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HELSREACH

AARON DEMBSKI-BOWDEN



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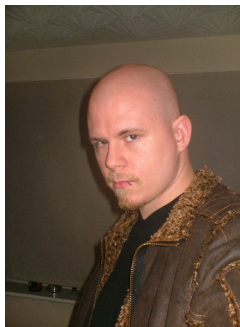
A Space Marine Battles novel

By Aaron Dembski-Bowden

When the world of Armageddon is attacked by orks, the Black Templars Space Marine Chapter are amongst those sent to liberate it. Chaplain Grimaldus and a band of Black Templars are charged with the defence of Hive Helsreach from the xenos invaders in one of many battlezones. But as the ork numbers grow and the Space Marines dwindle, Grimaldus faces a desperate last stand in an Imperial temple. Determined to sell their lives dearly, will the Black Templars hold on long enough to be reinforced, or will their sacrifice ultimately be in vain?

About the Author

Aaron Dembski-Bowden is a British author with his beginnings in the videogame and RPG industries. He's been a deeply entrenched fan of Warhammer 40,000 ever since he first ruined his copy of Space Crusade by painting the models with all the skill expected of an overexcited nine-year-old. He lives and works in Northern Ireland with his fiancée Katie, hiding from the world in the middle of nowhere. His hobbies generally revolve around reading anything within reach, and helping people spell his surname.



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PRIAMUS TWISTED THE blade, widening the wound before wrenching the sword clear. Stinking blood gushed from the creature's chest, and the alien died with its filthy claws scratching at the knight's armour.

Within the crashed ship, stalking from room to room, corridor by corridor, the Templars hunted mongrels in the name of purification.

'This is bad comedy,' he breathed into the vox.

The reply he received was punctuated by the dull clang of weapons clashing together. Artarion, some way behind.

'Fall back, damn it.'

Priamus sensed another lecture about vainglory in his future. He walked on, his precious blade held at the ready, moving deeper into the darkness that his red visor pierced with consummate ease.

Like vermin, the orks scrambled through the tunnels of the wrecked ship, springing ambushes with their crude weapons and snorting their piggish war cries. Priamus's contempt burned hot on his tongue. They were above this. They were Black Templars, and the morale of the puling humans was none of their concern.

Grimaldus was spending too much time among the mortals. The Reclusiarch was beginning to think like them. It had galled Priamus to stand in ranked formation for the pict-drones to hover around and capture the knights' images, just as it galled him now to hunt the scarce survivors of this wreck. It was beneath him, beneath them all. This was work for the Imperial Guard. Perhaps even the militia.

‘We will draw first blood,’ Grimaldus had said to them all, as if it was something to care about – as if it would affect the final battle in any way at all. ‘Join me, brothers. Join me as I shake off this disgust at the stasis gripping my bones, and slake my bloodthirst in holy slaughter.’

The others, as they stood in their foolish ranks for the benefit of the mortals, had cheered. They had cheered.

Priamus remained silent, swallowing the rise of bile in his throat. He had known in that moment, with clarity sharper than ever before, that he was unlike his brothers. They cared about shedding blood now, as if this pathetic gesture mattered.

These warriors who called him vainglorious were blind to the truth: there was nothing vain in glory. He was not rash, he merely trusted in his skills to carry him through any challenge, just as the great Sigismund, First High Marshal of the Black Templars, had trusted his skills to do the same. Was that a weakness? Was it a flaw to exemplify the fury of the Chapter’s founder and the favoured son of Rogal Dorn? How could it be considered so, when Priamus’s deeds and glories were already rising to eclipse those of his brothers?

Movement ahead.

Priamus narrowed his eyes, his pupils flicking across his field of vision to lock targeting reticules on the brutish shapes swarming in the darkness of the wide, lightless corridor.

Three greenskins, their xenos flesh exuding a greasy, fungal scent that reached the knight from a dozen metres away. They lay waiting in a puerile ambush, believing themselves hidden by fallen gantries and a half-destroyed bulkhead door.

Priamus heard them grunting to one another in what passed for whispers in their foul tongue.

This was the best they could do. This was their cunning ambush against warriors made in the Emperor’s image. The knight swore under his breath, the curse never leaving his helm, and charged.

ARTARION LICKED HIS steel teeth. I heard him doing it, even though he wears his helm.

‘Priamus?’ he asks. The vox answers with silence.

Unlike the swordsman, I am not alone. I walked with Artarion, the two of us slaying our way through the enginarium decks. Resistance is light. Most of our venture so far has consisted of kicking xenos corpses out of our path, or butchering lone stragglers.

Most of the Templars were sent across the wastelands in their Rhinos and Land Raiders, chasing down the crash survivors who sought to hide in the wilderness. I have given them their head, and let them hunt. Better the greenskins die now, rather than allow them to lie in wait and rejoin their bestial kin in the true invasion. I took only a handful of warriors into the downed cruiser to purge whatever remains.

‘Leave him be,’ I say to Artarion. ‘Let him hunt. He needs to stand alone for now.’

Artarion pauses before answering. I know him well enough to know he is scowling. ‘He needs discipline.’

‘He needs our trust.’ My tone brooks no further argument.

The ship is in pieces. The floor is uneven, torn and wrenched from the crash. We turn a corner, our boots clinging to the sloping decking as we head into a plasma generator’s coolant chamber. As huge as a cathedral’s prayer chamber, the expansive room is largely taken up by the cylindrical metal housing that encases the temperamental and arcane technology used for cooling the ship’s engines.

I see nothing alive. I hear nothing alive. And yet...

‘I smell fresh blood,’ I vox to Artarion. ‘A survivor, still bleeding.’ I gesture to the vast coolant tower with my crozius. The mace flashes with lightning as I squeeze the trigger rune. ‘The alien lurks beneath there.’

The survivor is barely deserving of the description. It lies pinned under metal debris, impaled through the stomach and pinned to the floor. As we approach, it barks in its rudimentary command of the Gothic tongue. Judging from the pool of cooling blood spreading from its sundered form, the

alien's life will end in mere minutes. Feral red eyes glare at us. Its porcine face is curled in a rictus of anger.

Artarion raises his chainsword, gunning the motor. The saw-teeth whine as they cut through the air.

‘No.’

Artarion freezes. At first, my brother knight isn't sure what he'd heard. His glance flicks to me.

‘What did you say?’

‘I said,’ I'm stepping closer to the dying alien even as I speak, looking down through my skulled mask, ‘...no.’

Artarion lowers his sword. Its teeth stutter to a halt.

‘They always seem so immune to pain,’ I tell him, and I feel my voice fall to a whisper. I place a boot upon the creature's bleeding chest. The ork snaps its jaws at me, choking on the blood that runs into its burst lungs.

Artarion must surely hear the smile in my voice. ‘But no. Look into its eyes, brother.’

Artarion complies. I can tell from his hesitation that he does not see what I see. He looks down and sees nothing but impotent rage.

‘I see fury,’ he tells me. ‘Frustration. Not even hatred. Just wrath.’

‘Then look harder.’ I press down with my boot. Ribs crunch with the sound of dry twigs snapping, one after the other, as the weight descends harder. The ork bellows, drooling and snarling.

‘Do you see?’ I ask, knowing the smile is still evident in my voice.

‘No, brother,’ Artarion grunts. ‘If there is a lesson in this, I am blind to it.’

I lift the boot, letting the ork cough its lifeblood through its blood-streaked maw.

‘I see it in the creature's eyes. Defeat is pain. Its nerves may be dead to torment, but whatever passes for its soul knows how to suffer. To be at an enemy's mercy... Look at its face, brother. See how it dies in agony because we are here to watch such a shameful end.’

Artarion watches, and I think perhaps he sees it, as well. However, it does not fascinate him the way it does me. 'Let me end it,' he says. 'Its existence offends me.'

I shake my head. That would not do at all.

'No. Its life's span is measured in moments.' I feel the dying alien's gaze lock with my red eye lenses. 'Let it die in this pain.'

NEROVAR HESITATED.

'Nero?' Cador called over his shoulder. 'Do you see something?'

The Apothecary blink-clicked several visualiser runes on his retinal display.

'Yes. Something.'

The two of them were searching the ruined enginarium chambers on the level beneath Grimaldus and Artarion. Nerovar frowned at what the digital readouts across his eye lenses were telling him. He looked to the bulky narthecium unit built into his left bracer.

'So enlighten me,' Cador said, his voice as gruff as always.

Nerovar tapped a code into the multicoloured buttons next to the display screen on his armoured forearm. Runic text scrolled in a blur.

'It's Priamus.'

Cador grunted in agreement. Nothing but trouble, that one. 'Isn't it always?'

'I've lost his life signs.'

'That cannot be,' Cador laughed. 'Here? Among this rabble?'

'I do not make mistakes,' Nerovar replied. He activated the squad's shared channel. 'Reclusiarch?'

'Speak.' The Chaplain sounded distracted, and faintly amused. 'What is it?'

'I've lost Priamus's life signs, sir. No heightened returns, just an immediate severance.'

'Confirm at once.'

‘Confirmed, Reclusiarch. I verified it before contacting you.’

‘Brothers,’ the Chaplain said, his voice suddenly ice. ‘Maintain search and destroy orders.’

‘What?’ Artarion drew breath to object. ‘We need—’
‘Be silent. I will find Priamus.’

HE WASN’T SURE what they hit him with.

The greenskins had melted from their hiding places in the darkness, one of them carrying a weighty amalgamation of scrap that only loosely resembled a weapon. Priamus had slain one, laughing at its porcine snorting as it fell to the deck, and launched at the next.

The scrap-weapon bucked in the greenskin’s hands. A claw of charged, crackling metal fired from the alien device and crunched into the knight’s chest. There was a moment of stinging pain as his suit’s interface tendrils, the connection spikes lodged in his muscles and bones, crackled with an overload of power.

Then his vision went black. His armour fell silent, and became heavier on his shoulders and limbs. Out of power. They’d deactivated his armour.

‘Dorn’s blood...’

Priamus tore his helm clear just in time to see the alien racking his scrap-weapon like a primitive solid-slug launcher. The claw embedded in his chest armour, defiling the Templar cross there, was still connected to the device by a cable of chains and wires. Priamus raised his blade to sever the bond even as the alien laughed and pulled a second trigger.

This time, the channelled force didn’t just overload his armour’s electrical systems. It burned through the neural connections and muscle interfaces, blasting agony through the swordsman’s body.

Priamus, gene-forged like all Astartes to tolerate any pain the enemies of mankind could inflict upon him, would have screamed if he could. His muscles locked, his teeth clamped

together, and his attempt to cry out left his clenched jaw as an ululating, shuddering ‘Hnn-hnn-hnn’.

Priamus crashed to the ground fourteen seconds later, when the agony finally ceased.

THE GREENSKINS HUNCH over his prone form.

Now they have managed to bring him down, they seem to have no idea what to do with their prize. One of them turns my brother’s black helm over in its fat-knuckled hands. If it means to turn Priamus’s armour into a trophy, it is about to pay for such blasphemy.

As I walk down the darkened corridor, I drag my mace along the wall – the ornate head clangs against the steel arches. I have no wish to be subtle.

‘Greetings.’ I breathe the word from my skulled face.

They raise their hideous alien faces, their jaws slack and filled with rows of grinding teeth. One of them hefts a heavy composite of detritus and debris that apparently serves as a weapon.

It fires... something... at me. I do not care what. It’s smashed from the air with a single swing of my inactive maul. The clang of metal on metal echoes throughout the corridor, and I thumb the trigger rune on the haft of my crozius. The mace flares into crackling life as I aim it at the aliens.

‘You dare exist in humanity’s domain? You dare spread your cancerous touch to our worlds?’

They do not answer this challenge with words. Instead, they come at me in a lumbering run, raising cleaver swords; primitive weapons to suit primitive beings.

I am laughing when they reach me.

GRIMALDUS SWUNG HIS mace two-handed, pounding the first alien back. The sparking force field around the weapon’s head flashed as it reacted with opposing kinetic force, and amplified the already inhuman strike to insane levels of strength. The greenskin was already dead, its skull obliterated,

as it flew twenty metres back down the corridor to smash into a damaged bulkhead.

The second tried to run. It turned its back and ran, hunched and ape-like, back in the direction it had come.

Grimaldus was faster. He caught the creature in a handful of heartbeats, hooked his gauntleted fingers in the ork's armoured collar to halt its flight, and smashed it against the corridor wall.

The alien grunted a stream of curses in Gothic as it struggled in the knight's grip.

Grimaldus clutched at the creature's throat, black gauntlets squeezing, choking, crunching bone beneath his grip.

'You dare defile the language of the pure race...' He slammed the alien back, breaking its head open on the steel wall behind. Foetid breath steamed across Grimaldus's faceplate as the ork's attempt to roar came out as a panicked whine. The Astartes would not be appeased. His grip tightened.

'You dare desecrate our tongue?'

Again, he bashed the greenskin back, the alien's head splitting wide as it struck a girder.

The ork's struggles died immediately. Grimaldus let the creature fall to the metal decking, where it hit and folded with a muffled thud.

Priamus.

The fury was fading now. Reality asserted itself with cold, unwanted clarity. Priamus lay on the deck, head to the side, bleeding from his ears and open mouth. Grimaldus came to his side, kneeling there in the darkness.

'Nero,' he said quietly.

'Reclusiarch,' the younger knight returned.

'I have found Priamus. Aft, deck four, tertiary spine corridor.'

'On my way. Assessment?'

Grimaldus's targeting reticule flicked over his brother's prone body, then locked onto the scrap-weapon carried by the orks he'd killed.

‘Some kind of force-discharging weapon. His armour is powered down, but he’s still breathing. Both his hearts are beating.’ This last part was the most serious aspect of the downed knight’s condition. If his reserve heart had begun to beat, there must have been significant trauma done to Priamus’s body.

‘Three minutes, Reclusiarch.’ There was the dampened suggestion of bolter fire.

‘Resistance, Cador?’ Grimaldus asked.

‘Nothing of consequence.’

‘Stragglers,’ Nerovar clarified. ‘Three minutes, Reclusiarch. No more than that.’

IT WAS CLOSER to two minutes. When Nerovar and Cador arrived at a run, they smelled of the chemical combat stimulants in their blood and the acrid tang of discharged bolters.

The Apothecary knelt by Priamus, scanning his fallen brother with the medical auspex bio-scanner built into his arm-mounted narthecium.

Grimaldus looked at Cador. The oldest member of the squad was reloading his bolt pistol, and muttering into the vox.

‘Speak,’ the Chaplain said. ‘I would hear your thoughts.’

‘Nothing, sir.’

Grimaldus felt his eyes narrow and teeth grind together. He almost repeated his words at an order. What held him back was not tact, but discipline. His rage still boiled beneath the surface. He was no mere knight, to give in to his emotion and remain flooded by it. As a Chaplain, he held himself to a higher standard. Putting the chill of normality into his voice, he said simply:

‘We will speak of this later. I am not blind to your tensions of late.’

‘As you wish, Reclusiarch,’ Cador replied.

Priamus opened his eyes, and did two things at once. He reached for his sword – still chained to his wrist – and he said through tight lips, ‘Those whoresons. They shot me.’

‘Some kind of nerve weapon.’ Nerovar was still scanning him. ‘It attacked your nervous system through the interface feeds from your armour.’

‘Get away from me,’ the swordsman said, rising to his feet. Nerovar offered a hand, which Priamus knocked aside. ‘I said get away.’

Grimaldus handed the knight his helm.

‘If you are finished with your lone reconnaissance, perhaps you can stay with Nero and Cadon this time.’

The pause that followed the Chaplain’s words was pregnant with Priamus’s bitterness.

‘As you wish. My lord.’

* * *

WHEN WE EMERGE from the wrecked ship, the weak sun is rising, spreading its worthlessly dim light across the clouded heavens.

The rest of my force, the hundred knights of the Helsreach Crusade, is assembling in the wastelands around the broken ship’s metal bones.

Three Land Raiders, six Rhinos, the air around them all thrumming with the chuckle of idling engines. I think, for a strange moment, that even our tanks are amused at the pathetic hunting on offer last night.

Kill-totals scroll across my visor display as squad leaders report the success of their hunts. A paltry night’s work, all in all, but the mortals behind the city walls have the first blood they so ardently desired.

‘You’re not cheering,’ Artarion voxes to me, and only me.

‘Little was cleansed. Little was purified.’

‘Duty is not always glorious,’ he says, and I wonder if he refers to our exile on the planet’s surface with those words.

‘I presume that is a barbed reference for my benefit?’

‘Perhaps.’ He clammers aboard our Land Raider, still speaking from within. ‘Brother, you have changed since inheriting Mordred’s mantle.’

‘You are speaking foolishness.’

‘No. Hear me. We have spoken: Cadon, Nero, Bastilan, Priamus and myself. And we have listened to the talk among the others. We must all deal with these changes, and we must all face this duty. Your darkness is spreading to the entire Crusade. One hundred warriors all fearing that the fire in your heart is naught but embers now.’

And for a moment, his words ring true. My blood runs cold. My heart chills in my chest.

‘Reclusiarch,’ a voice crackles over the vox. I do not immediately recognise it – Artarion’s words have stolen my thoughts.

‘Grimaldus. Speak.’

‘Reclusiarch. Throne of the God-Emperor... It’s truly beginning.’ Colonel Sarren sounds awed, almost eager.

‘Elaborate,’ I tell him.

‘Battlefleet Armageddon is in full retreat. The Astartes fleet is withdrawing alongside them.’ The colonel’s voice broke up in a storm of vox-feedback, only to return a moment later. ‘...breaking against the orbital defence array. Breaking through, already. It’s beginning.’

‘We are returning to the city at once. Has there been any communication from The Eternal Crusader?’

‘Yes. The planetary vox-network is struggling to cope with the influx. Shall I have the message relayed to you?’

‘At once, colonel.’

I embark and slam the Land Raider’s side hatch closed. Within the tank, all is suffused in the muted darkness of emergency lighting. I stand with my squad, gripping the overhead rail as the tank starts with a lurch.

At last, after the vox-clicking of several channels being linked together, I hear the words of High Marshal Helbrecht, the brother I have fought beside for so many decades. His

voice, even on a low-quality recording, is filled with his presence.

‘Helsreach, this is the Crusader. We are breaking from the planet. The orbital war is lost. Repeat: the orbital war is lost. Grimaldus... once you hear these words, stand ready. You are Mordred’s heir, and my trust rides with you. Hell is coming, brother. The Great Enemy’s fleet is without number, but faith and fury will see your duty done.’

I curse him, without giving voice to my spite. A silent oath that I will never forgive him for this exile... For damning me to die in futility.

Behind his words, I hear the cacophony of a ship enduring colossal assault. Dull explosions, horrendous and thunderous shaking – The Eternal Crusader’s shields were down when he sent me this message. I cannot conceive of any enemy in history that has managed to inflict such damage to our flagship.

‘Grimaldus,’ he says my name with cold, raw solemnity, and his final words knife into me like a bitter blade.

‘Die well.’

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