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40,000

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The air at the centre of the landing pad glowed golden. Rain hissed as it blew into the light. The teleport locus grew brighter, as intense as hot metal, whiting out the faces of Colonel Indrana's few remaining officers. Most of them had never witnessed a teleport before. A couple of them gasped, holding their hands up to shield their faces. Colonel Indrana squeezed her eyes shut against the glare.

The light shrank, coalescing into nine giant forms. It burned brightly and solidified; where before there had been empty space, angels stood. Indrana blinked away retinal after-images.

The Space Marines were huge, taller than Indrana and the other women under her command by half a metre or more, and far bigger than this world's men. They had come arrayed for battle in power armour, finely wrought and decorated. Each carried the mark of their Chapter upon their left shoulder, a drop of blood hanging above a stylised chalice. Of the nine, five bore armour entirely in the Chapter's red. A guard. One of these carried a banner of fine workmanship, two others sported claws upon their gauntlets as long as Indrana's arms while the remainder carried boltguns. They were alert, their armour's motors whining softly as they swept the pad for threats.

The other four were officers or specialists. Indrana knew enough of the Adeptus Astartes to see that. Their battle plate was ornate beyond compare, and each different to the next as summer was to winter. One was garbed in deep blue, a psyker who carried a staff shot through with crystal, his head nestled in a web of arcane technology. Another wore white armour bearing the marks of the medicae, the third wore a helmet

ghoulishly fashioned in the form of a skull, his armour black. And their leader...

The Chapter Master was taller than the rest, a man of noble countenance, clad in red and gold. The pelt of a great beast was pinned to his shoulders. Only he and the psyker had their faces revealed. Beneath the sheen of the rain, Indrana thought their skin and hair looked oddly dry, and yet both were preternaturally *beautiful*, as perfect as the statues on the Reliquary Sanctum; angels cast in plaster.

The Chapter Master looked around at Indrana's tattered retinue. She felt acutely aware of her filthy uniform. She stood as straight as she could. Amusement played in the Chapter Master's pale eyes. It never occurred to her that he might be laughing at her, it was clear to all that his eyes saw evidence of battle, and that he was pleased because of it.

'Colonel Indrana?' the Chapter Master said.

She blinked, momentarily forgetting her own name. He came closer, boots clanging on the landing pad. She was forced to crane her neck to look up at him. She knew she was unpresentable – dark rings surrounded her eyes, smudging her dark brown skin black. Her body odour was rank in her own nostrils. No one had access to the comforts of life here anymore. How different to her he was, tall and shining in his armour, a saint come down from the sky. She felt ashamed.

'My lord.' She bowed, her hands behind her back. Her warrior's braid swung forward, water running from its intricate plaits and beads to drip on the rain-slick metal. Her staff knelt around her.

The giant held his red armoured palms upwards, bidding them to rise. 'Please. We are all servants of the Emperor, brothers and sisters under arms.'

Indrana stood. The Chapter Master looked right into her eyes. His were almost colourless, like a vessel waiting to be filled, like the chalice upon his heraldry.

'I am Chapter Master Caedis of the Blood Drinkers, Lord of San Guisiga. He smiled, revealing white teeth that were too long. 'The Adeptus Astartes have answered your call.'

Colonel Indrana recovered her dignity. 'We are most grateful. We have refreshments and...'

‘That will not be necessary. You have fought hard. We will not insult your sacrifice by feasting while the foe still lives. Save your food for your soldiers, give them sustenance.’

‘You would see the monster immediately, then?’ Indrana shuddered inwardly at the memory of the three-armed horror. As big as the angels of death, it had slain fifteen of the Praetors of Saint Catria before it had been brought down.

‘In good time,’ said the Master of the Blood Drinkers. ‘First I would view the overall situation. There are decisions of tactics and strategy to be made. We must make haste.’

‘As you wish, my lord.’ Indrana drew in a deep breath. She was cold, soaked to the skin. She could not remember the last time she had been clean and dry. ‘This way.’

Indrana squatted behind the parapet of the command post, Caedis stood impassively beside her, his hand upon the wall.

‘My lord,’ Indrana hesitated. ‘I advise you to get down. Rebel sniper teams come far out into the fire zone...’

‘I have no fear of them,’ he said. He was still, unnaturally so.

‘Very well.’

The bulk of the Reliquary Sanctum filled the horizon, the parkland in front of it reduced to ragged mud. Trees stood limbless and splintered amid shell holes filled with stinking water. Tank hulls sat at the limits of the fire zone, hatches blown, streaked with rust and the black traces of fire.

The Sanctum had not been built as a fortress, but its steep walls made it an adequate substitute. Indrana watched as Lord Caedis examined it closely, staring at details an unenhanced human could never see through the rain. It was as large as a small town, a circular wall punctuated by seven spires that commemorated the heroic tasks of Saint Catria, enclosing a plaza and cathedral. Statues of the saint had been toppled from their niches by the rebels, heavy weapons taking their place. Everywhere, the muzzles of guns protruded. She was sure he could see them, even if today she could not.

‘Tell me a little of what happened,’ said Caedis.

‘I don’t...’ Indrana mumbled. She was terrified. Was she being tested?

Caedis looked at her, and his eyes were kind. ‘I wish only to hear the story from your own lips.’

‘Hesta, the so-called “living saint”,’ Indrana began. ‘She revealed herself to us eighteen months ago. Said she had been sent by Saint Catria to bless her followers. We didn’t know then what she really was.’

‘She was not tested?’

Indrana nodded hard, her beads of rank rattled. ‘Oh yes, by the Ecclesiarch and his priests. She was tested and tested again. There was something about her, a fervour... Those eyes... We wanted it, I think. This is a devout world, but far from the eyes of the High Lords. She performed miracles; miracles in the name of the Emperor.’

Indrana looked at the impassive, dry face of the warrior. She saw nothing there but curiosity. ‘We are not heretics, lord. We are good daughters of the Emperor. It was not until around six months later that we discovered the truth. The bodies, I mean. Only a few, but important. Our High Justicar was among them. We think he had uncovered the true nature of the cult, forcing them to seize control. By the time that happened, fully half of our people had joined Hesta. They... they would not believe what was shown to them, put right in front of their eyes. That she was no saint, but a murderer.’

Indrana shivered. Memories of riots on the streets, priories on fire. Good women burned as heretics by Hesta’s followers.

‘You fought.’

‘Yes lord, although it cost us dearly. I have few warriors left to me. We took back Orius and Regal well enough, but Hesta had been based in the Sanctum since the beginning, secretly fortifying it. We’ve trapped the rebel leadership within the Sanctum, but this is the closest we can get,’ she said, indicating the defence lines either side of the command centre, curving to encircle the rebel stronghold. ‘There is no way through their fire patterns.’ She swept her hand past the rebel bastions spaced out before the Sanctum, their outlines hazy in the drizzle. ‘Emperor knows we’ve tried. I’ve lost so many good women – I am down to less than one half regiment, fewer than a thousand troops. In the end, once you contacted us, I decided it would perhaps be best to stay put. We keep a constant watch. They cannot get out, but we cannot get in.’

‘You made a wise choice,’ Caedis favoured her with a wry smile. ‘Do not fear, we stand with you now. The Blood Drinkers will succeed.’

‘I... I do not doubt it,’ she stammered. ‘No offence, my lord, I did not mean to imply that this task was beyond you,’ she said. She tried to maintain her demeanour while dread contorted her stomach. This man could crush her without difficulty.

‘None was taken, colonel, nor would I wish you to fear that any had been,’ Caedis spoke gently. ‘Do not judge yourself against us. I will not have such a talented commander feel humbled.’ He nodded approvingly. ‘You have fought well, colonel. The Emperor has rewarded you, directing our attentions to this world and your salvation. Your struggle is over. The Emperor’s peace will return to Catria by our hand. This I swear.’

Indrana was ashamed that this angel stood unafraid in full view of the enemy while she skulked behind the plascrete. She rose hesitantly.

‘Do not fear,’ he said. He took one last long look at the Sanctum. ‘Your saint’s shrine is a work of great beauty. We will do our utmost to minimise the damage.’

Indrana gave a brief nod. She could not keep her gratefulness from her face. ‘I would see it returned to its rightful purpose more than anything else, my lord.’

‘Come,’ he said pleasantly. ‘Show me this beast you have slain.’

Indrana led Caedis down from the roof into the command suite. Women worked at cogitator banks and vox stations. Reports crackled in from all over the planet. She led the giant through the bustle of the place, Caedis forced to bow his head as they exited into the corridor. Behind him, women watched from out of the corners of their eyes.

‘This way, lord,’ said Indrana. She directed him through the small, prefabricated complex, then down another flight of steps. At the bottom, broad armoured doors barred the way to an ambulance bay, a lighter pair bearing the medicae helix facing them. ‘Our medical centre.’

The door opened with a pneumatic sigh. The ward had been emptied of beds; she had taken no chances with the monster. She took him on, into the operating room they had turned into a makeshift morgue. She hesitated before she keyed the door open.

Two of the other Space Marine officers were already within, conducting their own examinations.

The Chapter Master nodded when he saw the naked corpse on the table. The thing was an unholy blend of nightmare creature and human female. Parts of it were covered in a hard, blue carapace, the rest of it sickly purple flesh. An additional arm was jointed awkwardly to the left shoulder, ending in a three-fingered hand tipped with curved talons that could cleave through plasteel. This Indrana knew from bitter experience.

The thing would have not been able to stand straight while alive. Its spine was knobbed, tortured. Sagging breasts were pasted over its alien anatomy. Its face, awkward and small on the swollen cranium, was that of a human, but teeth as black and sharp as fear crowded its mouth.

The Space Marine medicae looked up from the corpse. He had removed his helmet; he had a black cross painted over his face, his brow glinted with metal studs, too many to count. ‘It is as we thought, Lord Caedis. Genestealers. The cycle is well underway,’ the medic said. The blades of the device on his arm were coated in dark blood. ‘This is a second generation, I think. The admixture of human material present in its essence is a match to the population of this world. They must have been here for some time – decades, perhaps. They are ready to move on and spread their contagion. It is good we are here.’

Indrana cleared her throat. The room was large, but with the three warriors it felt tiny, and she herself like a child around whom adults conducted their mysterious, serious business.

‘A genestealer? This is the... the *type* of the monster?’

‘You are not aware of them? They are endemic in this sector,’ the medicae said. His eyes were fierce. In the hard light of the room, features that should have appeared beautiful seemed feral somehow.

‘This world is well off the main shipping lanes, Brother Teale,’ said the black-armoured warrior.

‘Reclusiarch Mazrael speaks wisely,’ Caedis said. *There was a warning there*, she thought, but then he turned to Indrana. ‘They are an abomination, xenos who infiltrate a host society, infecting it with their genetic material so that those corrupted give birth to monsters, monsters that the parents will do anything to protect. Their will is lost to them. The

genestealers are like a sickness, do you understand? A physical menace that corrupts both body and mind.'

'That makes... The rebellion, the uprising. It makes sense,' said Indrana. 'At first we thought them rumours, and then...'

She trailed off.

'Our proximity to Catria was not mere chance, colonel,' said Caedis. 'We have been following and cleansing infestations of these creatures for a quarter-century in an attempt to pinpoint their source. Seven worlds we have purged of their evil.'

'How will you find them?' she said.

'They possess a psychic linkage to one another. Weak, but ever present. It leaves a spoor in the warp,' said Mazrael. 'Brother Epistolary Guinian chases it through the empyrean, although the trail is as smoke in the wind.'

'Nevertheless, our crusade nears its conclusion,' finished Caedis.

A look passed between the three Space Marines. Their eyes strayed constantly to the corpse, lingering on its wounds. Something was going on here that made Indrana uneasy.

Caedis in particular appeared transfixed. He shook his head as if clearing it, barely perceptibly, but Indrana saw. 'We will assault the Sanctum tomorrow.'

'Is there any way to free those in the thrall of the aliens?' she asked. 'There are many of my warriors in the Sanctum. They were good once, pure of heart.

Loyal Imperial soldiers.'

The Reclusiarch shook his head. 'No.' Through his helmet's vox emitters, his voice was sepulchral. 'They are blind to reason, and will fight like animals to protect their false family. They must be annihilated, lest the taint remain to overwhelm your world once more.'

The door hissed open. Indrana's astropath, Aland – one of the few men on her staff – walked in, deep in consultation with the Blood Drinkers psyker. The warrior broke off his conversation and looked to his lord.

'We must ask for privacy,' said the Chapter Master abruptly. 'We have much to discuss.'

Indrana hesitated. The four adepts stared at her. Caedis's smile suddenly seemed wolfish. There was a wildness in him, in them all, that scared her.

Astropath Aland came to her side, his staff clicking across the floor. He took her elbow and pulled her gently away. They left the room together.

The door closed behind them, and they walked through the deserted ward.

‘There is something here that I do not like,’ said Indrana. ‘For all their beauty, there is something savage about them.’

‘I cannot see their beauty,’ said Aland. The lights of the ward reflected from the plastic orbs covering his empty eye sockets. ‘And my powers may be feeble compared to those of their psyker, but I can sense that they are conflicted. They have dual natures, these angels of death, although they are in balance for now.’

‘Marvellous,’ said Indrana. She rubbed at her forehead. She was dizzy with fatigue. ‘Let us pray to the Emperor that they keep themselves so.’

‘What of the Sanctum, Lord Caedis?’ said Mazrael.

Sanguinary Master Teale barked out a laugh. ‘We shall storm it easily and drain the tainted blood of those weak-minded enough to fall under the xenos spell.’ His eyes shone with atavistic joy as he dissected the genestealer hybrid.

The Reclusiarch and Sanguinary Master; Caedis’s chief advisors. The first always the voice of reason, the calm in the storm, the bastion against the rage that could take any of them at a moment’s notice. So different from Teale, who urged the embracing of the thirst, the celebration of savagery. The two of them were the twin sides of his conscience, the two aspects of his Chapter: one restraint, the other surrender to the monster coiled round all their hearts.

‘The initial assault will be straightforward,’ Caedis said, ‘though there are many weapons installed. It would be a challenge to take even without the ring of bastions about it. With them there, doubly so.’

‘I welcome that!’ Teale said. He pulled forth a green organ from the hybrid and placed it into a steel bowl. ‘Already the battle-joy stirs within me, I would feel the blood of living foes on my hands and teeth.’

‘Patience, Sanguinary Master, you will have your opportunity,’ said Caedis.

Guinian spoke, his voice sonorous and perpetually tinged with sorrow. ‘We cannot bombard the Sanctum. I require a moment in the heart of their lair. Only then have I chance of locating the ultimate source of this evil.’

Caedis gazed at the genestealer, his eyes fixed on the thing's oozing fluids. Behind his lips his tongue touched upon lengthened canines. The blood was unclean, laced with the poisonous heritage of the genestealer, yet even so the thirst boiled up in him for a second, filling his mouth with saliva. He forced the thirst down, fettering it under the layers of civility he fought so hard to maintain.

'The circumstances are favourable?'

'From what they say of their false saint,' said Teale, 'the cycle must be close to completion. She is one of their magi, of that I am sure, and mother perhaps to a new brood.'

'Young,' said Guinan. 'I need to find their young, to follow their calls into the warp for their kin. Then I will find the source,' said Guinan. 'We cannot destroy them, or we shall be forced to move on to another infested world and try again.'

'I would not countenance the destruction of such a building in any case,' said Caedis. 'Far better to preserve what beauty we can and engage our foe blade to claw.'

'Such is the way of Sanguinius,' intoned Mazrael. 'The damage will be severe.'

'But not irreparable,' said Caedis.

'And so we will triumph where these lesser humans could not,' said Teale.

'Do not dismiss them, Sanguinary Master. That the Praetors of Saint Catria contained the revolt at all is close to a miracle.'

'And yet, lord, they would ultimately have failed.'

Caedis nodded distractedly. His pulse sounded loudly in his ears, his attention was fixed on the blood of the hybrid. What would it taste like, human blood spiced with alien genes...?

'One concerted breakout attempt and the Praetors' work will be undone. This hybrid was surely a test, a probing of the line. The Catrians' victory has cost them dear – there are too few Praetors left to finish the enemy. They stand in triumph upon the brink of disaster. More hybrids will come and find their weaknesses, and then finally the purestrains. They will be overwhelmed.'

'There is barely a soul upon this planet,' said Teale. His blades ran along the underside of the hybrid, slipping easily between the thing's twisted

ribs. Its stomach slid out. Teale pushed it to one side and reached inside the chest cavity. ‘Two or three hundred thousand. This world is not worth the effort of saving.’

‘There are fewer now. And where are the men?’ asked the Reclusiarch.

‘There is some minor aberration in the populace. Women are by far in the majority. Men rarely survive to adulthood and those few examples which do are feeble-bodied,’ said Teale.

‘Mutation?’ said Mazrael distastefully.

Teale pushed his arms deeper into the hybrid. ‘Inquisition records place them well within pure-blood norms. The disparity in sex distribution stems from environmental effects. They are not mutants.’

‘Then they deserve our aid, as all true humans do,’ said Mazrael. ‘And aiding them will bring us closer to the conclusion of our crusade. What are your orders, Lord Chapter Master? Shall I awaken Brother Endarmiel?’

Caedis did not reply. He stood with his hand upon his chin, gazing at the slow rivers of black fluid leaking from the corpse.

‘Lord Caedis?’ said Mazrael. ‘Brother?’

Caedis head snapped up abruptly. ‘Yes?’ he said, his voice thick.

‘Shall I awaken Brother Endarmiel? I feel we will have need of his talents in the battle ahead.’

‘Very well.’

Mazrael dipped his head. ‘Yes, Lord. What are the rest of your orders?’

‘We shall destroy the other infected sites from orbit. Guinian, please inform Colonel Indrana. She must withdraw her troops from the cities. Have them form a cordon. Send half of our number to aid them. Tell her that she is to hold the perimeter at all costs. Any who flee the cities are to be killed on sight. If even one of these xenos escapes our wrath, it will all have been for nothing.’

Teale pulled another organ out from the creature and put it carefully to one side. He took up a cloth and wiped down his narthecium blades. ‘I have the beast’s heart,’ said Teale. ‘I am ready to prepare for the Rite of Holos. We will sharpen the Thirst and bring our brothers to full battle readiness.’

‘Is there sufficient of its blood for the ritual?’ asked Caedis.

‘The fluids of these creatures are impure, lord – not fit for our needs. The heart can be burned, the ashes used...’

Caedis looked to his brothers. Their eyes gleamed as if silvered, all of them eager to slake the thirst that tortured them.

‘Our serfs dwindle by the day, lord,’ Mazrael said carefully.

‘Then do what must be done.’ Caedis paused, his heart heavy. ‘The lives of a few are small sacrifice for the preservation of the lives of the many.’

The air around the Sanctum was alive with weapon fire. Five Land Speeders wove between solid rounds and las-beams, drawing them away from the following Thunderhawk and its cargo. The speeders wove an intricate pattern, splitting from close formation as they drew close to the outer defences. Missiles streaked through the air from the Thunderhawk’s wings, obliterating a bastion and the guns within. An answering missile burst harmlessly on the craft’s fuselage.

The Land Speeders roared on, burning gun emplacements to slag. One caught an airburst from the rebels, spinning out of control before its pilot brought it down hard on the ground. The crew pulled themselves from the wreckage and ran headlong at the enemy guns. In seconds, they were within the great Sanctum, killing all they came across.

The way cleared, the Thunderhawk swooped low. Jets roared as it tilted its nose upward, coming to a near-hover. Lifting clamps disengaged, dropping a scarlet Land Raider onto the battlefield. The tank skidded across the mud, tracks spinning. Cannon barrels blurred as they reached their maximum fire rate, felling cult members and dragging tracks of pockmarks across the Sanctum’s stone walls. The tank drove hard at the main portal, a road tunnel that led within. It bucked as it thundered up the embankment onto the ruined road, slewing left to follow it.

A barricade of broken statuary barred the way. Puffs of rock dust erupted in long lines across its surface as the Land Raider’s crew blasted at the traitorous Praetors behind. Their return fire was ineffectual against the machine’s armour.

The tank drew close to the shattered barricade, and short-ranged flame cannons washed death over them, incinerating those who had not already fallen. The tank angled itself past the barricade, crashing into ancient stonework. Tracks squealed as the Land Raider pushed. Blocks toppled, bouncing from its roof, and then it was through into the tunnel.

One by one, the enemy's guns fell silent as the Land Speeders finished their work. Other sounds took the place of cannon fire – the roar of jets. Battle-brothers plunged from above, jump packs screaming. Mazrael was at their head, obvious in his Chaplain's black. In their wake another aircraft streaked from the grey skies like a thunderbolt. The assault ship headed directly for the hollow centre of the shrine, braking thrusters roaring.

Caedis's Land Raider pushed on through the ornately carved tunnel. Statues of Saint Catria in a hundred different guises went past. Foes – traitor Catrian soldiers and poorly-armed civilians alike – shot without effect at the plasteel behemoth. They were cut down without mercy by the vehicle's guns, crushed against its sides and under its treads. The Land Raider rumbled into the square at the heart of the Sanctum, a grand plaza two thousand metres across, the cathedral soaring from its centre. A giant mosaic of the saint's deeds covered the floor.

The Sanctum shuddered. Filigreed galleries crumbled as Blood Drinkers landed among the cultists from on high. Grenades shattered friezes, bolts brought saints down from their lofty perches.

All this Caedis observed. Strapped tight into his Land Raider, scenes of violence were projected upon screens in the vehicle's command suite. He yearned to join his men outside the tank, to sing the hymns of battle and smite the foe. All inside the Land Raider with him felt the same – Teale, Guinian, and the four veteran brothers who accompanied them – but he could not allow them the pleasure of combat yet.

'The real foe lairs deeper within the Sanctum. We will proceed. Let Brother Endarmiel and the others deal with this first line of defence. Our battle is not here.'

The assault craft spun slowly in the air above the mosaic, its thrusters burning the face of the saint. Cargo grapples retracted, and Brother Endarmiel dropped to the floor, landing upright, his heavy feet shattering tesserae that had endured for three thousand years.

Endarmiel was ancient, even by the standards of the Blood Drinkers, crippled in a long ago war and entombed inside a towering Dreadnought walker. Within his giant body of metal, Endarmiel had fought on with distinction for more than a thousand years, his wisdom helping guide generations of Blood Drinkers to victory after victory.

That Endarmiel was no more.

The Blood Drinkers controlled the curse of their founder with some success, and so Endarmiel had remained sane for a long time, but no one, not even a Blood Drinker, could resist the Black Rage forever. As the decades turned to centuries, Endarmiel's fall became an inevitability. He was a living reminder of the darkness inside them all.

Endarmiel strode toward the cathedral. Inside were many of the false saint's followers. Las-bolts and autocannon rounds sparked from his walking tomb.. He strode on heedless. He roared mechanical warcries that urged the Blood Drinkers to greater fury, ancient words that evoked heroes of distant centuries, and drove a powered blood fist through the cathedral's great door. Carved wood splintered. Rocks thrown from the building's towers clanged from his armoured shell. Then the door was torn asunder, and he was inside.

Caedis watched as a stick-thin man holding up a blasphemous icon was crushed under Endarmiel's foot, and then the ancient was deep into the church's interior and the multitude within, and lost to sight.

'To the left, past the cathedral's north tower, that is where our quarry lurks,' said Guinian. 'The taint of the xenos lies heaviest there.'

'Then let us engage them, and rip out their throats!' called Teale.

Caedis directed his driver across the plaza. The tank's weight turned tiles to powder and its guns shattered exquisitely carven stone, saddening the Chapter Master.

Fire rained down from above. Those Praetors turned traitor had kept some semblance of discipline. They fired by rank, fell back, fired again, although their guns were little use against the battle plate of the Blood Drinkers. Here and there, a brother fell, but when the Space Marines closed into melee, the humans did not last long.

The Land Raider smashed into an archway picked out by Guinian.

'Lord, we can go no further. The corridor beyond is too narrow.' The driver's voice came into the passenger cabin.

'Open the assault ramp!' ordered Caedis. 'Withdraw and support the assault.'

Metal creaked on stone, the mechanism's powerful hydraulics crushing it to rubble as it forced the ramp down.

‘Deploy!’ Caedis shouted to his honour guard. ‘Advance cautiously!’ Too often had the Blood Drinkers lost their heads on this crusade, charging in to engage and suffering at the claws of the genestealers because of it. These were his finest warriors, to be sure; if any of the battle-brothers could resist the Thirst it would be these veterans, but none who called Sanguinius father could claim to be wholly proof against its lure.

‘Steady my brothers!’ called Sanguinary Master Teale. ‘Hold tight to your thirst, embrace your fury, but do not succumb. Savour your anger and save it – now is not the time to strike with blade, but with bolter!’

Caedis could feel it himself: the desire to throw off circumspection and charge forward, sword raised. More than anything else he wished to confront the enemy face to face, to rip at them with his hands, and then...

He reined in his passion. He swallowed. His mouth was dry – he yearned for the warm slickness of blood to soothe his throat.

‘Brothers, ware the shadows!’ Caedis watched his honour guard deploy, taking up station behind the wide corridor’s pillars. Brother Metrion had left the Chapter banner aboard Caedis’s flagship, a flamer in his hands now instead. He took the point position, weapon ready. He was covered behind by Brother Atameo’s bolter. Brothers Hermis and Erdagon held back, blue energy playing across their lightning claws. The corridor was wide enough for groundcars, its ornate columns and carved stone screens providing ample opportunity for ambush. This was where the real test would begin.

‘Prime genestealer ground,’ said Caedis. ‘They will assault us first here.’

‘Let them come,’ snarled Teale.

Caedis drew his sword, *Gladius Rubeum*. The unsheathing of it activated the weapon’s power field and the holo-generator in its hilt. Scenes of victories from the Chapter’s history played up and down the blade.

Metrion went forward slowly, Hermis behind him, pausing to illuminate pools of darkness with goutts of burning promethium. He reached the end of the corridor, where daylight ended and only darkness remained. The others followed. They scanned every surface; walls, floor and ceiling. Attack could come from any angle.

Caedis looked into the next corridor, but there was no light source there. The systems of his armour banished the dark, image intensifiers in the helmet rendering it in grainy green and grey. ‘I see nothing.’

‘Their leader is here, my lord,’ said Guinian.

‘The false saint?’

Guinian nodded. ‘She watches us.’

‘We go on.’

Again Metrion advanced, washing the shadows bright with cleansing flame. He stopped halfway, swiftly unscrewing his depleted promethium canister and replacing it with another.

In that moment, the genestealers attacked.

Autogun and lasgun fire erupted from the far end of the corridor, poorly aimed but in such volume that the Blood Drinkers ducked back to the shelter of the pillars. Guinian, Caedis and Atameo returned fire. The corridor resounded to the distinctive double-crack of bolts, lit by flashes as the rounds embedded themselves in stone and flesh, blowing both apart with equal ease.

Caedis saw hunchbacked figures with scuttling walks. Their features were alternately lost to the grain of the lens images then blurred by the intense glare of bolt detonations, wisps of image distortion trailing brightly from crooked limbs. Only when Metrion braved the storm of fire and bathed the crowd in purifying flame did the Blood Drinkers truly see their enemy.

Hybrids filled the corridor. Like the specimen killed by Indrana’s soldiers, they were neither human nor alien but a mixture of both, the result of the genestealers’ terrible manner of reproduction. Some appeared entirely alien. Others could perhaps have passed for human in poor light. In keeping with the populace of Catria, they were mostly female, with lank hair and bizarrely delicate features. They shrank back from their burning sisters and hissed.

‘This is the first wave! Hold back! Hold back!’ ordered Caedis.

Metrion lost control and hurled himself into the mob of creatures, letting forth another cloud of fire before he cast his flamer aside and drew his knife and pistol. Caedis cursed and gunned down three of the beasts that threatened his standard bearer, but soon Metrion was lost amidst a sea of flailing limbs.

Hermis and Erdagon went to his aid. Lightning claws flashing, they carved their way through the crowd of malformed beasts. Caedis tasted metal as Guinian unleashed a spear of psychic energy at the mob,

skewering several of the half-women. Caedis advanced, Teale at his side, both firing as they went.

Then Caedis was in the fray, *Gladius Rubeum* rising and falling, its energy field crackling as it ripped chitin apart like paper. Hybrids came at him from the left and the right, but all fell to his blade. One penetrated his defences, its claws gouging a line in his greave. Sparks flew from his plate as the monster severed some vital connection. The damaged leg locked for a moment and Caedis felt the support of the armour waver.

All the while he struggled with his own rage. The Thirst battered at his reason, threatening to topple his soul into an orgy of bloodletting that would never cease. He cried out. Combat became a blur of leering faces and flashing claws.

And then, the foe was gone. A handful of hybrids fled, Hermis hard on their heels. Guinian called for him to halt, but he paid no attention. Caedis panted lightly. *Gladius Rubeum* had been well-blooded.

‘Master?’ said Guinan. ‘What ails you? I sense turmoil about you.’

‘Nothing, Brother-Epistolary,’ said Caedis. His voice croaked. He licked lips that should not yet be so dry, not so soon after the Rite of Holos. He was thirsty, *so thirsty...*

Teale knelt by the fallen Metrion, and slid a needle from his narthecium into the downed Space Marine’s flesh. The device hissed and a cylinder of red fluid emptied into his veins. ‘He’ll live,’ Teale said flatly. Metrion’s armour had been split in two places. Blood oozed through the gashes, colouring the scratched metal red again.

Caedis had to tear his gaze away. As Teale called in his acolytes to bear the wounded brother away, his own voice trembled. He had his own internal battle to fight.

‘Come,’ he said. ‘We must aid Hermis.’

Guinian paused, Caedis felt something tighten at the back of his skull as the Epistolary sent his senses outwards. ‘Alas, I fear he may already be beyond our help. He has drawn the enemy out in number. If we hurry, we might still save him.’

They ran down the corridor, caution running from them as blood runs from a cup. Caedis could feel it. Once one succumbed to the battle-joy of the

Thirst, others were sure to follow. Only the great will of the Blood Drinkers' elite kept them from rushing headlong into whatever danger threatened Hermis. The sounds of fighting grew, Hermis's snarls and battle-oaths loud over the helmet vox.

They rounded a corner and burst into a broad courtyard. The sun slashed the space in two, one side bathed in dazzling daylight, the other in deep shadow. Two civilian groundcars, luxury models, were parked by grand arch on the far side. Armour plating and concealed weaponry were readily apparent to Caedis's eye.

Brother Hermis fought in the middle of the square against a horde of monsters – hybrids close in form to their monstrous father. Hermis stood precisely where the line of light bisected the courtyard. One of his lightning claws pointed upward. Sunlight fought with the crackling lightning playing on its blades.

The other claw was in darkness, arcing upward toward the belly of a hybrid that loomed over him, a devil assailing an angel.

Several more alien abominations darted toward him, arms outstretched. One lay dead on the floor at the veteran Space Marine's feet, and another was missing one of its upper arms, but fought on regardless. Hermis's helmet had been torn from his head. Blood ran from a wound in his arm. His face was twisted with battle-joy.

To Caedis's blood-crazed mind, the veteran's battle appeared frozen in time, a study in light and dark as dramatic as any of the statue groups that crowded the Sanctum.

Swift motion wiped the impression away. Hermis went down, claws rending his armour apart. Teale bellowed. Boltguns fired. Alien flesh burst, splattering the pale stone with their gore. Erdagon ran toward the square's centre in a shallow arc, out of his brothers' lines of fire. Three genestealers turned to intercept him.

Caedis's head felt light – his throat was closing up, as dry as desert sand. He shook within his armour as he fought the desire to charge headlong at the genestealers, knowing that his bolter was a better tool here. With every kick it gave, he imagined the sensation of *Gladius Rubeum* biting into his enemies, and he felt his will ebbing away.

Guinian raised his arm, palm outstretched. Eldritch energy blazed around him, and abruptly died.

From behind the limousines, something that could almost have been a woman stepped out.

Almost.

Her body was as human as any of the other inhabitants of Catria, but her face betrayed her alien origins. Her features were a little too heavy, her nose was slightly ridged, making it appear wrinkled in disgust. Her mouth was unnaturally downturned. And her eyes – they blazed with a contempt for humanity born in the cold places between the stars.

She carried a staff glowing with wyrding might; an alien psyker, a cult witch. The Blood Drinkers had encountered several on the way to Catria.

Caedis's resolve crumbled, and he dropped his bolter – he could restrain himself no longer. Chanting the war cries of the Blood Drinkers, he raised *Gladius Rubeum* high above his head and ran at the hybrid magos.

The taste of metal. A blast of psychic energy.

Caedis was flung across the square, his armour dragging sparks from the stone as he skidded across it. The tactical overlays in his helmet lenses flickered. He clambered up, clumsily batting away a darting claw as he did so. Grasping hands sought to pin his arms, a genestealer's upper claws formed into a pair of single points to drive down at his armour, but Caedis shucked off the creature's embrace and brought *Gladius Rubeum* up in a wide arc as he stood, divesting the genestealer of three of its arms. He finished it with a return downwards blow.

Guinian stepped forward to confront the witch, sending aside a blast of energy meant for Caedis.

The air was taut, quivering with unnatural colours. Guinian shouted his praise to the emperor and Sanguinius. His hand upraised, red energy arced from his hand. The witch stood her ground, a dome of flaring light covered her, turning aside the attacks of the Epistolary.

Caedis advanced to the square's centre where Erdagon stood over his fallen brother, lightning claws weaving an impenetrable cage, keeping the talons of the hybrids at bay. He was on the defensive; power armour was not proof against the genestealers' diamond-hard claws. Caedis sought to even the odds.

He felled a hybrid from behind, cutting it near in two, the litanies of battle upon his lips. *Gladius Rubeum* crackled as its energy fields ripped apart another, and then Erdagon was free to attack. Another foul creature

died, and another. Back to back, Erdagon and the Chapter Master fought, singing the great songs of battle, surrendering themselves fully to bloody rage.

More genestealers were coming into the courtyard, forcing Teale and Atameo back. Teale discarded his empty gun, and laid about him with his chainsword, the blade's metal teeth juddering as they bit into chitin. Atameo snapped off bursts of fire as he walked backwards, dropping three, four, five of the gangling beasts. Then he fell. The hybrids were fast, their reflexes outmatching those of the Adeptus Astartes. One had been able to pass through Atameo's bolter fire and punch a clawed hand through his armoured torso, eviscerating him.

A rush of alien anger burst over the square. Guinian cried out. The crystalline matrix about his helmet sparked and he stumbled, overwhelmed by the cult witch's warp-born powers. Teale grabbed him by the arm, and pulled the Librarian to the centre of the square, where the others surrounded him.

'She is strong!' gasped Guinian.

The four Blood Drinkers stood with the alien dead piled about them. The genestealers came on from every arch and doorway; creeping down stone columns, slinking out of dark corridor mouths.

The Space Marines, heroes among heroes all, were outnumbered. Reports from the rest of the Sanctum came in through Caedis's helmet vox. Relief was deadly seconds away.

The false saint smiled. Her teeth were small and pointed, her gums dark. 'You test the might of Mother Hesta, you test and you *die*. This is our world now, it belongs to the Children of the Stars.'

She raised her staff, glowing with wyrding energy.

'The blood of life flows quickly!' Teale said, intoning the first line of the Sanguis Moritura.

'Only in death can it be stilled!' replied the others.

'Let not ours be stilled easily, let it flow on and outward – let it flow from us as we slay those who free it!'

'Blood is strength, in death it quickens!'

They sang then the hymn of fury, dry lips bitten red by sharp teeth. They prepared to sell themselves dearly.

Hesta pointed her staff at them and laughed.

Stone burst inwards. Lumps of saints flew across the square, battering down several genestealers. A cloud of dust billowed outwards.

Brother Endarmiel strode through the breach, roaring metallicly. White dust coated black armour. Twin blood fists whirred. He pivoted and drove a mechanical arm forward, smashing hybrids to a pulp. Hesta's eyes widened and she cast her bolt of gathered power at the war machine. Purple light flared around Endarmiel's black armour. He leaned into the blast, weathered it, then strode on and smashed a fist toward the false saint. Hesta stumbled, energy flaring around her as her psychic shield took the brunt of the blow. She snarled, swinging her staff at the war machine's leg. It connected with a resounding boom. Brother Endarmiel staggered, and Hesta howled victoriously, but the Dreadnought extended one mighty fist. The storm bolter slung underneath fired, and Hesta was cut to pieces.

Brother Endarmiel turned from the shattered remains of the magos and turned upon the brood. Caedis and the others charged forward.

Caught between the rampaging Dreadnought and the lord of the Blood Drinkers, the genestealers were doomed. Their claws could do little against the plating that protected Endarmiel's sarcophagus. They scored the metal, paring red blood marks and sacred scrolls away, leaving raw tracks in the adamantium, but they could not find their way through it. They died, crushed by Endarmiel's fists, impaled by *Gladius Rubeum*, cleaved in two by Guinian's force staff, torn apart by chainsword and lightning claw.

Erdagon fell, but the slaughter continued unabated.

Caedis slew another of the half-xenos, driving his sword point through its alien skull.

'Come,' said Guinian hoarsely. 'Our target lies within. I can sense them, and they can sense me. Their mother is dead and still they do not fear.'

There were only three of them now: Teale, Caedis and Guinian. Teale turned away from them. The roars of the Dreadnought were deafening as it finished the last of the hybrids, and he had to shout to make himself heard.

'I must remain here and put aside the blood rage. Erdagon can be saved, and I must retrieve the gene-seed of brother Hermis. Go with fortune and fury, sing well the hymns of battle-joy.'

Caedis gave his assent to the Sanguinary Master. Teale set about his solemn work. Battle-brothers were arriving in the courtyard in Endarmiel's

wake, the fight was nearly done. Caedis motioned for a squad to follow, and together they exited the square and descended into the catacombs beneath Saint Catria's Reliquary Sanctum.

How many holy women lay interred there? At the base of the stairs, in a wide corridor paved with marble, the burials began, hollows in the wall like shelves five high, each housing a set of mummified remains. Corridors led off at regular intervals, all crammed with desiccated corpses.

The Blood Drinkers advanced, the Thirst boiling within them.

In a tomb remade in a crude parody of a nursery, they found the purestrains. Hollow-eyed women and feeble men snatched the mewling creatures from cribs arranged around a throne of bone and iron as the angels of death entered. Four arms stole around the neck of each surrogate parent, and purple snouts nuzzled human necks. The bewitched humans turned to shield their hellish young with their own bodies. Some raised weapons; bolters barked, and these few fell.

A wave of psychic malice came from this twisted family. Cold, alien eyes stared with hatred from the changeling babies.

'Do not kill them, not yet,' ordered Epistolary Guinian in his stern and sorrowful voice. 'I must take the knowledge I seek from their minds.'

The children of Mother Hesta hissed, tubular tongues sliding over wicked teeth. Reptilian eyes possessed of deep and terrible wisdom regarded them. Their false mothers crooned over them frantically as though they were human infants, blind to their heinous form.

Guinian undid his helmet clasps, air hissing as the neck seal came undone. He set his helm on the floor, and stared at the xenos brood. 'Know me now, oh foul and repellent beasts, for I will have what I seek.' Guinian's eyes glowed, and he reached out to the creatures.

The purestrain young let out a haunting cry as one, heard as much in the mind as in the air. Fingers shifted on weapons in armoured hands.

'Wait!' commanded Caedis. The Thirst threatened to undo their task nigh to its completion. 'Do not fire!'

Guinian eyes slid open. Triumph pulled his dour face into a smile. 'My lord, I have it.'

‘You can augur the path of the hulk, brother? You can find the initial source of the xenos contagion?’

‘Yes, my lord. I have the psychic scent of these *things*,’ Guinian spat the word. ‘There are patterns and trails, lord, even in the chaos of empyrean. I can lead us to their foul progenitor.’

Caedis nodded. His eyes swam. The Thirst tortured him. Never had it assailed him so strongly, and a shadow of apprehension stole over his heart.

‘Excellent news’ he said, forcing himself to master his will. ‘I will recall the Second and Fifth Companies to our fleet. This will be a gathering of heroes! We shall crush this abomination at its source once and for all.’

‘Please!’ called one of the women. She was tall and famished, her vitality bled away by her monstrous family. ‘The children! Please, do not harm the little ones!’

Caedis shook his head slowly. ‘Your actions are no sin of your own, but you are forever lost to us. We will commend your souls to your Saint Catria – perhaps she will judge you kindly.’

Caedis raised his hand. The Catrians wailed and screamed.

He let it drop.

Promethium and bolter fire cleansed the chamber.

‘Where were they found?’ demanded Colonel Indrana. She fought and failed to keep the horror out of her voice. From outside the command centre she could hear the thunder of the Space Marines’ departing craft, taking the angelic warriors back to their fleet.

‘Bunker 85. No one saw or heard anything,’ said the medicae adept. ‘I have never seen anything like this. These cuts...’

‘Yes. I can see them,’ snapped Indrana. She stared. The medicae facility smelled like an abattoir, not a place of healing.

‘Colonel, what should we do?’

‘Burn them,’ she said curtly. ‘Burn them all. Contact the families. Tell them they died in defence of our home and the Emperor’s domain.’

‘Yes, ma’am.’

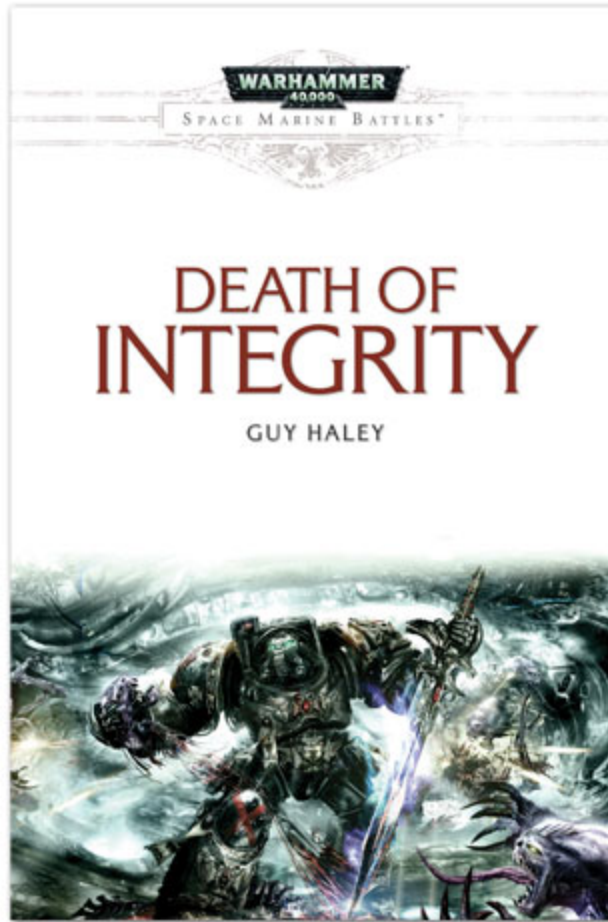
‘Immediately!’

The room burst into activity, her order breaking the air of terror in the room, each of the women present thankful of a task to perform.

There was no relief in action for her, not for Indrana. There was no one to order her, nothing to distract her from the terrible sight of her slaughtered soldiers. Slaughtered was the right word, she thought – they had been killed like animals. She looked upon the seven pallid corpses of her guardswomen, their skin bled to a sickly ashen grey, and she shuddered as she considered the nature of Catria's deliverance.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

GUY HALEY began his career on *SFX Magazine* in 1997 before leaving to edit Games Workshop's *White Dwarf*, followed by SF magazine *Death Ray*. Since 2009 he has been a wandering writer, working in both magazines and novels. He lives in Somerset with his wife and son, a malamute and an enormous, evil-tempered Norwegian Forest Cat called, ironically, Buddy.



Having tracked a genestealer brood across the sector, Chapter Master Caedis of the Blood Drinkers calls upon his old allies in the Novamarines to assist in the destruction of the space hulk designated *Death of Integrity*.

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