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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hailing from Scotland, **Graham McNeill** worked for over six years as a Games Developer in Games Workshop's Design Studio before taking the plunge to become a full-time writer. Graham's written more than twenty and Fantasy novels and comics, as well as a number of side projects that keep him busy and (mostly) out of trouble. His Horus Heresy novel, *A Thousand Sons*, was a New York Times bestseller and his Time of Legends novel, *Empire*, won the 2010 David Gemmell Legend Award. Graham lives and works in Nottingham and you can keep up to date with where he'll be and what he's working on by visiting his website.

Join the ranks of the 4th Company at www.graham-mcneill.com

Iron Warriors: The Omnibus can be purchased direct from this website and GW mail order, Games Workshop and other hobby stores, and better bookstores.

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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. Flex-ible 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 hardwired 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-scraps 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 voxgrille, 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?'

From

The Iron Without