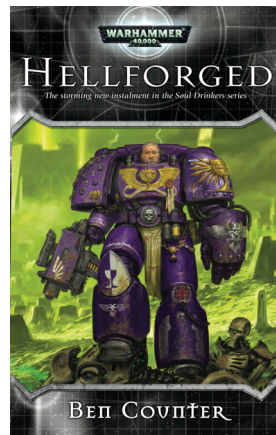


HELLFORGED

A Soul Drinkers Novel

By Ben Counter

The Space Marines are humanity's champions, their loyalty to the Emperor beyond question. When a Chapter falls from grace, the Imperium will stop at nothing to hunt them down and exterminate them. The disgraced Soul Drinkers Chapter attempts to elude their pursuers in a desolate area of space, but Sarpedon and his battle-brothers soon find themselves fighting for their lives against a deadly new enemy – the necrons!



About the Author

Freelance writer Ben Counter is one of Black Library's most popular SF authors. An Ancient History graduate and avid miniature painter, he lives near Portsmouth, England.

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The Soul Drinkers and the Adeptus Mechanicus had history.

The Adeptus Mechanicus had sought to recover the pre-Imperial artefact known as the Soulspear, so it could be properly studied. The Soul Drinkers, on the other hand, had wanted it returned to them as it was a relic of their Chapter, and, in particular, of Rogal Dorn, the Chapter's primarch, who had given it to the fledgling Soul Drinkers upon their foundation after the Horus Heresy. The rift thus created had been the first in a series of betrayals that had led the Soul Drinkers to break with Imperial authority, become excommunicated from the human race, and ply a new future as a renegade Space Marine Chapter.

The Inquisition, taking responsibility for hunting down the Soul Drinkers, had ordered the Chapter's name deleted from all Imperial records, so that the danger inherent in the very idea of a renegade Chapter would not imperil the minds of the galaxy's citizens.

The Adeptus Mechanicus did not always follow the dictates of the Inquisition to the letter.

'You are certain of this?' asked Archmagos Voar, looking down at the data-slate in his hand. He was seated

on the command throne at the top of the pyramid in the centre of the bridge, surrounded by tactical printouts brought to him by the ordnance and sensorium crew. The tech-priest that had handed him the data-slate was from the communications crew, who occupied a section of the library dominated by a monstrous switchboard with thousands of sockets and cables.

‘Every piece of data we have is consistent with this conclusion,’ said the tech-priest.

‘I see.’ Voar put down the data-slate and picked up a book fetched by a menial from the rare and sacred books section. It was one of the few copies in existence, since it had been ordered burned by Inquisitorial deletion squads in the great libraries of the Imperium. No doubt not one copy remained in the archives of the Inquisition. A golden chalice was embossed on its cover. It was a military history of the Soul Drinkers Space Marine Chapter. ‘You were right to bring this to my attention. Go about the Ommissiah’s work, brother of Mars.’

The tech-priest bowed and turned away.

‘One moment,’ said Voar. The tech-priest halted. ‘Summon an astropath.’

The tech-priest hurried down to the pyramid to attend to his orders.

The news he had brought was unexpected, and Voar allowed himself the luxury of a few moments’ thought. The Adeptus Mechanicus had a long memory; a grudge lasted a lot longer in a bank of data-medium than it did in a human mind. That memory was not easily erased. The Mechanicus knew the name of the Soul Drinkers and of the rebel who led them, Commander

Sarpedon. Sarpedon had killed Mechanicus tech-priests in taking possession of the Soulspear, and had resisted the best efforts of the Inquisition to bring him and his Chapter to justice. The Adeptus Mechanicus, in defiance of the deletion order, had collected all the information they could find on the Soul Drinkers. One such piece of information suggested that the Soul Drinkers were making use of a space hulk named the *Brokenback*, the description of which had set off an alert in the archive of the *Antithesis*.

‘This is Voar,’ he voxed to the magi commanding his fleet. ‘Target identified. No prisoners.’

The guns of the *Brokenback* roared, and the seeker shells, relics of an earlier age of technology, erupted from the enormous broadside guns, spiralling on columns of fire through the void. Armed with their own cogitators they sought out targets of opportunity, and drove into the cloud of smaller ships in the vanguard of the Mechanicus fleet. Blossoms of atomic fire erupted and imploded darkly in the vacuum, leaving silvery sprays of wreckage.

On the gun deck of the *Intolerant*, Sarpedon watched them on a grainy pict screen hooked up to the gun’s own simple sensors. At this distance, the enemy cruisers were visible as silver darts illuminated by light reflected off the surrounding nebulae, and the smaller craft as sprinkled points of light. Many of them were gone in those first few moments, homed in on by the seeker shells, and blasted into burning dust.

From Sarpedon's position, perched up on the housing of the gun, he could see right down the gun deck. Twenty guns, most of them automated and the rest operated by the Soul Drinkers, roared in unison. Loading cranes swung into action, and the Soul Drinkers began to reload their guns, their forms in purple power armour scrambling over the gun housings to haul the breech doors open and drag more shells into position. Sarpedon made ready to drop to the deck and lend his enormous strength to the task, when he caught movement on the pict screen: a glittering spray of ships approaching fast, wheeling in formation to approach.

'It's a bombing run!' shouted Sarpedon. 'Get to cover!'

Guided missiles sliced down from the weapon mounts of the approaching bombers. Automated turrets, studding the *Brokenback's* hull, opened up as they approached, snaring them in a lattice of laser fire. Many were destroyed, sliced in two by the lines of white-hot light, but not before they had released their payloads. Most Imperial Navy craft would have needed to get much closer to strike, but the targeting systems of the Adeptus Mechanicus were superior, and their ordnance streaked into the gun deck of the *Intolerant*.

Sarpedon leapt off the gun mounting. He braced his legs and hit the far wall, his talons finding purchase on the metal. He clung to the wall as the first missile hit home, erupting in white flame at the far end of the gun deck, and shattering the massive structure of a broadside gun. The shock wave hit him, and he clung on as Soul Drinkers were thrown off their feet below him.

The wave of flame was sucked away as the atmosphere shrieked out through the hull breach. Sarpedon's power armour was airtight and could use its own air supply in a vacuum. He still had to hold on, though, as the air ripped past him. Some of the Soul Drinkers below were dragged along by the force of it, grabbing on to loading machinery or grilles in the floor to keep from being pulled through the breach. Silence hammered down as the air was depleted, replaced with the vibrations of the guns, and the space hulk's engines through the metal wall transmitted up Sarpedon's talons.

Sarpedon dropped to the floor and ran for the relative safety of the *Intolerant's* internal decks. Another missile hit closer, blowing another gun off its mountings and sending the steel tower of the gun barrel somersaulting through the wall. The sounds of destruction boomed through the floor, surreally distant in the vacuum.

The Imperial ship's alarm systems, rigged back to working order by Lygris, were blaring. Sarpedon was in the maintenance decks for the ammunition systems, narrow walkways and corridors slung across steel chasms between the shell hoppers. The loading systems' massive conveyor belts and cranes were clanking along overhead and below, feeding ammunition to the guns that still worked.

'Salk!' shouted Sarpedon into the vox. 'Report! Any casualties?'

'Brother Thoss is down,' replied Sergeant Salk. 'Looks like one of Iktinos's men is dead too.' Over Salk's vox Sarpedon could hear the booming reports of

more impacts, scattered with the vibrations from the *Brokenback*'s guns.

'Where are you?'

'Still on the deck. We're regrouping and sounding off.'

'Get out of there.'

'Already on it. We're heading for the cargo decks. We'll put a few hull layers between us and the breach. Salk out.'

Sarpedon switched to Lygris's vox-channel.

'The *Intolerant*'s been hit,' he said.

'I'm tracking the incoming bombers now,' said Lygris. Sarpedon could hear the whirr of cogitators behind his voice. 'They're all over us.'

'Can we take them?'

'Of course. But they're not the danger. They're just spoiling our aim so the cruisers can hit us.'

'How much damage can they do?'

'Ordinarily, a cruiser wouldn't put much of a dent in a hulk this size. But the *Mechanicus* has plenty of tricks that could hurt.'

Sarpedon knew there were two choices: stand and fight, or flee. The *Mechanicus* clearly thought they had enough firepower to hurt the *Brokenback*. And the Soul Drinkers would gain nothing from fighting a battle here.

'How long until the warp drives are ready?' asked Sarpedon.

'Another ten minutes.'

'Then get us out of here as soon as you can. The *Intolerant* is being abandoned.'

‘Yes, commander. I suggest you and Salk’s men go on to damage control. The *Mechanicus* will get a few free swings at us before we’re gone.’

‘On my way.’

The *Intolerant* shook as more ordnance hit home. Smaller impacts, like sparks crackling against the hull, were the remains of fighters and bombers scattering against the *Brokenback* after the turrets had done their work.

□□*

The *Constant* drifted up out of formation into a high firing angle. The space hulk’s guns, formidable as they were, had been too busy fending off the wasp-like attacks of the Fleet Minor to pay the cruiser any mind until it was too late.

Magos Hephsebah aimed the nova cannon. She had designed it and overseen its fitting to the chassis of the *Constant*, turning it from a vessel of the line into a ship-killer. The barrel was so large it gave the cruiser a lopsided look as if it should topple off balance and tumble through space helplessly, but the cruiser’s thrusters kept its enormous mass still as Hephsebah lined up her shot.

No single kill shot could be taken against a space hulk. It was a welded mass of dozens of ships, and any one of them might house the bridge, or the ordnance hangars, or the reactors. Hephsebah’s duty was simply to do as much damage as possible.

A burning mass on the side of the space hulk that had once been an Imperial ship was ruined and ablaze. There was little point hitting it again. The swollen

rearward quarters of the ship were composed of enormous container ships and beetle-like carapaces of massive alien hulks, which looked like they contained little more than empty space and debris. Hesebah aimed towards the front of the ship, some way down below the reinforced armour of an ancient warship and a forbidding tangle of silvery alien craft. The ships there were many and densely packed, with more chance of important systems surviving.

Hesebah ordered the firing chamber menials to drag the two enormous hemispheres of radioactive metal together. Hundreds of men hauled on chains, their muscles burning under their skin in the heat of the firing chamber, their taskmaster barking rhythmic orders to keep the hemispheres swinging. The hemispheres clashed, rang like a great deep bell, and released a massive wave of power funnelled by electromagnetic fields into the accelerator formed by the cannon's barrel. The force of it hit the enormous nova projectile, accelerating it down the barrel at impossible speeds.

The nova cannon fired, and, for a fraction of a second, the *Constant* and the hulk were connected by a bridge of burning light.

Sarpedon arrived at the reactor array of the *Blessed Obedience*, the enormous industrial ship containing many of the plasma reactors that Lygris had got back on-line to make the space hulk warp-capable. The reactor chamber was enormous, close to a kilometre long, criss-crossed with catwalks that gave access to the titanic cylindrical forms of the reactors. The *Blessed*

Obedience had carried a dozen such reactors in some previous life as a space-faring refinery, each one powerful enough to fuel a spaceship for decades. Every one of the cylinders contained a vessel full of superheated plasma, locked in a constant reaction that pumped power into the hulk's warp arrays. They were crowned with spider-like arrays of steel struts, supporting the cables and pipes that provided the reactors with fuel and coolant, and drew off their massive outputs of power.

Sarpedon hurried along a gantry between reactors one and two. Chaplain Iktinos was on a command platform just ahead, along with several of his flock.

'Commander Sarpedon,' voxed Iktinos as he saw Sarpedon approaching. 'I hear on the vox-net that our brothers have fallen.'

'Thoss of Squad Salk, and Renigel of your flock,' said Sarpedon. 'He died when the *Intolerant* was hit. The enemy is going to throw everything he has at us. I am afraid that prayers will have to wait.'

'So it shall be,' said Iktinos.

Sarpedon switched his vox-net to the bridge channel. 'Lygris, I'm at the reactors. It looks like they're holding up well.'

'Stay there,' replied Lygris from the bridge. 'If we lose the *Obedience* then we're done—'

A sound like the death of a world hammered across the reactor chamber. One wall blew in, hurling a hurricane of shredded metal. The nova projectile detonated, and a great gale of fire and shrapnel ripped

across the Obedience, sending white-hot shards of shrapnel arrowing everywhere.

The shock wave threw Sarpedon off the gantry, slamming him into the wall. His head swam with the force of it. If he hadn't been wearing his helmet he would have been knocked out. Enough of him remained unshaken to remind him that if he fell, he would probably die. Talons lashed out in a reflex, and dug into the wall of the reactor chamber, halting him as he fell.

The reverberations of the explosion bellowed around the chamber. One wall had been completely demolished, beyond it only a glowing labyrinth of torn bulkheads and decking. A gale of fire howled into the maw of the wound as the air was sucked out through the hull breach.

The explosion had sent shards of shrapnel spearing through the vessels of reactors eleven and nine. Reactor eleven collapsed, its upper half too heavy for the shredded foundations. Deep splits opened up as the reactor's crown fell back into the lake of plasma inside, and raw, white burning plasma looped out in great arcs like solar flares, the massive release of pressure sending it lashing in destructive tongues through the roof of the reactor chamber. Gobbets of it bored through walkways and command platforms. A great torrent burst from the lower half of the reactor and flowed in a glowing flood through the tangle of conduits and cabling that obscured the chamber floor.

Sarpedon was aware of another shape falling towards him: a Space Marine. He stuck out an arm and grabbed the falling Soul Drinker by his shoulder pad.

The weight almost pulled Sarpedon off the wall, but he held on. He had caught one of Iktinos's flock, the purple paint on his armour bubbling with the heat.

Sarpedon climbed until he was level with the stub of a walkway. Most of it had been ripped away and thrown into the chamber's depths, but enough of it remained to hold the weight of a Space Marine. It joined the wall at a maintenance entrance. Sarpedon hauled the Soul Drinker onto the walkway, and was relieved to see that he was still alive.

Sarpedon looked across the chamber, trying to see more survivors. He spotted a couple of Iktinos's flock clinging to a precarious length of walkway, making their way towards a command post that had survived mostly intact. From there, they could make it up a ladder into the access tunnels above the chamber. Iktinos himself had been thrown onto the top of reactor three, and was making his way towards the crown of pipes and cables connecting it to the ceiling.

'Lygris!' yelled Sarpedon into the vox. The last of the chamber's air was shrieking and superheated, a terrible sound like a gale of fire. 'Lygris, what in the hells was that?'

Lygris's voice barely swam through the static. 'Direct hit! Commander, give me a damage report!'

'Reactors eleven and nine are breached,' replied Sarpedon. 'Eleven's venting plasma. Nine's about to go.'

'Evacuate the area,' replied Lygris.

The last words had barely reached Sarpedon's ears when reactor nine exploded, the pressure inside too much for its failing structure. A pure white starburst of

plasma erupted, like a caged supernova, and the structures surrounding reactor nine were obliterated. Bolts of plasma streaked into the nearby reactors, shearing more maintenance walkways from their mountings. The sound, just a vibration transmitted through the wall to which Sarpedon clung, was like the roar of an escaping giant.

The glare died down. Iktinos was crouching from the shock wave of the explosion, still clinging to reactor three.

‘Chaplain,’ voxed Sarpedon, ‘are you hurt?’

‘I am not, commander,’ replied Iktinos. His voice was distorted almost beyond understanding. ‘But there is no way off this reactor.’

‘There is for me,’ said Sarpedon. ‘Hold position. I’m coming for you.’

Sarpedon ran up the wall towards the ceiling. The whole chamber shuddered as the remains of reactor eleven collapsed into the floor. Plasma flooded the lower levels, swallowing up enormous bundles of cables and drowning the lowest walkways. Reactor twelve was sitting in a lake of plasma, and was listing as its foundations were eroded. Below the chamber plasma would be flowing through the rest of the *Obedience*, looking for ways into the ships surrounding it. It would melt its way through a huge area of the *Brokenback*, like a cancer, if it wasn’t stopped.

Sarpedon was above reactor three. He could see that a spear of shrapnel had punctured the reactor’s side, and plasma was spurting from the wound. The crack was

widening, and, every second, the sheet of vented energy grew wider.

Sarpedon ran down a coolant pipe to the top of the reactor. Iktinos was waiting for him.

Iktinos reached up. Sarpedon grabbed the Chaplain's wrist and hauled him off his feet.

Reactor three shuddered and leaned suddenly to one side. Sarpedon glanced up; the conduits were coming away from the ceiling. There would be no way off the reactor in that direction. He spotted a length of walkway hanging from one wall, half-melted away by a bolt of plasma. Sarpedon shifted his grip so that he was dragging Iktinos behind him by the collar of his armour. He crouched down on his back legs and uncoiled, sprinting at full tilt towards the edge of the reactor.

Reactor three split down the middle. Sheets of plasma sprayed out, forming a wall of fire behind Sarpedon as he ran. Metal screamed and heat roared. The metal below Sarpedon's talons became unbearably hot.

Sarpedon reached the edge and jumped with the power of every muscle packed into his arachnoid legs. He reached forwards and his hand closed on the handrail of the walkway. The whole structure bent with the weight of the two Space Marines. Iktinos clambered over Sarpedon, pulling himself onto the walkway, before hauling Sarpedon up after him.

'My gratitude, commander,' voxed Iktinos.

Reactor three split completely in two, a torrent of plasma flooding through the lower levels. Sarpedon got to his feet and followed Iktinos towards the doorway where the walkway joined the wall. Another reactor

breached as they ran, sinking into the burning mire and splitting open. A wall of radiated heat buffeted them as Iktinos reached the door and hauled it open.

Beyond was a dark, cramped maintenance space, leading to the cargo ship adjoining the *Blessed Obedience*. Sarpedon followed Iktinos through the darkness as the booming vibrations of dying reactors got louder.

‘Lygris,’ voxed Sarpedon to the bridge, ‘we’re clear.’

‘I’m shutting down the Obedience,’ replied Lygris. Sarpedon could hear every alarm on the space hulk’s bridge blaring at once. ‘Make sure you’re well clear. That whole area will be lethal.’

‘Can you get us out of here?’

‘With the reactors down? I can make it into the warp, maybe.’

‘Then do it. Whatever hit us will want a kill-shot.’

‘Yes, commander,’ voxed Lygris. ‘I suggest you hold on.’

‘Got it,’ said Magos Hephsebah with relish. Seated in the targeting observatory of the *Constant*, surrounded by the holo-projections of surrounding stars and spacecraft, she watched another flare of plasma burst from the side of the space hulk. ‘Target report!’

Tech-priests’ voices from the ship’s sensorium filtered back to her through the vox-net.

‘Major secondary explosions...’

‘Confirm plasma vent. Target reactor breach.’

‘Target power levels fluctuating beyond parameters...’

‘Arming chamber!’ ordered Hephsebah. ‘Full recharge! Navigation, line us up for another shot!’

She spun the barrels of the multilaser she carried in place of her left arm. Nothing fired the passions in her like a direct hit: the sum of all her knowledge, brought forth in a single moment of destruction. Such a wonder could only be possible through the Ommissiah’s will.

‘Magos Hephsebah, excellent damage,’ said Voar’s voice from the *Antithesis*. ‘The Fleet Minor is disengaging. We will coordinate fire and complete the kill.’

‘Yes, archmagos,’ said Hephsebah. ‘The Soul Drinkers, they once did the Mechanicus wrong?’

‘Most gravely so,’ said Voar.

‘Then it will be a pleasure to call in the debt.’

The holo flared red. Indicators around the image of the space hulk showed an enormous power spike.

‘Gellar fields active!’ came an alert from one of the tech-priests in the sensorium.

‘They’re hitting the warp!’ shouted Hephsebah. ‘They’re insane. That space hulk’s bleeding to death. The warp will swallow it alive.’

‘It has survived an aeon in the warp,’ said Voar. ‘Do not presume to know the capabilities of such an enemy.’

‘Hit it with everything we have! Now!’

Most of the *Constant*’s offensive power was tied up in the nova cannon, but she still sported plenty of medium-range guns and torpedoes. Every one of them

fired, spraying massive calibre fire towards the space hulk, even as the enemy ship was surrounded by a shimmering field projected by what power remained in its wounded reactors. Shots tore through the field and impacted against the hull. The *Antithesis* joined in, and a tremendous broadside hammered against the hulk's side, ripping chunks of spacecraft away, and exposing burning metal innards below. Secondary explosions rippled where stored ammunition detonated, and plumes of vented air burst from the impacts.

Space tore. A slash opened up in front of the hulk, so dark it was blacker even than the void. Power boiled within it, a monumental, malicious reflection of the Veiled Region in another dimension. The space hulk sank into it, explosions still studding its gnarled surface as the rip in space swallowed it up.

The holo blinked, and the space hulk was gone.

'We've lost them,' said Hephsebah. She slammed her multilaser against the observatory wall. 'Damn it! We had them! We had them, and we lost them!' She sat back in the observatory command chair, watching the debris cooling and falling off sensor range.

'Even in the Veiled Region, a wounded space hulk cannot pass without leaving a trail,' said Archmagos Voar. 'We have not lost them for long.'

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