



HELBRECHT:  
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*A short story by Guy Haley*



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Guy Haley

Aliens burned. A crescent of fires held bodies blackening, a challenge to the weird walls of the fortress some kilometres distant. Spindly limbs cracked and vile faces, elongated and inhuman, gave a low uncertain glow. The fuel, perhaps, or the air of this strange place – so thin and unwholesome, it was a wonder there was life at all – stayed fire's assault. Tongues of flame crawled and wicked as they did their work, no blaze from these mortal shells. Ruddy light, gold and amber, red and blue, marshlight, witchlight, not conflagration; as if so far from the Emperor's lucidity, here on the fringe of all, even fire had lost its ardour.

Still the aliens burned, if slowly, and fire's lack could not also be apportioned to the crusade. The Black Templars had fought well.

High Marshal Helbrecht surveyed his men, initiate and neophyte alike: faces set with doleful mien, their souls as sharp as their swords, whetted for the Emperor's service. Lines of giants contemplated victory. Motionless, they looked through the pyre's fell light, their eyes fixed upon the fortress through the flame. Tell them will alone would crack that oddly lambent stone, and they would stare until it cracked. Black and white armour bronze in the fireglow, their unmoving forms were as statues.

The time of address was upon him, a duty Helbrecht gladly performed. The crusade was his own, called upon his accession, to the Ghoul Stars from whence no expedition had yet returned. His would. Immense pride buoyed his hearts, tempered swiftly by humility.

This was not his victory.

He walked into the weirdly chill circle of the fire, turned to face his men. His cloak, so rich, swirled about him. Chained relics rattled upon his plate, parchments whispered out his devotion as they rasped upon plasteel, but the circlet about his head was tight. His badge of office, his reminder: who had raised him so high? The Emperor. Upon whose shoulders had he stood? Upon

those of his men.

This was their victory.

‘No statue!’ Helbrecht called out to his men. ‘No statue will here be raised, no memorial to stand as remark upon our triumph! No songs, no poems, nor tales of deeds, so mighty that they astound the ear! No roars of praise, no feasts, no drink nor meat shall we have! No hymns of valour, no sagas of remembrance shall be heard. Frigid winds on blue sands, the inconstant light of poisoned stars. These things shall be our witness.’

He dipped his head. Wind blew in cool curls from the jagged mountains away to the south, strange aurorae danced in cold skies above, their sickening involutions lending the peaks a height they did not possess. It was hard to look through those cosmic veils. The skies of the rim were endless black, the putrescent glimmer of the Ghoul Stars not enough to part the curtains of the night. And glad was Helbrecht that it was so; beyond their feeble cordon were endless seas of vacuum. No light in those great gulfs of space, excepting the embers of distant galaxies glowing lonely, impossible distant shoals in an ocean that could not be crossed.

He raised his head again. The muted crackle of fatless alien flesh consumed played chorus to his words.

‘These things do not matter. Who cares for baubles? Who cares for fame? Let our presence upon this world be our memorial!’ He gestured to his men with one hand, open palm encompassing them all. Some he had known an age, some barely at all. It was of no account, all were his brothers.

‘Let our feet, steel clad, pressed into the soils of this alien land, remark on our passing. Let the bones and ruin we leave behind be our joyful hymnal! What need have we of plaudit and praise? What satisfaction in elevation above the faithful is there, that can best the knowledge of service given? For we serve the Emperor! His eye is upon us. His will is our guide and our master. When we triumph, he is well pleased. When we falter, he aids our recovery. What is the opinion of men, what matters the swift-passing approval of mortal kind, when the Emperor looks upon our deeds? No matter these trinkets of recognition!’

He slapped at his own chest, his badges of office clattered. ‘No matter the laurels of victory, no matter the glories others may seek. We are Space Marines, the Adeptus Astartes, the Angels of Death! And more than this,’ he said, his voice dropping quiet. ‘We are the Black Templars. Victory is its own reward.’

The Templars took their cue. Their shout was sudden and invigorating, blasting back the sinister silence of the lifeless world. Helbrecht nodded in

approval. His eyes locked with many of those before him.

‘I would grasp each of your hands in turn, and give you my heartfelt thanks. This is your victory, your day, your might. I called this crusade not because it would be easy, but because it would be hard.’

More shouts.

‘Today you have fought. Today you have won! We stand upon the galactic shore, you and I, travellers halting at stellar strand. One day mankind will call these hollow worlds all his own, one day shall he set himself out across the gulf and bring the word of the Emperor to places unimagined.’ He clenched his fist. ‘Today is not that day. That is not our duty.’ He drew his sword and flung out the point so that it transfixed the highest point of the alien fortress. Atop those sheer walls of glimmering crystal, no doubt they watched him now, readying their uncanny weapons, making their strategies in their unknowable alien minds.

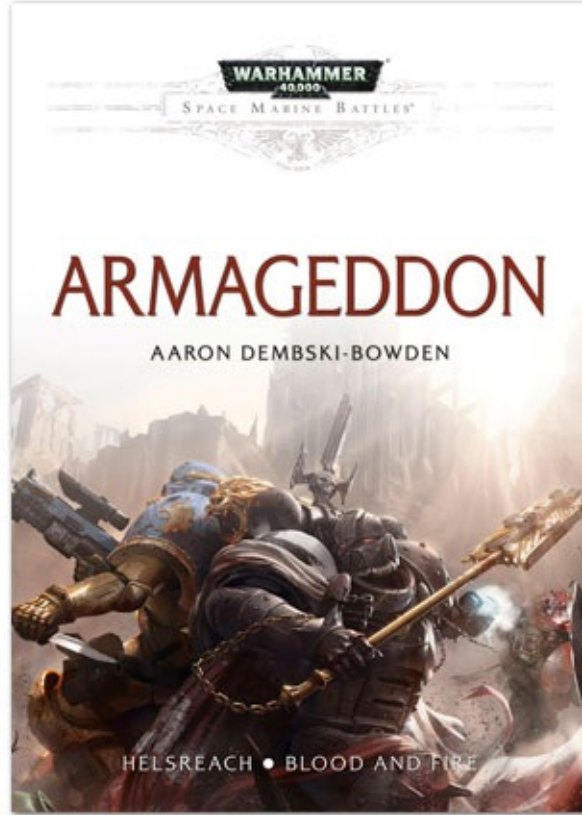
‘We have triumphed. But further toil awaits – in yonder castle our foe stand ready. They will not flee, they will not submit. We must smite them all, you and I, and purge this place of their evil now and forever more!’

No shouts this time, no roars. The metallic snap of weapons being readied, the muted whir of actuators coming to life, the thrum of power packs as they supplied vitality to wargear.

Helbrecht at their head, the Black Templars walked through the funeral pyres, and towards the alien fortress.

## **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.



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