

The cover art depicts a dramatic battle scene. In the center, a Space Marine commander stands prominently, wearing a dark, heavy tunic with a red sash and a gold eagle emblem on his chest. He has a stern expression and is pointing his right hand forward. Behind him, another Marine is visible, holding a large red banner. In the foreground, several other Marines are engaged in combat, some holding assault rifles. The background is filled with the chaos of battle, including smoke and the silhouettes of other soldiers. The overall color palette is dominated by dark greys, blacks, and reds, with highlights of gold and white.

**WARHAMMER**  
40,000

**URSARKAR CREED**  
**LAST STEP BACKWARDS**

JUSTIN D HILL

The illustration depicts a central figure, a high-ranking Imperial officer, standing amidst a chaotic battle scene. He is dressed in dark, heavy armor with a prominent gold eagle emblem on his chest and a red sash. He has a stern, determined expression and is pointing his right hand forward. In the background, other soldiers in similar armor are visible, some holding flags and others in combat. The overall atmosphere is one of intense warfare and military discipline.

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# LAST STEP BACKWARDS

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The aircraft came out of nowhere, roaring from the skies on super-charged engines, making the world shake. Major Luka ducked. They were so low he thought they might take off his head. Then they wheeled over the causeway, spewing white contrails from their wing-slung rocket pods, the side gunners raking the ground with heavy bolter-rounds. Salvos of missiles exploded in the air, shredding the lead squads of blood-maddened Anckorites, stemming the tide for a brief moment.

‘Valkyries!’ Major Luka shouted as the lead craft swung to the right, while three others pulled to a halt about ninety metres back from the Aegis defence line, their thrumming engines sending up clouds of blue dust. He had a brief glimpse of troops rappelling in pairs from either side, before they were lost in dust.

The lead Valkyries came in again. One sparked a half-track that was pushing up between the burning wrecks of the lead tanks. It gouted black promethium smoke. Then the flyers peeled off. The din of their engines faded. The world seemed quiet for a moment. Major Luka paused. ‘Do you hear that?’

Cadet Slander looked at him.

‘Do you hear it?’

Slander shook his head, but then over the din of men shouting and dying and the rattle of gunfire and las-rounds, came the strains of music. Not the dull chanting of the enemy, but *music*. And not just any music. ‘It sounds like... Flower of Cadia...’

Major Luka jumped up. ‘Sing, man! Sing!’

The sound came clear and distinctive. It was getting louder. Major Luka walked out into the causeway, ignoring the las-shots that stitched the air about him. The swirling dust began to settle. Four squads of elite Cadian kasrkin

appeared, coming in at a half run.

Major Luka remembered being a young boy in the choir at the cathedral in Kasr Ferro. Yes, he thought, the sight of those kasrkin was more beautiful than even the chapel mural of Saint Beatine. The music grew louder. 'For Cadia!' the major shouted, answering shouts coming from all across the ridge. Then he stopped.

In the middle of the kasrkin came a bear of a man: officer's greatcoat thrown over his shoulders, bull neck, head low, thrust forward, an air of defiant resolution, irresistible willpower, and the strength, courage and determination to resist.

'Creed,' shouted Luka. 'It's Creed!'

*Earlier...*

*War is the heart that pumps life through the Imperium of Man.* Cadet Fesk had learned that in basic training. *War is the heart of the Imperium, and the Astra Militarum is the blood.* What did that make the men he was watching? he wondered.

The Cadian Cadet – known as a Whiteshield for the broad white stripe on their helmets – was standing by the side of a six-lane rockcrete slabway watching files of weary troopers fleeing back towards the planet's only major habitation, Starport. The men were from a planet called Ephalia, and they were mysterious to him in their manners, food, speech, customs. Two weeks before, these troops had been speeding the opposite way down into the Long Dry, waving and whistling as they clung onto their lasrifles and velvet shakos. Now there was no cheering. They looked weary, exhausted and wounded. Even worse, Fesk thought, they looked *defeated*.

Major Luka always told them there was no defeat for a Cadian Shock Trooper, only tactical withdrawal, counterstrike and, ultimately, a hero's death.

Fesk's attention was caught by a gunner who sat half in the turret of his Chimera. His right arm was in a sling and he had lost his shako, his mouth rimmed with dried blue dust.

'They're coming!' the man shouted in heavily accented Gothic. He pointed back to the lowlands of the Long Dry. 'They'll kill you all!'

He held out a hand to Fesk, as if willing him and the other cadets up, but Fesk turned his back. 'The Anckorites are coming!' the man shouted again, but Fesk

was already walking away. He was a Cadian.

Major Luka was in the communications bunker. There was a steady crackle of static from the vox. He kicked the unit with his good foot and Slander, the vox-operator, as well, in his frustration. 'What do you mean you can't get through?' he demanded.

Whiteshield Slander shrugged. He'd been a petty thief on Cadia, and he had been lucky to escape the penal legions of St Josmane's Hope. He was good with the vox-unit. It was just like picking locks, he said. But not even Slander could get through to headquarters. 'It's this planet,' he said. 'It frags the comms.'

Major Luka gave the vox-unit another kick, this time with his bionic foot. The steady crackle of static was unchanged. He let out a long sigh and took out his order strip, written in the neat penmanship of a Administratum servo-scribe, stared at it for a moment, then sighed and slipped it back into his breast flap pocket.

'What is that, sir?'

'Our orders,' he said after a while. 'Fortify and hold the Incardine Ridge against Luciver Anckor's cult forces.'

'But those orders are three weeks old,' Slander said. 'When we were on the offensive—'

'What are you saying, cadet?'

'Well, I thought that maybe we've been overlooked. We're only...'

'Only what, Cadet Slander?'

Slander gulped. 'Only Whiteshields.'

Major Luka bent down. Slander could smell sweat, stale lho-sticks, and the morning meal of fried grox patties as the major roared at him. 'There are half a million Anckorites down in the Long Dry who want to get to Starport, and it's the only geographical feature this Throne-forsaken planet has. This is the only place we have a hope of stopping him. Sometimes it falls on the weak and defenceless. But that is the job of a Guardsman, do you understand? To die so that others might live.

'If we abandon our position, what then? Once Luciver Anckor gets up the ridge it's a straight drive to Starport. Understand? He'll be on your back before you can fight your way through this rabble onto a lander. And it will be a fight. Every one of those men will knife you rather than let you on a lander before him. I've seen evacuations. They're not pretty.'

'So we stay here?' Slander said.

'Yes, damn it! Dig in. We hold the Incardine Ridge! And we shall show those

cowards what it means to stand and fight.’

Major Luka had survived thirty years in the Cadian Eighth and had taken up the mantle of training the next generation of Shock Troopers. He shouted everything, especially when communicating with Slander.

‘You’re a stupid, know-it-all fool!’ he bellowed as Slander dug a fire support trench. ‘Dig deeper, understand?’

‘But the dust,’ Slander said, patting his sleeves, which were thick with the flour-fine blue dust of Besana.

‘To the Eye with the dust!’ Major Luka’s veins stood out, he was shouting so hard. ‘If you don’t dig deeper we’ll be burying you in it!’

Slander dug till the dust choked him. They all dug – Lina, Slander, Yetske, Darkins, Garonne – as Major Luka laid out the defence, drawing lines in the blue sand with his good foot.

‘Fire support here, reserves here. Comms here, command and control bunker here. I want the foxholes man-deep with grenade sumps dug at the bottom of each one at thirty degrees precisely. Do I make myself clear?’

‘Yes, sir!’ they all called back.

Fesk was with Lina, holding the empty flour sack while she filled it with spoil.

Lina was seventeen. A hard little nut with a shaved head and big green eyes, and she was good with a blade. Most of the others found the rings that pierced her lower lip and the aquila tattoo on her left cheek a little off-putting. Not Fesk. He rather liked her. But she didn’t seem to appreciate the fact.

‘What are you looking at,’ she said. It didn’t sound like a question.

‘Nothing.’

She kept digging. Her shoulders were lean and hard in her standard issue green tank top. Her back was wet with sweat, and it made the fabric cling to her lean contours. ‘I heard you’re to be stationed in this hole,’ she said.

‘With you?’

‘No fragging way. Me and Darkins. You’re getting that loser Yetske.’ She laughed. ‘You never know, the way he handles his lasrifles, you might be his first kill.’

Fesk hefted the sandbag into place. He paused for a moment to look across at the long rubble causeway, up which the enemy would be coming. It stretched out for almost half a kilometre, lifting the road three hundred metres up from the Long Dry to the rocky summit of Incardine Ridge. ‘What if they don’t come up

that road?’

Lina paused, and wiped her forehead with the back of her arm, leaving dirty blue smears.

‘Have you been down there? Slipsand pools as deep as a man. They’ll drown anyone who tries to come off the road. And armour will never make it. Now, it’s your turn to shovel.’

Ryse sent his own shuttle to pick them up: a stately barge suitable for a Warmaster, with brass fittings and an axelwood panelled mess with more fine types of luxury amasec than Jarran Kell had ever seen before. The colour sergeant spent a few minutes smelling each one and laughed when he picked out one from the back. ‘Look at this!’ he said to his companion, lifting up the gold-stoppered bottle. ‘Arcady Pride!’

It seemed a shame to waste this stuff on pen pushers and Administratum consuls. ‘Bring it along,’ said Ursarkar Creed. ‘We’ll celebrate later.’

The officer who met them at the landing bay blast gates was a major of the Cadian 345th. He was in his grey dress uniform with peaked cap and black leather glove. His other sleeve was neatly folded up at the elbow, and pinned in place. He saluted smartly.

‘General Creed,’ he said. Men always tried to say ‘General Creed’ without showing their excitement. It was impossible of course, like saying ‘Ah! Commissar Yarrick!’ or ‘Commander Pask, I presume.’

Creed nodded. ‘Where did you lose it?’ he asked. The man looked confused. ‘Your hand,’ Creed said.

The man laughed. ‘Oh, on Rellion Five.’

‘Traitor Ridge?’

‘No.’ The major’s cheeks coloured a little. ‘My company were seconded to the Forty-Fifth.’

‘You helped to clear the Shima Forest.’

The major nodded. He said nothing more. No need, Kell thought. Shima Forest had been a waste of good men.

‘I told Grask not to go in there,’ Creed said. ‘But I was only a colonel then, and Grask had stripes, a hundred years more experience than me and, well, let’s just say an arrogance problem. You were lucky to only lose a hand.’

‘Thank you, sir,’ the man said.

Creed paused. ‘What’s your name?’

‘Major Freight,’ he said.

‘Tell me, Freight, this recall. It’s got to be something bad. How deep in it is Warmaster Ryse?’

‘Not for me to say, sir.’

‘Ah,’ smiled Creed. ‘Look, Kell. Here we have a man of tact, as pure as the driven snow.’

The major’s mouth opened and then shut again. Kell smiled. It was always like this when men met Creed. They expected the Emperor Resplendent in flak armour and a greatcoat, with glowing halo and the aura of an Imperial saint, speaking beatitudes. *Blessed are the battle-worthy, for they shall stand firm. Blessed are the chaste, for their faith shall be ceramite.*

What they got was Usarkar E. Creed.

‘Show me in then, Freight. I’ll see for myself.’

Warmaster Ryse was so deep in thought that he did not hear the door open. Creed. It had to be Creed. It had been Ryse who had pushed for him. Two years before, at a seven course planning dinner, he had softened up the generals with vintage claret from Lethe Eleven, then made his pitch.

‘For the next push I want Major Creed to lead the right flank.’

‘Who?’ General Vishron had said.

‘Usarkar Creed.’

‘Never heard of him.’

‘I have.’ That had been Lord General Gerder, a white-haired veteran with impeccable military pedigree and a bionic monocle. ‘He is an *Utsider*.’

Utsider’s were those folk who lived in the bleak moors and wastes of Cadia, outside the bastion cities that dotted the landscape. Who lived always under the baleful gleam of the Eye of Terror and who retained something of the wild about them.

Ryse had set them straight with a few facts. Rexus IX, the Dreen Salient, Kasr Fuul and the Kamalang Bridge Campaign.

Lord General Gerder had not been impressed. ‘But he’s only thirty-six.’

‘Thirty-seven,’ Ryse had corrected.

‘Never mind. This Creed chap has got to serve his *time*.’

‘Time? *Time*?’ Ryse had slammed his hand onto the polished axelwood table. The officers had looked stunned and the waiters had shifted uncomfortably around the edges of the chamber. Even the clock had ticked slower. ‘You could give me twenty generals with a hundred times his experience, but I want Creed.’

He's a *winner*. And he's good. Damn good. *Macharius* good!

There was a collective air of disapproval at the name Macharius. His conquests had been admirable, but he was remembered as a maverick. Loners, peacocks, demagogues and mavericks were the antithesis of disciplined, organised warfare.

They hadn't liked it, but they had agreed. He was the warmaster, after all. 'On your head be it,' Lord General Gerder said later, in private conference, a threat he had never been able to make good on.

That meeting replayed through Warmaster Ryse's mind as he paced up and down the bay windows in the feast hall of the governor of Hare. Creed had not let him down. Yet. But when – *if* – he did, Ryse knew that the high command would be waiting.

Freight stood smartly aside and announced, 'General Creed, sir,'

Creed swept in and Ryse turned. 'Throne, Ursarkar, what took you so long? Listen, it's that damned fool Travis,' he said. 'He's been covering up a rebellion in the Gort System.'

Creed silently held out an igniter and the Warmaster sucked the flame into the end of a lho-stub – one, two, three puffs, before it lit.

'I gave him a safe job and he's screwed it up royally,' growled the warmaster, as Creed lit up one of his own. 'Look!' Ryse held out a sheaf of reports and puffed furiously as Creed flicked through them. The last one was stamped with the sigil of the Inquisition. Creed bit his stub.

'That bad?' he asked.

Ryse exhaled slowly. 'Yes,' he said. 'It's threatening the whole crusade. I need you to fix it!'

'When do I leave?'

'Your ship is waiting now. I've given you three companies.'

'Will that be enough?'

'It'll have to be.' Creed said nothing, so Ryse continued. 'But they're Cadians.'

'Which regiment?'

'The Eighth.'

'That's very thoughtful of you, sir.'

Ryse ground his stub into the porcelain ashtray. 'Don't let me down here, Creed.'

'This way, please.' Captain Avery, a smartly dressed officer of Battlefleet Scarus,

stood aside to let Creed and Sergeant Kell through the blast door ahead of him.

He had insisted on taking them on a tour of the more interesting parts of his three and a half kilometre-long ship, the *Magister Thine*, though Kell would rather have been drinking with the five hundred Cadian Shock Troopers billeted in one of the empty cargo stores, as would Creed if he knew him at all. But this was the captain's first command.

'I am sure you will be impressed by this viewing chamber,' the captain said. 'Some fine ornamental detailing.'

They stepped inside an arched chamber, with vast stained glass windows that were dark and indecipherable with the blackness of void behind them. Kell dutifully lifted his face to admire the mural of the Emperor Resplendent directing the Great Crusade in golden armour and halo. It covered most of the ceiling.

'Very good,' Kell said.

Creed walked across to the viewport. Even through the thick armourglass, it radiated cold.

Captain Avery coughed politely. 'Perhaps I might interest you in something more... *military*. The gun decks perhaps? The Avenger-class has a most remarkable lance array. Far above her class.'

'No, thank you,' Creed said. It was the first thing he'd said for half an hour. The captain caught Kell's eye and the sergeant shrugged. Creed was Creed.

'Apparently the captain has spent some time on Besana,' Kell said at last.

'Oh yes?' Creed turned quite suddenly. His manner was so intense that Captain Avery took an involuntary step back.

'Well,' the captain said. 'Only three days planetside. There's nothing particular about the place. All the usual for this sector. Stowers, geishons, enough stimms to blow a servitor's cortex. Oh, yes, and of course cad-ore.'

'Cad-ore. What's that?' Creed asked.

'Who knows,' the captain said. 'All I know is that it's what gives the soil its blue colour and that the Adeptus Mechanicus ship it out by the gigaton.'

'Anything else?'

'Well... nothing grows on Besana. And the soil is poisonous. Don't inhale when you're there.' Captain Avery laughed briefly, then quickly added, 'Not a problem for a week or two, but cumulative exposure will lead to rapid degenerative disease. Not a place for a protracted campaign.'

'How long until we can go planetside?'

'Seven hours.'

Creed nodded. 'I am sure you have much to do, captain.'

He shook the man's hand and turned back to the viewport. He stood with his arms behind his back, clutching a data-slate, staring at the blue planet as if it were an intricate puzzle that only he could solve.

Night was falling on the planet as Colour Sergeant Jarran Kell stared through the dust-pocked viewports of the Aquila lander. Besana looked bleak, even viewed from far above. He'd read that fierce winds heralded each dawn and dusk as temperature variations sent ferocious dust storms whipping across the arid, featureless expanses. Dust storms, heretics and war.

An hour passed. Maybe more. Kell stared out into the dark haze. He was lost in thought as the ground slowly approached. 'We're coming in to land.' The navigator's green screen underlit his face as the intercoms crackled. 'That's Starport,' he said, pointing down to the left.

Below them, Starport was lit up with glowing strings of yellow sodium lumens, revealing sprawling complexes of warehouses, habs, bunkers and the evacuation camps of Imperial Guard regiments.

'How long?'

'Ten minutes.'

Kell nodded and made his way to the back of the lander with one hand on the side to keep his balance. His power fist was stowed away in cargo, but he re-checked the charge of his power sword and slammed home a fresh battery pack into his hotshot laspistol. You never knew.

Starport changed from strings of lights to roads, runways, landing zones, lines of parked landers and the disorganised mess of abandoned Chimeras and Taurox. Kell could see a crashed Arvus, then individual figures on the ground.

There was a crackle of static. 'It's a hell of a mess down there,' the copilot said. The roar of descent returned. Kell flipped his vox-bead to 'on'. 'Bring it down where you can,' he said. 'Are we announced?'

There was a long pause as the lander banked slowly to bleed off entry speed. 'I can't get through,' the pilot said. 'Apparently it's the cad-ore. Frekks the comms.'

The ground was rushing up now, and as it did so a rabble of Guardsmen climbed the barriers. 'They're storming the landing zone!' the pilot's panicked voice said.

Creed had not spoken the whole trip. He sometimes reminded Kell of an actor, sitting in the shadows, waiting to play his part. Now his time was fast

approaching.

Creed clicked on the vox. ‘Just put it down,’ he said. ‘The bright ones will work it out.’

The engines flared one last time, driving the rabble back, before the landing gear scraped down and the back ramp thumped open and the hot desert air of Besana rushed in.

Commander Nel, of the Lemn Russ tank *Pride of Aquaria* hit the fuel gauge and cursed.

‘Can’t you get her to go faster?’ he yelled through the hatch.

‘I’m praying as hard as you!’ Jenks yelled back.

Night was falling and the lead hunters of the Anckorites were a kilometre or two behind. The image of them kept appearing in his mind: hooded, scarred faces wrapped close with black rags, blood-red eyes rimmed with kohl, scraps of flak armour, laspistols in one hand and sickle cult blades in the other. Each time those eyes stared at him, a shiver went through him. He did not want to be caught alive. He’d seen what they did to men they caught. Faster, he urged. They’d been gaining all day and now they were at the ridge, but he didn’t know if they had enough fuel – or time – to get up it.

‘We’re slowing!’ Nel said as the engine started to judder.

‘I’m trying,’ said Jenks.

Nel had never been much of a shrine man, but he prayed then, every catechism he knew, as the fuel tanks bled down to the dregs and the exhaust began to vent thick black fumes.

They were on the causeway that lifted the road from the Long Dry to the top of the Incardine Ridge. Whoever had laid the road had decided not to zigzag up the slope but to stick to straight lines and build a three kilometre causeway to lift the road the three hundred meters to the plateau.

The engine coughed and the Russ jerked. Nel rocked back and forth, as if he could will the tank faster. Dust started to whip up about him. The evening storms. He screened his mouth with his arm and squinted forward, but it soon became impossible. The winds blew fine blue crystalline dust straight up the hillside. He ducked down and slammed the hatch closed.

‘How are the filters?’

‘I emptied them this morning,’ Jenks said. ‘They *should* last.’

The way he said ‘should’ did not fill Nel with confidence.

Slowly, too slowly, they chugged up the last half kilometre and crested the top.

Suddenly they slammed to a halt and the engine wheezed.

‘I don’t know what it is,’ Jenks said, as he rammed the pedals. ‘We’re stuck.’

‘Throne!’ Nel cursed, spinning the hatch lock and pushing it open.

Dust swirled inside as he pushed himself up. It took him a moment to see what they had hit. ‘It’s a frekking Aegis,’ he said. ‘Someone’s left a defence line across the road.’ Nel shouted down to Jenks. ‘Swing us around this thing.’

At that moment there was a whine from the engines.

‘Jenks!’ Nel shouted. ‘Filters!’

Jenks cut the engine and pulled himself up.

Nel was shouting at Jenks when a light came towards them through the blizzard. It was a man with a portable luminator. He acted as if he were a traffic officer on some military base. He had bushy grey eyebrows and a sweat patch where his belly strained against his fatigues. Nel stared at him in disbelief.

‘I am Major Luka of the Cadian—’ the officer started.

‘I don’t care who you are,’ Nel shouted back, his mouth full of cad-ore. ‘Get out the way!’

‘We have our orders to hold this ridge.’

‘And I have my orders to get off this planet,’ Nel told him, but then he looked about, and saw, in the light of the Russ’s searchlights, the dazed faces of soldiers appearing from foxholes dug on either side of the ridge.

No, not soldiers. Boys. The white bands on their helmets marked them clearly out.

‘Gun-babies?’ Nel said and slapped the top of his tank. ‘You’re holding this line with gun-babies? Oh, Throne, I’ve seen everything now!’

Creed marched down the rockcrete bunker corridor, wiping cad-ore dust from his hands. He paused at the half open ceramite blast door, spray-stencilled ‘Starport: Command and Control’, and stiffened as he heard the note of panic from inside.

‘Gentlemen,’ Creed said as he stepped inside. There were a handful of hereditaries in the trim velvet dress jackets of various Mordax Prime regiments, a pair of sallow-faced officers from the Gudrunite Rifles with polished black webbing and boots, a couple of other minor planetary officers, an officer of Saint Percival’s Cavalry in full dress uniform and a couple of officers with the cap badges of the Aquarian Guard, 17th Armoured Company.

‘I am Lord General Usarkar E. Creed. Who is in command here?’

One of the Mordaxians stepped forward. He was a tall affable looking fellow with short-cropped hair and a golden cog symbol on his gold-trimmed jacket. He

cleared his throat. ‘Lord General Travis—’ he started.

Creed cut him off. ‘I have put General Travis into the custody of the Commissariat, on the orders of Warmaster Ryse. What I asked was who is in charge here in his absence?’

‘I am, sir. My name is General Stretto Balc.’ His manner was stiff and defensive. No doubt he resented a Cadian officer dropping in and pulling rank. Creed didn’t care what he thought, but stood before the man, waiting for him to finish. ‘No doubt you want a full briefing, but time is short. The Anckorites outnumber us ten to one, perhaps more. They are closing rapidly on Starport. Our situation is untenable. Evacuation will start as soon as the landers are loaded.’

‘No, it won’t,’ Creed said. He felt the officers bristle. Regiments of lesser reputation resented Cadians turning up and telling everyone else how to do their jobs. ‘General Balc,’ Creed said. ‘Seventeenth Steward of the Mordax Cuirassiers. A hereditary position. You are... the fourth to hold the post, and the great grandson of a Marcharian Cross winner. Am I correct?’

Balc nodded.

‘General Balc, did you become a general in the Astra Militarum of the Imperium of Mankind to cede planets to the enemy?’

‘No, sire, but...’

‘Good. On this we are agreed. The Imperial Guard has taken its last step backwards. I expect you to lead your men with exemplary courage and recklessness. Reckless courage, I tell you, underlined three times.’

Balc’s voice quivered. ‘It would be suicide.’

‘Perhaps.’ Creed was impassive. ‘But at least we shall go down with honour.’ Balc put up a hand but Creed cut him off. ‘You have shown extreme cowardice and incompetence in the defence of this planet. If you do not do as I ask then I shall report you to the commissars, who will lead you to the nearest wall and put a bolt-round through your head. Your family will lose their position, and they will curse your name for evermore. Now, which is it?’

General Balc straightened up. ‘Fight, sir!’

‘Good.’ Creed looked each officer in the eye, one by one. ‘The Emperor is watching us all. There is to be no evacuation. We are holding this planet, gentlemen. Or we are dying here. Understood?’

Creed swept his greatcoat over the back of a pearlwood chair. The fringes of the map had been weighted down with las-packs, an aide’s spent watch, a

Gudrunite's black helmet and a pair of matt-green scanners. 'This is the Incardine Ridge, yes?' Creed asked.

A lean woman with close-cropped hair and an aquila tattoo across her left cheek stepped forward and put out a hand. 'I'm Kamala,' she said. 'Besana militia. Yes. There are two causeways that lift the highway from the Long Dry to the Highlands. The ridge is the best place to stop the attack on Starport. Well, the only place really.'

Creed took a long drag of his stub and let the smoke curl from his mouth and nostrils. 'And that is being fortified and defended?'

Kamala frowned. 'I think so.'

'By who?'

'I don't know.'

'Find out,' he said.

It took Kamala five minutes to find someone who knew. 'I have the answer,' she said. 'But you won't like it.'

The dawn storm came just as predictably as the evening one, except the dawn storm blew in the opposite direction. It was whipping into the faces of the Anckorite vanguard as they came up the causeway, their crews squinting forward as the cad-ore crystals blinded them.

They were halfway up the slope when Nel's *Pride of Aquaria* broke the brow of the ridge, a little to the left of Fesk's dugout. The loader was muttering the Blessing of the Righteous. Nel added the Rite of Destruction as well, just for good measure, as the first enemy vehicle appeared through the sheets of blizzard dust.

'Half track soft-skin,' Nel said. 'Register gunner?'

'Aye.'

'Frag round,' he said.

'Frag round,' the gunner repeated.

There was a pause.

'Ready?'

'Ready.'

Sheeting dust hid the tanks for a moment, then the *Pride* fired. They speared the first, and the second slewed off-road, over the lip of the causeway, and turned over three times, throwing out bodies and crushing them in turn. A burning crewman was still screaming when the next vehicle – trying to ram its way through the wrecks – exploded. Then something larger rumbled up behind them.

‘They’ve got a Chimera,’ said Nel. ‘Register?’

‘Register,’ the gunner said. There was a clunk as he slid back the blast door of the top ammo crates. ‘Armour-piercing round.’

‘Acknowledged,’ said Nel. There was a long pause, then the *Pride of Aquaria* fired again, and blew the troops inside the Chimera out of the back door in a bloody spray of charred human remains.

‘Good shot,’ Nel said, a few moments later. ‘Two more incoming.’

Lina touched the aquila tattoo on her left cheek for luck, then leaned into the rifle stock. She had been lying all night in her foxhole: sleepless, tense, ready and excited. She aimed as an open-topped half track revved between the wrecks. Lina let her breath out and saw the black-wrapped face of the driver through her scope. His eyes were black-rimmed and bloodshot. She felt instant revulsion and fired three shots in rapid succession.

Two rounds knocked the driver’s head back. He didn’t move after that. His engine slewed to a halt. ‘I’ve done it,’ she said and turned to Darkins. ‘I killed one.’

‘I thought to prove you killed one you had to get his ear or something,’ Darkins said.

‘Yeah. You go get his ear. I tell you I shot him. He’s dead, no matter how many ears he’s still got.’

‘Lina’s got one!’ Darkins called out. There were scattered cheers.

Lina closed her eyes and said a prayer. If she survived this, she would be a Cadian Shock Trooper.

On the other side of the causeway, Fesk heard the news, and wanted to slap Lina on the back.

‘Let’s hope she lives long enough to be promoted,’ Yetske said as return fire slammed into the hillside. A storm of las, grenades and heavier rounds that threw up choking clouds of cad-ore. There were screams from the next dug-out.

‘Booth’s hit!’ one of them shouted. There was panic in the voice, and then Fesk heard, ‘Oh sh—’ and the voice stopped.

After what seemed like an age, the Anckorites, black-wrapped shapes wielding sickle knives and lasrifles, fell back under cover of the storm.

For that first hour after dawn the causeway was silent. Major Luka went from

position to position, doling out water, ammo and medical supplies. Five Whiteshields had been killed. Three were badly wounded.

As the storm cleared, Fesk pulled out a monocular. A dark line of vehicles and desert cavalry stretched back as far as the monocular would focus. They were all moving towards them, the lead units milling about in confusion at the bottom of the causeway.

‘Are there more?’ Yetske asked.

‘Oh yes,’ Fesk said.

‘Funny,’ Yetske said. ‘I thought for a minute that we’d beaten them.’

Fesk watched as the hunched shapes of Anckorites began to part, and through the mobs came a file of Lemman Russ. Fesk put the monocular down. He felt sick. He did not tell Yetske what he had seen hanging from the sides of the lead battle tank. He wasn’t going to die that way. No chance. No way.

Fesk checked his grenade pack. He’d keep a frag for the end, he thought.

The sound of revving engines drifted up to them, along with wild chanting voices and the background whine of chainblades in eager fists, and then, over it all, the voice of a demagogue shouting and raging in an unknown tongue.

‘What the hell is that?’ Yetske said.

From below came a great shout. A thousand – or it could have been ten thousand – voices lifted as one and then, with the roar of engines and gunning chainblades, the Anckorites started up the slope: a mess of tanks; half-tracks; mounted raiders with long charged lances, loping forward on shaggy, two-legged bighorns; four-wheeled assault speeders; bikers with revving chainblades; and hooded foot-sloggers scrambling up in their eagerness to spill Imperial blood.

The *Pride of Aquaria* had the range on them. She took out the lead Russ with a lucky shot on the mounting that spun the turret ten metres into the air. Three more heretic tanks pushed past and began to fire back.

The first shot missed, and then there was a sudden *whoosh*. Fesk pressed himself flat and shouted a curse as a shower of soil fell on his helmet and hands. He dusted himself off and looked up, watching a flash and the tank bucking backwards before he heard the boom of another round. He held his hands over his ears and prayed.

The lead Anckorites were dodging up through the rock fields. Hundreds of them, low to the ground, zigzagging, firing up at them and chanting over and over. Fesk stepped up onto the firing step. Five shots and he got one, a skinny little thing – not much older than himself – with a chainsword who went down like a sack.

There were sudden tears on his cheeks. ‘I did it,’ he said to no one in particular.

And then from around the tanks came a charge of horsemen, and he could see the lance tips as they bobbed towards him.

Major Luka ducked down behind the defence line, ejected the magazine from his pistol and jammed ten rounds in. Prendervil and Holden’s positions had been overrun already, and their heads were trophies in the hands of the lead horsemen. Major Luka cursed. His lads were being murdered and there was nothing he could do. ‘Nel!’ he shouted, but the tank had stalled again and Jenks was out kicking the filter casing open.

Major Luka took up a new firing position, firing wildly at the mass of riders who were howling as they hacked down his lads. He saw one horseman go down, saw another punched from the saddle and dragged along by the stirrup. Then he saw one with a Whiteshield’s head in his fist and he emptied the magazine.

‘Nel!’ he shouted, gesticulating wildly.

The tank commander seemed to understand. He shouted at Jenks and the *Pride of Aquaria* bucked suddenly forward. There was a moment’s pause before the heavy bolter sponsors opened up. The deep clatter of bolt shells made the defence line vibrate. Major Luka put up his head to watch the ruin of the Anckorite horsemen. Mount and rider alike were ripped apart by exploding bolts. It was over in moments. The causeway was a charnel house of feebly kicking horses and men lifting a hand to salute their Dark Gods.

Then the heretic tanks fired back. One round hit the *Pride of Aquaria* in the soft spot on the underside of her hull, and she went up like a firecracker, roaring flames and black smoke.

No one climbed out. *The Pride of Aquaria* burned like a torch.

‘Frekk!’ Luka said simply. ‘Fix bayonets!’

Fesk fired wildly. Rock by rock the Anckorites were coming closer, and their low chanting grew louder. ‘They’re all around us,’ Yetske said in panic, as he fumbled with his battery pack. He spun round, but above them was Kernigg’s firing pit, and Kernigg was still firing.

There was an Anckorite hiding behind a rock about fifteen metres down and to the right. Fesk waited for him to come out, his barrel ready to nail him, but he didn’t appear.

The sound of chanting grew louder and more insistent. Yetske started crying. 'I can't do it,' he said.

'Yes, you can,' Fesk said, stealing a glance over to where he stood with the power pack in his hands. 'Yetske, push the button and put it in, front catch first.'

Yetske looked down at his rifle as if he was staring at some kind of strange puzzle. He started engaging the catch when he dropped to the ground.

'Get up!' Fesk said.

Yetske lay on the floor. He was gurgling horribly. 'Yetske,' Fesk said, kneeling down. There was barely room in the firing pit. Yetske's eyes rolled up to stare at him, begging for help. Foam and blood poured out of a hole in his neck. Fesk put his hand over the wound, as if he could hold back the flow.

A shadow fell across them and Fesk realised his mistake: Yetske hadn't been asking for help – he was trying to warn him. He grabbed for his rifle, but he was too late. The shadow wanted his life.

All he felt was stabbing pain.

Fesk was dying. He knew the signs from his basic medicae training. He was bleeding out, adding his life-blood to this dry hellhole and staining the cad-ore red. Frekk this planet.

He tried to speak, but he slipped away for a moment, into dreams. A Cadian snowfall. Standing under a pylon on night-exercise, listening to it sing. Putting his ear to the cool rock, and hearing the melody as the wind blew through the honeycomb holes, and the structure hummed as if alive. Pulling his pack onto his back and turning to the cadet next to him in the embarkation parade. It was Lina. 'So where we going?' he asked.

'Throne knows,' she said.

He blinked back to consciousness for a moment. 'Yetske,' he said, before he remembered. He put out a hand, and pulled Yetske back. The cadet's eyes had rolled up white into their sockets. His head lolled loose on his neck. Dead.

*You'll be joining him soon,* a voice in his head said. Fesk shut his eyes.

He was on Cadia again, rubbing bare hands against the cold, fumbling with his las-rifle, cursing the cold. In his dreams there was a roar of aircraft. He looked up into the night sky and saw only the purple stain of the Eye of Terror, rising high into the sky. He thought of Lina's sweat-soaked top, her lop-sided smile, and the blue aquila on her cheek.

Then there was singing. That was when Fesk knew he was a goner. These were the companies of souls welcoming him to the Emperor's Blessing. He closed his

eyes. He said his last prayer, fixed in his mind the vision of the Golden Throne. The singing grew louder. The angels were singing *Flower of Cadia*. Fesk's mouth moved weakly as he joined in.

*Creed*. The word came to him in his delirium. It stalled his dreams for a moment.

'Creed!' an ecstatic voice shouted from the top of the ridge. 'It's frekking Creed!'

Creed swept Major Luka up with him as he barked out orders and the kasrkin manned the Aegis, unfolded their heavy bolter stands, piled crates of missiles up and flipped the catches open. 'Luka!' the general shouted. 'It's been a while. I see they made you a major.'

'It was in exchange for the foot.' Luka lifted his bionic foot as if for proof.

Creed laughed briefly. 'How are your lads?'

'Well, we've no heavy weaponry and it looks like Anckor has launched his entire army against us. Business as usual,' he said.

They made their way between the dugouts. 'I've got reinforcements on the way,' Creed said. 'But we're going to have to hold out until then. It's just us and whatever the Valkyries can ferry in. How many Whiteshields do you have?'

'I had two hundred this morning,' Luka said. 'We've lost thirty, I'd say. The cavalry overawed them. And this is the first time they've seen heresy.'

Creed nodded. He knew all about that. Knew exactly the terror your first cultist brought. 'Well, I've brought some bolters, and lots of ammo. I need the ridge to hold. I know it's a big thing to ask, but it has to be done. We have to stop them here.'

'For how long?'

'A day,' Creed said.

Luka puffed out his cheeks. It didn't look optimistic. Creed laughed again and slapped him on the arm. 'I know. It looks a little tight, but the whole crusade is resting on our shoulders here, and I had no one else to send, so I had to come myself!'

Jasper Fesk was wandering.

He was still wandering in dreams – and Jasper Fesk's dreams were not a pleasant place to be.

He was eight and frightened, hiding under a bed. There were explosions and screaming, and the screams were getting closer. Ingri, his sister, was with him. In

one hand she clutched her rag doll. It was dressed in a scrap of old desert camo. The doll was called Sabine after a saint her aunt had told them about, and Ingri loved it more than anything. Her other hand was clamped over Fesk's mouth. It was clamped so tight he couldn't breathe. He kicked and struggled.

'Shut up,' his sister breathed in his ear. '*They're coming!*'

There was wild laughter. The door was kicked open. Footsteps came closer. A shadow fell over him and...

...Fesk struggled to consciousness. It was coming back to him. Fire, flames, pain. He would not be taken alive. His fingers scrabbled for that grenade. A foot pinned his hand to the floor. A gloved hand reached down and grasped him. It lifted him up.

There was a face close to his. The face was speaking, but not to him.

'He's still alive,' it said. 'One gun-baby still alive. One dead.'

His vox crackled. The man spoke slowly and loudly. 'I'm getting you out. Understand? Can you walk?'

'What is that?' Darkins said as Lina fell back into their pit. Lina bent down and pulled at the straps. There was a black Munitorum canister inside. 'Look what the Valkyries brought us!'

She flipped back the clasps and pushed the lid back. Inside lay a compact heavy bolter, brand-spanking-fresh-from-the-Munitorum-new.

'Holy throne! Think you can handle it?'

'Sure I can,' she said.

They scrambled to get it up on its tripod, remembering their drills. But they had trained with Godwyn-pattern bolters... Darkins cursed as the coils of shells slipped through his hands. 'How do you get the bolts in?'

Lina tried one way then another. In the end she looked at the inside lid of the air-drop canister. 'Accatran Vd', the label said, then simple cartoon instructions, with a neat-looking Guardsman. 'Oh I see,' she said. 'You've got to pull the bolt back first.'

Lina set the tripod down on top of the sandbags, pulled the bolt back, and felt the first round engage. 'Here goes!' she said.

She aimed down the hill. *Thud thud thud*. It was like holding onto a wild dog. She took her finger off the trigger for a moment, and then fired again, panning wildly from side to side as the bands of Anckorites scrambled towards them.

*Thud thud thud. Thud thud thud.*

'Did you hit anything?' a voice shouted.

‘I don’t know,’ Lina shouted back.

Darkins nudged her and she looked back at the man standing over her pit. She almost dropped the bolter in surprise. ‘Frekk. Is that...?’

‘Yes it is,’ General Creed said. ‘Now, there’s more than one heretic for each of those bolt shells. Make sure you find each one an owner.’

‘Yes, sir!’ she shouted, and kept firing until her boots were buried beneath bright brass bolter shells.

It was a battle of immovable object and unstoppable force; the Anckorite army massed on the Route Equatorial trying to squeeze up the causeway in the face of defiant resistance. Creed paced back and forth, shouting orders, bolstering men’s courage when it was lacking and fighting when killing was needed. With him came Kell, power fist crackling with energy, and the colours of the Cadian Eighth held high.

‘That’s it lads!’ he called out. ‘We’re showing these heretics what it means to rebel against the Imperium of Mankind!’

There was a sudden wail and an artillery shell landed about thirty metres beyond them. Creed didn’t even duck. He paced up and down, smoking and firing, and laughed. ‘I’ve missed this,’ he said.

Every hour the six Valkyries returned on their ferrying mission, kasrkin rappelling, dump canisters being shoved out of the side hatches. They barely replaced the men killed, but they were Cadians, and they made their numbers tell three times over.

In their desperation the Anckorites sought a route around the sides of the causeway, but the slip-sands swallowed them, drowning them in deep pools of blue cad-ore.

The day was failing at last. The wind picked up, this time blasting dust into the eyes of the defenders. The Valkyries would not be flying in these conditions. Their vents would be clogged in seconds. ‘Pull back!’ Creed ordered, and they stumbled up through the dark and dust to the defence line.

The Anckorite armour tried to force a passage. It was a terrifying stand off as tank shells hammered the Aegis and the heavy weapons teams returned the hatred. There was a brief and furious exchange of lascannon bursts, bolter shells and missiles.

Cadians fell in droves as shells exploded about them. Creed roared to the gun crews, and suddenly the surviving tanks clicked into reverse and this time the

Anckorite infantry charged. They were met with a blizzard of las and bolter shells.

The battle was impossibly savage and impossibly brutal, close-quarters, incessant, terrifying. Creed was everywhere. Kell's power fist crackled furiously, punching holes in any Anckorites that managed to clamber over the Aegis line, pulling their spines out of the front of their chests.

Then they fell back one last time.

'How are you men doing?' Creed asked Luka.

Luka's top was dark with sweat and splattered blood. He had lost his helmet somewhere. 'As you'd expect,' he gasped.

'Time for a smoke,' Creed said and pulled out a half smoked lho-stub from his breast flap pocket. They fell back to the communications bunker. There was a kasrkin manning it now.

'Got that thing working yet?' Creed said.

'Not yet,' he said.

'Keep trying.' Creed puffed slowly. Luka thought he could see concern in the general's eyes.

'Need it?' he asked.

Creed looked thoughtful. 'The vox? Well, possibly. It would certainly make things easier. Perhaps when this storm has passed.'

Darkness fell. The wind dropped. The air cleared.

The hours passed quietly and Creed sent out scouts. 'I want to know when they're coming back before they do.'

It was an hour after nightfall. Slander was fifty metres back from the front line, standing at the water butt with six bottles to fill. Throne knew how they had held on so far. The funny thing was that all that training they had done was starting to make sense now. Fire drills, fixing bayonets and charging. It all made sense. He was going to tell that to Major Luka.

The thought made him smile as he turned to fill the bottles he had slung about his neck. He filled one, put it to the side, was opening the second when someone tapped him on the helmet.

'Wait your turn!' he snapped. 'I've got a whole load to fill up here.'

The tap came again.

'Is that Lina?' he asked. Frekking Lina, he thought. They all had had to listen to how much better a shot she was than all the rest of them.

There was another tap, a little harder this time. ‘Throne!’ he said, turning to see which idiot was doing this. The face that looked down on him was wrapped in the black of the Anckorite Brotherhood, red eyes staring down at him, ritual scars criss-crossing the face.

‘They’re behind us!’ Slander yelled. Except there was a hand clamped over his mouth and pain, terrible pain then hot gushing liquid that was his blood. He would never be able to tell Major Luka now.

Creed was alone in the command bunker studying maps of Besana. The wind blew the curtain open. He heard men laughing not far off. The curtain wafted again. Creed smelled fresh blood. It was all the warning he needed. A blade seared a line along his shoulder. It snagged on his carapace plating.

He heard the hiss of his foe and twisted, ramming his forearm up under the Anckorite’s neck. Creed saw a face wound round and round with strips of black cloth, red eyes, and a mouth slick with blood. He drove the heretic back against the sandbagged walls and heard a satisfying grunt of pain.

The serrated sickle blade stabbed for a chink in his carapace armour. Creed drove it deep into the groin of his enemy, keeping the foe pinned to the wall, stabbing until the Anckorite’s guts slipped out of the tattered wreck of his abdomen and his struggles weakened and failed.

Creed pulled his arm away and let the body slop to the floor amongst its own guts. He fell to one knee, unholstered his pistol and fired from a kneeling position. The hotshot las seared a hole through a second Anckorite’s face as he came through the door. Three more shots punched the figure back. Creed stepped towards the exit and his boot slipped. The cadet sentry lay sprawled against the back of the bunker, the floor slick with blood. ‘Kell!’ Creed bellowed. He could hear his colour sergeant’s vox-amplified voice shouting orders.

Two more shadows were outside. Creed stepped in close. He had been fighting ever since he could remember. Since his days with his father, sparring in the yard outside their cabin. Afterwards, in Kasr Gallan, he had boxed in the street until his knuckles were raw and bloody, and he soaked them in surgical spirit, despite the pain. The years as an orphan when he had to prove himself, not to others but to himself. He gloried in the danger, the thrill, the joy of fixing the throat of a foe, and then punching his face to mush.

It was almost a relief to get in close like this. Not to be thinking positions, reinforcements, counter-attacks, logistics – to just be thinking about life and death, the next blow his enemy would throw, and how he was going to kill him.

Creed hammered the enemy's wrist, a short hard strike that knocked the blade from his hand while the other hand, clenched into a blunt bull fist, punched the heretic's windpipe. There was a gasp of pain. Creed stamped on the man's foot, came in close, caught his head and twisted it to the side, brought it down on his rapidly rising knee. Either could have killed. Both were a surety. There was a crunch. Neck, skull, Creed didn't care. He pulled a pistol out, fired it point-blank into the Anckorite's face.

'This takes me back,' he muttered. 'Where the frekk is Kell?'

Jarran Kell causally tore the head from the last of the Anckorite Brotherhood, then deactivated his power fist and let the steaming head drop to the floor with a wet thud.

Creed was standing with his back to the sandbag wall, breathing hard. The cloth at his shoulder was ripped, blood flowing freely.

Kell stopped. 'You all right?' he said.

'I've been better.'

Kell nodded. 'We'll get it stitched up.'

'Find out where they came up and cover the rat hole.'

Kell nodded.

Half an hour later, Kell appeared through the darkness, his eyebrows singed. He had lost seven men.

'Did you find it?' Creed asked.

'There'll be no more coming that way.'

Creed nodded. There was nothing more offputting for a soldier than to have the enemy in unexpected places. 'They'll get around us again. Make sure everyone knows that. I don't want anyone surprised. We should expect them to surround us. That doesn't matter. All we have to do is hold on.'

Kell nodded.

'Have they got through to the *Magister Thine* yet?'

Kell's voice sounded the way it did when he wanted to appear calm. 'Not yet.'

Creed thumped the table. 'Damn it,' he said. The two men shared a brief glance. Creed was already thinking five steps ahead. 'I'm going to have to go. You'll have to stay.'

Kell stiffened. He had sworn to protect Creed and he hated being put in an impossible position like this. 'No,' Kell said. 'I come with you.'

'Jarran,' Creed said. 'I need you here.'

‘No.’

‘Friend,’ Creed said. ‘I’ll be fine. You will be the one in danger. Don’t get yourself killed.’

‘Of course not.’

‘Good. Think you can hold the line?’

Kell waited a long time before answering. But when he did his tone had changed. ‘How long for?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘You really need this?’

‘I do. This planet needs it. Warmaster Ryse needs it.’ Creed gave his friend a wink.

Kell looked away, but he nodded. ‘We’ll hold,’ he said. Creed smiled briefly. He put his hand to his friend’s arm and they exchanged a brief look. He didn’t need to say more.

‘Vox officer!’ Creed shouted. ‘Get me a flight back to Spaceport. I need to have some words with the headquarter staff.’

‘I’m trying.’

‘Don’t try, *do*.’

‘Yes, sir!’

Fesk woke with a start.

‘You’re up.’ Darkins was crouching over him. The night was black about them. Fesk pushed himself up. They’d put a bag of fluid into his veins, and he felt odd with the stimms in the mix. An unpleasant mix of queasy and hyper alert. He winced. The ground was strewn with sleeping men, rolled sandbags used as pillows, lasrifles held in their arms. Fesk yawned, wincing from the pain of his wound, and picked up his own lasrifle. He was on third watch.

He made his way over the sleeping bodies. From the Long Dry there was the occasional growl of a chainblade, and the sound of chanting that rose and fell. Fesk tried not to listen to it.

He was on the second point at the middle of the Aegis. Far below, at the bottom of the long causeway, he could see their lights in the lowlands. Camp fires, torches. One man seemingly on patrol, walking up and down in lines. There were hundreds, perhaps thousands, of them and yet more vehicles streaming up along the Route Equatorial.

How could they hold back such numbers?

Fesk looked up. The stars burned white. He did not recognise them. He was

very far from home. 'Dear Ingri,' Fesk said aloud, imagining writing to his sister. 'We held out against the enemy for as long as we could. You, Sharla and Oleg would have been proud of us. We did Cadia proud. We are her sons. I was not afraid when I died. I have taken many enemies of mankind with me.'

'Cadet,' a voice said suddenly. 'Do you have faith in the Emperor?'

Fesk started. He reached for his gun. 'Do you have faith?' the large figure asked, stepping close. It was a bear of a man. The glow of a stub lit his fingers and face as he inhaled.

'L-lord General?'

'Do you have faith in the Emperor?'

'Y-yes, sir!'

'At ease. Here. Smoke?'

Fesk didn't but he took a lho-stick and inhaled.

'I have to get back to Spaceport,' mused General Creed. 'But I should think another six hours.'

'Is that how long we have left?' Fesk stammered.

Creed grinned in the light cast by his stub. 'I think so,' he said. There was a long pause. 'You did well today. All of you.'

'I feel like we took a hell of a beating.'

Creed seemed amused.

'I mean, look at how few of us are left,' Fesk continued.

Creed looked around. 'You think we're done?' He savoured a long drag. '*They* are the ones who're trapped, cadet. They're bottled up with the quicksand on either side of them, with us in front, and soon we'll send them howling back to the warp. They are about to face the wrath of the Astra Militarum.'

Fesk said nothing. He didn't quite believe it.

'Where are you from?' Creed said after a while.

'Kasr Ferrox.'

'Ah. There's a fine minster there. My mother took me there once.' Creed paused. 'I must have been six years old. I had never seen such a bastion. Great spires and gun emplacements, and statues of saints at every loophole. I was an Utsider. My father was a hunter in the Gallan Highlands. I think Kasr Ferrox was the first city I ever saw. It would be good to go and see it again.'

'It would,' Fesk said.

'We should go there when this war is over, when Anckor and his men are dead.' Creed slipped a lho-stick behind Fesk's ear. 'Save that for tomorrow,' he said, walking off. 'When this is all over.'

When Fesk finished his watch he stumbled back to the camp.

Lina was sitting, smoking a lho-stick. 'I saw him talking to you too,' she said. He nodded and rolled his jacket up as a pillow.

'What did he talk about?'

'The minster at Kasr Ferrox.'

She laughed. 'You're kidding.'

'No.'

She pulled out her knife, wiped it on her thigh and slammed it back into its sheath. 'He's something else, isn't he? Did you ever think you would meet someone like that?'

'No.'

'I hope they come again tomorrow.'

'I'm sure they will.'

They stood staring out into the night, watching Creed moving slowly around the sentries. Every once in a while they could hear his low bass chuckle, or see the red glow of his stub.

Fesk started as Lina suddenly stepped towards him. He could smell her proximity, and then without warning she leaned in close and kissed him. A firm, wet kiss.

Fesk was lucky there was a line of sandbags for him to lean against. He put a hand on the small of her back, and she pulled away out of reach. 'Tomorrow, let's kill them all.'

It was an hour before dawn when Fesk woke with a start. Valkyries were approaching. He sat up and squinted as they landed and kicked up a blizzard of cad-ore. The wind was starting to stir. He smelled stub smoke and sat up. The gunships paused for a minute, and then they veered up and wheeled away. Fesk pushed himself up with his rifle butt and limped along the sandbags. He felt deflated suddenly. As if hope had blown away on the wind.

'What happened?' Fesk said when he saw Major Luka standing over him, running a hand over the stubble on his head.

'He's gone.'

'Creed? He's left us?' Fesk felt panic quicken his heartbeat. 'Why?'

'He's a commander. Now he has to command.'

'So what's going to happen here?'

'I have no idea, cadet. And nor, I bet, do the Anckorites.'

Major Luka started away, but he turned and put out a hand. 'You fought well,

Cadet Fesk. This should all be over soon. Get some more sleep. We should have a few hours yet. Have faith in General Creed. If anyone can pull this off, he can.'

Creed jumped from the Valkyrie as it fired its landing jets.

Kamala, the wiry commander of the local militia, ran in to greet him. 'We thought you were lost!' she said.

'Well, I'm here now,' he shouted over the roar of the engines. 'What's the situation?'

'The commissars have rallied the retreating columns. They're heading to the coordinates you provided. They'll be in position by 0600.'

'And did you get through to the fleet?'

'Yes, sir.'

'At last.'

Creed stood over the maps at headquarters. Kamala had never seen an officer who thought so quickly and in such detail. He made rapid calculations of movements, deployments, unit strengths. An air of quiet intensity filled the place as he shuffled through the maps, checked his timepiece and then looked up.

'Get me the *Magister Thine*,' he said. 'I want to speak to the captain personally. Now.'

Creed drummed his fingers as he waited. When the link was established he took the handset. 'Captain Avery,' he said. 'I need those lance batteries of yours. The future of this campaign lies on your shoulders. I am going to give you coordinates. You will position your craft above the target and strike them at 0600 hours local time. You will bombard that point for exactly three minutes.'

He put his thumb on the map, and picked out a series of points below the Incardine Ridge, asked Captain Avery to repeat them and then nodded.

'Good. You have the thanks of the Astra Militarum and of Warmaster Ryse himself, captain.'

At 0553 hours the order went through *Magister Thine* to open gunports for 'collective and concentrated fire'. For kilometres along the length of the grand cruiser, batteries opened, colossal turrets turned to face the planet, vast black gun barrels slowly pointing towards the Incardine Ridge and lances powered up. Gunnery crews, hundreds strong, hoisted vast kilotonne ordnance; power lines hummed as the gantries shook with power lifts slowly slamming the shells into

firing position.

At 0558 silence fell. The gantries and loading decks were strangely still. The clocks ticked down. The order to ‘ready weapons’ came, and dull clicks rang through the ancient linebreaker as firing mechanisms engaged.

At three seconds after 0600 hours the bombardment was announced. The *Magister Thine* lurched suddenly in orbit.

A sudden storm raged in the skies above Besana. The planet trembled. Fissures began to form in the crust of the world as the *Magister Thine*’s linear accelerators threw magma warheads with adamantine cores deep into the base of the Incardine Ridge. The firing picked out the coordinates, boxing the massed Anckorites in then smashing into their massed ranks with horrible precision. Volcanic eruptions threw up dust storms of cad-ore that would last for months after. Along the Incardine Ridge men threw themselves to the bottom of their dugouts. They shouted to the Golden Throne and could not hear themselves.

Below them the hordes of Anckorites died, their screams unheard in the maelstrom. The massed ranks were incinerated, the reinforcements turning and fleeing back into the Long Dry, where the escape was blocked by disciplined companies of Cadian Eighth, Ephanlian Hussars, the brightly coloured lances of Saint Percival’s Cavalry and, ranked in echelon formation, the massed grey armour of the 17th Company of the Aquarian Guard.

The Anckorites stopped and pulled the black rags from their scarred faces and stared in shock at the thousands of muzzles – lasrifle, bolter, autocannon and battlecannon – all trained on them.

Then a single voice gave the order – ‘Fire!’ – and the Anckorites howled in fury and frustration as they were slaughtered.

Fesk’s nightmare was of thunder and flame.

It was later that day when he woke in the back of a Chimera, while the medic injected more stimms into his arm. There was cad-ore in his mouth, his ears, and it gummed his eyes closed.

There was a brief sting, the odd sensation of the syringe being emptied into his vein, and then the stimms hit and he let out a sigh. There were voices all about. Calm, professional voices, hurrying back and forth. The medic was busy. He put a wad of cotton on the place he had injected.

It took an age for Fesk to unglue his lips to speak. When it came, his voice was a dry croak. ‘Did we win?’

‘Not yet,’ the man said through his white mask.

The sound of an autocannon started up somewhere nearby. Then two, and eventually a chorus of them.

Fesk sat up with a start. He wanted his rifle. He wasn't going to get caught again. 'Are we going to die?'

The medic spoke between clenched teeth. 'Will you sit still?' He breathed slowly and Fesk could feel the tug of skin as the needle went in and pulled the wound tight. 'Creed's shown them.'

What had he shown them? Fesk wondered. The drugs took hold again and he lay back and dreamed of Creed, and of Lina and the sudden kiss. Fesk started laughing. He wiped his eyes. He couldn't help it. He sniffed and shook his head. He felt someone next to him and looked up. It was Yetske. He was staring at the lho-stick behind Fesk's ear.

'I'd give it to you, but you're dead,' Fesk said.

Yetske didn't go away. But his face turned into Lina's.

'Oh, you too?' he said. 'You're dead too?'

'You're crying,' she said. 'Fesk blubbing like a baby?'

'No,' Fesk said, wiping his cheeks again.

It was a week later that Fesk – still a little giddy with stimms – slung his kitbag over his shoulder and limped forward to join the file of men waiting to exit Starport Medicae Facility. There were ships out there; he had heard their engines as they landed. Maybe he'd get to write that letter, he thought as he shuffled forward, but now he didn't really know what to say. He was still alive. That was enough.

The line was slow. At last he came to the front. A short-tempered Munitorum quartermaster stood behind a high wooden counter. He had a clipboard before him. 'Name and number?'

'C20004.346. Whiteshield Jasper Fesk.'

The man flipped a number of pages back and looked up. He found the right spot. 'Fesk. Uniform, helmet. Yes?'

Fesk nodded. Whatever they said. The quartermaster walked off and came back a minute later with a neatly folded pile of clothes, with a fresh helmet on. Fesk took it, signed and then moved to the side before realising he'd been given the wrong pile.

'Excuse me,' he called out, but the quartermaster was already serving the next man. He gave Fesk a fixed look.

'Yes?'

‘You gave me the wrong pile.’

The quartermaster came forward. He looked like he was going to strike him.

‘Fesk. Whiteshield. 20004th Cadet Group. ident number 346. Correct?’

Fesk nodded.

The quartermaster put out a hand and lifted the materials. ‘These are correct,’ he said. ‘What is the problem?’

Fesk held up his helmet. There was no white stripe. The quartermaster was busy and waved him away. ‘Did no one tell you?’ he said. ‘You’re a Shock Trooper now. Cadian Eighth.’

Fesk looked at the icon on the helmet. A silver skull and Cadian Gate badge, underneath the number eight and a wreath of laurels.

Fesk looked around. He didn’t know the men about him. They were a mix of all the wounded from the fighting: Mordax Dragoons, Crinan Fourth, Aquarians and a Vostroyan Firstborn with a grey moustache and a white bandage over one eye.

‘Are you all right, lad?’ he asked.

‘I’m a Shock Trooper,’ Fesk said dumbly.

The Vostroyan had no idea what he was talking about.

‘I’m a Shock Trooper,’ he said again, holding up the badge.

‘Eighth?’ the Vostroyan asked.

Fesk nodded.

‘Never heard of them,’ the man said, and stalked off towards the landers where files of troops, transports, freshly washed armour and gun barrels in their tarpaulin sheathes were waiting to board.

Fesk found Lina and they stood together. Lina had her jacket thrown over a fresh tank top. ‘Not dead then?’ he asked. He didn’t know what to expect in response.

All she said was: ‘Eighth?’

Fesk nodded.

‘Me too,’ Lina said. There was a long pause. ‘He got away.’

‘Who?’

‘Luciver Anckorite. He let his men die and ran. We’re going after him.’

‘Are we?’

Lina gave him a look. ‘Don’t you listen to anything?’

Fesk shook his head. ‘I’ve been in the medicae.’

‘Oh. How is it?’ She looked down. His stitches pulled, but they were healing. He said nothing. The ground shook as a lander took off about a mile away.

‘I hear they got Darkins,’ Fesk said.

Lina looked away for a moment. When she looked back at him there were tears in her eyes, but they did not fall and the look she gave him dared him to notice them.

‘Yeah,’ she said. ‘Pultin. Yetske. Shanner. Brantsk. All the poor frekkers. They got Garonne too. Skinned him.’ Lina paused. She nodded as she scratched a symbol in the dirt with her toe. ‘Well,’ she said. ‘We should get to the lander.’

It took a day to load the lander. Fesk and Lina and the other new Shock Troopers bunched together. Major Luka came to say farewell.

‘I’m proud of you all!’ he said. ‘Now go out there and kill each and every one of them.’

‘What will you do now?’ Fesk asked.

‘Teach more gun-babies like you how to survive.’

‘That was a tough straw we pulled, yeah?’

Major Luka looked him in the eye. ‘One of the toughest I’ve ever seen. But you made it. And you held Luciver back. And now you’re Shock Troopers!’

The crowd drifted off in twos and threes. Fesk lingered. ‘What happened, major?’ he said. ‘I was wounded, and I don’t really remember what was going on around us. Last thing I remember is you telling me to go back to sleep. The rest seems like a dream.’

Major Luka stopped. ‘You don’t remember the bombardment?’

‘Oh, yeah. I remember that.’

‘Well, our position was critical. We had to hold the causeway. Once Creed had the Anckorites bunched up along the Route Equatorial he had the Navy boys fire on it. I’ve never felt a planet shake before. Besana trembled before the fury of the *Magister Thine*. The very ground shook. It was the only way we could beat the Anckorites. They outnumbered us ten or more to one.’

‘So why didn’t they just flee?’ Fesk asked.

‘Ah well. They tried that. But remember all those troops who were sitting on landers waiting to evacuate? Creed landed in the Long Dry behind the Anckorites. He put belief back into them. The enemy were trapped. Desert. Causeway. Imperial armour.’ Major Luka held out an open palm, and slowly closed it. ‘He crushed them.’

Fesk was numb as he filed up the lander ramps. The Cadians were quartered in container Alpha-Six. He passed containers full of parked tanks and Chimeras,

and a gallery of Sentinels, like ranks of giant warriors, eerily still.

Fesk looked about him. Each Shock Trooper found a bunk. He pictured one in the corner under a massive steel girder. He was quiet and thoughtful, looking about the vast hangar. This was his regiment now and his family. This was his world.

An hour after boarding, a claxon rang. No one seemed to take any notice. Then the engines lit and the whole craft began to vibrate, and then they were taking off.

His stomach always lurched when the landers took off. He shut his eyes and prayed that this time he didn't vomit. Suddenly, Fesk smelled something. He pushed himself off his bunk and walked towards a crowd of men. None of them knew him, but they saw a young face and they let him in. They were all Cadians. Someone in the middle was telling jokes.

Fesk pushed to the front. There was a long table of men. In the middle was a bear of a man, three days of stubble, a greatcoat over his shoulder, a stub in his fingers, empty bottle on the table.

'Ah!' he said. Creed put his hand out to the table to steady himself.

'Gentlemen! Meet one of our newest recruits...'

'Jasper Fesk,' Fesk said.

'Drink with me, Fesk.' Creed poured an amasec and held it out to him.

'Arcady Pride!' he said. 'Straight from the warmaster's table!'

Fesk took the glass. The liquid smelled sweet and strong. He held it up and took in the men about him: young, old, wary, wounded, fierce and friendly. He lifted it to his mouth and drank.

Creed winked. 'Just for luck.'

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Justin D Hill** is the author of the Warhammer 40,000 stories ‘Last Step Backwards’ and ‘Truth Is My Weapon’, and the Warhammer tales ‘Golgfag's Revenge’ and ‘The Battle of Whitestone’ for Black Library. He is an English writer who has been nominated for the Man Booker Prize three times. He has lived around the world and is currently situated in Hong Kong, where he teaches creative writing.

[The Shock Troops of Cadia face a world tainted by Chaos, and an army of the living dead.](#)



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