



**WARHAMMER**  
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# THE IRON WITHOUT

An Iron Warriors short story



**GRAHAM McNEILL**

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# THE IRON WITHOUT

Graham McNeill

## NOW

His name was Soltarn Vull Bronn and ten of his vertebrae were mangled beyond the power of even the most mechanically adept Apothecary to save. His legs had been crushed to paste and his left arm jutted from the misshapen ruin of his chevroned shoulder guard like a broken girder. No amount of will could force it to move, but he was able to free his right arm from beneath his breastplate.

The circumvallations at the cave mouth were gone, buried beneath the collapsed ceiling of the enormous cavern. Through dust-smearred eyes, he saw that the wall and his command staff were a crushed ruin of flames and smoke. That meant Teth Dassadra was likely dead as well. Bronn had no feelings towards the man save apathy and an Iron Warrior's natural mistrust, but at least he had been a vaguely competent siege-smith.

His collapsing lungs heaved to sift enough oxygen from the smoke- and dust-clogged air as his ears rang from the apocalyptic detonation that had triggered the collapse. He coughed a wad of bloody phlegm, knowing the position was lost and that any of his warriors who had survived the cave-in he had caused were as good as dead. The Ultramarines' guns would see to that.

Had that been the plan all along?

Try as he might, Bronn could see no other conclusion.

He had followed the Warsmith's orders to the letter, with diligence and dogged loyalty.

In retrospect, perhaps that was the problem.

The Warsmith was a warrior like no other, a killer of men whose mind functioned in a radically different way to the Legion in whose name he once fought. To some, that had marked him for greatness, but to others it was a vile

stain on their honour that he should bear the visored skull of the Iron Warriors.

Half-breed, they called him.

Mongrel upstart.

Honsou.

He had left them to die, and though Bronn suspected that defeat would be the inevitable outcome of so risky a war, he found he was still surprised. A lifetime of betrayals; from the dawn of the Imperium, when gods walked among their disciples, and all through the Long War to this latest spasm of rebellion. Ever was it the lot of the Iron Warriors to taste perfidy, but this latest treachery was the bitterest Bronn had ever swallowed.

He had *believed* in Honsou.

Despite his squalid inception, the half-breed had risen through the ranks with the persistence of a monotasked servitor digging an approach trench, displaying just the right balance of initiative and blind obedience to his betters until those less skilled had fallen by the wayside.

It had been on Hydra Cordatus his chance to excel had finally come. Bronn remembered the thundering violence of that siege, the brittle regolith that collapsed at every turn, the hot sun that baked slaves alive and bleached their bones before they were buried in the foundations of the redoubts. Most of all, he remembered the deep yellow rock that resisted every pick and shovel.

It had been a masterfully wrought approach, each sap pitched at a precise angle and every battery thrown up with a speed that would have made the artisan masters of lost Olympia proud. Bronn had fought in the Grand Company of Forrix, and he could still remember the pain of seeing his master gunned down by the Imperial battle engine at the moment of final victory. Standing triumphant in the ruins of the fortress, Forrix had been killed in the moment of regaining his lost fire.

At battle's end, Honsou was named the Warsmith's successor and he had given Forrix and Kroeger's warriors a stark choice: accept him as their new Warsmith and live, or deny him and be destroyed. It was no choice at all, and every warrior had dropped to one knee and sworn fealty to their new master. From Hydra Cordatus, they had battered a path through Van Daal's Black Legion whelps at Perdictor and returned to Medrengard. Honsou had claimed the timeless fortress of Khalan-Ghol for himself, as was his right, but brooding in a crooked spire was not to be the half-breed's destiny.

Jealous eyes had fallen upon Khalan-Ghol, and the grand armies of Lord Toramino had joined forces with the berserk horde of Lord Berossus to attack

Honsou in his mountain lair.

Though pain was eating away at his formidable powers of endurance, Bronn grinned wryly at how the two lords of Medrengard had been humbled by the upstart half-breed, their armies broken and scattered to ashes beneath the cruel light of the daemon world's black sun.

Whisperers railed at being commanded by a warrior without lineage, a half-breed with no memory of the Great Betrayal, who had not known the pain of the thousand indignities heaped upon the Legion by the Emperor, and who had not earned his bitterness on the fire-blackened rock of Terra. Honsou's warriors were now fighters without a fortress, rootless wanderers little better than sell-swords, and that was hard to stomach for men who had stood at the side of a living god.

Even after the destruction of Tarsis Ultra, they called Honsou unworthy, and not even the release of the daemon lord M'kar from his imprisonment on the *Indomitable* had appeased his doubters. They hated him, called him impure, and plotted his downfall. Heritage and purity of genetics was all that mattered to these schemers, and no matter how many victories Honsou won, they would never accept him.

Bronn had hunted those who spread dissent and ended them, for he had always known that a warrior's worth was measured in the blood he shed, the soil he dug, the walls he raised and the citadels he split asunder.

By that measure, Honsou was a true Iron Warrior.

But now this...

Bronn could stomach betrayal, it was the Iron Warriors' lot, but to have it come from within on so grand a scale was galling.

What could be so important beneath the surface of Calth that was worth *this*?

## THEN

Earth-moving machinery roared and bellowed, spitting clouds of caustic, lung-tarring smoke, spraying stone chips from beneath solid rubber tyres. A hundred and fifteen machines pulled like blood-maddened flesh hounds on chains at the cave's exit. The confined air reeked of machine oil, blood offerings, petrochemical fumes and sweat. Over four thousand mortals in reinforced work overalls and canvas hoods huddled in the shadow of the heavy machines, armed with picks, shovels and rock-breaking drills.

Soltarn Vull Bronn swept his gaze around the widened chamber with a critical

eye.

‘I need more machines,’ he said.

‘A hundred and fifteen should be more than enough,’ replied Teth Dassadra, comparing the arrangement of machines with hand-drawn schemata plotted out by Bronn less than an hour ago. ‘The forward redoubt only needs to be five hundred metres wide and twenty high.’

‘You say “only” as though we will be building it in a summer meadow with the enemy attacking us with flower blossoms,’ said Bronn.

‘No,’ said Dassadra, unable to keep the impatience from his voice. ‘I know the mathematics of construction as well as you. My logarithmic calculations are correct, even allowing for losses.’

‘And if those losses are greater than we expect?’

‘Why should they be?’

‘Because this is a world of Ultramar,’ said Bronn.

‘A world like any other,’ said Dassadra with a dismissive shrug as they reached a group of workers crouched behind a kinetic mantlet and bearing heavy picks across their shoulders. The men were tense, awaiting the order to advance into the teeth of massed artillery. For men under a virtual death-sentence, they appeared remarkably calm.

Bronn rounded on Dassadra. ‘No, it is not. These are the best fighters we have faced. They fear us, yes, but not so much that they will break and run when the first shells land among them. So long as the Ultramarines stand, so too will they.’

‘You admire them,’ hissed Dassadra.

‘I do not admire them, fool, I simply recognise their abilities,’ countered Bronn. ‘It would be stupid to do otherwise.’

Dassadra gestured to the thousands of men, servitors and drones gathered around the machines. ‘Plenty of meat and bone to raise a wall if the diggers fail.’

Bronn turned to the group of men sheltering behind the mantlet. With a casual twist of his arm, he unsheathed his entrenching tool from its shoulder scabbard. Its name was *Earthbreaker*, and its dull iron was scored and nicked where swords and axes had gouged its haft, yet the pointed half-moon of its blade was as sharp as the day it had been taken from the forge-armoury.

As a tool of siege, *Earthbreaker* had dug countless trenches, excavated a thousand tunnels beneath the hardest rock and raised earthworks so vast as to be visible from low orbit. As a weapon, it had taken the head of ten captains of the Fists, had split the spine of a greenskin warlord of six systems and hewed innumerable humble rankers in the bloody heave and swell of close-quarters

battle.

Bronn hammered its blade into the nearest slave's back. Blood welled around the embedded iron, and the man jerked as his ruptured spinal column sent contradictory impulses flailing around his dying body.

'Mortal muscle to drive iron tools is in plentiful supply, and can be easily replaced when blood inevitably soaks the earth,' said Bronn, irritated at needing to explain his methodology to Dassadra. 'Machines are less easily replaced.'

Bronn shook the split body from his blade as another mortal ran up from the rear ranks to take his place. The dead man's former comrades threw his corpse in front of the bulldozer, to be crushed into the rock when the assault began.

Using *Earthbreaker* like a walker's staff, Bronn moved through the cavern, marking out lines of advance and reinforcing his construction orders as he went. The mortals looked up in terror as he passed, which was as it should be. He was sending them to their deaths, but even marching out into a hellstorm of artillery, gunfire and shrapnel was more palatable than displeasing an Iron Warrior.

Dassadra watched his every move, searching for mistakes and flaws in his orders, but Bronn knew he would find none. His aide had come to him from the shattered survivors of Lord Berossus's army, and though those warriors had sworn loyalty to Honsou, they were little better than whipped dogs, volatile and always looking for advantage.

Bronn paused at the machine closest to the cavern mouth, a towering eighteen-wheeler on spiked iron tracks and with a giant hopper of crushed stone secured at its rear, rubble gathered from the collapsed ruin left by the defenders after the destruction of the giant tunnel leading from Guilliman's Gate to Four Valleys Gorge. From this debris would be built a wall to shelter the heavy guns of the Iron Warriors, and the dark symmetry of this pleased Bronn no end. Flexible pipes at its sides pulsed like intestines, filled with rapid-setting permacrete that would be used to bind the loose rubble together and allow the mortal slaves to erect the mesh-wrapped blockwork of the batteries.

The cavern mouth was a semi-circular slice of wan daylight, something that grated against Bronn's sensibilities. They were underground, and underground places should be dark. It made no difference to the projected operation, but it offended his sense of the way things ought to be. Bronn knew the subtleties of rock better than anyone, and it was said with only a spoonful of irony that it *spoke* to him.

Where there was a weak seam in a wall, Bronn would find it. Where the soil was softer and more amenable to undermining, he would know of it. Just by

touching the rock, Bronn could know its hidden strengths, its complex structure and its inherent weaknesses. Where others might mount an escalade with more flair or know best when a breach was practicable, no-one knew the rock better than he.

Bronn held out his hand for the plan he had drawn earlier. Dassadra gave it to him with the speed of one who knows well his master's desires. Bronn checked the distances between his machines and the cavern walls, the lines of advance and the routes of dispersal once they emerged from the transient safety of this tunnel.

'This is all wrong,' he said, swinging up onto the integral steps machined into the flank of a vast bulldozer with its shovel blade worked in the form of an enormous fanged daemon maw. The machine had been a gift from the Tyrant of Badab after the Skull Harvest, and was, to Bronn's eyes, needlessly embellished. The operator's cab was set behind a heavy mantlet of flared horns and armoured in sheets of layered metal, with only a thin slit by which the driver could see out.

He hauled open the door to the operator's cabin and growled at the hunched figure hard-wired into the control mechanism. A hybrid thing of machine parts and bruised flesh, it had once been an Iron Warrior whose mortal remains had been housed in the sarcophagus of a Dreadnought.

'Brother Lacuna,' said Bronn, his voice muffled behind the fire-blackened visor he had taken from the pulped remains of his former captain on Hydra Cordatus. 'You are too far forwards. Pull back ten metres.'

'I will not,' answered the operator, his voice a wet, rasping thing of droning vox-scrapes stitched together to form a stunted vocabulary. 'To raise the first block, I must be ahead of the pack.'

Bronn sighed. No Iron Warrior who could stand, wield a weapon or entrenching tool wished to demean himself by operating one of these machines, yet they were an integral part of the Iron Warriors modus operandi. Just another of the many contradictions inherent to the Iron Warriors. Only those plucked from wrecked Dreadnoughts or too badly injured to survive were deemed fit for such duties, and even then they weren't the most suitable candidates.

'You must pull back,' insisted Bronn. 'The first layer of foundation needs to be dug simultaneously. The rock at this depth is layered with staggered bands of loose soil and will collapse inwards if it is not strengthened at the same time. You understand?'

Lacuna stared at Bronn, though it was impossible to tell what was going on in his ravaged brain. The similar urge to wreak harm and inflict mayhem that saw

many Dreadnoughts reduced to blood-crazed madness afflicted the machine operators, though their madness was of an altogether more dangerous kind.

The kind that could cause a fortress to fall.

‘I understand,’ said Lacuna in his chopped-up language. A hash of binary blurted from his vox-grille, and Bronn was glad the visor hid his grin as he caught the gist of Lacuna’s insult.

‘Just get it done,’ said Bronn. ‘And if you call me a fabricator of wooden walls again, I’ll have what’s left of you wired into a mine-clearance drone.’

Even with half his face gone and the remainder replaced by cannibalised servitor parts, Lacuna was able to register surprise at Bronn’s understanding of binaric cant. A frothed grate of machine laughter bubbled up from Lacuna’s rebuilt throat, as the bulldozer’s engine fired up and the gears clattered into reverse.

Bronn withdrew from the cab and slammed the door shut, riding along on the running boards until he was satisfied the machine was where it was supposed to be. He banged a hand on the door and dropped to the hard floor of the cavern. Its surface had been planed smooth by melta fire in readiness for the earth-moving machines and the Black Basilica, and Bronn felt its strength as he knelt and placed his palm upon it.

‘Is the rock strong?’ asked the harsh, guttural bark of this host’s war leader.

Bronn stood and gave a curt nod. ‘It is good rock, Warsmith Honsou, *old* rock,’ he said. ‘The kind of rock that can stand against everything the universe has to throw at it. The kind of rock that once formed the heart of Olympia.’

Honsou shook his head at such ill-placed nostalgia. ‘Olympia’s rock failed in the end, didn’t it?’

Bronn’s jawline clenched. ‘Its people failed,’ he said. ‘Not its rock.’

Honsou never missed a chance to remind his Legion that they had destroyed their own homeworld after its populace rebelled against their lawful rulers. It seemed wilfully perverse to twist such a knife in the guts of his men, but Bronn had long-since learned to let such barbs pass without comment.

‘But the rock of Calth will fall?’ asked Honsou.

‘It will not stand before the inevitability of Perturabo’s true sons,’ Bronn assured him, meeting Honsou’s barb with one of his own.

‘I never thought it would,’ said Honsou with a lopsided grin. The upper quadrant of the Warsmith’s face was a mangled, knotted mass of scar tissue, mortician-grafted augmetics and raw flesh, the result of a close encounter with a bolter shell and a collapsing tunnel. What might once have been considered

roguish was now pulled into a permanently sardonic leer. One arm was encased in Mark IV plate pulled from the body of a dead Iron Warrior, the other a perfect replica of an arm fashioned from silver mercury.

Honsou saw Bronn's attention and lifted the arm up before him.

'This whole cave could fall and this arm wouldn't have a scratch on it if you dug it out.'

'The rest of us would be crushed, though,' pointed out Bronn.

Honsou grinned. 'Always so literal,' he said. 'I think that's the real reason the Iron Warriors followed the Warmaster into rebellion. Horus probably said it as a joke and Perturabo took him at his word.'

'Then that just shows how little you know,' snapped Dassadra.

Bronn held up a fist to prevent Dassadra speaking again, but Honsou appeared to be amused rather than angered at his aide's outburst.

'He has spark, this one,' said Honsou.

'One of Berossus's men,' answered Bronn.

'Ah.'

Before Honsou could provoke Dassadra again, Bronn said, 'Is there something you needed, Warsmith?'

Honsou nodded, acquiescing to Bronn's authority here. 'You are ready to begin the advance?'

'I am,' confirmed Bronn. 'Just give the word and I'll have a wall built across that ridge inside a day.'

'Good. Who's leading the first push?'

'Jaegoth Ghent.'

Honsou nodded. Ghent was a good man under fire. Lord Toramino had had most of his nervous system stripped out by adepts of the Dark Mechanicus and replaced with artificial receptors. It made him a dour battle-brother, but a warrior who wouldn't flinch if an artillery shell landed right next to him. Ghent had directed the approach saps to Khalan-Ghol, and Honsou had been careful to spare his life in the wake of the carnage surrounding the last days of his former abode.

'Tell him to stand down,' said Honsou.

'What? Why?'

'You and I are going lead the push from the cavern,' said Honsou.

'Are you insane?' demanded Bronn. 'Why would you order such a thing?'

'It's been too long since I got my hands dirty with a pick and broke the earth of an enemy world,' said Honsou. 'I need to get back to what I do best, building

walls for big guns. And if I'm going to do that, I need someone who knows the rock better than anyone else at my side.'

'If the half-breed wants to die, let him,' said Dassadra. 'No-one will mourn him.'

Bronn expected Honsou to kill Dassadra for his temerity, but Honsou just laughed.

'Maybe not,' said Honsou. 'The daemon lord may command the Bloodborn, but I lead this host, and one of the benefits of that is being able to do what I damn well please. Bronn, get this little bastard away from me before he spoils my good mood and I kill him.'

Bronn ordered Dassadra away with a curt nod, and stared at Honsou.

'Why are you really doing this?' he asked once Dassadra was out of earshot.

'Do I need a reason?' countered Honsou.

'If you're going to lead my machines out there, I need to know you're doing it for the right reasons. I'm not going to let you get them destroyed just to prove a point to the daemon lord or the Legion.'

'And what point would I be proving?'

'That you're an Iron Warrior,' said Bronn. 'A true son of Perturabo.'

'Do I *need* to prove that? Look at where we are. Not even Perturabo brought the iron and the stone to Ultramar.'

Bronn shook his head and lowered his voice so that no-one but Honsou would hear him.

'No matter how many escalades you make, no matter how many breaches you storm or fortresses you raze, they will never respect you as an Iron Warrior. This will make no difference to how these warriors see you. To them you will always be the half-breed.'

Honsou put a hand on Bronn's shoulder and turned him towards the light at the cavern mouth. Rippling shafts of sunlight danced in the blue-hazed fumes of the grumbling bulldozers and lifter rigs.

'Beyond that opening are my enemies,' said Honsou. 'Behind me are warriors who would happily turn their weapons on me if they thought they could get away with it. Do you really think I'm doing this to try and impress anyone? I know who I am, and I don't give a greenskin's fart what anyone thinks of me.'

'Then what *do* you hope to achieve?'

'I need them to see me make war like an Iron Warrior,' said Honsou, leaning in close and baring his teeth in sudden anger. 'Even if they never accept me as one, I need them to know that I fight like one. I need them to understand that if

anything happens to me, if any of them make a move against me, then they're all going to die on this forsaken rock. I'm the only one who can win the war on Calth, and I want them to know that. Without me, this invasion is over.'

'And if we die out there?' asked Bronn as Honsou walked away. 'What happens then?'

'We'll be dead,' said Honsou. 'What does it matter what happens after that?'

Leaving Soltarn Vull Bronn to oversee the last preparations for the assault, Honsou made his way back through the cavern, relishing the sudden sense of excitement that filled him. It had been a spur of the moment decision to lead the assault into the great underground cavern, but it felt right. It felt *good*. Every word he had said to Bronn was true, but there was more to it than that.

Honsou cared little for the esteem of his fellow Iron Warriors, but the voices that harped at him from the darkest recesses of his mind demanded he prove his worth every moment of every day.

*They are right to hate you...*

*The Clonelord should never have wrought you...*

*You are nothing but an aborted experiment that escaped the furnace...*

Most of these voices made no sense to Honsou, for he remembered nothing but disjointed scraps of his birth as an Iron Warrior. Nor could he recall the life he had lived before being transformed into a thing reviled by those he had been crafted from and those he had been created for. No, the drive – the *obsession* – he had to place himself in harm's way came from the need to prove those voices wrong.

He *was* as good as any Iron Warrior.

He could fight as hard and with as much cunning and dogged determination as any of those crafted from Perturabo's gene-seed. And if he had to set the galaxy afire from one spiral arm to the other to prove it, then so be it.

Honsou had long ago come to this realisation, but had never voiced it to another soul. Let them think he wanted to be like them. Let them think he wanted to *be* one of them. Their hate only spurred him on, and their sneering condescension only made him stronger.

His fists clenched and he unsheathed the monstrous, night-bladed axe from its leather harness at his shoulder. The weapon had belonged to a warrior of the Black Legion, but like most of the accoutrements of war Honsou now sported, it had been taken as a trophy of murder. His augmetic eye had been plucked from the ruined skull of a Savage Mortician, and the impervious, silver-steel arm had

been sawn from the body of a captive Ultramarine.

Further back in the long tunnel that led to the irradiated surface of Calth, a series of armoured blockhouses had been built in staggered chevrons. The Iron Warriors never paused on the march without constructing solid walls to protect their fighters. M'kar might have an inexhaustible army of daemons to call upon, but Honsou needed to husband his resources.

Warriors in burnished plate ran mock assaults with tiny clockwork armies thrown against miniature fortresses, cleaned weapons that had been cleaned a thousand times already or simply stood like ageless statues and waited for the order to attack. Honsou saw Cadaras Grendel and the Newborn working through a series of combat drills before a blockhouse at the centre of the ugly constructions of steel and stone.

Grendel had taken over the Newborn's training since Ardaric Vaanes' capture, but his methods were far from subtle, and he did not have the fluid panache of the former Raven Guard. Where Vaanes had sought to teach the Newborn from a standpoint of making it a better warrior, all Grendel wanted was to make it a better killer.

A subtle difference, and one that mattered little in the crucible of combat, but a difference nonetheless. Honsou had often watched the Newborn train with Vaanes, grudgingly enjoying the ballet of limbs and blades, the lethal choreography of death and the bouts that were more like dances than brutal combats. The Newborn had tried to learn more than just battle skills from Vaanes; it wanted to learn of its soul and how it could rise above its nature to become something more. No such teachings were to be found in Grendel's sparring, only bloody, bruising lessons in killing. If the Newborn sought any higher truths to its existence in Grendel's tutelage, it was having those desires beaten out of it.

Honsou found it hard to look upon the creature, seeing the face of his nemesis in its lopsided features and dead skin mask.

Hot-housed in the nightmarish Daemonculaba womb-slaves, the Newborn was a dark mirror of Uriel Ventris, a hybrid by-blow of warp spawned genetics. No-one had expected it to survive, but it had lived and become stronger than anyone could have foreseen. Better to harness and mould such a creature in the ways of its masters before allowing it to become something of its own.

Honsou paused to watch Grendel and the Newborn fight.

It wasn't pretty, a brawl of superhumans who fought without the drag of honour, rules or the need to play fair. Knowing the skill of Grendel and the

Newborn, it was likely the bout had been going on for quite some time. Elbows, knees and heads were weapons, a moment of weakness an opening. Their fight was not about who was the best, but about who was left standing. Grendel sent a vicious right cross at the Newborn's jaw, the fist driving with enough force to pulp rock. The Newborn swayed aside, but Grendel's elbow jabbed, cracking it in the jaw and hurling it from its feet.

Grendel followed up with a crushing knee to the groin and a thundering series of rabbit punches to the Newborn's throat. Honsou grimaced as he heard bone break and flesh rupture. The bout was over, but Grendel kept up his furious assault without pause.

'I think you beat him,' called Honsou, and Grendel turned to look at him with a grin of triumph. The mohawked warrior's chest heaved with the adrenaline of battle as the Newborn spat a geyser of brackish fluid and rolled onto its side.

'Remind me never to get into a fight with you, Grendel,' said Honsou, holding a hand out to his lieutenant. Grendel looked up, his malignantly scarred features a clenched fist of venomous anger.

Honsou saw the look and said, 'Don't even think about it.'

Grendel shrugged and took Honsou's silver hand. His fists were coated in blood that vanished into the depths of the alien limb as Honsou pulled him to his feet.

'After we're done here, you and I need to get in the ring,' said Grendel. 'Ever since Khalan-Ghol I've wanted to beat you bloody.'

'Trust me,' said Honsou. 'The feeling's mutual, but I need you alive.'

Grendel twisted his neck and spat a mouthful of crimson spittle as the Newborn climbed to its feet. A faint luminosity shimmered beneath its skin, as though its heart were a lumen globe buried beneath its armour instead of a beating organ. The bones Grendel had broken were already healing, and the cuts his mailed fists had opened on the Newborn's face were sealing even as Honsou watched. He'd long been aware of the Newborn's ability to undo the most horrific damage, but it never failed to unsettle him.

'Is it time to launch the attack?' it asked.

Honsou nodded, but kept his eyes on Grendel.

Though its skin hung loosely on the bone beneath with a mannequin's artificiality, there was no mistaking the patrician cast of its inherited features. He didn't know what the creature had looked like before its transformation in the Daemonculaba, but it bore the unmistakable gene-cast of Uriel Ventris.

'Bronn has everything in place, and we're ready to move,' said Honsou.

‘I don’t like Bronn,’ said Grendel.

‘You don’t like anyone,’ pointed out Honsou.

‘True,’ admitted Grendel. ‘But he *really* gets under my skin.’

‘Why?’ asked the Newborn. ‘From what I have seen, Soltarn Vull Bronn is a highly competent warrior. His geophysical knowledge is second to none. Better even than yours, Warsmith.’

Honsou wanted to feel slighted, but he knew the Newborn was right.

‘There’s a trace of the witch to him,’ said Grendel, swinging his shoulders to loosen the muscles and twisting his neck from side to side. ‘I don’t care how many sieges a man’s fought, you can’t know the heart of a planet’s rock just by touching it and looking at it.’

‘I don’t care how he does it,’ said Honsou. ‘He’s never wrong.’

‘There’s truth in that,’ nodded Grendel with customary capriciousness. ‘How long before he gets a practicable wall up?’

‘It won’t be long, no more than a day,’ said Honsou.

‘We will lose a great deal of men to complete a wall in so short a time,’ said the Newborn.

‘We stand to lose a lot more than just men if we don’t get this done quickly.’

The Newborn nodded, accepting Honsou’s logic, but its head cocked to one side as it read a hidden truth behind his expression.

‘What are you not telling us?’ it asked.

The attack began, as all Iron Warrior attacks began, with a punishing artillery barrage. The guns at the tunnel mouth boomed and roared, filling the cavern with choking banks of acrid propellant smoke. Vast, ceiling-mounted extraction units sucked great lungfuls of the smoke and pumped it back through the rock to the surface of Calth, though no amount of machinery could totally eliminate the chemical reek of explosives fashioned in the heart of a daemon world. No sooner had the first barrage been launched than the second was away. Mutants and adrenal-boosted mecha-slaves fed the voracious appetite of the guns, hauling heavy flatbeds of shells to the artillery line.

Bronn watched the thundering power of the artillery and knew the field of fire was woefully narrow for the task at hand, but with the restricted frontage allowed by the cave mouth, there was little that could be done to widen it. The vibration of the shellfire was titanic, and the cavern shook with the violence of it. Dust and fragments of stone fell from the ceiling, and Dassadra looked up with a critical eye.

‘Don’t waste your energy worrying about the cavern,’ said Bronn over the helm vox. ‘The rock above will hold.’

‘You’re sure?’

‘Positive.’

Dassadra looked unconvinced, but Bronn had little time to waste in reassuring him. Any Iron Warrior who couldn’t read the structural strength of a cavern like this wasn’t worthy of the name. Bronn heard the sound of distant explosions, a subtle change in the pitch of the unending pounding that filled the cavern.

‘Earth and deep rock,’ he said, angrily. ‘We’re hitting their earthworks.’

‘You want the guns realigned?’

Bronn considered Dassadra’s request. It was not a suggestion without merit, for the shellfire was killing nothing of note; maybe a few units of the Ultramar soldiery, but certainly none of the Space Marines sure to be in the valley beyond.

‘Yes,’ he said at last, ‘but remember that these volleys aren’t about killing, they’re about keeping the bastards’ heads down. Move the guns forward and increase the tempo as the flanking artillery widens its fields of fire.’

Dassadra passed the word to the gun crews, and moments later the rapid tempo of the guns stepped up as yet more shells arced into the valley. Dust and pulverised rock hung in the air like heavy fog as the artillery line moved forward with mathematical precision. Bronn felt the vibration of footsteps behind him, and knew from the weight and length of them that his Warsmith was approaching.

Bronn turned to see Honsou hefting a short-handled entrenching tool. Like *Earthbreaker*, it was as much a weapon as a tool of siege.

‘Yours?’ asked Bronn.

Honsou nodded, and hefted the tool up for him to see. The haft was scored steel and its blade was notched with repeated impacts on hard earth and brittle bones. Flaking brown stains coated its edges, the residue of a thousand or more deaths, and the dirt of myriad worlds encrusted its ragged edge.

‘I crafted it myself,’ said Honsou proudly, offering it to Bronn.

‘As any proper Iron Warrior should,’ agreed Bronn, feeling the heft of the entrenching tool. ‘It’s shorter than most I’ve seen.’

‘All the entrenching tools made in the weapon forges of Warsmith Tarasios were short. Made them better weapons for fighting in a trench.’

Bronn’s eyes widened in respect for the lost Warsmith.

‘The Warsmith who broke open the Jade Bastion,’ said Bronn with an admiring nod. ‘I forgot he trained you. That explains why it’s weighted towards

the digging end.’

‘You know as well as I do that battles fought in the trenches are bloody toe-to-toe affairs,’ said Honsou, taking back his entrenching tool. ‘Brute strength, ferocity and a short swing are more important than skill.’

‘And you lack for none of these qualities,’ laughed Bronn. ‘You are a scrapper and a brawler.’

‘Is that a compliment or an insult?’ asked Honsou.

‘You decide,’ replied Bronn. ‘Now are you ready to use that thing?’

Honsou grinned and tucked it in tight to his chest. ‘Give the word, Soltarn Vull Bronn.’

Bronn lifted *Earthbreaker* and held it aloft for long moments before ramming it down into the hard rock of the cavern floor. The vitrified stone split apart and as the cracks spread out from his feet, a mighty roar went up from the thousands of workers gathered behind him.

As the guns fired once more, Bronn jogged with heavy, mile-eating footfalls towards the mouth of the cave. The rocky floor shook with the force of the heavy digging machines moving through the gaps between the artillery pieces, and trumpeting, honking, screaming war horns blared in unison as the Iron Warriors advanced into the teeth of the Ultramarines defences.

Bronn ran at a relentless pace, stolid and inexorable, with Honsou on one side and Teth Dassadra on the other. They moved without haste, but with a terrible inevitability that had seen even the mightiest citadels humbled. Howitzers spoke with thunderous booms, and the roar of engines echoed from the cavern sides like the howling of an army of daemons.

The light at the cavern mouth swelled before them. The noise was deafening, a titanic hammerblow of shockwaves that made a mockery of any attempt of their armour’s auto-senses to attenuate the crescendo of destruction. Bronn felt the percussive body-slam of artillery fire as they ran past the forward line of emplaced Basilisk guns. Spewing clouds of ejected smoke billowed in chaotic vortices, hauled and yanked by the extractors and subterranean atmospherics.

‘Iron Within!’ shouted Honsou.

‘Iron Without!’ answered Bronn.

Honsou had seen Four Valleys Gorge before through the eyes of remote drone servitors, each time a fleeting glance before a lethally accurate artillery round atomised it, but this was the first time he had seen it with his own eyes. In times of peace, it would have been place of bucolic splendour that led deeper into the

caverns beneath Calth, but now it was like a page from Perturabo's great *Castellum Arcanicus*, with entrenchments spread across the landscape like the sutures on the Newborn's face.

Earthen redoubts and permacrete strongpoints occupied the high ground, while firing trenches, automated pillboxes and armoured brochs covered the dead ground where landscape did not conform to the needs of defence. By any estimation, it was a fearsome array of textbook defences, but what was textbook to the Ultramarines was predictable to an Iron Warrior. Three fortresses of green marble barred further passage downwards at the cardinal points of the enormous cavern, and though each was a powerful bastion, with overlapping fields of enfilading fire, none offered serious impediment to the Iron Warriors.

Honsou saw this in an instant, spotting where the defences were weakest, where an approach might be made – though he would not be making it himself – and where the Ultramarines were hoping to lure them into attack. His view was obliterated a second later as a thundering series of hammerblow detonations marched across the landscape, booming mushroom clouds of geysering earth and fire and smoke.

The sound rolled over Honsou and he grinned at the visceral thrill of fighting at the sharp end of a charge. The plateau before him was empty and shaped like a flat oval, a place for visitors to Calth's underground to marvel in the sheer technical bravura that had shaped so vast a space for human habitation from the rock of a lethal world and rendered it as hospitable and welcoming as any heavenly paradise.

In a heartbeat that vision changed from a place of wonder to a place of death.

The first enemy artillery shells screamed down and exploded above the plateau in a storm of deafening horror. Air-bursting warheads flensed the ground with a hellstorm of red-hot steel fragments; some no larger than a fingernail, others like scything axe-heads, and the carnage wreaked amongst the slave workers was horrendous. Honsou saw a man shredded to the bone, his skeleton pulped to a rubbery mass a second later by the pounding shockwave of detonation.

A group of near-naked slaves with heavy picks slung over their shoulders vanished in a fiery mass of swirling fragments, their remains no longer recognisable as human. Hundreds died in the first instants of the barrage, and a hundred more in the rippling firestorm that followed. Honsou heard their screams, but paid them no mind. Mortal flesh was of no consequence to him. He would sacrifice a million lives on the altar of his ambition, and then a million more.

Shredded carcasses littered the ground, dancing bloody jigs as the ground shook and the air buckled with the bludgeoning force of the blasts. Black streaks of burned smoke and the sucking heaves of pressure drops, sudden vacuums and bangs of displaced air made all sense of direction meaningless. Any sense of up or down, left and right was obliterated in the terrifying disorientation of overloading sound and light and pressure.

Honsou's armour saved him from the worst of the hellish thunder, but it could not fully mask the cataclysmic hammering. His every plate rang with impacts, as though someone was unloading shotgun shells against the back of his helmet with every step. The ground heaved as though in the grip of a powerful earthquake, and fires erupted sporadically from the ignited clothing of the dead.

He could see little before him save banks of shrapnel-twitched smoke and sheeting knives of fire from above that lit fresh scenes of suffering and bloodshed with every strobing flash. Black gashes torn in the ground filled with boiling blood and severed limbs, headless trunks and bones shorn of their flesh. He lost sight of Bronn and the few other Iron Warriors who had made this charge with him. It was impossible to tell if they were still alive or were unrecognisable chunks of gouged meat and metal.

Adrenaline surged around Honsou's body, driving him on through the nightmarish blitzing hurricane of pounding blast waves and fizzing shrapnel. He knew it was foolish to expose himself like this, that he was risking the success of the invasion of Calth with his reckless theatrics, but there was little choice but to show the warriors who followed him that he was willing to risk his own life and that he could fight like an Iron Warrior.

Something struck the side of Honsou's helmet like the thunder hammer of a Dreadnought and he was sent flying. A body flashed past him, and he braced for impact as the clashing, intersecting waves of force flung him about like a leaf in a storm.

He hit the ground hard and skidded across the cratered rubble of the plateau. After a quick check to make sure he still had all his limbs, Honsou pushed himself to his knees with his entrenching tool. The sky rippled with orange and red streamers of arcing shells and fiery detonations, but it felt distant and somehow unreal.

The smell of cooking meat came to him, and Honsou looked down to see a long shard of shell casing jutting from the centre of his breastplate. The metal sizzled, and it was still possible to make out a white eagle and read the stencilled lettering on its side. He grunted and pulled the fragment from his body. Its tip

was sharpened to a dagger point, the last ten centimetres coated in blood.

‘You don’t get me that easy,’ he snarled, standing calmly in the midst of the barrage.

Along the length of the plateau, Bronn’s earth-moving machines were advancing through the constant rain of artillery shells. The air-bursting shells were having little effect on their up-armoured topsides, and they were driving ever-increasing heaps of rubble and pulverised rock towards the edge of the plateau. A waist-high berm of Calth’s earth was being pushed out before the machines, and would swiftly give the mortal slaves a measure of protection while they built up the more permanent defences.

Dozens of machines had been crippled with lucky strikes to vital components, while others had been comprehensively wrecked by enemy gun crews who’d realised the futility of air-bursting man-killers and switched their weapons to high-explosive shells. He saw Teth Dassadra waving more diggers forwards, allocating them work space in lieu of wrecked machines. Honsou remembered Dassadra from the final days of Khalan-Ghol, a warrior who had only too readily switched his allegiance from one master to another. Honsou couldn’t fault him for that, where was the sense in staying with a master whose star had been eclipsed?

Honsou would have done the same, but it meant keeping such a man appeased with victory and enough scope for his own ambition to prevent him from turning to bite the hand that fed. Honsou remembered Huron Blackheart’s last words to him, and decided that when the time came to abandon this front, he would leave Teth Dassadra behind.

‘Are you just going to stand there or are you going to use that damn tool?’ demanded Soltarn Vull Bronn, emerging from the smoke and hanging fog of dust particles. Honsou grinned and took a two-handed grip on its short haft.

‘Show me where to dig,’ he said, and Bronn gestured towards the forward edge of the plateau. Honsou and Bronn ran past a blazing digger, its cab a mass of fused metal and molten rubber pouring from its conduits and exposed pipework. Something writhed within the operator’s cabin, something still alive and unable to die in the killing fires. Thick black smoke obscured the horror, and it was behind them before Honsou could make out more than a blackened skull twisting on a serpentine neck, screaming in pain that would never end.

‘That trench needs to be another metre deep, and at least half a metre wider if the foundations are going to hold up to a barrage!’ shouted Bronn. ‘See it done.’

Honsou felt no anger towards Bronn at his brusque tone. This part of the

campaign was Bronn's to run as he saw fit, and if that meant dragging the Warsmith towards a trench then so be it.

'Consider it done,' said Honsou, dropping into the trench. A hundred or more mortals in shredded work wear hacked at the earth, picks battering the bedrock of Calth in a staccato rhythm. Some looked up as he landed among them, but most kept their heads to the earth, terrified that if they looked up and acknowledged the carnage going on around them it might reach out and pluck them from their illusory safety.

'Dig together!' shouted Honsou, though he had no idea how many heard him over the constant pummelling of artillery. 'With me!'

Honsou bent his back and drove his entrenching tool into the earth, the blade biting deep and parting the soil of Calth like the softest flesh. He twisted and tossed the earth backwards without breaking the rhythm of his swing, and even before it landed, his shovel blade was embedded in the earth once again.

'Together!' bellowed Honsou, his digging like the regular piston strokes of a battle engine. Dig, lift, twist, thrust. The motion never changed, and Honsou grinned as the memory of his early days in the Legion returned to him. He remembered days spent digging on his belly, pushing approach trenches forward, filling sandbags and gabions with turned earth. Instinctive muscle memory drove his arms, his strength working his body like a perpetual motion machine. There was purity in this work, a singular purpose that allowed for none of the infighting between warbands or any rancour of past betrayals to interfere.

All that mattered was the man and the soil, and the powerful strokes to shift it.

Honsou glanced to his left, and saw the men around him were attempting to mimic his pattern of dig, lift, twist and thrust. They couldn't match his speed or apparently effortless rhythm, but they were at least working together. The trench was already widened and getting deeper with every passing minute.

He heard a screaming whine, louder than the others that blended together in a banshee's chorus, and looked up. Through the billowing, dancing clouds of smoke and dust, Honsou saw a bright streamer of a shell's contrail as it arced over with agonising slowness and aimed its warhead down towards his trench. It should have been moving too fast to see. There should have been little more than a split second's warning, but Honsou saw the gently spinning shell as though upon a slow-motion pict-capture. Its wide body was tapered at both ends, spinning slowly and painted sky blue. Its tip was gold, which struck him as needlessly ornate for a weapon of war, and he had time to wonder whether it would be better to be killed by a precious metal or a base one.

‘Incoming!’ he shouted, though few would hear his warning or be able to respond to it in time. Honsou threw himself into the forward wall of the trench he had just dug, pressing his body into the earthen rampart and hoping the shell wouldn’t be one of the lucky ones to score a direct hit. He clutched his entrenching tool tight to his chest as the scream of the shell’s terminal approach battered through the endless thunder of impacts and detonations.

Honsou knew artillery sounds, and this was the sound of a shell coming right at him.

He closed his eyes and exhaled as the shell struck.

The high-explosive shell slashed down and struck the centre of the trench, as though a mathematician had plotted its trajectory. Confined by the high walls, the blast roared out along the trench, incinerating those closest to its point of impact, and shredding those beyond in tightly packed storms of tumbling metal. The shockwave blew men out of their overalls, leaving them naked and twisted into grotesque knots of liquefied bone and shattered limbs.

Honsou was plucked from the trench and hurled into the air. Dozens of red icons flashed to life on his visor as the reflecting blast waves pulled his body in a hundred different directions. Seams split, plates cracked and pressurised coils beneath his breastplate ruptured, venting corrosive gases and precious oxygen. He lost all perception of spatial awareness, and only knew which way was down when he slammed into a line of prefabricated, mesh-wrapped blocks of wall being driven forwards by the second wave of diggers.

Gathered up in the tumbling debris before the blocks, Honsou had no control over his movement. His body was still paralysed by the numbing force of the explosion, and he roared in frustration as he was pushed back towards the trench line. Earth and rock gathered around him, pinning his arms in place, but every nerve in his body was still reverberating in the aftermath of the blast, and he couldn’t move.

The yawning black line approached, and Honsou knew there was nothing he could do to prevent his being buried in the trench. A fitting end to his short-lived reign as Warsmith or a bitter irony to be buried in the foundations of a siegework? He kept struggling, though there was nothing he could do to prevent being buried alive. To the last breath he would fight, even as hundreds of tonnes of rubble crushed him to death in the depths of an invaded world.

The harsh rumble of the digger’s engine changed pitch, changing from the throaty roar of a corpulent dragon to a squealing wail of a denied hedonist. Honsou teetered on the brink of the abyss, a rain of pebbles, soil and permacrete

drooling into the trench in front of him. He let out the breath he hadn't realised he was holding and felt sensation return to his limbs. A hand reached out to him. He grabbed it unquestioningly and hauled himself upright, steadying himself with his entrenching tool.

'Getting buried in the foundations of a fortress wall is one way to prove you are a true Iron Warrior,' said Soltarn Vull Bronn. 'But I wouldn't recommend it.'

Honsou gasped, his body now his to control again, but his racing senses too stupefied to reply. He nodded his thanks as Bronn pulled him away from the front of the earth-moving machine as its engine revved up again, vomiting a petulant blast of exhaust fumes in his face.

'Brother Lacuna does not like to be stopped in his tracks,' explained Bronn, as the machine's horns emitted a series of angry honks and squirts of binary static.

Honsou saw a hostile pair of cybernetic eyes glaring at him from the thin slit cut into the armour of the operator's compartment, and moved away from the machine as its tracked wheels spun and bit. Its feed pipes retched as they poured sludgy grey permacrete into the trench. The oozing mixture set almost instantaneously to form a foundation bed for the blocks coming in on the mass-loaders.

'Won't happen again,' promised Honsou. 'He's bigger than me.'

'When has *that* ever stopped you getting in a fight?'

'Never,' grinned Honsou, taking stock of the work around him.

Despite the continuous bombardment, the shape of the fortification was taking shape all along the plateau. The trench line was filled with rubble and rapid-setting permacrete, onto which hundreds of rectangular, mesh-wrapped blocks of debris were being fixed. Already they formed a waist-high wall embedded with iron spikes and the beginnings of gun ports. The artillery duel was still ongoing, with the Ultramarines having the better of the exchange in terms of lives taken.

But this first sortie had never been about taking lives.

Booming reports exploded overhead, and hammering detonations shook the plateau, but kinetic mantlets were now in place, sheltering the slave workers from the worst of the barrage. As the ground level smoke began to thin, Honsou saw the plateau was a cratered no-man's-land of torn up rock, craters filled with steaming blood and bobbing body parts. A vision of desolation, ruin and death.

'You have your bridgehead, Warsmith,' said Bronn proudly.

'What's the cost?'

'Negligible,' replied Bronn, picking his way over the broken ground to stand in the outline of a gun tower yet to be built. 'Perhaps two thousand slave

workers, but there are plenty more on the surface yet to be brought down.'

'Machines?'

Here, Bronn looked concerned. 'At least fifty out of action, and maybe half of those will never raise earthworks again.'

'Fifty? So many?'

Bronn shrugged. 'As I told Dassadra, this is not a normal foe we face. These are warriors of Ultramar. They fight hard, just like us.'

'You're wrong,' said Honsou. 'They don't fight like me.'

'Maybe not, but it's going to be a hard bloody slog to reach those fortresses, no matter how you fight. *That* I can promise.'

Honsou unsnapped the ruptured seals at his gorget and pulled off his helmet. Dried blood streaked his face and he felt a fragment of green glass embedded in his cheek. He had long ago become inured to pain and tore it clear without even noticing.

'The fortresses are unimportant, Bronn,' said Honsou, marching back through the mass of rumbling machines. Milling warriors and bustling slaves jostled in the smouldering ruins as they dragged more and more blocks forwards to raise the fortifications still higher. Much remained to be done on the wall before it could be called practicable, but the hard work had been done. The foundations had been laid and mortared with blood. All that remained was simply a matter of arithmetic and the cold hard logic of war.

'Unimportant?' repeated Bronn. 'That doesn't make any sense.'

Iron Warriors stood tall as Honsou passed, and he knew he had, if not won their unquestioning loyalty, at least earned a measure of temporary respect for his willingness to fight at the lethal edge of battle. The weapons of war may change, knew Honsou, but every war needed a powerful will of bone and muscle and living flesh to win it. No matter how big the guns, or towering the war machines, every siege came down to men putting themselves in harm's way and breaking open the soil of an enemy world. Since the first wooden palisade walls had been raised on hilltops by savages in a forgotten, lightless age it had ever been thus, and always would be.

'It will make sense all in good time, Bronn,' promised Honsou.

'Speak plainly,' demanded Bronn, taking hold of his arm. 'How can the fortresses be unimportant? How else are we going to get below the surface except by breaking them open?'

'*We* aren't getting below the surface,' said Honsou. 'I am.'

'Have you gone mad?' stormed Bronn. 'Ardaric Vaanes was your master of

stealth and even he failed to insert himself behind the enemy lines.'

'I'm not planning on doing it stealthily, it'll be in plain sight, but they'll not see me coming,' said Honsou, shrugging off Bronn's hand. 'But this is where I need you to trust me like you have never trusted anyone. Can you do that?'

Bronn stopped to remove his helm, and tucked it under his arm. He looked at Honsou with a resigned expression that spoke of a lifetime of bitter disappointments.

'I would rather not,' he said.

'Honest, at least,' laughed Honsou.

'What did you expect? You didn't get to become Warsmith by being a model of trust and honour.'

'True,' admitted Honsou. 'But I need you to fight in a way you've never fought before.'

'What way is that?'

'I want you to attack this cavern like you're looking to win, but fight simply to hold.'

'What is the point of that? If I attack, it will be to win.'

'I don't need that,' said Honsou.

'Why? There is no purpose to war if not to crush the enemy.'

'Listen well, Bronn,' said Honsou. 'There is something beneath this world the daemon lord requires me to destroy, and I can't do that if I have a host of Ultramarines in pursuit. They need to be kept here, pinned in place for as long as I'm gone. I need them to think this is our true purpose in coming here.'

'Then what is our purpose if not to conquer this world?'

'Better you don't know,' said Honsou. 'We're here for one thing, and it's something I can only do without an army at my back.'

'You're leaving the army?' asked Bronn in disbelief. 'Who will command? The Grand Company won't accept Grendel as their leader; the man's a brute. And that... *creature* from Medrengard you keep around. It's an abomination and it insults every son of Perturabo that you allow it to wear our Legion's colours.'

'Don't worry,' said Honsou with the grin of a man who knows the punchline of a joke no-one even knew he was telling. 'Grendel and the Newborn are coming with me.'

'So who will command?'

'You will,' said Honsou.

It took another fifteen hours for the wall to rise to its prescribed height, twenty

metres of hard-packed blocks sheathed in molten metal, strengthened with adamantium reinforcement, and built upon bloody permacrete footings hacked deep into the flesh of Calth. Circular towers with angled abutments, deflector hoardings and numerous loopholes where heavy guns could launch explosive warheads into the valley punctuated its length. Deep artillery pits were dug in the shadow of the banner-topped wall, and into them masked slaves dragged wide-barrelled howitzers on bloody chains. Shaven headed madmen attended these guns, iron-visored priests of the Dark Mechanicus and corrupted calculus-logi with eyes that saw not in hues of mortality, but in angles, trajectories and degrees of deflection.

The Bloodborn army was now ready for battle, thousands of soldiers clad in combat fatigues, gore-smeared armour, fright masks and ragged semblances of uniforms stitched with the daemon lord's rune. Entire regiments were poised in the shadow of the wall, eager to spill the blood of their enemies. Scattered through the host, impatient squadrons of battle tanks, hulking daemon engines and weaponised servitor-things blared their hatred from saw-toothed augmitters. Ten thousand Bloodborn swords clattered on spiked shields, and a rhythmic chanting of meaningless doggerel filled the air beneath the rumble of gunfire.

While the Bloodborn waited for the order to attack and the Iron Warriors busied themselves with the mortal mechanics of their craft, other beings made their way to the centre of the wall. Clad in flesh-sewn robes, they were an incongruous sight amid such industrial activity and mechanistic surroundings. They moved with the lurching, awkward gait of cripples, broken clockwork automatons or things that were unsuited to using mortal bodies for locomotion.

An unnaturally tall being in a fuliginous robe of crimson led them, skeletally thin and hunched over as though made from twisted wire. Its hood flapped loose, as though draped over the long skull of a crocodylus. Wheezing breath escaped from beneath the hood, cold as the grave and just as lifeless.

Bronn and Teth Dassadra watched the approaching warlocks from the centre of the wall with more than a measure of distaste.

'It offends the rites of advance that we use such unnatural means to fight the enemy,' said Dassadra. His hand rested on the butt of his boltgun, as though he was considering turning it upon the witches.

Bronn shrugged. 'We are at war, and we use what weapons are made available to us.' But he too was irked at the appearance of these lurching, wiry figures. Though they were ready to storm the valley, Honsou had postponed the attack until these daemoniac sorcerers had done their work.

‘What can warpcraft do that our guns cannot achieve?’ pressed Dassadra.

‘Wait and find out.’

‘Where did they even come from? They weren’t on any of the ships that came to Calth.’

‘You know that for sure, do you?’ said Bronn, growing tired of Dassadra’s constant harping. ‘You searched every scrap of darkness aboard our warships and know they were not among us?’

‘I didn’t see them when we took Ultimus Prime,’ said Dassadra more warily. ‘Where were they when we had to fight through an army of skitarii and battle-servitors?’

‘Perhaps you should ask M’kar himself,’ said Bronn. ‘I’m sure the daemon lord would welcome your questions.’

Dassadra fell silent at the mention of M’kar’s name, and watched as the figures formed a circle, into which was led a group of slaves who walked with the sluggish, dragging footsteps of sleepwalkers. Their flesh was excoriated and raw, cut with symbols that meant nothing to Bronn, but which he presumed were of significance to the warlocks. The slaves dropped to their knees, idiot grins plastered across their willing faces as they bared their necks.

The leader of the skin-robed witches stepped into the circle of sacrifices and a long blade of a finger unfurled from his ragged sleeve. Part organic, part sharpened wire, it flicked out like a scorpion’s stinger, and a throat was opened with a whip-crack of metal on flesh.

‘*M’kar tothyar magas tarani uthar!*’ screamed the warlock as blood squirted from the slave’s ruined artery. Before the first drop hit the ground, the pack of thrall-warlocks fell upon the slaves in a jagged, jerky frenzy of stabbing blades and shrieking wire-claws.

Like a shoal of ripper fish, they tore the slaves to gory tatters, letting their blood fill them like water pumped into empty bladders. The bodies of the warlocks, once so skeletal and thin, now swelled with black life as they gorged themselves on the slaves’ life force. They howled with perverse satisfaction, but their joy was short-lived as the master of the sorcerers supped greedily from their newfound well of power.

The blood was drawn from them like dark mist, pulled towards the master of the warlocks like spiralling ribbons of oil in an ocean maelstrom. His hunched form gradually straightened until he stood taller than a Dreadnought, his once frail-looking frame now made monstrous. He raised his curling arms to the cavern’s roof and loosed a piercing scream that split the air like the sonic boom

of a Hell Talon.

The beat of a thousand Bloodborn drums echoed from the cavern walls in answer as roiling thunderheads formed just below the rocky ceiling. Bronn had quickly adjusted to the changeable weather patterns of the cave, but this was something else entirely.

Arcing bolts of lightning leapt from cloud to cloud, gathering strength and frequency with every passing second. The temperature in the cave dropped sharply, and a cold wind blew from the mouth of the tunnel that led back to the surface.

‘Blood of Iron,’ cursed Dassadra. ‘Lightning? With this much metal? They’ll kill us all!’

Bronn said nothing, knowing that this was no ordinary lightning to be drawn to iron as metal is drawn to a magnet. This was warp lightning, brought into being and directed by the towering figure at the heart of the sorcerers. A booming peal of thunder eclipsed the maddened drumming, and a sheet of dazzling lightning blazed from the clouds. The atmosphere in the cavern *twisted* as though some fundamental aspect of it had changed, and blinding trceries spat from the unnatural clouds. Black rain fell in torrents, turning much of the cavern floor to quagmire and slicking the armour of the Iron Warriors with an oily, rainbow sheen.

Instead of striking amid the Bloodborn as Dassadra had feared, the lightning slammed down again and again over the upland ridges where the enemy artillery pieces were sited. Mushrooming flares of explosions curled into the air, followed moments later by the crack of detonating munitions. Fire raced over the high ground as weapon after weapon went up, vanishing in a spreading bloom of electrical fire. Explosions lit the underside of the clouds, and Bronn blinked away dazzling afterimages of darting, invisible forms; all black wings, reptilian bodies and screaming fangs.

‘Now do you see the worth of these warlocks?’ asked Bronn.

Dassadra nodded curtly. ‘They are effective, I’ll give them that.’

That was as much as Dassadra would allow, and Bronn grinned as the ridges between the three fortresses burned in the fires of the warp.

‘Order the advance,’ said Bronn. ‘Tanks and infantry only.’

Dassadra looked up, puzzled. ‘Only tanks and infantry? Why not the daemon engines?’

‘Because that is the order,’ said Bronn.

‘We should attack with everything we have,’ protested Dassadra. ‘First Wave

doctrine requires overwhelming force to break the will of the defenders.’

‘I know Perturabo’s doctrines, Dassadra, I need no lessons from you.’

‘Then why—’

‘Carry out your orders!’ snapped Bronn.

The sounds of battle were muted by the rain and distance, but even from behind the high wall he had built, Bronn could hear sharp exchanges of gunfire, explosions and screams. Dassadra remained on the wall, and though the man had balked at Bronn’s seemingly inexplicable orders, Bronn had given him no choice but to obey.

Bronn marched through the screaming, stamping mass of cyborg battle engines Votheer Tark had contributed to the invasion of Calth, knowing better than to stare too long at the binding symbols hacked into the meat and iron of their bodies. Some were restrained by chains of cold iron, others by more esoteric means, but every one was a lethal engine of bloody death that could fight for an eternity without tiring of the carnage.

Had these machines been sent into the fight, the enemy might already be broken, but Honsou did not want the enemy broken. It seemed like folly of the highest order, but Bronn forced himself to stop second-guessing Honsou’s plans. The Warsmith had the favour of the daemon lord, and the workings of such a mind were not for mortals to know.

Bronn entered the vast arch that led back towards the surface, following the sound of shrieking hydraulics, low-grade melta cutters and clattering armour. Arc lights riveted to the cavern walls illuminated ammunition and explosives gathered in towering stacks, and the light reflected dazzlingly from vast iron plates being bolted to the rock of the cavern. The metal roadway was being laid in readiness for the arrival of the Black Basilica, the hulking leviathan that was part mobile cathedral to the great gods of the warp, part awesomely destructive war engine with the power to level cities.

The Iron Warriors and the Bloodborn had reached the valley through tunnels dug by subterranean Hellbore diggers, but the Black Basilica needed the rubble blocking the full girth of the tunnel cleared before it could take part in the battle. Its overwhelming firepower would be decisive, and Bronn wondered how he could possibly maintain the stalemate Honsou desired with so powerful a weapon at his disposal.

He paused in his journey to place a hand on the cavern wall, letting the soul of the planet come to him through his gauntlet. The rock glistened in the glow of

the arc lights, the quartz and nephrite shimmering like specks of sickly gold. Bronn pressed his cheek to the stone, feeling every tiny vibration, every imperfection and every teasing ripple from afar. The Black Basilica was close; he could feel the tremors of its monstrous weight and the core-deep rumble of its engines.

‘Two hours perhaps,’ he said quietly. ‘No more than three.’

This world was hurting, and every pick, shovel and drill that pierced its skin was a wound that would never heal. Though Calth was a planet honeycombed by tunnels burrowed through its mantle, they were passages opened by people that had once called its surface home before Lorgar’s spite had poisoned its sun. Calth had not resented those intrusions, but the Iron Warriors were unwelcome visitors, and every grain of soil they dug was begrudged.

Bronn pushed himself away from the wall and continued deeper into the cavern until he came to a row of five tubular machines shaped like enormous torpedoes with rock-drilling conical snouts. Each Hellbore was as long as a Stormbird, but wider in beam and more heavily armoured. Their flanks were bare, scraped iron and all five had their crew ramps splayed wide as the assault forces boarded.

Only the nearest of the Hellbores would be carrying Iron Warriors, the others transporting Bloodborn shock-troops or Astartes warriors from the renegade Legions spawned in the aftermath of the Great Betrayal. None of these latter warriors were closer than six foundings to the first Legions, and yet they called themselves Space Marines. Mixed in with these inferior copies were a bastard mix of xenos species, some bipedal and birdlike, crested with spines of many colours, others arachnid, quadruped or unclassifiable in form.

Bronn shook his head at such a mongrel mix of killers.

‘I know what you’re thinking,’ said Honsou, approaching from the nearest Hellbore. ‘It’s an ugly looking army.’

‘Ugly doesn’t even begin to cover it,’ said Bronn. ‘I can accept a great many things, but to know that we have fallen so far is... galling. We once fought alongside the primarchs, gods of the battlefield, and now we draft sub-par warriors who call themselves Space Marines and unclean species from who knows where in the galaxy to fight our battles.’

‘These are cannon fodder,’ said Honsou. ‘And if it makes you feel any better, they’re all going to die.’

‘Yet you are going with them into the valley.’

Honsou shook his head. ‘No, these are just a distraction, something to keep the

Ultramarines looking straight ahead while I go beneath them.’

‘Hiding in plain sight,’ said Bronn with a slow smile of understanding.

‘Just so,’ agreed Honsou.

Bronn’s hand unconsciously moved towards his pistol as Cadaras Grendel and the creature Honsou called the Newborn approached. Both saw the gesture and their posture changed immediately. Grendel grinned in anticipation of a fight, while the Newborn looked at him curiously, as though trying to decide which limb to remove first. It took an effort of will, but Bronn removed his hand from his weapon.

Grendel laughed and jerked his thumb in the direction of the Newborn. ‘Very wise, this one would have ripped your head off before that gun could clear its holster.’

Bronn ignored Grendel, watching as the sinuous forms of the blade dancers climbed into the last Hellbore. Each was a swordmaster of sublime skill that had followed their champion, Notha Etassay, to New Badab in search of enemies worthy of their blades. Bound to Honsou after he had defeated Etassay during the final duel of the Skull Harvest, they were devotees of the Dark Prince and therefore not to be trusted.

Honsou followed his gaze and said, ‘This is war; and I’ll make use of such weapons or warriors as I have without care or regret.’

‘I said the same thing to Dassadra,’ replied Bronn. ‘But I was lying.’

Honsou shrugged. ‘You still believe in the old ways, Bronn. That’s always been your problem.’

‘The old ways were good enough for Lord Perturabo,’ said Bronn.

‘And look where that got him,’ said Honsou with sudden anger. ‘Stuck in a dead city on Medrengard, imprisoned by his own bitterness and resentment. If he cared so much about the wrongs done to him, why isn’t he out bringing every Imperial stronghold to ruin? There isn’t one fortress wall left standing that he couldn’t put to rubble in a day.’

Honsou’s vehemence surprised Bronn. He hadn’t thought the Warsmith cared anything for the Long War or Perturabo’s notable absence from its battles. Had Bronn misjudged him or was this yet another piece of theatre designed to achieve an end that could not yet be seen?

‘The ways of our master are not for us to judge,’ he said, though words sounded hollow even to him.

‘You’re wrong,’ said Honsou. ‘They *are* ours to judge. And one day someone will take Perturabo to task for his lack of action.’

That made Bronn laugh. ‘Really? And who will that be? You?’

Honsou’s anger vanished, and Bronn was reminded how unpredictable Honsou could be, as violent as a berserker or as capricious as a pleasure-seeker of the Dark Prince.

‘Who knows?’ said Honsou with a broken-toothed grin. ‘Maybe I will one day. Wouldn’t that be delicious? A half-breed mongrel bastard sat atop the Ivory Throne. What I wouldn’t give to see old Forrix’s face if he could have lived to see that!’

‘You’re insane,’ said Bronn, as sure of that fact as he was about the composition of Calth’s bedrock.

‘You might be right,’ said Honsou, turning away and making his way towards the assault ramp of the Hellbore. ‘But I have a shrine to find and you have a battle to prolong.’

A group of perhaps forty Iron Warriors marched ahead of Honsou, filing into the Hellbore with unquestioning discipline. Bronn knew a great many of these warriors; they were among the finest killers left to the Legion. All had fought on Terra, and each had sworn personal oaths of moment before the Ivory Throne. A pang of bitter and solemn regret touched Bronn to see such warriors engaged in such an ignoble war.

Honsou climbed to the top of the ramp and turned as Grendel and the Newborn went inside. He raised a fist to Bronn and slammed it hard against his breastplate.

‘Give me a day,’ said Honsou. ‘Give me a day, and I’ll give you a victory that will make you forget there ever were any “old ways”.’

Bronn nodded as the assault ramp folded up into the body of the Hellbore, but his heart sank as he heard the lie in the Warsmith’s voice.

Honsou was leaving them to die.

## NOW

The pain was getting worse.

His armour was non-functional, and he could barely move. His strength, once so formidable, was deserting him. Plates that had once protected him from harm were now a burden his weakening body could no longer endure. He remembered being presented with his armour in the columned majesty of the Gallery of Stone, kneeling with thousands of his fellow warriors before the burnished form

of the primarch.

Bronn remembered the unbreakable pride he had felt, the sense of belonging to something greater that had sustained him all through the darkest days of the Great Betrayal. The Long War and the decline of the Legion had shown him there was no such thing as unbreakable. Even the greatest pride could be humbled, even the mightiest fortress could be breached, and even the staunchest faith could be shattered in the face of betrayal.

*How had he failed...?*

The attack of the Bloodborn had been defeated, broken and hurled back by the combined might of the Ultramarines and their mortal armies. The savage warriors of the Mechanicus had fallen upon their dark brothers, fighting with a ferocious hatred born of the knowledge that their foes had once been like them. Yet even as the battle turned in the favour of the Imperial forces, the Black Basilica had joined the fight, and its vast array of guns had wrought fearful carnage upon the defenders, bringing them to the verge of destruction.

But even that mighty weapon had been lost...

Pieces of the dark leviathan lay scattered around the cavern, its priceless debris left to rust in the moist atmosphere, for no adepts of the Dark Mechanicus remained alive to gather them. Bronn should have anticipated a stealthy insertion, after all the Raven Guard had always been the masters of the shadow strike and the infiltration of the most heavily defended citadels.

Bronn remembered fighting alongside Corax and his warriors many years ago, in battles that had been forgotten by that primarch's sons, but which were still fresh in his mind. For all that the Space Marines of this stagnant Imperium were pale shadows of the great Legions of old, the man who had led his team into the heart of the Black Basilica was a warrior worthy of the title. Professional admiration gave way to pain as he coughed a wad of blood onto his chest.

With the destruction of the Black Basilica, the fight had gone out of the Bloodborn, and Bronn cursed Honsou for allying what little strength remained to their fragment of the Legion to such dross. Dassadra had slaughtered scores as they fell back over the wall, bloodied and broken against the ceramite and blue lines of the cavern's defenders.

A gloomy status quo had fallen between the two armies as Bronn and Dassadra sought to re-establish control over the shattered mortals of the Bloodborn. Threats, promises of plunder and a number of strategic executions had brought order back to the host, and Bronn had drawn up plans for a second assault when yet another disaster had struck.

With the Bloodborn drawn up in readiness to assault the valley once again, word came of an attack from the rear. Sporadic explosions and gunfire drifted from the tunnel they had fought to clear for the Black Basilica, the rattle of small-arms fire and the heavier blasts of wide-bore guns belonging to battle tanks. It should have been impossible. Hadn't the Ultramarines been broken on the surface? But as more contact reports screamed over the vox, it became impossible to deny the reality of the catastrophe.

A ragtag host of scavenged armoured vehicles, ad-hoc battalions and Ultramarines surged from the tunnel mouth and fell upon the Bloodborn with the fury of berserkers. Bronn knew some form of communication must have passed between these Ultramarines and the defenders of the valley when an answering battle cry went up from the three fortresses.

Their gates had opened and thousands of blue-armoured soldiers had charged out with squads of Ultramarines at their head. Despite the best efforts of Bronn and Dassadra, the sight of two forces closing on them had shattered the last courage of the Bloodborn and they had scattered into disparate warbands, striking out for their own survival, little realising that by doing so they had doomed themselves.

Hammer and anvil, both forces of Ultramarines had smashed together, crushing the Bloodborn between them, and they had not been merciful. Yet for all that the battle was lost, the Iron Warriors were not about to lay down their weapons and go quietly into defeat. Knowing that Honsou had left them to die, Bronn had prepared for such a moment and waited until the time was right to vent his last breath of hatred.

The traitor Warsmith Dantioch had called it the final solution to any siege, and in that at least he had been right.

A vast array of explosives rigged along the length of the tunnel awaited his trigger signal, and as Bronn saw an Ultramarines sergeant coming for him with murder in his stride, he had known that time had come. With one last look at the fortifications he had fought and bled to build, Bronn mashed the firing trigger and the world ended in fire, falling rock and thunder. He expected to die in the collapse, but he had lived, though it was to be only a brief respite.

Bronn blinked away afterimages of crackling detonations, strobing flashes of secondary explosions and crackling ammo fires.

He knew he was dying, but to die for this?

To be nothing more than... what, a distraction for a mission that had clearly failed?

That was galling for a warrior of his heritage.

He felt the earth shake again, and his eyes flicked towards the roof of the cavern. Dust fell in a dry rain, and spalling flakes of glassy stone sounded like sand trickling through an hourglass as it slowly coated the battlefield. Though the cavern's structure was sound, Bronn wished for the cave to collapse, to bury this moment of infamy beneath millions of tonnes of rock and deny his foes any succour in triumph.

The ground shook again, but this was no aftershock of his final solution, this was a tremor of something moving beneath the earth. Bronn knew rock well enough to know the difference, and he pressed his palm to the ground, letting it speak to him as it had on countless occasions before. He felt the seismic communication, the echoes and the gnawing bite of melta-bladed cutters as they clove the rock like a pack of subterranean borer-ambulls.

Beyond the mangled remains of a trio of Basilisk artillery pieces, the earth heaved upwards, and a geyser of spraying stone and mud exploded into the air as something iron and yellow heaved its bulk into the cavern. Bronn instantly recognised the conical snout and flared rock scoops of a Hellbore drilling rig.

‘Careful, you idiot...’ he hissed. ‘The soil is always thinner nearer the surface.’

Whoever was driving the Hellbore was unskilled in the finer points of its operation, handling it like a runaway Land Raider instead of a precision tunnelling device. Sparks flew as its drill cogs tore through a wrecked chassis of a smouldering battle tank. Metal shavings flew like glittering decoy chaff ejected from the defence pod of a Thunderhawk.

The Hellbore vanished from sight as it lurched past its centre of gravity and crashed down onto its side. An explosion ripped up from the mangled tank as an ammo cache exploded. More than likely, the occupants of the Hellbore were now trapped within. If the Ultramarines didn't kill them, the lack of oxygen would eventually see them dead.

Whoever had brought the machine back to Four Valleys Gorge had returned to defeat and death, and Bronn dismissed the tunneller as he heard the voices of Ultramarines, curt orders barked in a battle cant that had not changed in ten thousand years.

Such a span of time was almost incomprehensible. To Bronn, those days of gods and heroes were a past he had lived in the span of a single lifetime, but these warriors had only half-remembered myths to tell them of such long ago days. They could not remember what was a recent memory for him...

*I was there when the walls of the Imperial Palace fell.*

Bronn turned his head, searching for a weapon to hold as he died. A bolter lay within easy reach, but beyond it he caught sight of *Earthbreaker*, the weapon that had cast unnumbered fortresses down and raised myriad others to the skies. His gauntlet closed on the T-shaped pommel, and he dragged it over the broken ground with his fingertips. The blade scraped over the black stone brought down from the cavern's ceiling, high-density igneous rock laid down in volcanic eruptions before men had set foot on this world.

'Fused metamorphic stone from close to the surface,' he said with a wheezing, frothed breath that told him his lungs had finally collapsed. With only his secondary organ dragging oxygen to his broken body, it was only a matter of time until hypoxia killed him.

'Aurelian's sons were thorough in their spite,' he noted, seeing fragments of irradiated flakes mixed in with the rock.

'Yet still they were defeated,' said a cultured, perfectly enunciated voice above him.

A foot stamped down on *Earthbreaker's* haft, snapping the weapon in two. Anger engulfed Bronn, and he rolled onto his back, ignoring the shooting spikes of searing pain that engulfed his chest, yet left his body below untouched. He looked up at a broad-shouldered warrior in the azure battle plate of the Ultramarines. A golden eagle glittered at his chest and star-bleached emerald trim lined the notched edges of his shoulder guards.

'Things might have been different had the Iron Warriors been with them,' hissed Bronn, clutching the broken handle of *Earthbreaker* to his chest. The warrior shook his head and removed his laurel-wreathed helm, revealing a face of classic patrician proportions, symmetrical and with high cheekbones, a strong chin and close-cropped blond hair that framed eyes of milky blue. Every inch an Ultramarine.

'You are defeated here,' said the warrior, sliding a fresh magazine into his pistol. 'I do not think the outcome then would have been much different had a wretch like you been there.'

'You are wrong, whelp, iron is forever,' said Bronn, letting his head loll to one side. 'From iron cometh strength. From strength cometh will. From will cometh faith. From faith cometh honour. From honour cometh iron.'

'What is that?' asked the warrior, his voice dripping with contempt. 'A prayer?'

'It is the Unbreakable Litany,' said Bronn, his strength fading. 'And may it

forever be so.'

Through the dancing flames of defeat, Bronn saw a darting figure slip through the wreckage of the Basilisks crushed by the Hellbore, a half-glimpsed shadow with a limb that threw the firelight queerly from its mercurial surface. Though it should have been impossible, Bronn thought he saw a pale blue glow of an augmented eye through the sheeting dust and ash.

*Your mission is complete, the eye seemed to say. But mine goes on...*

'Why did you come here?' demanded the Ultramarine. 'You must have known you could not defeat the true sons of Guilliman.'

'Why did we come here?' smiled Bronn, shaking his head as a weight lifted from his broken body. 'Better you don't know.'

He loosened his grip on the iron will that held his life anchored to his flesh, staring up at the Ultramarine warrior with a last breath of defiance.

'You think you have won a victory here?' he said.

'I know we have,' said the warrior. 'Your force is destroyed, and Calth is ours again. All across Ultramar, your master's armies are being pushed from our worlds. Yes, I would say this is a victory.'

'The years have not been kind to the Ultramarines,' said Bronn. 'Once they were the Battle Kings of Macragge, but you are just poor shadows of those giants.'

The warrior levelled his pistol at Bronn.

'I should leave you to suffer your pain, but it insults me to let you sully this world with your life a moment longer.'

'Who are you?' asked Bronn. 'Tell me the name of the man who is going to kill me.'

The warrior considered his request for a moment before nodding.

'I am Learchus Abantes, sergeant of the Ultramarines Fourth Company.'

Bronn smiled. 'The Fourth, yes. Of course it would be one of you.'

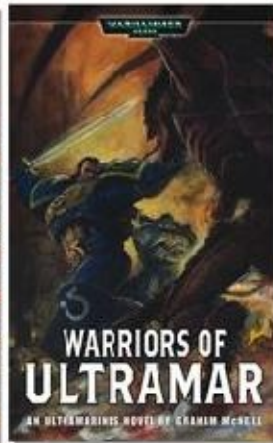
Learchus pulled the trigger, and Bronn died knowing yet more blood would be spilled before the Iron Warriors were done with Calth.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

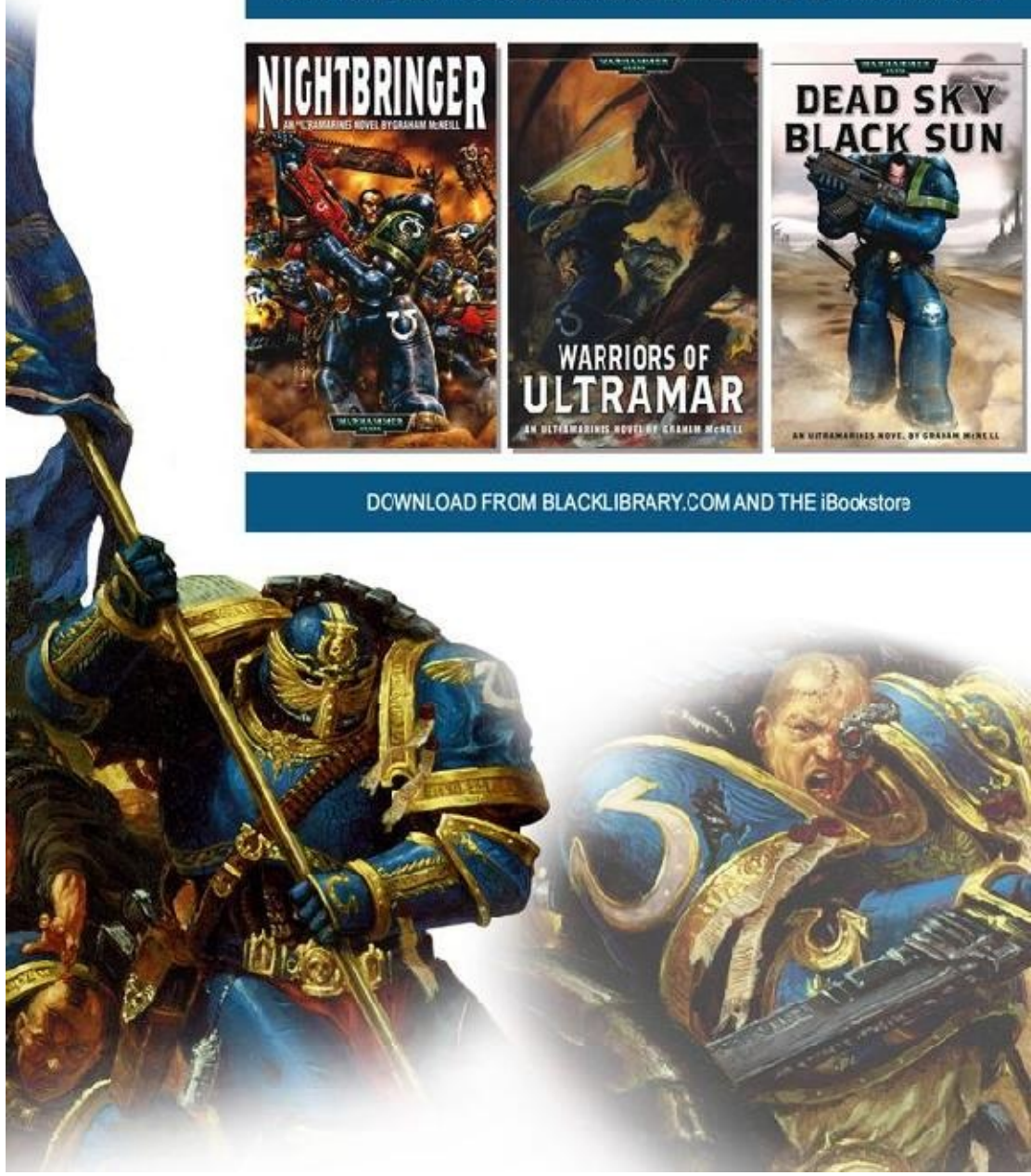
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Join the ranks of the 4th Company at [www.graham-mcneill.com](http://www.graham-mcneill.com)

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