

CONQUEST OF ARMAGEDDON

A Warhammer 40K novel by Jonathan Green

THE BLACK TEMPLARS are one of the most determined Chapters of Space Marines – refusing to take a step backwards, no matter what the consequences. When one of their units goes missing in the ork infested jungles of Armageddon, an elite squad is sent to investigate. Their mission is further complicated by the presence of a key Imperial officer who has crash-landed behind enemy lines. Hunted by both the savage orks and the corrupted Chaos Space Marines, the Black Templars must call upon every ounce of their faith and firepower if they are to survive and rescue their lost battle-brothers.



Jonathan Green has been a freelance writer for the last thirteen years. He has written Fighting Fantasy and Sonic the Hedgehog gamebooks. His work for the Black Library, to date, includes a string of short stories for Inferno! magazine and six novels. Jonathan works as a full-time teacher in West London.

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from CONQUEST OF ARMAGEDDON

FROM THE BRIDGE of the mighty battle-barge *Divine Fury*, Marshal Brant of the Black Templars Chapter and the other assembled crusaders looked down on the cloud-wreathed world of Solemnus and at the orbital laser strikes igniting the atmosphere above the largest continent on the planet below. From the *Divine Fury's* position in high orbit, the coruscating explosions looked like blossoming crimson flowers amidst the dense white cloud cover, incongruously beautiful considering the abominable sacrilege to which they were a testament.

Through the armacryst glass of the oriel window the Space Marines could see the ugly, angular shapes of the alien vessels – no more than rusting conglomerations assembled from chunks of metal debris. They were circling the wrecks of orbital defence platforms like piranhas around a fresh kill.

Several of the larger predatory craft hung in geosynchronous orbit over the broiling cloud beneath them. Beams of rippling energy blasted from the gaping maws of their blunt, archeosaur-headed prows, piercing the cumulonimbus with their intense laser barrage and boiling the water-laden air around them.

Watching the ork assault, Brother-Apothecary Colber felt hatred burn in his heart. But behind the all-enclosing mask of his gleaming white helmet, his expression remained surprisingly impassive – thanks to the nerve-shredding wound dealt him by a mantagaunt on the ocean-world of Eswulus twenty-seven years before, three years before he had been elevated from the rank of neophyte-medic to the status of full Apothecary initiate.

But righteous fury still blazed inside Colber. From the moment he saw the shark-ships dealing out death to the chapter world below, he made a personal vow that he would not rest until every last one of the vile aliens had been expunged from existence, whether by his hand or others.

‘Sigismund’s sword!’ Brant roared, his cry of anger and heartfelt anguish reverberating from the cathedral nave of the battle-barge.

Every one of the marshal’s senior officers and attendants aboard the bridge with him uttered their own disbelieving oaths at the sight that appalled them through the viewing port in front of them.

How had the orks been able to home in on the one place on the planet worth attacking so quickly and so accurately? The greenskins were renowned for their lack of forethought. What power had allowed them to locate the site of the ancient chapter keep with such deadly speed?

Ultimately the alien armada would have found the keep, their own crude communications system picking up comm traffic from the ancient bastion, but the *Divine Fury* had been tracking the ships ever since the Lugnasad Crusade had dropped out of the warp at the edge of the Solemnus system. They had been only a matter of hours behind the invading xenos fleet.

What dread ability did the aliens possess? Had they looted some devastatingly powerful doomsday weapon from another vessel... perhaps one of the drifting derelicts they were prone to colonise as they drifted through space, dropping in and out of the warp at the whim of who knew what powers, carried unguided on the currents of the Sea of Souls?

‘Helm, lock in an intercept course. Full power to the plasma engines!’ Brant commanded.

Space Marines, blank-faced servitors and servants of the Machine God, hurried to do his bidding.

‘Lock every Omnissiah-given weapon onto those abominations and hit them with everything we have!’

The *Divine Fury*’s weapons arrays charged and then, in a supernova fusillade, unleashed the fury of a thousand volcanic eruptions at the ork armada.

As the battle-barge’s weapons charged again, the other ships of the Templar fleet discharged their own weapons batteries and moved in for the kill, ploughing through the chill void to engage with the xenos vessels.

The sleeker, faster-moving Gladius-class frigates *Loyalty’s Reward* and *In Memoriam* closed on the first of the ork vessels – designated terror ships by the Imperial Navy – pounding them with heavy ordnance as well as devastating barrages of laser fire.

The capital ships of the crusade fleet – the *Hammer of War*, forgeship *Goliath* and the *Divine Fury* herself, fired again. Laser lances pulsed with vaporising light. Gun decks shook with seismic vibrations as weapons crews loaded and fired their artillery pieces, before clearing the breach and reloading, ready to fire again. Outraged by the sacrilege, the orks were perpetrating against their chapter world, the ships of the Lugasad Crusade bombarded the rabble of ork ships with everything they had, closing in on the alien constructs in a spearhead formation.

The rusty skin of the nearest of the ork vessels fractured and then detonated from within, its ugly bulk disappearing within an expanding ball of roiling nuclear flame. The first kill went to the Emperor’s finest. But only the Lord of Terra Himself knew at this stage how many had already been lost on the planet below.

The chapter keep of Solemnus usually housed up to as many as one hundred battle-ready brethren and neophytes, enjoying a time of solitude and monastic prayer between conflicts. A vital part of the role of those left behind was to protect the planet from invasion and to search out new recruits for the most zealous of the Astartes Chapters.

Ever since Lord Sigismund had assembled the first and largest of the war fleets of the Chapter and begun the greatest crusade the Adeptus Astartes had ever undertaken, the Space Marines of the Black Templars Chapter had scorned the idea of maintaining a single home world.

The Black Templars zealously guarded their chapter keep worlds, for they were vital to the continuation of the Chapter itself, founded ten millennia back. Lord Sigismund, once of the Imperial Fists, but known to the Black Templars as first high marshal of their order, had established the Chapter of holy warriors, following the accursed days of the Horus Heresy. Those dark days had seen the Imperium of Man torn apart and brought to the edge of oblivion. To save all mankind, the Emperor had sacrificed himself aboard the Warmaster's battle-barge in order that he might cast down his favoured son Horus.

Such chapter worlds also acted as staging posts for war fleets of what was essentially a fleet-based Chapter. And on every world conquered or reclaimed for the Imperium by the Black Templars of the Adeptus Astartes there stood a chapter keep. Mighty, majestic strongholds eons-old, of untold might they were great bastions that stood as unyielding as the zealous faith of the Templars themselves. Never had there been a more loyal and holy body of warriors in the ten thousand-year history of the Imperium of Man.

And now the marshal's war fleet had returned from its pilgrimage to the Apollo subsector only to find Solemnus and its ages-old monastery-fortress at the mercy of the filthy alien orks. And the ships under Brant's command – the grand battle-barges, strike cruisers and their escorts – were bringing down divine retribution upon the enemy for what they had dared to do.

Standing on the bridge of his fleet flagship, Marshal Brant of the Lugnasad Crusade felt an all-consuming hatred for

the xenos greenskins possess his huge bio-engineered frame.

'By all that is holy,' Brant swore, 'not one of these blasphemous alien scum shall escape my wrath and the wrath of the Emperor for the wrong they have done our glorious Chapter this day!' He slammed his gauntleted fist down on top of the command-pulpit at which he stood, cracking the carved granite lintel.

'I swear it in the Emperor's name, in the name of our patriarch Rogal Dorn and in the most venerated name of Lord Sigismund! Every one of them will die and burn in the fiery hell of our vengeance!'

THE DROP POD rocketed through the atmosphere of the planet, buffeted by hurricane-force high altitude winds. Strapped with their locking-harnesses, there was nothing that Apothecary Colber and his retinue could do, other than pray to the Master of Mankind, their gene-father Rogal Dorn and their saintly founder, that they would make planetfall safely. And pray they did, chanting meditative mantras, filling the interior of the screaming drop pod with sanctifying reverberations as it plummeted towards the surface of desecrated Solemnus.

Solemnus was a μ -class world, as grim and dour as its name suggested. It was believed to have been first settled by mankind during the millennia-distant Dark Age of Technology, an almost mythical time pre-dating the Age of Strife.

It was a world troubled by storms, the climate of its major landmasses temperate and enduring more or less continual rainfall for ten months of its thirteen-month year. The people of Solemnus who lived beyond the towering walls of the Templars' massive sanctuary were hardy, humourless folk. They made their feudal livings rearing sheep and livestock of all kinds, by mining and quarrying, and through timber production from the swathes of deciduous

and coniferous forests that covered vast areas of the damp uplands.

Those same people maintained their own method of government via a system of petty kingdoms and vassal lords. But it was the castellan of the chapter keep who was the true overlord, and effectively governor, of the planet, who represented Solemnus to the greater Imperium. The tithes it paid to the Imperium were the warriors it provided for the Adeptus Astartes. That and the unwavering faith of its populace, numbering several million according to the last census performed by the Ministorum, with the hallowed brotherhood's consent.

A thousand years before, the Black Templars had come to Solemnus to quash the insidious genestealer cult that had held almost the entire planet in its filthy talons. The people only remembered those terrible bloody events now in their legends, but the Black Templars never forgot any injustice done against the people of His Glorious Majesty's galaxy-spanning Imperium. The eradication of the alien cult was inscribed upon the walls of the magnificent Hall of Heroes inside the chapter keep, along with the record of the other battles that had been fought by the Templars that now called Solemnus their ancestral home.

As his thoughts focused on the threatened world beneath them, Colber found himself wondering what fate it was that had befallen the current castellan, Lord Hagan.

Retro-jets firing at the last possible moment, the drop pod impacted before the shattered keep with a ground-quaking thud.

The heat-seared panels of the pod fell open with a resounding clang and Apothecary Colber burst from its plasteel interior. Seeing the smoke-wreathed silhouette of the keep, Colber nearly faltered in his charge.

The Templar stronghold had stood for two hundred generations. Now it was nothing but a burnt-out, vitrified shell, black and broken, like the carcass of some prehistoric behemoth,

stark against the icy peaks of the Lammas Mountains a hundred kilometres distant.

The keep had been the largest man-made structure on the backwater world of Solemnus. Now it was just a ruin of its former glory and a cruel reminder of the newly found devastating power of the ork asteroid-fortress. Despite having stood for a thousand years and resisted sieges by the piratical eldar and Chaos renegades in its long history, in one day the greenskin rabble had breached the ancient fortification's walls.

In front of the keep a wide crater had been formed in the surface of the very bedrock of the planet. Something exerting colossal pressures had come to ground at this spot: the ork rok.

As he took in the scene of devastation, the furious hatred Colber had felt when he had first set eyes on the terror ships of the ramshackle ork armada now returned ten-fold.

'Suffer not the alien to live!' Colber cried, raising his reductor, and pointing it towards the shattered shell of the fortress before them.

Doubling their pace, the Apothecary's honour guard charged up the slope towards the broken outer fortifications. The hillside had been pared down to the bedrock, the blackened vitrified scars testifying to scything energy beams having chewed at the exposed granite.

Colber's armour was in stark comparison to that of the battle-brothers who accompanied him. Where their ancient suits of enclosing power armour were almost totally black, with only a few contrasting white or red details, his Apothecary's uniform was almost totally white. He moved like a spectral vision of a Space Marine between his black-armoured brethren.

Drop pods continued to make planetfall on the bleak hillside in a thick black rain. Enraged Templars, their souls full of the fires of battle, bursting forth to take the battle to the orks. The alien fleet had been broken by the

superior might of the crusade ships and were being driven from the Solemnus system in the shadow of their blasphemous hulk.

Those orks left behind on the ground seemed oblivious to their predicament, or they simply did not care that they had been abandoned and that the full dreadful might of the Black Templars would soon come upon them in a hail of furious vengeance. Whatever terrible fate had befallen the keep and its guardians, not a single ork would live to glory in their brutish destruction.

A solid gatehouse had once stood before the keep, as big as one of the castles of the feudal lords who once held sway over the populace on a day-to-day basis for their own Templar overlords. There was little left of it now.

Charging through the smashed gatehouse, a drift of ember-blown smoke cleared momentarily and Colber saw lumpen, green-fleshed creatures plundering the corpses of those who had defended the gatehouse. The beasts were pulling weapons as well as pieces of armour from the bodies of the fortress's own human custodians.

Colber felt his stomach knot in anger and grief as he saw that the largest of the xenos scum was trying to pull the bolter from the deathly grip of what remained of one of the keep's superhuman guardians. The Templar had been crushed under several tonnes of rubble, a huge corbel sculpted with the equal-armed cross of the Chapter having crushed his head completely.

And then the battle cry of the Black Templars was spilling from Colber's lips – 'No pity! No remorse! No fear!' – his deep basso voice making the exclamation sound more like a bullish roar.

An Apothecary was a Space Marine trained to undertake the routine medical and surgical duties of the Chapter, particularly on the front line of battle. But first and foremost an Apothecary was a Space Marine, trained to be one of the Emperor's finest warriors. Although those chosen to serve

in the Apothecarion of the Chapter were expert medics, they were also expert killers, having been trained to kill the enemies of the Imperium in a myriad ways.

Bolt pistol in hand, Colber threw himself at the greenskins. Pulling the trigger, he felt the reassurance of the weapon kick in his left hand as it hurled round after explosive round into the alien marauders. Green flesh exploded in sprays of foul ichor. Two of the hideous, tusked creatures fell, one with half its head missing, the other with daylight visible through the cavity blown through its chest.

There was a blur as something hulking, and clad in pieces of scavenged armour and animal hides, lunged for the Apothecary. But Colber's reactions were faster. He lashed out with his right fist and the gleaming spike of the reductor attached to his armoured wrist. The reductor was a medicae tool designed to extract the precious progenoid glands that every battle-brother carried inside their bodies, but it made an equally effective weapon. There was a viscous pop followed by a brief, high-speed whirring and then Colber pulled the reductor free. Most of the ork brute's brain seemed to come out with it through the hole of its ruined eye socket.

Colber's fellows fell on the remainder of the ork mob scavenging within the ruins of the shattered gatehouse. In a matter of minutes, with deft strokes of swords and carefully aimed bursts of gunfire, the aliens' carcasses had joined those of the keep's defenders.

More orks were lolloping out of the main keep to repel the Black Templar attackers, armed with crude automatic weapons and hand-axes.

But amidst the raging cauldron of battle, Colber himself paused. There was crucial work for him to do here. Crouching down beside the black-armoured body of the fallen Marine, with a silent prayer to the Emperor, he set about his labour. Far more important even than tending to the wounded on the battlefield, an Apothecary's most vital

duty was the guardianship of the future and the continuance of the Chapter.

Those who served the Apothecarion were the keepers of the Chapter's holy biological legacy, the guardians of the Chapter's precious gene-seed. The source of the gene-seed was the Space Marines themselves, each one having been implanted with the mysterious replicating progenoid organs as part of their induction into the Chapter. These miraculous Emperor-created implants absorbed genetic information from a Marine's body. When a battle-brother died, his progenoids could be removed and used to produce further zygote implants for future initiates of the Chapter.

Without the progenoid glands, no further implants could be cultivated, and no new Marines created. And if no neophytes could be engineered then, in time, the Chapter itself would die, as so many had in the past. The Sons of Gorgax and the Silver Stars were now no more than dusty memories, the only evidence of their existence being a record within the Index Astartes. So it was that the life of the Chapter was totally dependant upon the medicae work of the Apothecaries.

With the anointed seals of the dead Templar's gorget and chestplate released, Apothecary Colber was able to remove those pieces of litany-inscribed power armour. Placing the point of the reductor against the Marine's neck, Colber punctured his skin. The point sank into the dead warrior's body with ease, Colber following its course as a sub-dermal mag-res scan on a tiny medicae-augury screen built into the wrist unit.

Then there the swollen slug-like gland appeared on the monitor. Colber activated the arcane device with a thought-impulse and the reductor set to work removing the implant. The progenoid extracted, with practiced speed and ease, Colber did the same with the second of the gene-seeds buried deep inside the Marine's chest, behind the fused

bone shell of the ribcage. Cutting tools built into the reductor automatically came into play before the second implant could be taken out successfully.

He could not help but feel a pang of grief as he extracted the glands from the dying Templar. To lose his gene-seed truly meant the end for a warrior, and no matter how many battles he saw, how many dying men he ministered to, Colber still felt the same way. And he was glad, for as soon as he stopped feeling this way then he would be dead himself, a soulless, emotionless creature.

And what good was that to the Chapter, when its warriors needed to feel the torments of anger, grief and moral righteousness to prosecute their crusades against the myriad enemies of the Emperor? What would a Space Marine of the Black Templar Chapter be without passion, without overwhelming love and respect for the Emperor and the sacrifice He had made for the sake of all mankind, and the ability to hate?

The two gene-seeds recovered, Colber transferred them to his narthecium unit, where they would be preserved within a self-regulating, cold-stasis compartment.

'Your death will not have been in vain,' Colber addressed the nameless corpse, as if to offer some comfort to the deceased Templar. 'May the Emperor's warrior-angels guide your soul to His side to fight for His glory for all eternity.'

The whole procedure was over in a less than a minute. His duty done, Apothecary Colber rose to his feet. Having made the sign of the helix across his chest, he followed an advancing squad of initiates and their neophyte charges as they crossed the splintered remains of the stronghold's massive drawbridge into the heart of the chapter keep itself.

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