

CRUSADE FOR ARMAGEDDON

A WARHAMMER 40,000 NOVEL BY JONATHAN GREEN

BATTLE-WEARY MARSHAL Brant of the Black Templars returns home after leading his Space Marines to victory through countless campaigns to find their planet, Solemnus, under attack from battle hungry orks. After a desperate struggle, Brant finds his forces are all but destroyed and the honour of the Chapter stained with blood. His vow for revenge takes him to the fiery shores of Armageddon, a sulphurous world synonymous with war, and into the heat of battle!



Jonathan Green works as a full-time teacher in West London. By night he relates tales of Torben Badenov's Kislevite mercenaries and the adventures of the Underhive bounty hunter Nathan Creed for Inferno! magazine.

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from CRUSADE FOR ARMAGEDDON

BROTHER JAROLD'S WORLD lurched violently, his dreadnought body pushing against its restraining clamps, as something collided with the mark IV Mars pattern drop pod. Lights flashed and warning sirens sounded for a few seconds then faded again as stabiliser jets steadied the plummeting insertion craft.

The Black Templars' mission was a straightforward one: insertion and interception.

Castellan Adlar's fighting company was being deployed via drop pods in a planetfall mission, running the gauntlet of the aliens' arguably superior air defences over the drop zone, to place as many troops, as quickly as possible, in the path of the enemy. The Black Templars were needed to stop motorised ork reinforcements emerging out of the ash wastes from reaching the main greenskin force assaulting the wearied walls of Tartarus Hive.

Tartarus was a hive teetering on the edge of oblivion. It was on the verge of falling to the aliens, just as Tempestora, Acheron and Hades had fallen before it. Having halted the ork advance coming from the toxic desert, at the request of Tartarus High Command, Fighting Company Adlar was then to make its way to the beleaguered hive-city and lend their aid to a push that was designed to break the ork siege at last.

And a request was all it was, all it could possibly be. For the military commanders of one, war-torn world did not command the elite warriors of the Emperor who were so much greater than their mere mortal counterparts in so many ways. The Imperial forces on Armageddon had to thank the Astartes' indoctrinated sense of honour and duty for their assistance on this field of battle at all.

Having responded to General Kurov's distress call, the Imperial commander on Armageddon pleaded to all loyal servants of the Imperium to help his troops defend the hive-world from Ghazghkull Mag Uruk Thraka's terrible waaagh, it had to be remembered that the Black Templars were there solely of their own volition. However, they could also be relied upon to not quit until the planet had been purged of its rancid alien infestation.

And of course, the Templars of Crusade Fleet Solemnus had their own reasons for being there. Intelligence, from various, indeterminate sources, had confirmed the presence of the Blood Scar tribe both on the ground on Armageddon and in orbit around it. It was believed the hulk *Krom Kruach* had been detected amongst the ork fleet supporting the rok drops over the planet's southern hemisphere.

However, intelligence suggested that the ork warboss Morkrull Grimskar had disembarked the *Krom Kruach* to join the land war for Armageddon. Like all ork commanders, he revelled in the brutality of close combat. While it was enjoyable to blow things up from a distance it was far more satisfying to the ork mind to savour the savage pleasure of slaughter first hand. The site of his landing was believed to be within the ash wastes of Armageddon Secundus, east of Tartarus Hive.

Every battle-brother who had travelled the interstellar gulfs between feudal Solemnus and mighty Armageddon had sworn a sacred oath, stronger than life and more binding than death, to hunt down Grimskar and his horde and avenge the loss of their fallen comrades and their chapter keep. That was the ultimate objective in their crusade for Armageddon and none of them would forget it. They would make planetfall and aid Tartarus Hive. In the process they would hunt out their nemesis and put him down like the dog he was.

Conflicting intelligence suggested that Grimskar was still aboard his hulk, planning some appalling atrocity so the Black Templars would also engage the ork fleets in battle in another attempt to attain their objective. While Castellan Adlar's troops deployed on the ground, Fighting Company Gerhard and the marshal's own household would remain in orbit, fighting fleet based actions against the enemy, carrying out boarding actions against the multitude of roks and the malignantly monstrous ork armada still polluting the space ways high above Armageddon. They would be joining Space Marines of other

Chapters in this approach, noble Astartes orders such as the savagely proud Celestial Lions, the evil-banishing crimson-armoured brothers of the Exorcists, and the Ultramarine successor Chapter the Sons of Guilliman.

As the dreadnought drop pod plunged through the stratosphere, freezing high-altitude winds cooled thousand degree entry-heated panels until a skin of ice formed around the craft. Inside it, insulation maintained the internal temperature at the optimum level for all mechanical and electronic systems to remain fully functional.

Ancient cogitators, their esoteric operation only half-understood by the erudite techmarines of the Chapter, downloaded thousands of gigabytes of data into the dreadnought, all the information he would need for the mission ahead. Details about the planet itself, from its topography and climate to its orbital distance from the system's sun and seasonal cycles; the accepted Imperial historical record of the Third War for Armageddon; current statistics of Imperial losses and gains; analysis of ork warband deployments; were all inputted directly into his brain. They were relayed via data-channels and cerebellum plugs through mind-impulse wetware, from ports that linked the dreadnought to the pod's systems, so that it could autonomously access the pod's data-core.

The pod shook again as it hurtled towards the planet's surface at several hundred kilometres an hour, the ten-kilometre descent projected to only last a matter of minutes. But to the motion of atmosphere-buffed, high-speed descent was added the sensation of centrifugal spin. As well as being transmitted by the armour's surveyors through the links of his still intact subdermal black carapace, Jarold felt this new rotation through the movement of his paraplegic body locked inside the amniotic tank of the dreadnought.

Electronic ears heard, and motion-sensors detected the vibrations of, the explosions impacting on the hull of the drop pod.

The craft lurched. Klaxons sounded stridently, although there was nothing Jarold could do to adjust the course of his descent. If a fin or rocket booster had been destroyed he could now be shooting off course at a sharp tangent. And without the stabilising jets or steadying dorsal fins operating as they were designed to, no matter what adjustments the pod's machine spirit made, Jarold was doomed to a crash landing of potentially catastrophic

ic consequences. An uncontrollable disabled drop pod could all too easily become a warrior's tomb.

Something was carrying out an aerial assault against the drop pods as they plunged through Armageddon's carbon- and sulphur-dioxide ravaged atmosphere, and it did not take a techmarine to tell him what it was.

Orks.

As the fleet was deploying its insertion craft, Castellan Adlar's company had already run the green-fisted gauntlet of fire from the orbiting kill kroozers that had moved against the *Divine Fury*, the *Goliath*, and the strike cruisers *Sigismund's Wrath* and *No Pity*, like sharks homing in on a drop of blood in an ocean.

The urgent voices of his battle-brothers sounded over the comm-net. Some of them were mere neophytes, barely even blooded compared to Jarold's long and distinguished career. It was at a time like this that a veteran should lend his younger brothers the support and reassurance of his experience.

Brother Jarold cleared his throat instinctively – even though there was barely anything left of his trachea and oesophagus to clear – his augmented voice crackled from vox-speakers in the suit and reverberated over the comm-net to the other landing craft.

'Brothers,' Jarold's voice boomed, 'there is nothing to fear. Hold strong to your faith in our primarch and the Emperor. How can they answer your prayers when they cannot hear them? You babble uncertainties and anxieties to the void. Where is your trust in the one who made us what we are?'

Anxious calls were replaced by the sound of muttered invocations.

'What have we to fear when we are Adeptus Astartes? Are we not the Emperor's strong right arm? Are we not fear incarnate?' Jarold rumbled. 'Trust in the Emperor and he will send his angels on wings of fire to carry us into battle and smite our enemies. We shall make planetfall and when we do we will deliver divine retribution upon the greenskins. We will soak the sands of Armageddon with their blood!'

There was a series of dull clangs. The pod jerked violently, causing Jarold to cut short his speech, and an insipid whining began to rise from somewhere about the deployment craft. Cabling links spasmed free of the dreadnought as one of the pod's systems went down. Sirens blared and emergency lights flashed fitfully then failed altogether.

Throne of Terra! This is it, Jarold thought. It's going to be a rough landing.

STRAEKER SAW THE ork plane hit the plummeting drop pod with a barrage of rockets. Most impacted against the scarred side of the black craft, but one scored a direct hit on the pod's main engine. The engine cone exploded, tail fins shearing off from the pod and thick oily smoke began pouring from the wrecked nacelle. The drop pod lurched and soared off at a tangent from its original trajectory, spinning wildly.

Conrad Straeker swore loudly and punched the flight console. He jinked his Lightning hard to starboard as the pod rocketed straight towards him as it changed direction. The ork had been in his sights but now the fighta-bommer was gunning after its next target, while Straeker banked right, feeling the G's pushing him back into his seat.

The pod dropped away out of sight towards the curving horizon of the ash desert below, although it still registered on the Lightning's radar a few seconds longer. Going off course this high up, Straeker projected that the pod would crash down many kilometres away from its intended landing site. He didn't fancy the occupants' chances of coming out of the crash alive either – Space Marines or no.

He swore again in frustration. He had let one of the flyboyz through. The ork had been in his sights! But there would be time to mourn the Imperium's loss after the battle. All that mattered now was that Blitz Squadron gave the Astartes planetfall the air support they needed, keeping the ork smokers off their tails.

Yanking hard left on his con-stick, Straeker pulled his craft out of its bank, bringing it level. To port, following a course thirty metres above him, was the ork. Drawing the stick in his gloved hands back ever so gently, despite the enormous pressures working against his body, he gave the engine a little more throttle.

The two amber circular crosshairs on the heads-up display of his cockpit glided towards each other as the fighta-bommer came into view through the front windshield of the plane. The crosshairs overlapped and changed to flashing red. The visual was accompanied by a high-pitched beeping. The Lightning's machine spirit had target lock.

He had let one get through: there wouldn't be any others.

Conrad Straeker, ace Imperial Lightning pilot of Blitz Squadron, depressed the lascannon triggers. Streams of brilliant white light streaked from the wingtip mounted weapons, peppering the fighta-bommer's tail fins with flashes of white fire. The alien craft veered sharply.

He fired again, his last shot puncturing a fuel line. The crude plane's fuel tanks ignited in a magnesium flash that left Straeker blinking away a purple after-image for several seconds. The ork's fate was sealed.

The greenskin craft appeared to be built with only two things in mind: speed and firepower. One system was not effectively shielded from another, so that if one part of the craft went down, was destroyed or ruptured, then the rest would soon follow. There was no thought given to pilot safety, but then what Straeker knew of the ork flyboyz' mentality from first-hand experience suggested that the pilots didn't care. Even compared to other orks they seemed particularly mentally unstable, addicted to the adrenalin rush of travel at dangerously high speeds.

Orks didn't seem to go for much in the way of camouflage either, Straeker considered, as the burning shell of the alien plane nose-dived towards the swirling bronze wastes three thousand metres below. Their red-painted fighter craft, with snarling mouthed nose cones and flame-painted engine housings were all for show, the need to show-off born out of some alien sense of bravado. There was no attempt to hide the craft from an enemy that relied on its own eyesight rather than optically-superior surveyor arrays and machine-slaved auspexes.

The sky was like an azure canvas, soiled with the dirty contrails of the smoking ork aircraft. Everywhere the greenskin planes swarmed around the plummeting drop pods, far outnumbering the Imperial interceptors. The Space Marine deployment would soon be complete and once they were on the ground, Blitz Squadron would keep the aliens busy until their decreasing fuel reserves forced them to return to base. But before that happened, the Imperial fighter pilots would do their very best to make sure that not one ork was left to tell the tale of the air battle.

A shadow flashed across Straeker's cockpit and he glanced up to see the wing of an ork plane spin past overhead as another fighta-bommer dissolved into a comet-tailed ball of flame. The sleek grey V-form of another Imperial Lightning, wings swept

forward, roared past close enough for Straeker to see its pilot throw him a salute.

'I make that three-two,' a cheerful voice sounded in Straeker's ears over his headset. 'But who's counting.'

'You sure you want to do this, Hellas?' Straeker threw back at the cocky pilot of Lightning Three. A large part of Blitz Squadron's success was down to the comradely rivalry of its fighter pilots.

'Well, if you're not up to it, Straeker.'

Lightning Three turned sharply to starboard again, homing in on a formation of ork fighters closing on the last of the falling drop pods.

'Let's keep this clean and professional, shall we?' came a third voice over the comm-net.

'Yes sir!' Straeker answered Commander Devereux automatically. 'But don't say I didn't warn you, Hellas, when you're hanging your head in shame in the mess tonight,' he chuckled, throwing his craft into a sudden dive.

Two fighta-bommerz, engines spewing out clouds of greasy brown exhaust smoke, were following the rapidly receding shape of a black pod as it hurtled towards the desert dunes. His own engines screaming, Straeker closed on the rickety, shaking craft, the stresses of the high-G dive on the ork planes visible as roughly riveted pieces of recycled metal began to shake loose of their blunt-nosed fuselages.

The orks must be close to stalling, Straeker thought. Primitive craft like theirs couldn't take what their maniac pilots were putting them through.

Lightning Two's machine spirit beeped wildly. Target lock acquired.

With the flick of a switch Straeker returned the lascannons to cogitator control and gunned the trigger on his control column that would fire the nose-mounted autocannon. The roar of the gun was lost amidst the roar of the engines and the doppler scream of the dive, Straeker followed the whizzing rounds to their target. His cannon-fire shredded the top of the nearest plane, tearing great holes through the body of the craft. The cockpit vanished in an explosion of glinting glass shards, which looked like diamonds in the sharp sunlight. Straeker didn't see what happened to the ork flying the thing, although the skill and mastery implied by the word 'flying' hardly applied to these alien air-jockeys.

The second fighta-bommer suddenly jinked to port.

Had its pilot caught a glimpse of what had happened to its wingman, Straeker wondered? Or maybe it knew he was on its tail.

Whatever the reason, the bank had slowed the fighta-bommer's descent quite dramatically, and brought it within range of its plummeting wingman. The pilot-less plane collided with the back of the second craft, tearing away the tail section of its fuselage. A split second later, the second plane's tanks blew, setting off its payload of bombs and missiles in the process.

The fireball rushed up to meet Straeker and then he was blasting out the other side, pulling back hard on the con-stick, abandoning the ork-freed pod to make planetfall unhindered, and catching a third fighta-bommer in his sights. A rapid rattling volley put an end to the flyboy before the ork even knew it was in trouble.

'Wooo-hooo!' he yelled into his hood.

Harsh sunlight refracted over the Lightning Two's cockpit, the sudden glare making Straeker blink. Whickering fire blasted past him, quickly followed by yet another garishly painted plane. It wasn't looking for him: the ork pilot had a different target in his sights.

Above him was the distinct silhouette of a Lightning. His heads-up display marked it as Maxx Hellas's fighter.

'Hellas!' he shouted into his rebreather's built-in mic. 'Greenskin, bearing two-four-zero!'

'Understood,' came the other pilot's crackling reply.

Straeker watched as Lightning Three tried to pull free of the incoming attackers, rising in a steep climb. The ork that had hurtled past his own craft missed Hellas's fighter by a matter of metres and then rocked as it was caught in the jet-wash from the Imperial Lightning. The pilot appeared to lose control and the fighta-bommer lurched as it banked sharply, going into horizontal spin about its central axis.

But Hellas was not out of danger yet. With the glaring ball of Armageddon's sun behind it, the ugly black silhouette of an ork plane zoomed out of the sky directly towards the Lightning. There was nothing Hellas, Straeker, or any other member of Blitz Squadron could do as the fighta-bommer hit Lightning Three with everything it had. Twin-linked wide-barrelled guns punched holes through the underside of the climbing craft in a chugging hail of fire.

Lightning Three continued to climb for a moment as if nothing had happened and Straeker wondered if, somehow, it had come out of the encounter unscathed. Then reality hit him as Hellas's fighter disappeared in a rapidly expanding ball of light as its power-core exploded.

Straeker's craft bucked as it met the spreading shockwave that was all that remained of Lightning Three. He suddenly caught a snatch of guttural barking as interference briefly patched ork radio signals through on the squadron's comms frequency. It sounded like laughter.

He hit the alien plane head on. He was so close he could actually see the horrified expression on the ork's goggle-eyed face as he put several rounds through the front of the cockpit, exploding the alien's brains across its cockpit.

'Maxx Hellas was my best friend!' Straeker bellowed, anger and grief welling up inside him.

He tugged back on his control column as the ork craft nosedived abruptly.

'Say hello to the ground, you piece of ork shit!' he screamed in heart-rending triumph.

'Lightning Two. There are two on your tail,' came Devereux's calm, commanding voice over the comm.

'Thank you, commander,' Straeker responded, trying to suppress the emotional quaver in his voice.

Jerking the con this way and that, Straeker adeptly evaded the orks. First one, then the other disappeared from his scope as fellow members of Blitz Squadron took out his dogged alien pursuers. Lightning Four, piloted by the gung-ho Gidro Crowel, came alongside and performed a hasty victory roll before peeling off again after the choking contrail left by another ork flyboy.

A scream, riven with electrical distortion, crackled over Straeker's headset and then cut to the white noise of static.

'What was that?' Crowel voiced the question all the squadron were thinking.

'We've lost Devereux,' Lugaz Tolyev, the pilot of Lightning Six, notified the others.

'Look, we've done our job here.' It was Josef Kacirk, Lightning Five. 'The pods are through, we've brought down half the enemy's air support, and those that are left will be running low on fuel by now, so let's return to base.'

The response to Kacirk's suggestion, if there was one, was lost

to Straeker's ears as an explosion rocked his craft. Pieces of debris from the destroyed ork craft pelted the Lightning. They were from an earlier wound it had taken in the dogfight that proved suddenly and dramatically fatal. Straeker was sure he heard a whirling blade of shrapnel cut through an aileron. He certainly noticed the loss of control in the starboard wing as the plane threatened to go into a spin.

Bringing all his expertise to bear, Straeker wrestled with the conn-column, desperately trying to keep the Lightning under control. If he couldn't tame the bucking, he would be an easy target and would not make it to the ground, alive or dead.

Bullets spanged off the craft's hull.

Straeker turned his head to see a fang-mawed plane bearing down on him in a strafing, killing run. Gunfire emitted from its chunky shooters and they riddled the side of his plane. His heads-up display blinked off.

The glasteel of his cockpit shattered and was torn away by the whipping wind.

Warning lights flashed on the dash of his flight console but he couldn't hear their alarms over the scream of the air around him.

He tugged at the control column but to no avail.

The plane flipped over violently and went into a spin, leaving Straeker's stomach somewhere far behind. He no longer knew which way was up. One moment it was blue above him, the next the bronze-grey sea of the wastes had become his sky.

With the G-forces increasing with the rising scream of the wind, he reached for the handle beneath his pilot's seat. Fingertips straining, with a last, desperate lunge he grabbed hold of the ejector release and pulled.

Then Conrad Straeker blacked out.

THE BLACK TEMPLARS' insignia-bearing drop pods made planet-fall, landing jets firing at the last possible moment. Planetfall was accompanied by a series of ground-shaking thuds amidst the grey ash-buried ruins. Each juddering *crump* sent falls of dust cascading from the wind-eroded and sandblasted stone structures, and jarred the Space Marines restrained within.

Punching the release icons of their harnesses, the Black Templars pulled free of the restraining straps as the pods opened, like a dozen black orchids flowering in the desert, giving the ruins the appearance of a darkly, lush oasis. The blasted

desert landscape of Armageddon – a hundred hues of ochre, yellow and grey – awaited them, under a pollutant-clouded sky the colour of rusted metal.

Squad Bellangere was the first to break free of its deep strike craft. Brother-Initiate Garek pounded down the ramp formed by the pod's lowering side, and leapt off the end before the metal hatch clanged down on the broken stones of what might once have been the central plaza of an Administratum supply depot or Imperial firebase.

Following in his boot steps was Neophyte Gervais. Garek had accepted Gervais as his apprentice on leaving Solemnus to undertake the fleet's pilgrimage to the Liberation of Lugnasad. Normally this period in a Black Templar's training would only last a few years at most. Under the guidance of the Chapter's chaplains, as well as that of his initiate, the neophyte was inducted fully into the brotherhood, having trained in the art of war and been taught the rituals of the order. It was also during this novitiate that the brother would have the last of the specially-cultured organs implanted into him that would transform him utterly into a Space Marine.

But Brother Gervais still served Garek as his servant, when he was not in battle; he tended to domestic chores and waited on him at Chapter feasts. There had been few of those in the last twelve years, as the crusade ploughed its way between the stars, just as there were few of the specially grown gene-seed implants.

A Chapter's future was dependant on the survival of its gene-seed. It took many months to propagate new zygotes from a progenoid gland. Gene-seed could only be obtained by removing the progenoid glands from a still living, or more often very recently deceased, Marine. It was the responsibility of the Chapter's apothecaries to harvest these precious glands from their fallen brethren, extracting the progenoid organs from the dead and dying Space Marines on the battlefield, frequently whilst the battle still raged around them.

If the apothecaries failed in their appointed task then there was always the danger of the total loss of a particular type of gene-seed which could have disastrous consequences. The extinction of a gene-seed would result in the extinction of the corresponding zygote. Were that to happen to the gene-seed responsible for culturing fresh progenoids in new recruits, or the biomechanical linking black carapace, it would effectively mean the lingering death of a Chapter. It would be unable to

replenish its ranks with novitiate Marines after their warriors had fallen in the endless battles to preserve the Emperor's galaxy-spanning realm.

With the destruction of the great keep on Solemnus, much of the fleet's precious store of genetic material had been lost too. What remained, preserved inside the battle-brothers of the crusade was now even more valuable. The apothecaries fulfilled their duties religiously, extracting the progenoid glands from the corpses of dead Marines. They could afford to waste nothing. It was a gruesome task, but one which had to be done.

And it had been done after the reclaiming of the great keep. For in death there was life for a Chapter. Within a year of that terrible dark day, a dozen neophyte novices had been implanted and raised to the rank of initiate. In the years since, others had gradually been given the honour of becoming fully initiated into the order and every time, the brothers of the crusade had celebrated the event with feasting, and the singing of devotional hymns and prayer. There were only a few neophytes left: in Fighting Company Adlar there was only himself and one other – Brother Mabon, Kyner's neophyte, of Sergeant Doane's squad.

Due to the severely depleted gene-seed stock of Marshal Brant's crusading fleet some of the zygote-producing genetic material now only existed inside the battle-brothers, so short were they of the precious progenoid glands.

This meant that until one of his brothers died in battle – which he did not wish on anyone, in fact he would give his own life to avenge such a death if need be – and the precious progenoid cells could be cultivated, Gervais would remain a neophyte, awaiting the final additions to the very fibre of his being that would make him one of the Adeptus Astartes at last.

So it was that in battle Gervais still followed Garek's example fully. He had become as close and as unnoticeable to the initiate, in a way, as his own shadow. But Gervais followed him now as Garek and the rest of Sergeant Bellangere's tactical squad took their places in the defensive line that the orks would not cross. They would make sure of that.

CHAPLAIN WOLFRAM JUMPED down from his pod, hitting broken rubble two metres below. His pod had hit part of a wall as it landed, crushing the ferrocrete under its great metal weight. It had come to rest leaning at a pronounced angle. The rest of his five-man squad disembarked from the crashed craft and quickly

took up their places, following his hand signals and barked orders, and joining the defensive perimeter being established by the fighting company within the ruins.

But these ruins were not from Ghazghkull's most recent invasion. In fact, Chaplain Wolfram doubted they were even testament to the aliens' assault fifty years before. Was it possible the place where they were about to make their stand against the greenskin menace was where others had once made their stand against the hellish forces of the traitor Primarch Angron, five hundred years before?

Wolfram's memory was longer than most of the brothers of the Solemnus Crusade, and his access to restricted, sacred information was greater than many of his Chapter due to his venerable position as a chaplain of the Adeptus Astartes. As such he held many of the secrets of the Chapter and the history of the Adeptus Astartes close, preserving them for future generations so that the warriors of the Imperium might never forget their sacred duty or rest on their laurels in damning complacency.

Wolfram hefted his *crozius arcanum* in one hand. The *crozius* was both the chaplain's rod of office and a weapon, and each one was different. The one in Wolfram's possession was an ancient artefact, handed down from one generation to the next for the last five thousand years. Its head was in the form of the Black Templar's cross insignia, but the edges of the flaring cross blades had been sharpened, turning it into a vicious, double-headed axe. A power source and disruptor generator concealed within its haft sheathed the axe-head in a shimmering blue energy field that tore apart anything struck by the weapon.

And he would make sure that it would smite the greenskin forces a grievous wound from which they would never recover. He would lead the Templars into battle against the foe, quoting the holy liturgies and singing rousing battle-hymns. In doing so he would exhort the brothers to acts of greater and greater bravery in their fight to bring the wrath of the Emperor down on the heads of his enemies. Fanatics, some called them. Loyal warrior-servants of the Emperor were how Wolfram thought of his charges and himself.

Chaplain Wolfram paused to watch as the Space Marines spread out around the broken compound. His own insertion craft's *situarum* had regularly updated him on the status of the other pods during the drop, so he already knew that one of those whose spiritual well-being he had been responsible for

would not be joining his brothers in forthcoming battle. One of the veteran brothers of Fighting Company Adlar hadn't made it along with the rest of them: revered Brother Jarold's pod had gone out of contact range with the others as they fell through the planet's atmosphere and was now missing. They would miss the power of his assault cannon in the battle to come.

Fifty-three Space Marines of the Black Templars Chapter had so far made groundfall safely, however, including the drop pod-inserted land speeder *Excalibur* and its crew. They only awaited the deployment of Assault Squads Phelan and Vortimer via the one thunderhawk available at this time to Fighting Company Adlar's mission before the gunship had to return to the fleet-based actions taking place high in orbit over Armageddon. Yet despite having all these mighty warriors alongside each other, the loss of the dreadnought was one that would affect all of them and possibly the mission itself.

Zealous anger began to grow in Wolfram's heart at the thought of the loss of one of the Crusade's greatest heroes. His anger was further fuelled by the thought of the invading ork armies that infected this vital world with their corrupting alien presence. He knew the approaching ork force would be on them in a matter of minutes.

Glowering at the approaching dust cloud through the glittering ruby-eyed deathshad skull of his devotional armour, Wolfram commenced the Invocation of the Golden Throne under his breath.

Will the the Imperial forces save Tartarus Hive, and
will the Black Templars succeed in their quest to
eliminate ork warlord Morkrull Grimskar?

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