



STORM OF IRON

A WARHAMMER 40,000 NOVEL BY
GRAHAM McNEILL

STUTTERING VOLLEYS of las-fire blasted from the trench, but it was too little, too late as Honsou dropped into the prepared position. The Traitor Marine worked his way down the trench, hacking a bloody path through the defenders who fell back in horror from his deadly blade. As Honsou killed the Guardsmen, he revelled in his superiority, and could well understand the attraction of Khorne's path. The Iron Warriors swept over the trench killing everything in it with the fury of those who had fought their way through hell and lived to tell the tale.

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NEARLY A THOUSAND men died in the first seconds of the Iron Warriors' initial bombardment of Jericho Falls spaceport. The battle barge *Stonebreaker* fired three salvos of magma bombs into the desolate rocky slopes surrounding the spaceport, blasting vast chunks of rock hundreds of metres into the air and flattening almost all the torpedo silos in the mountains with unerring accuracy.

Alarm sirens screamed and the spaceport's weapon batteries rumbled into firing positions as their gunners desperately sought to acquire targets before being annihilated. A few hastily blessed torpedoes roared upwards through the orange sky on pillars of fiery smoke and powerful beams of laser energy stabbed through the perpetually cloudless heavens.

More bombs fell, this time within the perimeter of Jericho Falls, demolishing buildings, gouging great craters and hurling enormous clouds of umber ash into the atmosphere. Flames from burning structures lit the smoke from within and bodies lay aflame in the wreckage of the shattered spaceport. Smashed aircraft littered the ground and more exploded as the heat from the fires cooked off their weapons and fuel tanks.

Bombs slammed into the rockcrete, scything lethal fragments everywhere. Others smashed into the runways, cratering them and melting the honeycombed adamantium with the heat of a star.

The Marauders and Lightnings out in the open took the worst of the barrage, pulverised by the force of the explosions.

The noise and confusion were unbelievable; the sky was red with flames and black with smoke. Heavy las-fire blasted upwards.

A number of shells impacted on the main hangar's roof. Its armoured structure had absorbed the damage so far, though vast cracks now zigzagged across the reinforced walls and roof.

The main runway was engulfed in flames, burning pools of jet fuel spewing thick black smoke that turned day into night.

Hell had come to Hydra Cordatus.

THE FIRST WAVE of drop-pods fired from the *Stonebreaker* landed in clouds of fire and smoke as their boosters slowed them after their screaming journey through the atmosphere. As each pod hit the ground, the release bolt on its base slammed home and the sides unfolded to reveal their interiors.

Each pod in this wave was Deathwind class, equipped with an auto-firing heavy gun platform. As they opened, the weapons began to pour their lethal fire in a spinning, circular arc. Fresh explosions erupted across the ready line as the bolts found their marks in the exposed attack craft and pilots. The volleys from the battle barge in orbit ceased as more streaking lines of fire followed the first wave. Gun turrets mounted on armoured bunkers engaged the weapon pods, methodically targeting them one at a time and destroying them with well-aimed gunfire. But the Deathwinds had done their job, keeping the gunners occupied as the second wave of drop-pods slashed downwards, unmolested, through the atmosphere towards the base.

KROEGER GRIPPED HIS chainsword tight and repeated the Iron Warriors' Litany of Hate for the ninth time since his Dreadclaw drop-pod had fired from the belly of the *Stonebreaker*. The pod shook with the fury of its fiery journey through the atmosphere and, as their passage became smoother, he knew that the curses and offerings to the Powers of Chaos had appeased their monstrous hunger. He grinned beneath his helmet as he watched the bone-rimmed altimeter unravel, counting the seconds to their landing.

They would now be within the lethal range of the spaceport's guns, but if the half-breed, Honsou, had successfully completed his mission, then there should be little or no incoming fire to meet them. His lip curled in contempt as he thought of that mongrel leading one of the Warsmith's grand companies. It was unseemly for a half-breed to attain such responsibility, and Kroeger despised Honsou with every fibre of his being.

He cast his gaze over the armoured warriors who sat around the steel-panelled walls of the drop-pod's interior. Their dented power armour was the colour of dark iron, heavy and baroque, none less than ten thousand years old. Each man's weapon had been anointed with the blood of a score of captives, and the stench of death filled the pod's interior. The men strained at the harnesses that held them in place, eyes fixed on the iris hatch on the pod's floor, every thought slaved to the slaughter of their foes.

Kroeger had picked these killers personally; they were the most blood-soaked berserkers of his grand company of the Iron Warriors, those who had trodden the path of Khorne for longer than most. The Blood God's hunger for death and skulls had become the driving imperative for these warriors, and it was doubtful that they would ever break from the cycle of murder and killing that had swallowed them. Kroeger himself had revelled many times in the fierce joy of slaughter that so pleased Khorne, but had not yet fully surrendered to the frenzy of the Blood God.

Once a warrior lost himself in that red mist, he was unlikely to survive and Kroeger had agendas yet to follow, paths yet to tread. For Khorne was no sanguineous epicure. He cared not from whence the blood came and as the worshippers of the Blood God often discovered, their own vital fluid was as welcome as that of the enemy's.

The drop-pod's retros fired, filling the cramped vessel with a howling shriek like a banshee's wail. Kroeger took the hateful screaming as a good omen.

He raised his sword in the salute of the warrior and roared, 'Let blood be your watchword, death your companion and hate your strength.'

Barely a handful of the warriors acknowledged him, most too immersed in thoughts of the blood they would shed to even register that he had spoken. It was immaterial; the hated Imperial followers of the corpse-god would die screaming as he ripped their souls from their torn flesh. His blood sang at the prospect of killing yet more of their ancient foes and he prayed to the Majesty of the Warp that the honour of the first kill would be his.

He felt the bone-jarring impact of the Dreadclaw drop-pod through the thick ceramite plates of his power armour as it

slammed into the ground. Scarcely had the bottom hatch irised open than he dropped through it, bending his knees and rolling aside as the next warrior followed him down. Thick, grey smoke from the retros obscured his vision, and the flames burning across the spaceport rendered the heat augurs in his helmet useless.

He drew his pistol, offering his thanks to the power of Chaos for giving him such a chance to bring death to his enemies.

ADEPT CYCERIN WAS close to panic. He had had no response to his pleas for aid from the citadel, though they must surely be aware of their plight. The thought that there were enemies with the power to circumvent their surveyors and approach their fastness, unseen and unknown, had all but unmanned him. He cursed the weak, organic part of him that felt such bowel-loosening terror and wished again for the emotional detachment of his superiors.

The data-slate on the wall indicated a breach in the outer wall and garbled contact reports howling across the vox circuits told of giants in armour of burnished iron slaughtering all those who stood before them. He could not co-ordinate a defence without better reports and the chaos of battle was...

Chaos.

The very word sent a hot jolt of fear down Cycerin's spine and suddenly he knew how their enemies had managed to elude their auguries. Accursed, warp-spawned sorcery must have confounded the spirits of the machines and rendered them blind to the monstrous evil that approached Hydra Cordatus. As soon as this first thought had struck, a second followed.

There could only be one reason the followers of the Ruinous Powers would come to this place and the thought made him shake with fear. Confused icons flashed on the holomap of the base, representing friendly forces deploying from barracks and attempting to engage the invaders. Cycerin could see that it would not be enough; there had simply been too much devastation in the opening moments of the attack.

But he consoled himself that he and his staff were safe enough in the Hope. Protected high within its armoured structure, there was no way an enemy could penetrate its security. No way at all.

* * *

HONSOU HACKED HIS sword through a weeping soldier's torso, separating his upper and lower halves with a single blow. Their attack through the breach in the wall had caught the mustering Imperial soldiers completely by surprise. Most were already dead, crushed by masonry blasted from the wall by his heavy weapon teams.

An enemy officer attempted to rally his men from the hatch of his command Chimera, screaming at them to stand firm. Honsou shot him in the face and vaulted a rebar-laced chunk of rockcrete, swinging his mighty sword amongst the horrified soldiers. Gunfire raked the ground beside him, explosions of ash kicked up in red spurts by the Chimera's hull-mounted heavy bolter. Honsou rolled aside as the turret began traversing in his direction.

'Take that vehicle out!' he yelled.

Positioned on the walls, two iron giants carrying long barrelled cannons on their shoulders swung their heavy weapons to bear. Twin streaks of incandescent energy blasted into the vehicle. Seconds later, it vanished in an orange fireball, raining yet more debris down upon the battlefield. Honsou picked himself up as another Chimera attempted to back away from the breach, firing its weapons as it retreated. His gunners on the wall methodically swept their weapons around and destroyed it with contemptuous ease.

The base was in flames, but Honsou's practiced eye could see that the vital runways and landing platforms had escaped most of the violence of the bombardment. As his men gathered at the foot of the wall, he aligned himself with the map projected on the inside face of his visor. Through the smoke and billowing flames, he could see the faint outline of a tall tower with a flattened circular top. This must be the control tower and it was his next target. Wreckage and bodies littered the battlefield: drop-pods, aircraft and burning vehicles, their crews either dead or battling for their lives.

The sky was streaked with lines of fire as more Iron Warriors descended to the planet. His fellow company commanders, Kroeger and Forrix, would even now be bringing death to this world. He could not be seen to be doing less in the eyes of the Warsmith.

'We have them now, brothers, and there is death yet to be done. Follow me and I will give you victory!'

Honsou raised his sword and set off at a sprint towards the control tower, knowing that its capture would earn him great reward. He wove a zigzag course towards the tower, pools of burning fuel and wrecked machines forcing him into frustrating detours. After three months of creeping through the mountains, it was a cathartic release of his fury to be amidst such brutality. The air was thick with death, and though he was no sorcerer, even he could feel the actinic tang of slaughter that they had brought to Hydra Cordatus.

Here and there, they met pockets of resistance, but the sight of his thirty blood-soaked warriors charging towards them broke the courage of all but the most stalwart. Honsou's blade was dripping with gore as he and his men finally reached the tower.

Grudgingly he was forced to admit that its construction and defences were formidable. Soldiers in prepared positions surrounded it in well-constructed, angled redoubts, laying down a hail of bright las-bolts. Behind four linked and high-walled berms, Honsou could see the aerals of tanks, but what pattern they were he could not yet tell. Armoured bunkers at each of the compass points sprayed the area in front of the tower with deadly bullets, turning the open ground into a killing zone.

Honsou and his men moved into concealed positions behind the twisted wreckage of a Marauder bomber, as the thunderous crack of a tank's main gun activated the dampers on his armour's auto-senses. Clouds of dust and rubble rained down and Honsou could hear the cries of those wounded by the blast. They had to move fast or the citadel's defenders would be able to counterattack before the Iron Warriors were able to consolidate their position here.

He peered through a ragged hole torn in the side of the aircraft, wrenching the pilot's bloody corpse out of the way and pondered the situation. The corner bunkers were the key: take them and they could roll up the Imperial line with ease. The gunfire sawing from the bunkers was murderous; anyone who attempted to charge through it would pay the price for such stupidity. He grinned wryly as he saw several of Kroeger's men, berserkers by the look of them, lying torn open, their blood leeching into the dusty ground. He wondered if perhaps Kroeger himself might be numbered amongst the dead, but knew that, despite his recklessness, Kroeger was no fool and would not risk his own neck if he did not have to.

Even as he formed the thought, he caught sight of his nemesis some two hundred metres away, firing his pistol ineffectually at the Imperial defenders. Kroeger's attack on the tower had failed and Honsou knew that this was his chance.

He crawled along to his heavy weapon gunners and hammered his fist on the shoulder guards of the warriors with the lascannons, slung across their shoulders as easily as a human soldier might carry a walking cane.

The gunners turned, acknowledging their leader with curt nods.

Another rain of debris fell around them as a tank shell exploded nearby. Honsou pointed towards the tower, shouting, 'When I give the order, aim for the salient angle of the near bunker, and keep firing until you break it open.'

The gunners nodded and Honsou moved further down the line. He knew he was condemning those men to death, but didn't care. Another of his heavy gunners carried a hissing weapon with a wide, flaring barrel etched with elaborate trceries of flame. The gunner's armour was dented and scorched in places, but the weapon was pristine, as though freshly pressed from a weapon forge.

'When the lascannons blow open the bunker, I want you to put enough melta fire into that bunker to make the rock run like liquid.'

Without waiting for a response, Honsou rolled over towards the lascannons and jabbed his fist towards the bunker, voicing the order to stand to throughout his squads. He scrambled to the edge of the wrecked Marauder, watching as the two warriors carrying the lascannons moved into firing positions and aimed their weapons. Bolt after bolt of powerful las-blasts slammed into the protruding salient angle of the bunker, blasting away huge chunks of armaplas and rockcrete. Realising the danger, Imperial gunners switched their fire to the two heavy gunners, tearing up the ground in a storm of las-blasts and bolter fire.

The two Iron Warriors paid no attention to the incoming fire, sending shot after shot of unimaginably powerful energy into their target. Honsou watched as the angled corner of the bunker cracked wide open, the rockcrete burning orange in the heat. For a moment it appeared that the gunners might survive the hail of shots directed at them.

But the thunder of Imperial battle cannons settled the matter, obliterating both gunners in an explosive storm of ordnance. Before the echoes had died, the Iron Warrior with the multi-melta rose from his concealment and charged forwards to fire. The gun's discharge built to a deafening screech before erupting from the barrels in a searing hiss. The warrior's aim was true and the air within the bunker ignited with atomic fury, spurts of vaporised flesh and superheated oxygen blasting from the weapon slits.

A huge hole had been blown in the tower's line of defence. Honsou rose up from his cover and screamed, 'Death to the False Emperor!'

He leapt over the Marauder's fuselage and sprinted towards the molten hell of the wrecked bunker, its walls now flowing like wax across the ground. His men followed him unquestioningly. To his left, he could see Kroeger gathering his men for the charge, obviously realising that Honsou would beat him to the tower.

Honsou leapt onto the remains of the bunker, his iron-shod boot sinking into the molten rock. The heat scorched his leg armour, but it held firm as he pushed off and dropped into the heart of the defence.

He caught a glimpse of the carnage his men had inflicted and rejoiced to see that his labours had borne such bloody fruit. Scorched and blackened limbs lay strewn about, all that remained of those stationed too close to the bunker; the backwash of the melta impact had burnt flesh and bone to cinders in an instant. An open mouthed head lay perched bizarrely atop a pile of rubble as if placed there by some macabre prankster. Honsou punched it aside as he passed.

Imperial soldiers were frantically reorganising their battle line as the Iron Warriors poured in through the gap in their defences. Honsou could see a tank – a Leman Russ Demolisher – reversing from its revetment and bringing its ponderous turret to bear on the attackers. Honsou dropped as the sponson-mounted weapons sprayed shells overhead, the ricochets tearing up the blasted rubble around him. Another white-hot blast of melta fire flashed and the Demolisher's turret was engulfed in the inferno of the impact. Steam and smoke obscured the tank for brief seconds, but, unbelievably, it continued onwards through the boiling cloud.

Time slowed as Honsou watched the barrel of its main gun depress and knew that any second it would blast him to atoms. Then, with a terrific explosion, the turret lifted clean off, the tank detonating spectacularly from within as the shell exploded inside the main gun. Deadly shrapnel whickered through the Imperial ranks, scything men down by the dozen and ripping them to bloody rags. Honsou roared in release as he realised the heat of the melta blast must have warped the barrel enough to cause the weapon to misfire and the shell to detonate prematurely.

He rose to one knee and opened up with his bolt pistol, raking his fire over those fortunate enough to survive the destruction of the Demolisher, killing everything he saw in his battle rage.

Kroeger's blood-maddened berserkers clambered across the shattered walls of the redoubt, ignoring wounds that would have felled a normal human a dozen times over. Not for them the elegance of precisely orchestrated attacks using sound principles of military engineering. Bodies were hurled aside, ripped apart with their bare hands when there was no weapon to wield.

Honsou spotted Kroeger amongst his men, wading through a press of bodies, hacking left and right with his chainsword. He raised his own sword in acknowledgement towards his fellow commander, but Kroeger ignored him, as Honsou knew he would. He smiled beneath his helm and sprinted through the blazing wreck of the Demolisher towards the tower.

ADEPT CYCERIN WATCHED the battle raging below with analytical detachment. His moment of panic had passed. Now, secure within the Hope, he watched the dance of attackers and defenders as coloured icons moving across a topographical representation of the base. Red icons surrounded the tower, periodically closing in, but each time fading as the fire of the defenders below saw them off.

He felt mildly ashamed at the panic he had displayed earlier and resolved again to request ascension to the next level of symbiosis with the holy machine. He would seek permission once these impudent creatures had been defeated. Despite his failures in the past, surely Arch Magos Amaethon would not deny him again after his masterful defence of Jericho Falls? He smiled to himself as he watched yet more red icons fade from the slate.

The smile fell from his face as the icon representing the southern bunker faded from a steady blue to an ominous black.

'Operator Three, what's happened?' he asked.

'It's gone, destroyed,' replied Koval Peronus. 'One second it was there, now it's not!'

Cycerin watched, horrified as the red icons suddenly spilled over the location that had, only moments before, been one of the lynchpins of his defence. As the defences were breached, the entire line fell apart with horrifying rapidity. The blue icons vanished as they were systematically eliminated. Cycerin could not even begin to imagine the carnage occurring less than twenty metres from where he stood.

Eerie orange glows from the fires flickered through the armoured glass windows, but no sound penetrated the control room, making it appear remote and detached. Just below him, countless lives had been lost and there would be many more before this day's slaughter was over.

He consoled himself with the knowledge that the tower itself was totally secure and that there was nothing more he could have done to prevent this disaster.

A deathly hush fell upon the operators and staff within the tower as a massive thudding boom suddenly echoed up from the main entrance.

'What in the name of the Machine was that?' Cycerin whispered in terror.

FORRIX WATCHED THE adamantium door shudder under the impact of the Dreadnought's siege hammer, the metres-thick door buckling under the repeated blows. It was only a matter of moments until the door would be ripped from its frame by the screaming war machine. Thick chains, looped through bolted rings, ran from its legs and shoulder mounts, where two dozen of the strongest Iron Warriors stood ready to restrain the machine once it had broken down the door to the control tower.

He could well imagine the torment the damned soul bound within the armoured sarcophagus must be undergoing. To be cut off from the sensation of bloodletting, never to feel the beat of blood in your veins at the moment of the kill. To be denied the thrill of bare flesh against flesh as you took another being's life. Such a fate was indeed misery and suffering. It was small

wonder that, once confined to the shell of a Dreadnought, the scraps of flesh that awoke to find themselves confined within the cold, metal walls of such an eternal prison could not escape the clutches of madness.

At least for those lunatic war machines, madness was some sort of release. For killing held no joy for Forrix any longer. Ten thousand years of butchery and murder had allowed him to explore the deepest, most wretched corners of the human capacity for cruelty and death. He had shot, cut, tortured, strangled, snapped, choked, bludgeoned and dismembered uncounted souls in his long life, yet he could remember none of them. Each blended into a seamless segue of banal horror that had long since dulled his senses and vicarious enjoyment of such slaughter.

Gunfire sounded sporadically, the last pockets of resistance being mopped up even now. The half-breed's warriors were clearing out the Imperial soldiers from the ruins of their barrack complex, and despite Forrix's contempt for Honsou's flawed heritage, he had to admit that his rival was a competent commander. Furthermore, he still believed in the dream of Horus, and the unification of Humanity under the terrible Powers of Chaos.

Forrix watched Kroeger pace like a caged animal, straining to be let loose within the confines of the tower. Kroeger's impatience had long ceased to anger Forrix; now it simply irritated him. The man was a proficient killer, and he had fought the Warsmith's enemies for ten thousand years, admittedly, but he lacked the perspective that such an eternity of war and despair should bring. Unlike Honsou, Kroeger had long since cast off any notions of the good of humanity. He fought for greed, for slaughter and the chance to exact a measure of revenge upon those who had bested them so long ago.

As for himself? Forrix no longer knew what he fought for, only that there was nothing else he could do. He had been damned the instant he had spat upon his oaths of loyalty to the Emperor. Now he could walk no other path.

His own warriors waited behind him, drawn up in serried ranks, ready to begin the massive logistical operation of landing tens of thousands of slaves, workers, soldiers and war machines from orbit. In the centuries since the betrayal on Terra, Forrix had organised hundreds of such operations and could land ten

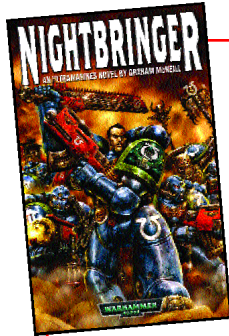
thousand men and have them ready to march off in battle order in under five hours.

Until they landed the Titans, the sheer mass of the tower was proof against their available weapons, and the Warsmith himself had impressed upon Forrix the need for swiftness in this campaign. He could not risk bringing the massive bulk carriers, essentially vast barrack ships, down into low orbit until the control tower was theirs. It was entirely likely that there were torpedo silos or orbital batteries concealed within the mountains just waiting for the chance to down such valuable targets.

Once Kroeger had taken the tower he would begin the landings.

And then this world would burn.

This epic tale of war and betrayal
continues in STORM OF IRON



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