



CELEBRATING 15 YEARS OF THE BLACK LIBRARY

FOR THE FALLEN

AARON DEMBSKI-BOWDEN



A CRIMSON FISTS SHORT STORY



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by Aaron Dembski-Bowden

The necronomer walked in silence through the city of the dead – spiritual capital of a worthless world. His aide walked behind him, trudging at the programmed three paces, muttering to itself as it panned left and right with the imagifier built into one eye. The servitor’s murmurs were disrespectful but unavoidable. Its propensity to mutter was one of many behavioural tics it had picked up in the thirty-nine years since Esca first purchased it from a junk trader on his homeworld.

Its limp was another. It walked in a ragged un-rhythm, its bionic leg never quite bending enough for fully agreeable perambulation. Instead, Esca was forced to listen to it thud on the stone as it dragged its augmented leg in an ungainly half-stride.

‘Adjusting to compensate for light saturation,’ the servitor mumbled. Esca heard the mechanical purrs in its neck as it tilted its head. ‘Angle adjustment complete. Secondary memory spools at forty-seven per cent capacity.’

‘Yes,’ Esca replied beneath his breath. ‘Whatever you say, Solus.’

Solus had been the name given to him by the trader, to use when commanding the servitor. Esca could have paid to reprogram it at some point down the years – it wasn’t as if the lobotomised bionic slave was going to object – but he felt strangely guilty about the idea.

The necronomer pulled his hood up against the bitter wind. Even the breeze smelled of ash on this world. Some stains needed more than a handful of years to fade.

If, he thought, they ever fade at all.

He walked to the first of the grave markers lining the next avenue. The warrior depicted here was yet another towering god, carved from black stone, rendered faceless by a neutral, noble helm. The statue stood atop a plinth of white-veined black marble, quarried off-world and brought here for the holiest of purposes. Twenty such statues lined every avenue in the city of the dead. A memoriam site for the Adeptus Astartes and, occasionally, a place of pilgrimage for scholars such as himself.

Esca knelt down before the bronze plaque, pressing a page of parchment over the inscribed letters. Solus was tasked to record every name and citation, but Esca liked to take his own notes from time to time. It gave him something of substance to present to his peers. A necronomer's duty was easy enough, but difficult to do *well*. It was all about remembering what mattered. Emotional truth, that was what mattered. Not just names in a list.

He started rubbing the charcoal stick over the warrior's written deeds, tracing them onto the parchment and trying to ignore the ache in his knees. As usual, he found himself pretending he was still young enough to kneel down without making the same grunts and sighs his father used to make doing the very same thing.

That was when he first heard the footsteps.

Esca looked up, forcing weak eyes to stare down the avenue. Five figures, five statues come to life, were stalking towards him. Their strides ate the distance in a matter of moments.

'Hail,' said the first of them, the one dressed in black. His helmet's facemask was a sculpted skull, red-eyed and grinning with the secrets of the grave.

'I... I...' Esca's throat wobbled as he tried to speak and swallow at the same time. 'I... I...'

'A gifted conversationalist,' said one of the others – the one with the bandolier of malformed xenos-breed skulls. The giant warriors shared a chuckle that left their helms' mouth grilles as a vox-crackling rumble.

'I...' Esca said again. 'I have a permit. A permit to be here.'

Only one of the figures wore black armour. The others were clad in ceramite plating the colour of deep oceans on other, better, untainted worlds. One of them, the one whose armour was draped in a robed toga of rich red, leaned on a massive axe.

‘He has a permit,’ the axe-wielder said.

‘Impressive,’ voxed one of the others. His helm was white, and he wore a bulky gauntlet on one arm, complete with a clicking scanner and several tools that looked like flesh-drills and bonesaws. Esca had to tear his eyes away from the torture device. His hands trembled as he reached for his carrybag, fumbling for his printed-paper permit.

‘Enough,’ the warrior in black said. He had brutal, ornate war maul over one shoulder, inlaid with Gothic scripture. ‘My brothers meant no offence with their taunting words. This is Sergeant Demetrian, Brother Imrich, Brother Toma and Apothecary Vayne. And you are?’

‘Esca,’ he replied. ‘Esca of Teresh. A necronomer, lord. I came here for my order. I record the—’

‘I am aware of a necronomer’s duties, Esca of Teresh.’

The old man’s hands were still trembling as he held out the permit. He hadn’t risen. He wasn’t sure his knees would allow it.

‘Here, lord. My permit. See.’

‘You do not need to show me any permit, Esca. And I am no lord. My rank is Chaplain. My name is Argo. Use either when addressing me. What brings you here?’

The old man swallowed again, and gestured to the statue rising above him. ‘I record the fallen. Their names. Their deeds.’

‘That is not what I meant.’ The Chaplain reached up to his armoured collar, disengaging the seals there. Air pressure released in a sighing hiss, and he pulled the helm free. He was... young. Esca could scarcely believe it. Despite the warrior’s immense bulk, he seemed scarcely older than twenty or thirty.

His eyes were pale blue, and curiously kind. ‘I mean,’ the Chaplain continued, his deep voice clear without the vox-crackle, ‘why have you come to Rynn’s World? Our fallen are recorded. They’ve been recorded many times over, in hundreds of archives.’

Esca felt something like a blush taking hold. ‘This was as much a pilgrimage as a duty. I’ve always wanted to walk here, in the Necropolis, and see it with my own eyes. My order seeks out places of great mortis-resonance, of great emotion and memory. We... We collect memories of the dead. Iconic images. Untold lore. The moments that get forgotten, that never get recorded in traditional, sterile archives.’

Argo went to his knees, crouching by the old man. The ceaseless hum of his active power armour set Esca's gums itching. Even the smallest movements made the suit of black ceramite growl and snarl.

'This,' the Chaplain said softly, 'is the graveyard of the Crimson Fists. We return here ourselves, on very rare occasions, to perform pilgrimages of our own. We come home to pray, to reflect, to remember, before we journey back to the stars. Hatred keeps us crusading. Regret brings us home. Shame always calls us back.'

Argo helped the old man rise, and escorted him a few steps away. 'You wish something for your archives? Something less sterile and dry than a mere name?' The warrior gestured to the abandoned, unfinished parchment etching.

'I'd be honoured, lord.'

'Argo,' the Chaplain corrected with a half-smile.

One of the others stepped forward. This one wore a shoulder guard of shining silver, with his left arm painted to match. He was marked with the symbol of the Holy Inquisition.

'I am Toma. The warrior whose grave you are etching was Athren. Let it be known in your off-world archive that Athren was a murderous shot with a bolter. I never saw him miss.'

'I am Imrich,' said the next, the warrior with the bandolier of alien skulls. 'Athren once beat me in a fistfight. I never forgave him for that.'

The next to step forward was the warrior with the white helm. 'I am Wayne. I was the one to harvest Athren's gene-seed. He lives on, at the genetic level, within the Chapter. Let that be known in your archive, Esca of Teresh.'

The last to step forward was the axe-bearer in the scarlet toga. 'I am Demetrian. Athren's laughter banished all doubt among his brothers. Let it be known that he is among those missed most by we who survived.'

Esca was writing frantically, heedless of his arthritic knuckles. At last, he looked at Argo. 'And you, lord?'

The Chaplain said nothing. Something passed between him and the old man, some silent understanding. Argo turned, unlocking his gauntlet and drawing a gladius from a sheath at his thigh. He drew the sword across his palm – a clean, bloodletting slice that painted the blade red. Without a word, he pressed his bleeding hand to the statue's chest.

The other four warriors did the same. All five of them honoured their fallen brother with their crimson hands pressed to his cold chest. Unity, even beyond death. The kind of kinship that so easily survives the grave.

‘Solus...’ Esca whispered.

‘Compliance,’ replied the servitor, interpreting its master’s need. Its imagifier ticked and clicked as it recorded this rarest, most precious of moments. Few souls in the Imperium ever bore witness to the intimate privacy of the Adeptus Astartes honouring their fallen. In a long life of service, travelling to three dozen worlds, Esca had never even seen traces of such a moment in any of his order’s archives.

His recording would be the first.

The Crimson Fists withdrew their hands, and replaced their gauntlets.

Argo made the sign of the Aquila, his gloved hands forming the Imperial eagle over his chestplate.

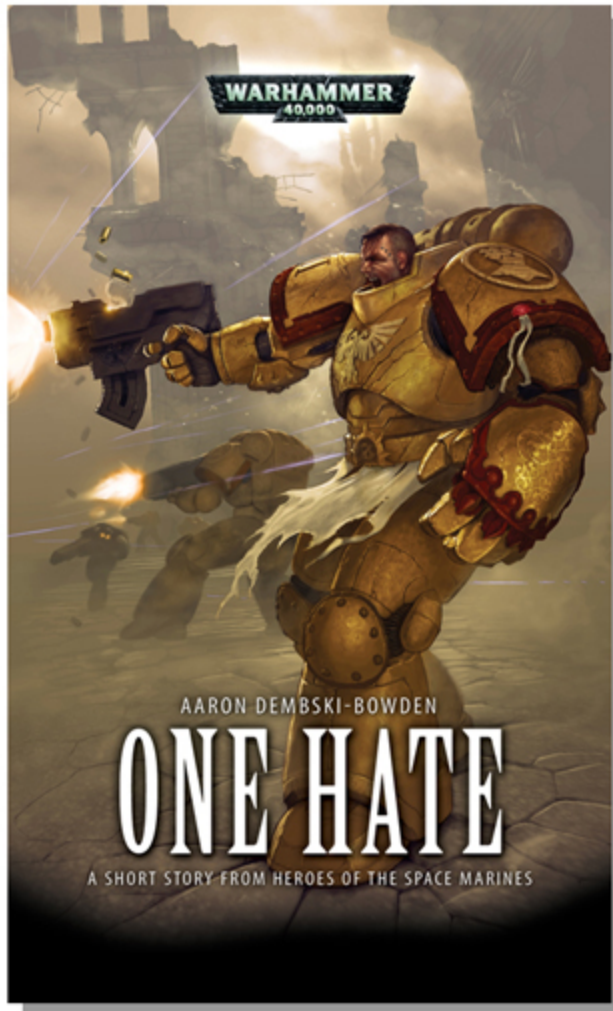
‘Remember us, Esca of Teresh. Remember Rynn’s World, and remember Athren of Fifth Company.’

‘I will, my lord.’ He could barely speak. ‘I will.’

‘Die well,’ the Chaplain said, as he replaced his helm. The last words left his skullish faceplate as a vicious vox-snarl. ‘But live well before that happens.’

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

AARON DEMBSKI-BOWDEN is a British author with his beginnings in the videogame and RPG industries. He's written several novels for the Black Library, including the Night Lords series, the Space Marine Battles book *Helsreach* and the New York Times bestselling *The First Heretic* for the Horus Heresy. He lives and works in Northern Ireland with his wife 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.



Bloodied from their war with the orks, the Crimson Fists descend on Syral. From *Heroes of the Space Marines*.

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