understand it just made it kill quicker.

Some got out. The Administratum offices cut through enough red tape to get the higher echelons to safety. Some of the manufactorium owners made the most of their razor-sharp business sense to buy themselves passage out of Hive Quintus as passengers on fleeing pleasure-yachts or human ballast on smugglers' scows.

Others could have run but did not – the governor had done the most noble thing of his reign and presided over the death of his city. The Adeptus Arbites decided without debate to stand their ground and preserve the Emperor's laws even as the city fell apart. The preachers of the Adeptus Ministorum stayed, and bellowed the Emperor's praises from temples crammed with desperate infected citizens. But the hundreds of millions who filled Hive Quintus's thousands of layers all wished they had the chance to flee in one of the pitifully few craft that were escaping. Any craft large enough to carry a significant number of people was shot down by orbital defence lasers maintaining the quarantine order against Eumenix – those who escaped did so in a tiny trickle, barely a dent in the massive, doomed population.

That, of course, did not stop larger ships from taking off and being turned into long burning streaks in the sky – more omens of death for the people below. But there were some smaller ships in the city that might run the quarantine blockade. Some spaceports were still operational, and whenever word went round that there was a ship about to launch,

hordes of half-dead victims piled up around the launch pads and ship hangars.

Most of the time there were no ships. But as the plague reached its height, on Ventral Dock 31, Cartel Pollos managed to salvage a small research vessel just spaceworthy enough to get the House patriarch and his immediate family off Hive Quintus.

Sure enough, masses of plague victims swarmed against the walls around Ventral Dock 31, held at bay by the private army of Cartel Pollos. Shotgun blasts ripped down into the crowds as the ship fuelled and prepped for takeoff. It was perhaps the last hope for anyone to escape the plague.

Hope was the rarest commodity of all. But when a massive explosion tore out a section of the east wall, all hope disappeared.

THE AUTONSENSES IN Sergeant Salk's helmet snapped his pupils shut as the glare of the explosion burst across the east wall. From his squad's vantage point in the ruins of a hab-block like an island in the centre of the heaving plague-infected crowd, he could see chunks of ferrocrete hurled into the air with a massive thunderclap. Pollos's guards were thrown off the battlements and a ripple ran through the crowd as the front ranks were blown backwards by the force of the explosion.

Karrick's demolition charge had done the job. Separated from his squad, Karrick would be lucky to survive to meet up with the rest of the squad, if any of them got inside the spaceport at all. But that didn't matter now. Captain Dreo was dead and Salk was in charge. The squad had secured their target and he understood that if he had to cash in the lives of his battle-brothers to complete his mission, then he would do so.

'Go!' he yelled into the vox and the six remaining Soul Drinkers vaulted from the burned-out windows of the shattered hab-block. They landed in the thick of the crowd and Salk felt festering limbs pushing against him as he sunk into the crowd as if into an ocean. He clambered to his feet and saw the rest of the squad battling against the human tide – Space Marines were a clear head and shoulders taller than the

tallest unaugmented man and Salk easily spotted the Marines of his squad: Krin with the plasma gun, Dryan, Hortis, Aean and big Nicias hauling the squad's sole prisoner.

Nicias had been forced to abandon his missile launcher after the mission's bloody early stages, where Dreo was lost, and had fought on with knife and bolt pistol. He had accepted responsibility for hauling the prisoner, head covered and wrists bound, with his free hand.

Salk forged a way through the heaving crowd. Lolling-mouthed, mad-eyed faces loomed from the masses and hands grabbed at him. They were lit by the fires that burned in the hive-spires rising all around like mountain ranges, and the searchlights directing the fire of the soldiers on the breached walls of the spaceport. There must have been ten thousand crowding up against the east wall alone, and Salk could see where they were piled up, living and dead, against the barricades beneath the walls.

Salk pushed through them, his power armoured body barging bodies aside. He picked up and threw those in front of him. He didn't want to hurt these people – they could not help the madness of the Imperium into which they had been born – but if they put themselves in his way, he would crush them underfoot. This mission had turned ugly from the outset, and it would end ugly, too.

The crowd surged forward as the front ranks recovered from the blast and began to pour into the breach. Gunfire stuttered from up ahead as the Cartel Pollos troops poured their fire into the plague victims that clambered over the rubble onto the landing platform of the spaceport.

A missile streaked down from the closest watchtower and blew a hole in the surging crowd. Salk pushed against the crowd and burst out into the smouldering crater, ringed with blackened bodies, a short sprint from the yawning breach in the wall. The wall was twenty metres high and several thick, but the charge had torn a huge section out of it. Autogun fire was already spraying from behind the fallen chunks of masonry, with shotgun blasts barking beyond the rubble as Cartel Pollos troops hunted down the plague victims that had got through.

'Nicias, Krin, with me!' voxed Salk as he fired a couple of bolter shots at the gaudily dressed Pollos troops ducking behind the masonry. 'The rest, covering fire!'

The huge form of Nicias tore out of the crowd beside Salk, followed by Krin. Already some of the troopers had spotted the massive purple-armoured Marines and were directing their fire towards them, rightly singling them out as the biggest threat to the east wall. Autogun fire spanged off Salk's shoulder armour and he returned fire, almost blind, as he put his head down and ran across the open ground towards the cover of the rubble in the breach.

The two Space Marines back in the fringes of the crowd opened up on full auto with their boltguns, spattering the walls with miniature explosions. Troopers on the walls jerked and fell, some tumbling over the lip of the wall onto the barbed wire and barricades below, their bodies mingling with those of the fallen plague victims.

Salk slid into cover as a heavy stubber in the watchtower stitched fire all around him. Nicias was seconds behind him, firing up at the watchtower. There was a missile launcher and a heavy stubber up there, and by now the Pollos troops would have marked Salk and his Marines as priority targets.

And with good reason. A spear of white heat ripped up from the open ground behind Salk and the top of the watchtower billowed open, the blast of the plasma impact compressed within the firepoint and incinerating whatever men and munitions were inside. Krin, plasma gun shimmering with haze as the heat rose from its charging circuits, stumbled under the impact of autogun fire from the walls but slid into cover beside Nicias.

Nicias's prisoner had given up struggling by now. Dressed in simple rust-red coveralls, blackened with grime and the residue of bolter fire, the prisoner simply hung on as Nicias hauled the rag-doll figure around with one hand while his other held his bolt pistol.

Salk ducked to one side to see what lay within the breach. A sergeant of the Pollos troops was organising his men into a firing line across the breach, most of them armed with autoguns, but there were a few shotguns mixed in. There were about

twenty men, all dressed in the emerald green of Cartel Pollos with bright gold buttons and buckles and shiny black knee-high boots. Most of the time they were used by the cartel for show, hence the garish uniforms, but the cartel had built itself on the intimidation value of a private army and these were well-trained and motivated men.

Salk nodded at Nicias and Krin, then cast a handful of coin-sized frag grenades past the slab of rubble he lay against. A series of low whumping explosions sounded and Salk scrambled up the slope of rubble towards the firing line through the falling dust kicked up by the grenades.

His first few shots were sprayed on full auto to keep the troopers' heads down. Then he switched to semi-auto and fired as he ran, bolts kicking up crimson spray as they snapped back heads of those soldiers firing back. Shells impacted all around him, a couple registering as flashes of pain as they penetrated the ceramite of his armour. Salk ran through the bursts of pain and leapt into the heart of the firing line.

This was how the Soul Drinkers fought. Cold and fast. A Space Marine was safest at the very heart of the battle, face-to-face with his enemy where his armour, weapons, physical strength and valour were magnified and the resolve of his enemy could be shattered. As Krin's recharged plasma gun burst liquid plasma over the far end of the line, Salk clubbed the stock of his bolter into the first face he saw. Streaked with grime and lined with fatigue, the trooper stared in disbelief at the three-metre killing machine that reared over him even as Salk's gun cracked into the side of his head. Salk pulled the body beneath him, drawing his combat knife and slashing at the trooper behind the first.

Salk's second victim fell, clutching at the deep wound across his torso scored by the monomolecular edge of the knife. Nicias's bolt pistol spat shells into the troopers along the line and many were already running, to be cut down in turn by Nicias.

Nicias was still hefting the prisoner as if the quivering body weighed nothing. If the prisoner died, the whole mission would fail. But Nicias was using his massive, barrel-chested body to shield the prisoner from incoming fire. He was a huge

man even for a Marine, which was why he was one of the Chapter's few heavy weapons troopers, and the few shots that hit him burst against his armour in showers of sparks.

Salk pulled a third body off his knife and pumped half a magazine of bolter shells through the breach, showering the threshold of the spaceport with fire. The troopers' officer was trying to rally them into a new firing line on the smooth surface of the spaceport itself – Krin vaporised him with a gout of superheated plasma and the Pollos troopers broke and ran.

'Squad Salk, report in!' voxed Salk hurriedly to the Marines who had stayed behind to cover his assault. 'Aean, Hortis, Dryan!'

The only reply was broken fragments of speech cut up by static. Whichever of them was still alive was swamped by the masses of the crowd so heavily that his vox equipment had been damaged. Since the receiver was implanted in the ear and the transmitter in the throat, that meant a fractured skull at least. It was no way for three good Marines to die, pulled down by a baying, half-mad mass of dying civilians. No way to lose Soul Drinkers, who in their entirety were down to about seven hundred battle-brothers. The mission was a costlier one than the Chapter could really afford, but if it succeeded Commander Sarpedon had assured Dreo and Squad Salk that it would be doing the Emperor's work in an immediate and valuable way.

Salk didn't know what Sarpedon's plan was. Dreo had, but he was dead, far beneath Hive Quintus. But Salk believed in Sarpedon, the mutated, visionary Librarian who had rallied the Soul Drinkers against the evils of Chaos and the blindness of the Imperium alike. If he had to die here to ensure the prisoner was delivered as Sarpedon commanded, then Salk would die.

Salk waved the two Marines with him forward as he slammed a fresh magazine into his bolter. They had to move now, while the troopers in front of them were scattered and the crowd had yet to surge forward behind them. Even now he could hear the masses pouring towards the newly cleared breach. Three men, even Space Marines, could drown in the human tide.

Salk clambered over the crest of the rubble and saw the Ventral Dock 31 spread out before him. Lit by makeshift landing lights of burning fuel drums, it was a wide expanse of



blast-stained ferrocrete with landing zones marked out all over it. Massive maintenance sheds and building-sized docking clamps broke up the surface, and many of these had been transformed into firepoints by Cartel Pollos. Emerald-uniformed troopers manned heavy stubbers and artillery pieces, nervously waiting for the hordes to burst in.

There, several hundred metres away, was Salk's immediate objective. An ugly, crouched craft, like a huge metal fly, squatted on one of the launch zones. Bulky servitors lugged thick fuel lines towards the craft as the maintenance crews tried frantically to prep it for takeoff. A gaggle of exotically dressed men, probably the leaders of Cartel Pollos, were being escorted across the spaceport by shotgun-wielding troops with crimson as well as emerald on their uniforms. Household troops, bodyguards of the cartel heads. No match individually for Space Marines, but they could be guaranteed not to give up.

The ship was the only way off Eumenix, and the Soul Drinkers had to ensure they were the ones who took it. They had been dropped onto the planet what felt like a lifetime ago by drop pod, because the risks from the orbital batteries were too great for a Thunderhawk gunship to bring them down. The plan had been for Dreo to lead them out into the barrens outside the city so they could be picked up later, maybe months afterwards, but the risk from the plague extended even there and the prisoner would not have survived. Ventral Dock 31 was the only choice left.

Salk ducked back down beyond heavy stubber fire from the closest hard point. A pair of two-man teams was hiding amongst the huge metal claws of a docking clamp, covering the breach.

Salk charged again, sending a volley of shots tearing into the heavy stubber position. Heavy chains of fire ripped into the ground all around him, one catching him on the greave and almost pitching him onto his face. He spotted Nicias out of the corner of his eye, taking shots to the torso as he tried to shield the prisoner. A plasma blast washed over the docking clamp and a couple of the gunners were turned to bursts of ash, but the fire kept coming, pinning down Salk and Nicias on the edge of the spaceport concourse.

A sudden explosion ripped the docking clamp apart, sending chunks of metal spinning, split sandbags fountaining the earth, broken bodies flying. Stubber rounds cooked off like chains of firecrackers. From the wreckage a single black-clad figure ran, gun in hand. Salk was about to open fire when he realised that the figure was as tall as he was, in power armour charred black but still with the chalice symbols picked out in bone on one shoulder pad.

‘Good work, Brother Karrick,’ voxed Salk.

Karrick crouched into a firing position, keeping troopers away from the firepoint. Salk sprinted to his side, Nicias behind him, and another plasma blast burst amongst the next firepoint along the line as Krin broke cover behind.

Fire rattled over the Marines’ heads and Salk realised the fire from the spaceport was being drawn into the crowds now swarming over the rubble behind him. ‘Now!’ he voxed, and the surviving Marines outran the approaching edge of the crowd, charging towards the lone spacecraft. Salk sprayed bolter fire at any glimpse of emerald and Krin ripped a plasma shot into the ground by the Pollos heads’ entourage, forcing them to delay embarkation as they scattered from the incoming fire.

Salk felt small arms fire impacting against the ground all around him as he ran, ringing off his armour. He switched to semi-auto and flicked shots off at the bodyguard trying to drag the dignitaries towards the ship. Two fell, and another spasmed as bolt pistol shots from Nicias tore through him. Karrick sprayed shells around the rear of the ship and the bodyguards fell back, trying to put themselves between the incoming fire and the dignitaries.

Salk could see the heads of Cartel Pollos now, clad in impractical aristocratic dress with so many layers they looked corpulent and farcical as they scrambled around the rear of the ship, trying to shelter behind the sternward landing gear. The bodyguards were opening fire at the Marines and the crowds spilling over the concourse, but they didn’t have the range of the Marines’ disciplined bolter fire. A quick volley of snapped shots from Salk took one man’s head off and knocked another off his feet like a punch to the gut. Karrick

kept the rest pinned down and Krin vaporised a handful of troopers trying to bring a missile launcher to bear.

Salk reached the prow of the ship, firing all the time, switching magazines as Nicias covered him with pistol fire and then sniping at the bodyguards through the landing gear.

'Get aboard!' voxed Salk to Nicias. Covered by Karrick, Nicias ran round the side of the ship and threw the prisoner over the extended boarding ramp and into the passenger compartment. A spray of fire sparked off his armour, tearing chunks from the ceramite as he vaulted his huge form into the ship.

Krin was next, then Salk and Karrick firing a full-auto volley as they clambered into the ship.

Inside, the small compartment was luxuriantly upholstered in the deep, clashing greens and reds of Cartel Pollos. There was room for about a dozen back here, and seemed cramped when filled with the bulk of four Space Marines and their single prisoner. Salk glanced at the remains of his squad – Karrick's armour was charred and the purple paintwork had almost all blistered off. His helmet was gone and one side of his face was badly burned. Krin's gauntlets were smoking from the overheated plasma gun, and Nicias's armour was riddled with bullet scars. Many of Nicias's wounds were bleeding, his blood clotting almost instantly into dark red crystals.

The prisoner was slumped on the carpeted floor, motionless except for shallow breathing.

Salk turned and saw the hatchway leading into the cockpit of the shuttle. It was shut. He slung his bolter, dug his fingers into the edge of the door and ripped it clear out of its frame, metal shrieking. In the cockpit were two pilots in emerald uniforms, young and terrified, shivering with fear. They had neural jacks plugged into sockets in the backs of their shaven heads. Salk glanced at the readouts on the instrument panels in front of them – the shuttle was fuelled up and ready to go.

Salk removed his helmet, feeling sweat running down his face. The smell of gun smoke from his bolter, burned skin from Karrick and the ever-present miasma of hive city pollution, flooded his senses.

'Launch,' he said. The two pilots paused for a second, mesmerised by the immense armoured figure that had just

torn its way into the cockpit. Then they turned to the shuttle controls and, almost mechanically, began switching on the main engines and direction thrusters. The rumble of the main engines cut through the background noise of gunfire and screams.

Salk turned back into the passenger compartment. Past the closing boarding ramp he could see the crowd swirling just metres away, emaciated plague victims dragging down Cartel Pollos bodyguards and the heads of the cartel themselves. Krin lined up a shot into the crowd but Salk pushed his plasma gun aside – there was no need. Within a few seconds the shuttle would be aloft. There was nothing these people could do to them now.

The boarding ramp swung shut and there was a hiss as the interior pressurised. Salk looked through to the cockpit and saw, through the frontal viewscreen, the spires of Hive Quintus burning and the smoke-laden clouds boiling up ahead.

The primary thrusters kicked in and the craft lurched forward, away from the burning nightmare of Eumenix and Hive Quintus. Salk was leaving many good Soul Drinkers in the hive city, including Captain Dreo, none of whom the Chapter could easily afford to lose. But as long as their prisoner survived and was brought off the planet, any losses were ultimately acceptable. Commander Sarpedon had made that very clear to Captain Dreo, and Salk had been compelled to carry out those same orders when Dreo was lost.

Salk returned to his squad. Karrick and Nicias both needed medical treatment and Salk had been apprenticed to the Chapter apothecarion as a novice, before he had been selected as a squad sergeant and then taken into Sarpedon's confidence after the terrible Chapter war. More importantly, the prisoner was in shock and would have to be properly looked after.

They would have to search the shuttle for supplies. It would be some time before they could expect pickup and they would have to keep the prisoner alive. But for the time being, he would have the squad enter half-sleep and take turns watching the prisoner, and settle into the routine that

would keep them alive until they could return to the Chapter.

Salk didn't know the details of Sarpedon's plan. But he knew enough to guess that this mission was only the start.

The Soul Drinkers search the galaxy for their  
Chapter's salvation **THE BLEEDING CHALICE**,  
the second novel in the Soul Drinker series.

## ALSO BY BEN COUNTER

### SOUL DRINKER

*The first Soul Drinkers novel*

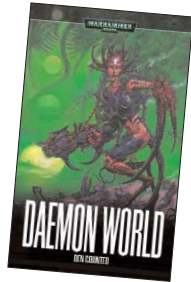


*GENETICALLY ENGINEERED* superhumans, the Space Marines stand foremost among the warriors who protect the human Imperium. The Soul Drinkers have served the Emperor loyally for thousands of years, but their obsessive desire to retrieve an ancient relic throws them into conflict with those they are honour-bound to obey. Faced with an impossible choice, will this proud and noble chapter back down, or rebel to forge a new destiny for themselves among the stars?

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