

CRIMSON TEARS

Soul Drinkers • Book Three
A Warhammer 40,000 novel by Ben Counter

WHEN ALL CONTACT is lost with the Imperial planet of Entymion IV, an expeditionary force led by the Crimson Fists Space Marines is sent to find out what is happening. Their investigations bring them into contact with the renegade Soul Drinkers Space Marines Chapter and the Crimson Fists ready themselves for war. With the Imperial troops engaged in combat, ancient evil forces take the opportunity to claim the planet for their own foul ends. Can the Soul Drinkers and Crimson Fists put aside their differences and unite to destroy their common enemy?



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. *Crimson Tears* is his fifth novel.

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from CRIMSON TEARS

LIFE, IF YOU knew how to look, was a field of stars. If you could see past the mundane backdrop of the galaxy and tune in to the lights that everyone carried around in their minds, then you would see a million shining beacons of humanity. Most were virtually static, milling around in cities on tight endless circuits from homes to manufactoria and back again. A few ranged over their worlds, aristocrats or lawkeepers, criminals or wanderers. Some orbited planets in smugglers' scows or planetary defence platforms, and some zipped between worlds on spacecraft – they were the soldiers, the messengers, the adepts, the Imperium's lifeblood pumping through the arteries of space.

This particular system, Diomedes Tertiam, was well-populated so the task would be difficult. There were about twenty-three billion inhabitants spread across two hive worlds and a multitude of colonies and off-world stations. How was it possible to sort one life-light out from all these?

It was certainly the right system. One of the hive worlds sported the psychic scars of sudden, inhuman violence. All hives were shaded with the mental crimson of bloodshed but that was like a dull glow, almost comforting in its normality, signalling that the underhivers were culling each other as effectively as they had ever done.

But one hive was different. Bright slashes of carnage were still written across the upper spires of one particular hive,

throbbing with the shock that had yet to wear off, seeded with the residue of death and watered with intense white fear that ran like foul water down the levels of the hive.

There. It had happened there. It matched up with what they already knew, and confirmed they were in the right place.

There was another world, equally important as a landmark in their quest. It was a smaller planetoid where the lives were penned into tight regular clusters – they barely moved, and so they formed geometrical ranks rising in pyramids from the surface. Prisoners in their cells. A prison-world, the sinkhole for the most dangerous criminals that the Diomedes Tertiam could produce. Beneath the upper levels were empty spaces in the pattern, larger cells with no prisoners. The life-lights present on those levels flickered with pain or throbbed dully with desperation. Glowing splashes of death were overpowered by the ice-cold rime of suffering.

Interrogation cells. Highest security. And one of them was full of bright lives, milling around as they made preparations. Reinforced doors, adamantine restraints, medical servitors to deliver massive doses of hypno-sedatives into the prisoner to be kept there. They knew what they would have to hold, and they knew what it could do. Perhaps they had been to the hive and seen the results first-hand – either way they would be under no illusions. They were preparing to receive one life-light that could never again leave the pattern of the prison world. It would grow dim and die there.

The view pulled out again. The object of their scrutiny would not be there, but the knowledge of the prison world helped pin it down. Seen from a distance, the system had patterns of its own. Some lives – smugglers, fleeing criminals, deep system patrols – moved seemingly at random around the planets and their star, but most followed fairly regular routes between the worlds. Thin

arteries picked out by the psychic echo of those who plied them, the standard routes were relatively safe and well-patrolled. That meant the highest chance of getting their prisoner back if he escaped. That meant he would be there, somewhere.

The collective scouring intelligence lined up the violence-marked hive and the prison world, and found a thread that connected them – a short, straight, direct route with few travellers but plenty of static waypoints where monitoring stations were marked out by the lives of those who kept watch.

There. It had to be. The secure route the system authorities used to transport their prisoners. It was probably watched over by the Adeptus Arbites, watching out for treachery or incompetence. Perhaps some of those hard, bright, disciplined points of light were the life-echoes of the Arbites officers, stern and upright, giving leadership to the Imperium's policing.

The watchers had killed more than a few Arbites in their time. They had not relished it, but it was necessary. The Arbites were just one arm of the Imperium, just one cog in the huge machine that ground Mankind down into a helpless, pliable mass of weakened minds. The lights of the population were dim and dying, susceptible to rebellion or suggestion from dark powers. If more men and women of the Imperium could see the population as the watchers saw them, then perhaps the Imperium would be no more and there would be freedom. Or perhaps just mindless anarchy – they all knew the solution for the galaxy would not be an easy one.

These were all questions for another time. Together the watchers peered down closer at the inter-system route between the hive and the prison planet. The prison planet, they noticed, was small and its gravity would be low. That way the prisoners' muscles would be wasted and stringy after a year or so, making it more difficult to

escape if they got onto a ship or made it as far as a standard-gravity world. It was an old trick, and it worked. It probably wouldn't work on the prisoner they were surely transporting at that moment, though. There would be no choice but to restrain him permanently, and kill him when they were done with him. This was because their prisoner, in body and especially in mind, wasn't really human.

One ship carried several hundred despairing souls. The result of an underhive sweep, rounded up to fill some conviction quota. Another had a few hard-bitten criminal minds sedated and kept in restraints. Killers. Seditious. The Imperium's worst, as much a result of the Imperium as the bustling hives and iron-hard discipline of the Arbites. Interesting, but not what they were looking for.

One ship was small, holding barely a dozen life-lights. It was the crew that gave the first clue. They were afraid. Fear was a strange thing that made a soul stronger and weaker at the same time, and you couldn't hide the stain it left on your soul. A thin, reedy flicker hovered at the heart of their minds, fluttering away behind everything they did. They were afraid because they knew their ship could be scuttled at any moment if their prisoner looked like he could escape; their lives were not valuable enough to be spared if it looked like they might lose their cargo. They were afraid, too, that they would do something wrong in the long, complicated dance of red tape that surrounded the transport of a prisoner like this. Adepts from a dozen organisations would have to be notified, and each would have to ratify some part of the process. Maybe even the Inquisition would be involved, demanding one of their observers be present, perhaps even insisting on conducting some interrogations of their own.

The Inquisition would have a lot of questions to ask the prisoner. Most of them would be about the watchers themselves.

Most of all, of course, the crew were scared of the prisoner himself.

A hard red-white point of boiling hate, so sharp and stark it looked like it had been nailed into the backdrop of space. A bullet wound of madness. The depths of primal emotion had bubbled up to the surface and swallowed the conscious mind. It was unmistakable. Even from this distance, even with only the psychic residue to go by, there could be no doubt. This was their man. The violence on the hive had been of such intensity that only several men like this could be responsible. Most of them had escaped to ply their carnage in some other system, but something extraordinary had happened at Diomedes Tertiam – one of them had been captured. Probably at great cost, he had been subdued, restrained, processed through many layers of bureaucracy, and assigned a grim drawn-out death of interrogation on the prison world. It was extraordinary, one in a million. But it had happened. And it was the chance the watchers were looking for.

The hating soul writhed in its restraints. At its heart it was a paradox – everyone was, but the paradox here was stark and obvious. It was boiling over with hatred, the uncontrolled outpourings of a broken and degraded mind. But all that was doubly dangerous because it was bound in the iron-hard bands of discipline – that same discipline that bound the soul of every Space Marine.

THE CERTAINTY WAS enough to break the contact. The Diomedes Tertiam system snapped back, the billions of life-lights whirling away into the distance as Sarpedon's perception pulled back from the psychic landscape.

The swirling blackness dissipated and Sarpedon was back in the chamber on the *Brokenback*. Librarian Gresk sat just across from him, sweat running down his dark skin. The Chapter's third Librarian, Tyrendian, sat stock-still and meditative, his breathing controlled. He looked too young and handsome to

be a Space Marine, let alone a battle-hardened outcast like a Soul Drinker.

Each Librarian did things differently. Gresk's power tuned into the metabolisms of his fellow Marines, quickening their reactions and movements to make them more effective fighting machines. Tyrendian's psychic power was raw and unchannelled – he hurled lightning bolts across the battlefield. Sarpedon, meanwhile, was a telepath who could transmit but not receive, and so he sent hallucinations and unwanted primal emotions straight into the minds of his enemies. And just as they differed on the battlefield, so the three used their own techniques and skills when it came to the meditation.

Sarpedon had found a large, lavish ballroom in one of the spaceships that made up the twisted hulk of the *Brokenback*. It was dim and shadowy now, its chandeliers burned out and its furnishings mouldering. It was large, dark and quiet, perfect for the meditations.

Gresk shuddered and leaned forward over the table. He had focused his power inwardly, forcing his mind into ever-faster cycles of activity until he had projected his perception out into space and into the Diomedes Tertiam system. It took its toll – Gresk's breathing was heavy and laboured. Gresk was old, and meditation was a paradoxically exhausting activity for him.

'It was him,' he said.

'He was further gone than we thought,' replied Sarpedon. 'You felt the hatred. I couldn't feel anything else in him.'

'But it was definitely one of them. One of our own.'

'Yes, yes. It was.' Sarpedon shifted uncomfortably. The meditative session had lasted several hours and, even without his power armour, he had become stiff and aching. 'They have almost put him past our reach. We will have to be quick.'

'Perhaps it is best to leave him be,' said Tyrendian. The Librarian's eyes slowly opened as he brought himself out of the trance. 'There is nothing in this brother that can be reasoned with. He is just an animal now. Think what Tellos himself would be like! Perhaps it is better to let him run amok. The Imperium will find him and put him down.'

'Think, Tyrendian.' snapped Gresk. 'Tellos had the run of this place. He knows the *Brokenback* better than any of us. He might know how to hunt it down, or cripple it. Even Techmarine Lygris doesn't know what all its strengths and weaknesses are. If the Inquisition got to Tellos it could be the end of us.'

'And if we go after him, Gresk, we might deliver ourselves to the Inquisition regardless. Don't you think they're after him, too?'

'Enough,' said Sarpedon. 'We haven't got that close yet. We will make the most of the lead we have. Thank you for your meditations, brothers. Now rest and prepare. If we recover this one we might need both of you to break him open.'

Sarpedon stood up from the table, and an ignorant observer would see for the first time one of the reasons the Soul Drinkers were excommunicate. Sarpedon was a mutant, an obvious and powerful one. Eight segmented arachnoid legs sprouted from his waist, a relic of the Chapter's most shameful actions. Taking advantage of a schism between the Soul Drinkers and other Imperial authorities, the Daemon Prince Abraxes had corrupted the Marines' bodies and very nearly done the same to their souls. Abraxes was dead and the Soul Drinkers were treading the long path of redemption, outcast by the Imperium they had once served but sworn to fight the powers of Chaos that had so nearly claimed the Chapter itself. The mutations remained, and though Apothecary Pallas was well on the way to halting the degeneration they were causing, they would never be completely cured. Most of the Soul Drinkers had mutations somewhere, but none so dramatic as Sarpedon's own. As Chief Librarian and de facto Chapter Master of the Soul Drinkers, Sarpedon was their greatest hero and their greatest failure. It was he who had led them into the Chapter War that left so many of their own dead at a brother's hands, who had almost led them into the worship of Abraxes's patron god Tzeentch, who had left them with a mutative legacy that had almost claimed all their lives.

And Sarpedon was responsible for Tellos. That might be his greatest failure.

Sarpedon activated the vox-bead in his throat with an unconscious impulse. 'Lygris?'

'Commander?' Techmarine Lygris's voice crackled through the vox.

'We've got a location. A transport heading for the prison planet in the Diomedes Tertiam system. Get some sensors on it and put us on our way. I'll need intercept plans.'

'Understood. Boarding torpedoes?'

'No, it's a well-policed route. They could be shot down. Use one of our Imperial ships. We'll send in the scouts.'

There was a slight pause. 'Understood.'

'This is what we trained them for, Lygris.'

'Can they handle one of Tellos's men?'

Sarpedon smiled. 'Ask Karraidin.'

It was all the answer Lygris needed. The hoary old Captain Karraidin, the Chapter's hardest-bitten assault officer, was the Soul Drinkers' new Master of Novices and he was an even harder taskmaster than Sarpedon had expected. The scout-novices had hated him when they were first recruited, now Sarpedon knew they would follow Karraidin through the Eye of Terror itself.

Gresk had stalked off through the decaying finery of the ballroom, beginning the long trek through the hulk to his cell where he would run through mental exercises to recover his strength. Tyrendian had stayed behind, contemplating the once-beautiful gilt murals that covered the room's walls.

'Aekar would have been so much better at this,' said the Librarian quietly. Tyrendian seemed to say everything quietly.

'We did well enough,' said Sarpedon. Aekar had died of psychic feedback while probing the atmosphere of a world where the Soul Drinkers had fought the Daemon Prince Ve'Meth. The rest of the Chapter's Librarians had been killed in the subsequent battle against Abraxes, on Stratix Luminae, or from uncontrollable mutation. Now Sarpedon, Gresk and Tyrendian alone made up the whole Chapter Librarium.

Tyrendian turned to Sarpedon, his face was normally unreadable but there was something earnest in it now. 'We all need to know you understand the risks, commander. The

Imperium is hunting Tellos as closely as we are. We will put ourselves in plain sight if we move on him.'

'I can't leave one of our own out there,' replied Sarpedon. 'Tellos is my responsibility. I was the one who let him get so far.'

'You,' said Tyrendian. 'Not us. You have led us this far, commander, but remember this Chapter is still bigger than you. We have the scouts and the novices to protect, too. We only have – what, four hundred Marines left? And just the three of us Librarians. We cannot afford another Stratix Luminae.'

Sarpedon nodded sadly. 'You're right. A Space Marine Chapter should consolidate after our losses. Build up a scout company, fortify, re-equip. But Tyrendian, the Soul Drinkers are not a Chapter any more. We are not an army. We are nothing but the principles that bind us together, and one of those principles is that a brother is a brother and we have a responsibility towards him. If we can get Tellos and his Assault Marines back then we have to try. And if we can't, it is our responsibility to see that the Dark Powers do not get him first. Besides, Gresk is right. If the Inquisition gets hold of Tellos they could hunt us down.'

'We might not survive, Sarpedon. You know that.'

'If we forget why we are fighting then we will be just one more band of renegades. Remember what we once were, Tyrendian. We fought for the Imperium to prove how superior we were. Now we fight because it is the work of the Emperor. Rogal Dorn was the man he was because of the strength of his will. We have to be the same.'

Tyrendian shrugged. 'We could leave. Take the *Brokenback* to the other side of the galaxy. Tellos is the Imperium's problem.'

'The people of the Imperium have to live with a corrupt regime that would see them dying before it admitted it was wrong,' replied Sarpedon. 'They don't deserve Tellos butchering his way through them as well. He's our problem and I intend to see that we solve it.'

For a moment it looked like Tyrendian would say something in reply, but whatever it was he bit it back.

‘The scouts will have to be everything we hope they are,’ continued Sarpedon. ‘How are the Librarium recruits doing?’

Tyrendian thought for a moment. ‘Scamander will join the Librarium eventually. Nisryus too, perhaps. None of the others are strong enough to be certain, but there may be a couple of capable psykers still amongst them.’

‘I want Scamander going in with Eumenes’s squad.’

‘Then we’ll see if I’m right.’

With that, Tyrendian left. The Soul Drinkers’ Librarians, even before the Chapter’s excommunication, had served as advisors to the Chapter Master, always open and honest with their advice. Sarpedon was glad there was one still left who felt he could speak his mind. The Soul Drinkers had followed Sarpedon almost religiously since the schism and he knew that he needed a foil for his command. The Primarch on whom the Soul Drinkers’ geneseed was modelled, Rogal Dorn, had himself been wilful and headstrong. That was his strength, but also his weakness, a weakness shared by every Chapter Master since and compensated for by the counsel of the Librarium.

What if Tyrendian was right? Sarpedon could tear the Chapter apart, pursuing battles they couldn’t win. But what else was there? How many times had Sarpedon sworn to die in the service of the Emperor? What would the Soul Drinkers themselves say? They would walk into hell if it seemed the best way to do the work of the Emperor and bring the fight to the forces of Chaos. But then, Tellos had once been the same.

These were questions for later. Sarpedon had to brief the scouts for their first true mission, one that would go some way to deciding the Chapter’s future.

THE DESTRUCTION OF the Entymion IV Expeditionary Force did not go unnoticed. The sketchy reports from orbit showed a massive enemy force cutting Colonel Sathis’s command to ribbons in a matter of minutes. No one had any idea anything like that could be present on the planet – any potential resistance had been expected on the plains outside Gravenhold,

consisting of rebellious guerrilla fighters or, in the worst case scenario, household troops and rebellious Planetary Defence Force units commanded by Gravenhold's hereditary aristocracy.

The reality had been impossible to understand. The sheer numbers were dizzying. A minimum of ten thousand enemy soldiers had packed the valley, having seemingly appeared from nowhere. Warcraft or hitherto unknown xenos technology were the only explanations for the sudden appearance of the army. Worse, the only place an enemy could have mustered an army of that size was from the population of Entymion IV itself.

The Adeptus Terra had to assume that Entymion IV was under the control of a hostile force, a moral threat, something that could use Imperial citizens as a weapon against the Imperium.

The message reached the dusty ancient halls of Terra itself. Lord Commander Xarius, hero of the Rhanna Crisis, was swiftly appointed command with orders to recover the planet at all costs. Xarius appropriated all the available Guard units for several sectors around and had, in a little under two months, assembled a force that most commanders would need years to pull together. The entire Seleucaian Fourth Division, more than seventy thousand men, demanded that Xarius take them to Entymion IV to avenge the dead of their brother regiment. Xarius also brought the regiment with which he once served, the elite heavy infantry of the Fornux Lix 'Fire Drakes'. The sector battlefleet was less rapid to answer the call but still seconded a cruiser, the *Resolve*, and escort squadrons along with a fleet of transports to get Xarius's army to the Entymion system and maintain a blockade to keep the rot on Entymion IV from spreading.

Xarius was a hard and unrelenting man, especially with himself. He called in every ally and favour he could to bring the army together, but if he wanted a rapid, effective invasion of Entymion IV then he had to have a cutting edge. The Seleucaians and the Fire Drakes were tough troops but they weren't the tip of the spear, the surgical strike-capable assault

troops he needed to crack open Gravenhold. For a moment he paused before he ordered the troop-laden fleet to move into the Etymion system. He had seen the hazy, flickering sensor images of what had happened to Sathis. He knew he needed an edge before he would send a hundred thousand Imperial lives into the teeth of that kind of war.

At the last moment, answering the request of the Senatorum Imperialis itself, a strike cruiser arrived then left just as suddenly, leaving behind several Thunderhawk gunships carrying the men Xarius needed to lead the charge on the walls of Gravenhold. Those men were the Space Marines of the Crimson Fists' Chapter.

*Hell comes to Gravenhold as the Soul Drinkers
clash with the Imperial Guard and the Imperial
Fists... but worse terrors yet await the
combatants in
CRIMSON TEARS*

Also by Ben Counter

SOUL DRINKER

Soul Drinkers • Book One

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?



THE BLEEDING CHALICE

Soul Drinkers • Book Two

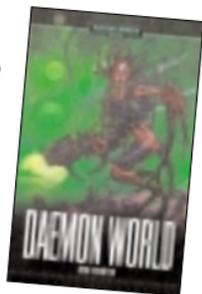
LONG YEARS HAVE passed since the Soul Drinkers were declared excommunicate. Sarpedon, stoic leader of this once loyal Chapter, has become hell-bent on finding some way to cure his battle-brothers of the cursed mutations inflicted upon them. After numerous false trails, he stumbles upon the most tentative of leads which promises a final redemption in the eyes of the God-Emperor, but are they heading to salvation or destruction?



DAEMON WORLD

A Warhammer 40,000 novel

DEEP WITHIN THE twisted hell-storms of the warp lies the daemon world of Torvendis, a planet damned by the dark powers of Chaos. Savage battle has raged for so long that the very bedrock of the planet is formed from strata of crushed bodies. The arrival of a mysterious stranger threatens to upset the balance of power currently held by Lady Charybdia, princess of Slaanesh, precipitating a bloody revolution. But are the stranger's motives as straightforward as they appear or do the fickle powers of Chaos have one last trick to play?



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