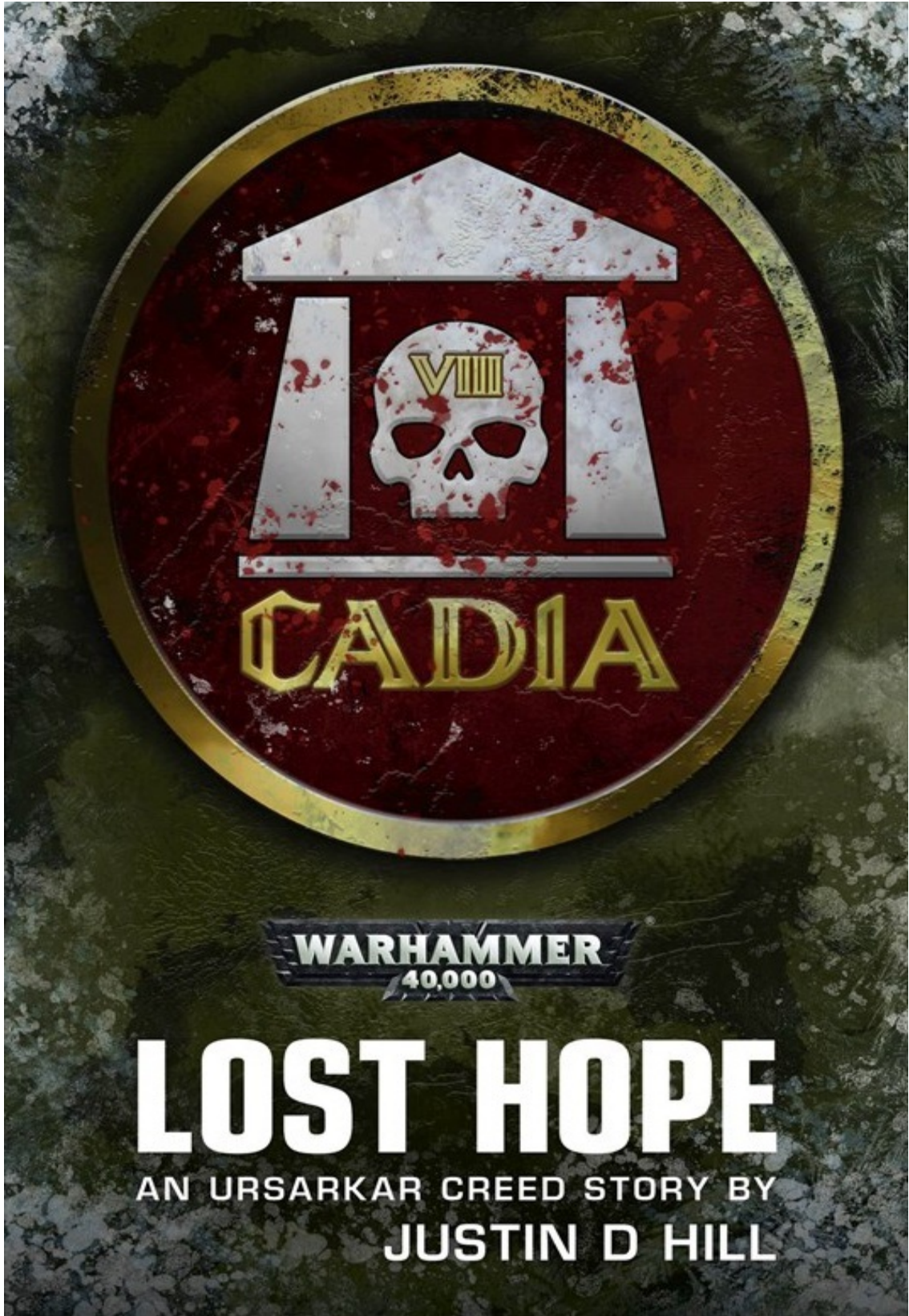




WARHAMMER
40,000

LOST HOPE

AN URSARKAR CREED STORY BY
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LOST HOPE

Justin D Hill

It had been ten minutes since the astropathic message had reached him, and Ursarkar Creed was still cursing. Colour Sergeant Jarran Kell watched as Creed strode towards the drinks table, picked up a bottle of green spirit and read the label.

‘What is this?’ Creed growled.

Kell stepped up. ‘*Zub-rod-ka*. It’s amasec, or something like it. Fleet Captain Avery sent it, with his regards. I think he finds having you on board easier when you have good drink around you.’

Creed grunted, unscrewed the brass cap, poured a measure of the green liquid into a cut crystal glass and knocked it back. From his expression Kell guessed it wasn’t bad. Creed offered the bottle to Kell.

‘No, thank you,’ he said.

‘Not when on duty, eh?’ said Creed. ‘You’re always such a stickler for those kinds of things.’ The general poured himself another drink, rested both fists on the map table and stared down at the spread of system charts. Scarus, Belis Corona, Chinchare, Agripinaa. In the centre was a chart of the Cadian system. Every region was covered with crosses, each one marking an uprising, a rebellion, a lost contact.

‘Look at it!’ Creed snapped. ‘It’s clear!’

Kell looked. It wasn’t clear to him, and he told Creed so.

‘Look!’ Creed shouted. ‘Here! Here! Here! Supply routes to Cadia. That’s what this all about. It’s not random – it’s war, and it’s about *Cadia*. About the

Imperium itself. And Warmaster Ryse is so far up his own backside that he thinks his little campaign is all that is going on. Damn him! Damn the lot of them!’

The lot of them were the officers of Cadian High Command. They hadn’t taken to Creed any more than he had to them. He was too *rough*, was how they phrased it as they passed the amasec to the left. Too successful, more like.

Creed slammed an open palm down again. Neither of them spoke. The silence was marked only by the scratch of the seated data-servitor’s blunt metal quill writing out more reports of uprisings and more attacks by Anckorite forces – more mess for them to clean up.

‘And now Ryse tells me we need to end this campaign before I can get back to Cadia and High Command.’

Creed knocked his drink back, sat down and lit his lho-stub. He stared at the glowing data screen on the wall above the servitor’s head, which scrolled with unpunctuated lines of data: names of places, officers, reports, automated reminders, ship-to-ship transmissions. All the petty white noise of Imperial communications. Kell picked up a plan for a mooted defensive trench system on a planet named Atelier-888 and studied it.

Creed had the air about him of a man who was beaten, and Kell didn’t know what to say. Warmaster Ryse’s message had been clear. Defeat Luciver Anckor, with no more reinforcements.

‘What’s that?’ Creed said suddenly.

Kell looked up but the line of data had already scrolled down out of sight. Creed moved over to the dataport. He pressed buttons and cursed. ‘How do you work this thing?’

Kell gingerly turned a brass dial three clicks to the left, but nothing happened.

‘Servitor,’ Creed snapped. ‘There was a report of a ship just arriving in-system. Is it a military craft? Reserves, perhaps?’

Stranger things had happened. Ships got lost, delayed, diverted. Perhaps this was one of those. Cogs whirred in the metal parts of the servitor’s brain as its speech function warmed up.

‘Negative,’ it said.

‘Hostiles?’ Kell asked, his mind beginning to organise boarding parties, strongpoints, layers of defence.

‘Negative,’ the servitor responded. ‘Vessel is the *Justicae Eternas*. Prison barge. Crew, one thousand three hundred and seven. Indentured population at outset from Scarus Sector, twenty-five thousand, six hundred and eighty-three. Attrition

rate estimated at 4.3 per cent per month of travel. Due to dock at Lost Hope—

‘Impossible,’ Creed muttered, leafing through the pile of maps. He slapped the one he wanted with an air of triumph. ‘Lost Hope. Ice world. Uninhabited!’

Creed impressed Kell at moments like these. The knowledge he had was phenomenal. The cogs behind the screen whirred again as the servitor accessed its data banks. ‘Data incorrect. Penal colony on Lost Hope for one hundred and fifty years—’

‘A penal colony?’

‘Correct, servicing a promethium drilling station at the pole,’ the servitor said. ‘Administrators of House Kasky tithed to the Administratum...’ It droned on, reeling through lists of information that were no longer pertinent. Creed had what he wanted. He clapped his hands and laughed. ‘A penal colony!’

Kell didn’t know what was so amusing.

‘Jarran,’ Creed said, a grin on his face, ‘we’ve got an army!’ Kell’s expression must have spoken volumes. ‘Don’t worry,’ Creed said as he swept up the bottle of zubrodka. He swept Kell up as he thrust the bottle into his greatcoat pocket. ‘Come on, there’s no time to waste. And stop looking at me like that. I won’t put you in charge of training them. We need to see Captain Avery.’

Kell spat, and his spit froze in the air before it hit the ice.

‘Frekk, it’s cold,’ he muttered as he strode to the bottom of the landing ramp and looked around at the ball of ice and rock that was Lost Hope.

The landing zone was deserted. All Kell could see was a row of six vast rusted promethium tanks, wide puddles of oily slush where Adeptus Mechanicus tankers had landed to refill, and behind and about it all a bleak vision of white tundra, marked only by a few patches of dark pine forest where terraforming had achieved limited levels of success. He rolled his head back into his high jacket collar. He wore hostile environment thermals, but still the chill was like icy water on his scalp.

Creed appeared at the head of his honour guard as the landers’ engines powered down. ‘This is it?’ he asked.

Kell nodded. ‘Yes. This is it.’

Creed rubbed his gloved hands together and watched the first Chimera began to reverse down the landing ramp. He seemed unduly cheerful. ‘It’s not so bad.’

Kell had a sense of doom about this whole endeavour. He saw no point in putting polish on the proverbial. ‘This planet is a class-A frekkhole,’ he said sourly.

Creed took a deep breath and stalked off. 'It smells just like Kasr Partox,' he called back.

'Kasr Partox is a frekkhole,' Kell muttered, as he followed his commander.

There was no need for signposts. A single track led off through the plateau of dull grey ice. The place was deserted. Creed climbed into the lead Chimera with his personal guard.

'Let's go,' Kell called out to the remaining troopers. 'No point getting cold.'

Kell was the last to embark, and he stood on top of the Chimera, scanned one last time for stragglers then waved to the lander pilot preparing for take-off. He dropped into the Chimera turret, closed the hatch above him and shimmied into the front gunner's seat, next to the driver, Blendal. He tapped the heavy flamer fuel canisters and nodded in approval. They were full.

'Let's go,' he said. His tone conveying in no uncertain terms that Colour Sergeant Jarran Kell was in a bad mood.

'It's cold,' Blendal tried after a few minutes.

'Tell me something I don't know,' Kell said. He reached back and tried to loosen the ache in his shoulder, but beneath the hostile environment jacket he was wearing his carapace armour and he couldn't get to it. 'Is the heat on?'

Blendal flipped a couple of switches for show. 'It's at maximum, sir.'

Kell cursed silently and tried rolling his shoulder instead.

Trooper Agemmon crawled in from the back cabin. 'So what are we doing here, sergeant?' he asked.

'We're picking up penal troopers,' Kell said.

'How many?'

'Ten thousand.'

'You're not serious,' Agemmon said.

'Yes, trooper, I most certainly am.'

'We're that short?'

Yes, Kell thought, and Creed's got it into his head that Cadia is in danger. But his jaw remained shut and his face gave nothing away. He didn't comment on things like that.

Agemmon puffed out his cheeks. 'Think they'll be any good? The penals?'

He withered under the look Kell gave him.

The prison governor's residence was set in a low valley which offered a little shelter from the gales that plagued the planet. A simple barricade of ice and ditches formed a square about the prefabricated complex. From a single

watchtower flew an aquila flag, and the banner of House Kasky: two white hands clasped in friendship. The metal struts of the watchtower had not been cleared of icicles for a month or more. The only sign of life was a flickering strip light and a plume of sooty black smoke coming from a heating duct. Kell had seen a number of complexes like this on far-flung worlds. They were all the same, designed to support life in the worst of conditions: a tiny top floor of hab units, with a vast system below the ice comprising of heating and ventilation works, store rooms, freezers and bunkers that could keep the inhabitants alive for decades.

Blendal pulled his Chimera up behind Creed's. Kell was first out and into the biting air. He dropped onto the ice with a dull crunch, laspistol ready, while the other Cadians formed a semicircle about Creed as he strode down his vehicle's ramp. The general seemed oblivious to the precision of the troops, but Kell was not. He watched each man and he was pleased, though he didn't show it. They were, after all, men of his own Cadian Eighth.

'They should be expecting us,' Creed said, pulling his greatcoat closed and starting up the broad rockcrete steps to the prefab doorway. As they approached, the blast doors gave a low sneeze of hydraulics and began to slide open. A tall woman stepped out. She wore a long coat of purple silk-velvet astrakhan shako. Behind her stood four penal guards dressed in heavy black greatcoats, with rebreathers and pump-action short-barrelled shotguns. Not very friendly, Kell thought, but he kept his mouth closed. The galaxy was full of populations who had spent too long in isolation.

'Welcome to Lost Hope,' the woman called out in an imperious voice. 'I am Governor Irena Kasky, of the House Kasky.'

Kell saluted. He'd overheard enough of Creed's communications to know that the Kaskys claimed to be descended from an ancient family of rogue traders. The sector was full of their scions. They bought up hereditary positions by the system-load. Why any of them would want to run a penal colony, Kell had no idea.

Creed saluted. 'I am General Creed of the Cadian Eighth, commander of the Imperial forces in this sector.'

'It is an honour, General Creed. Come inside.' She stood aside to let the Cadians enter. Kell counted them all in, then looked up and realized she was staring at him. Or rather at his equipment. 'Are all of those entirely necessary?' she asked.

Kell never went anywhere without his power fist, laspistol and a brace of

grenades. He shrugged. 'The galaxy is a dangerous place.'

'Clearly,' she said. 'This way please.'

Agemmon gave Kell a wink as if to say he had caught the eye of the local lady. The sergeant's broad jaw betrayed nothing in return. He gave a slight inclination of his head.

'Inside, trooper,' he growled.

Kell kept his arms behind his back as they followed Governor Kasky down the corridor. The complex had the shabby, lived-in air of an Imperial troop carrier after a long warp jump. There was dust in the corners, water stains down the walls, and an old notice board with yellowed signs, long since out of date.

They stopped at what appeared to be Kasky's office. Outside was a roster list, a poster of an Imperial Guardsman with the words *Stay Alert, Stay Alive* printed underneath, and a picture of Saint Celestine, which appeared, blasphemously, to have been used as a target for darts.

Kell sniffed, and Kasky's cheeks coloured.

'Shall we go inside?' she said. 'We can talk there.'

'A good idea,' Creed said. 'Kell, with me.'

Kasky gave him a look. 'Does he follow you everywhere?'

'Yes,' said Creed. 'Yes, he does.'

The walls of Kasky's chambers were hung with rich carpets, the floor was strewn with cushions, and one end of the room was given over to a vast bed. There was a silver ewer of water. She poured each of them a glass and handed them out. 'It's fresh,' she said.

Creed waited for her to drink first. She did, ostentatiously. Kell refused, and stood smartly by the door as Creed pulled up an ornate velvet chair and started to talk in a low voice. It took about thirty seconds for Kasky's voice to rise. 'You want what? No. It is unacceptable!'

Kell couldn't hear what Creed was saying clearly, but he could guess.

'There are always problems!' Kasky said. There was a long pause. 'General Creed, my family has invested...' she stopped and looked for the right words. 'I... I have tithes to deliver. You cannot just come here and take my prisoners. I have my superiors too, you know.'

The general, evidently, was not budging. Kasky stood up and tried a different tack. 'Can you even fit ten thousand prisoners on your ship? Oh.' At last she said, 'Not all the prisoners are fit. Some have gone, well, mad, during their incarceration. Maybe you should go to check on them. You would not want to

take some of them on board any ship.’

Creed nodded and stood up, raising his voice for Kell to hear. ‘I understand. I am in a hurry, so I think the best thing is for us to go and sort through them. We would not want anything untoward to happen on ship, after all.’ He turned away from Kasky and winked at Kell.

‘Coats on,’ Kell said as he strode out. ‘We’re going to see the new recruits!’

There was a palpable air of disappointment as the men knocked back their cups of fresh water, but within a moment they had slung their lasguns and were standing ready at the door.

‘You will understand if I do not join you,’ Kasky said as they assembled just inside the entrance doors. ‘I need to communicate this information urgently to my family.’

‘Of course,’ Creed said. He gave Kell a look that implied that the less time they had to spend with Kasky the better.

‘There are guards at the hangars, about five kilometres away. They will meet you down there. They won’t be hard to find – there are only two roads on Lost Hope. Adel!’ she called. ‘Can you go with our guests and make sure they reach the hangars?’

Adel was a skinny man with patches of ginger stubble and pale blue eyes. He seemed a little giddy with the prospect of someone new to talk to. ‘Yes, ma’am.’

‘Take them to the prison camp,’ ordered Kasky. ‘They want to sort through the prisoners for those suitable.’

The man put out a hand. ‘I’m Adel. I’m the plant chief.’ He nodded towards their Chimeras as the blast doors shut behind them. The vehicles were still wearing their mottled brown and beige desert camouflage from the Besana campaign. ‘Didn’t have time to whitewash them, eh?’

Kell had the suspicion that he was talking to an idiot. ‘No,’ he said slowly. ‘But then, we’re not expecting trouble.’

Adel laughed, ‘No, and why should you?’ He rubbed his hands together. ‘Well, let’s get going.’

The prison camp was situated next to the promethium fields, where derricks were black against the sky and long, low hangars were half-buried with snow. Work seemed to have stopped for the day, and a company of about twenty guards were waiting around a burning barrel, hands outstretched or thrust deep into pockets. They were a hard-faced bunch with long knives, a variety of shotgun patterns, autopistols, rebreathers, and black shakos, which must have been a

House Kasky thing. They gave their hands a last rub as they left the barrel and walked across to where the Chimeras were idling. Adel waved a brief greeting. He did not speak to them, but stamped his feet as he led them down the broad rockcrete steps to the first hangar doors and stopped before the interlocking steel blast doors. The black spray-painted lettering was flaking with the cold. *Grubhut 01*, it read.

‘You sure want to see them?’ he asked.

Kell nodded. ‘That’s why we’re here.’ He turned to the troopers. ‘Safeties off. Just in case.’

The doors rolled slowly back. The hangar stretched into darkness. There was no sign of the convicts. Adel banged on the doors with his electro-goat. There was a hollow metallic ring.

‘Up, dogs!’ he shouted.

There was no response.

Kell and Creed exchanged looks and together they strode into the hangar. The deeper they went the stronger the stench of sour, sweaty, unwashed bodies became. Someone behind them flicked a switch and lumen strips flickered to life overhead. The harsh light revealed a crowd of hundreds, crouching together for warmth. ‘They’ve come again,’ a voice said.

‘Shhh!’ said another.

‘Are those Guardsmen?’ asked a third. ‘Listen!’

Kell felt disgust. *They’re barely worth shooting*, he thought.

Creed stopped, hands on hips, and stared at them. His disappointment was palpable. He needed killers, not whipped dogs.

‘Look at you,’ Creed called out. ‘You have sunk as low as men can sink. And you will die here on Lost Hope, sooner or later. Like this. On this Emperor-forsaken hole. But I offer you a chance of redemption.’

There was a muted response. ‘Shh!’ one of the men said. ‘Listen!’

Creed called out again. ‘I am offering you something very precious, a chance few men get. Do you want to make your peace with the Emperor?’

The heap of bodies began to break apart. One man came forward on his knees, tears streaking his face. ‘Take me from this hell!’ he hissed reaching for Creed. Kell drew his pistol, but Creed raised a hand. ‘Give me a gun and I will atone for my sins!’

Soon all those that could were coming forward on their knees. They were like animated corpses, shuffling forward into the light. They were not desperate, Kell thought, they were *thankful*. He felt his skin tingle. He’d seen Creed do this

before, turn fleeing cowards into men who would take a las-round to the heart and still keep fighting. But always before it had been in the madness of defeat, with the ordnance exploding about them and the mad flare of las-fire strobing Creed's ash-streaked face. But here, in this dark, cold, forsaken pit, men – starved, broken, inhuman – were lifting their hands up to thank him for the chance to die a glorious death. A death worth having.

Despite everything, Sergeant Kell felt pride.

Creed gave Kell a curt nod and lowered his voice. 'We'll take them all. Any who can hold a gun. Keep them here until the lander arrives. I'll see what transports they have to get them all up to the space port. We'll pack them in as tight as we need to. Burn their clothes, shave their heads, delouse them all. We'll make sure they get a good meal.' He paused. 'I don't like the way they've been treated here. I have a bad feeling about this place.'

Kell saluted.

'Adel,' Creed said as he marched out. 'I'm going straight back to call my ship. Take Sergeant Kell to the other hangars. He will finish up here.'

They took the hangars in threes to get through them more quickly.

'Make it look like you're sorting through them,' Kell said to Sergeant Tarloc, 'but we'll take the lot, unless they're really mad. Don't leave any here with these scum.'

Tarloc nodded, and led his two men off to see the last batch.

'This is the Corrections unit,' Adel said as he led them to the last structure, much like the others but about half the size. There was a single door, set into the blast shutters. Adel tapped a code into a datapad and the door unlocked. He motioned the Guardsmen to go in. Troopers Hesk and Luord went first, and Tarloc followed.

Hesk hit the lumen switch, and the lights came on from the back, revealing a long chamber of cages. 'They're all empty,' Tarloc said, turning back.

Adel was standing in the doorway, leaning casually against the doorpost. 'Yes,' he said. 'Funny that.'

'Where are the penals?'

Adel grinned. 'I think you killed them,' he said. 'On Besana.'

Tarloc glanced at Hesk and stepped forward to shove Adel out the way, but Adel lowered his shotgun from his shoulder to point straight at Tarloc's face.

'Quit frekking around,' Tarloc said.

'Don't give me orders,' Adel said, and fired. Point blank, both barrels.

Sergeant Tarloc was dead before he hit the ground. Trooper Luord left a long red smear down the hangar door. Hesk lay on the ground, moaning in pain. He had been hit in the side of the face. Adel walked casually up and kicked him hard in the ribs. Hesk glared up at the man, his one good eye filled with anger and hatred. He tried to reach for his fallen lasgun, but Adel kicked it away.

‘No, no, no,’ he said as if he were scolding a naughty child. He put the barrel of his gun to the side of the Cadian’s head and fired.

Adel was whistling as he arrived at Grubhut 07. His men were wiping their long knives clean.

‘Done?’ he called out. They pointed down to the floor where three Cadians lay, freshly butchered. Their blood was bright against the snow, the red puddles already freezing. ‘Good work,’ Adel said, and climbed up towards Grubhut 06. He hummed as he went, resting his shotgun on his shoulder and reliving the moment he had shot the Guardsman in the face, relishing the look on his stupid face when he knew he was about to die. He grinned. He liked killing.

‘Got them?’ he called out as he rounded the corner. There were five dead bodies lying on the ground. They were laid out as they had been killed, arms and bodies twisted and bloody and broken. Adel looked again. The dead men were not Cadians. He barely had a moment to curse before a hand clasped his shoulder and spun him around.

His attacker headbutted him, slammed him against a wall, kned him in the crotch, then slammed him against the wall again, a hand so tight about his throat he could barely breath. His nose felt broken, and he gagged on blood as he spat out two teeth. As he blinked away tears, he looked into the indigo-blue eyes of a Cadian. And not just any Cadian, but Colour Sergeant Jarran Kell.

The Cadian ground out the words between clenched teeth. ‘What the frekk is happening here?’ He let the pressure off a fraction. ‘Do you know what happens when I turn this thing on?’

Adel looked down and saw that it wasn’t just a hand clamped about his throat, but Kell’s power fist. He kicked out at his attacker and then felt a sudden searing pain as the power fist’s energy field was activated and his neck fried and came apart.

The stench of cooked skin and blood filled Kell’s nostrils. He let Adel’s smoking body drop to the floor.

Drusus and Odwin had secured the open hangar doors. ‘Anything?’ Drusus said.

Kell shook his head and wiped the gore from his face onto his sleeve. His carapace armour had saved him but the shotgun blasts had torn holes through his extreme hostile environment suit and he was losing heat fast.

‘Here they come,’ Agemmon hissed. Kell could hear the prison guards laughing and chatting as they ambled up the slope. ‘Lots of them.’

Kell and his men exchanged glances. ‘Come!’ the sergeant said. ‘To the Chimeras.’

As the prison guards came around the corner, Drusus slammed the Chimera into full forward and Odwin, in the front gunner’s seat, mumbled the prayer of Righteous Flaming and squeezed the trigger. A great gout of burning promethium blazed towards the traitors. They didn’t stand a chance. The Chimera rumbled over their burning bodies, and Kell, in the turret, tracked those few who had escaped.

The multi-laser whined as the batteries charged. Kell was almost casual about it. He sniffed, aimed, fired. Fist-sized holes were seared through each fleeing man.

‘Got them,’ Kell voxed. ‘I’m going to check on the others.’

Kell’s face was grim when he returned.

‘All dead,’ he said, pulling a less damaged hostile environment jacket on. He dropped down through the turret. ‘Right, let’s get the hell out of here and find out what’s really happening on Lost Hope.’

They found the remains of Creed’s Chimera at the top of the slope. It had fallen into the ditch at the side of the road and tipped onto its side. It had been shot up badly, by an autocannon judging from the damage.

Kell knew what happened when heavy calibre rounds penetrated armour like this. They filled the cabin with molten shards of metal and toxic smoke. It got messy. He peered in through the open top hatch. Jeorg and Fresk had been torn apart. Their blood and guts had frozen to the metal. Poor frekkers. They hadn’t stood a chance.

Blendal was in the front. His head had been shot away. Resko had crawled clear. His throat had been cut, and he had bled out into the snow. There was no sign of Creed. Kell looked about him. The white tundra was blank, silent and empty.

Odwin called out, ‘Sir. I found this.’

It was a thin piece of cloth scrawled with glyphs. Kell recognised them.

‘Anckorites,’ he cursed.

‘The general?’ Agemmon said.

Kell shook his head. ‘He’s not dead,’ he said. ‘He must be over there,’ he said and strode towards the Chimera. There was only one ‘there’ to speak of.

Drusus climbed back into the driver’s seat.

‘So, we attack the governor’s residence? Just the four of us?’

‘Yes,’ Kell said, closing the top hatch. ‘Just the four of us. They won’t know what hit them.’

Ursarkar E. Creed shivered. He was a child again, sitting by the fireside on Cadia, inside his father’s sheiling. Winter had come. The auroks were grunting in their pens as they chewed through the loads of leaf-hay he had helped his father cut in the summer. There was not enough to feed the herd. His father blamed the weather, his mother the spirits that howled through the pylons. His sister said nothing. Ursarkar was seven and he shivered. He didn’t know who to blame.

‘Son, come!’ his father said. His sister gave him a look, but Ursarkar did not need the warning. He had seen how much his father had drunk. He followed the old man’s gaze. Above them, the vast, dark purple and green bruise of the Eye of Terror had risen high in the sky. He did not need to point, but gripped his son’s shoulders too hard, and said simply, ‘I fought there.’

Ursarkar bit his lip to stop himself wincing. He looked up. It did not seem possible to leave the world and travel into the stars and fight.

‘I fought in the stars. I was a Cadian Shock Trooper.’

Ursarkar turned and looked up into his father’s eyes. Dark and unsure, almost guilty, they brimmed with tears for a moment. He wiped the tears away before they could betray him.

Ursarkar put his hand up and touched his father’s face. ‘I will fight there too,’ he said.

‘Good,’ his father said, but he sounded distant. The world went dark and there was a scream. His father and the shieling were gone. The screaming went on. It was his own voice, calling on the shooting to stop.

He was lying under a bed, rockcrete dust in his nose, his mouth, his eyes. He gagged and coughed. His ears were ringing from the explosions. He could not move. There was a weight on his leg. It was his sister. Her eyes were open and staring. Blood trickled from her nostrils. The sight of her dead face shocked him back into understanding, with a sudden terror, that he was eight again, in Kasr

Gallan.

The realisation clutched him like a cold hand. Cultists were padding through the ruins, sniffing for survivors, mumbling their prayers, their sacrificial knives dripping blood. He knew he must not move. He must make no sound. He could not help his sister.

He did not know how long he lay there before he heard the crunch of a footstep entering what remained of the room. A heavy footstep. He held his breath and squeezed his eyes shut. Step by gritty step, the footsteps crossed the room towards him. Great black-booted feet, larger than seemed possible for a human. He did not dare even breathe as the metal frame of the bed was lifted back. He risked a glance.

Above him stood a giant, dressed in gleaming black power armour and swathed in cream-coloured robes that hid his face. He held a pistol in one hand. He reached down and pressed the pistol into Creed's hand. It was a laspistol. Then the warrior spoke to him in a voice that was deep, ancient and lonely...

Creed woke with a start before he heard the words. Not that he had ever forgotten them. He looked around. It was dark and cold, and deathly still. He was at the bottom of a crude shelter, a rough roof of pine branches above his head. His hands were bound. His head ached.

A man squatted over him. Not the armoured warrior of his dream, but a common man: skinny, shaggily bearded, thin, curious. The distinctive blue number of a convict was tattooed across his forehead. The man motioned Creed to silence with his finger.

Creed nodded and looked about him. There were twenty more men, shaggy, crouching low to the ground, three of them carrying lasguns.

He pulled himself up into a seated position and remembered what had happened. He had been sitting in the front of the Chimera, smoking and looking forward to planning the next campaign against Luciver Anckor's fortress on Grettel, when the cabin was suddenly full of smoke and ice and bits of what turned out to be Blendal's head.

Creed had kicked open the Chimera's top hatches, and hauled Gismar out. He was moaning, and it was clear from the bone sticking through his fatigues that his shin had been broken in the crash. Creed was about to start cutting the cloth away to set it straight when he saw dark shapes loping over the ice, shaggy fur capes and prayer strips flapping behind them. Harsh voices whooped and called out to their gods.

Trooper Gismar was solid, reliable. Creed had seen him lose a hand on Besos Nine and still hold a gun emplacement against the greenskins. 'If this is the end, Gismar, there's no one I'd rather have by my side,' Creed said.

Gismar had laughed. 'Don't let Sergeant Kell hear you saying that, sir,' he had croaked. Together they'd put up a stout resistance, but it was clear they were trapped and outnumbered. Creed fired three shots off behind them. They were returned. The Anckorites were working their way around them. There was nothing else for it. He had to think of Cadia, and if he was going to go he'd have to go now. Creed looked about. If he ran along the ditch he might just make that stand of trees.

'Go!' Gismar hissed as he reloaded. 'I'll hold them off.'

'See you on Cadia,' Creed said, looking into Gismar's face. Another one he would always remember.

Gismar looked up and smiled. His spirit was going home first, faster than any starship. He saluted with his bionic hand. 'See you on Cadia, general.'

The Anckorites shouted to one another as Creed burst from the ditch fifty yards away and dashed hard and low for the trees. The cold was raw in his throat. His legs pumped. Las-rounds lanced about him. One went through his greatcoat wings. They fizzed in the cold air about him. But he had grown up on the frigid moors of Cadia, and this felt like his home turf as he outpaced the Anckorites. He threw himself into the trees and rolled to the side, keeping the trunks between him and his pursuers.

He had easily outpaced them, and when he was clear Creed started looking for a way of surviving the night. He had been making this shelter when he had heard a footstep, and turned just in time to see a club descend towards his head. And now here he was, trussed up like a beast ready for slaughter. His captors were a gang of escaped convicts, each with a blue tattoo across their foreheads. The man who squatted next to him stared at his uniform and the name badge sewn into his left breast: Creed.

'You're not one of them,' the man said finally.

Creed shook his head. 'I am not.'

'When did you come to this planet?'

'Last night.'

'I saw your lander. It was a blue star in the sky. Two hours before darkness.'

'That's it.'

'Were the other landers yours as well?'

Creed's mind raced. What other landers?

'No,' he said.

There was a pause. The man had been through Creed's pockets: the contents lay on the ice between them. Ration packs, lho-sticks, a folded map, and his whiteshield cap badge. Creed's pistols were missing.

The man followed Creed's eyes. 'You are a Guardsman,' he said.

Creed nodded.

'Which regiment?'

'Cadian Eighth.'

'Never heard of them.' The man took one of the ration bars and took a bite. He chewed slowly, savouring the flavour. 'I was Guardsman once.'

'Which regiment?'

'Vostroyan Firstborn.'

'Never heard of them,' Creed smiled.

The man gave a low laugh. 'I like you. Are there more of you?'

'More of me? I hope not. I landed with twenty men though. My ship is in orbit and I have thousands there. If I can talk to them I can help you all.'

The man put up a hand. All Creed could hear was the low moan of the wind through the trees, the lonely howl of some hunting beast, and then the distant crack of exploding sap. The man seemed satisfied.

'Who are you?' Creed whispered.

'I am a dead man to my people, my planet, my regiment. Here I am Convict 92497759. But once men called me Sergeant Leder. You think you can help us?'

Creed nodded.

The man held Creed's gaze. He seemed to be thinking. At last he took out his knife and bent over Creed to cut his ties. He helped Creed stand. 'Come,' he said. 'You should meet the others.'

Darkness thickened about them as they trekked through the forest. They walked for nearly an hour. The only sound was the scrape of boots on ice and low voices as they checked the way. Creed was shivering despite his hostile environment suit. The cold was so intense it went straight through to the bone marrow. Leder suddenly stopped at the base of a fallen pine. 'In here,' he said.

The opening was dark and damp. Pine roots brushing against his face. Creed bent down and as he pushed along the short passageway a fine sprinkle of dirt fell down the back of his collar. At last he stepped out into an open chamber and straightened. A smoky tallow flame burnt in the centre of the ice cave.

Creed smelt hot broth, stale sweat and heat.

Leder stood up. 'I have brought someone,' he announced. 'He comes from the Imperium. He wishes to speak to us all.'

They abandoned the Chimera two kilometres from the governor's palace. Kell led Agemmon, Odwin and Drusus across the ice fields. They were quiet, determined. When they sighted the hab complex Kell squatted down, laid out the plan, then said simply, 'Understand?'

The three shock troopers nodded.

'Right,' Kell said. 'Move out.'

The watch tower still appeared to be deserted. They moved with a quiet discipline, covering each other, kneeling, checking they had not been spotted, hurrying on. They dashed across the last stretch of open ground and slid down behind the perimeter bank. Kell peered over the top. He was tormented by the idea that Creed was in there and was pushing them along at a ruthless pace.

All clear, he motioned. They scrambled up, crossing the last thirty feet and ducking down by the side of the buildings. Kell led them along the walls to a hooped metal ladder. He kept his power fist beneath his jacket to stop the batteries from seizing up with the cold. In a moment they were up amongst the lumps, vents and chimney stacks of the hab-complex. At last Kell found what he was looking for. He knelt down, used his hostile environment mitten to dust off the snow and grinned.

Generatorium.

He had to take off the mitten to clamp a melta bomb in place and set the timer.

'Right,' he said, leading them a little way off. He took out his chronometer and counted down quietly. 'Five, four, three, two...' The melta bomb blew.

He pulled his power fist out of his jacket. It fizzed ineffectively. The battery had run low. Odwin shot Drusus a worried look.

'Frekk!' Kell counted to ten and tried once more. The power unit sparked one, two, three times, and at last the fist was coated in a crackling blue light. He plunged it down through the melted hole and peeled back the frozen sheets of metal, widening the breach. He kicked the last panel out. 'Ready?' he asked.

They nodded.

Kell went first, dropping down through the hole.

'Why should we help you?'

The voice rang out through the ice cave. A figure strode towards Creed. His fingers were black with frost bite, one of his eyes was a mess of scar tissue and

an ugly scar ran from forehead to jaw. The other eye burned with hatred as he spat out words.

‘I was sent to this hell for the sins of our commanders, who were cowards. Do you know what they did to us here, the House of Kasky? Their men cut symbols into our flesh. They fed us on our own raw dead. The things they did to us were inhuman. Look at my brother.’ He pointed to one man in the corner of the room. His eyes had been torn out, and his face had been carved with grotesque glyphs and symbols. ‘*That* is what they did to us. So why should we help the Imperium who put us here?’

Creed’s greatcoat hung from his shoulders. He was impassive as the man paced towards him. When he spoke his voice was low and resonant. ‘Because I need you. Because the Imperium needs you... and because I can free you.’

‘Free us from what, greatcoat?’

‘I can free you from *fear*.’ He paused, and let his words sink in. ‘Your struggle here is part of a larger conflict. Great forces are moving. War is coming.’

‘War is always here!’ the other man laughed.

‘This is war on a scale that we have never seen,’ Creed said. ‘What do you know of Luciver Ankor? He is a heretic. An enemy of the Imperium of Mankind. *He* is the man who had this done to your brother. His forces are on this planet. They are desperate and broken and I need your help to finish them. My ship is in orbit. If I can communicate with it, I can call my men down.’

‘How can you call them? The only comms on the planet are at the Governor’s residence.’

‘Then we take it.’

The man snorted derisively. ‘And what do *we* get from helping you?’

‘When the battle is done I will take you with me. From this planet.’

‘For what? To die as penal troopers?’

Creed smiled. ‘We all die,’ he said. ‘But when you do, at least the Golden Throne will shine on you. You will die knowing that the Emperor has forgiven you.’

The man looked at him. His stare was long and hard. ‘Keep your forgiveness. I want only revenge.’ He walked forward and saluted. ‘I am Major Darr Vel.’

Governor Kasky closed the door to her chambers. She was starting to panic.

‘We have to get out of here,’ she said. Her men nodded. She was right, but none of them wanted to go and none of them wanted to stay.

At that moment the complex shook. The lights flickered and went out, and

klaxons began to wail as the secondary generatorium kick-started. ‘*Environmental breach,*’ a voice announced. ‘*Environmental breach.*’

‘Throne!’ she hissed as the door flew from the hinges.

Sergeant Kell shot the two men on either side of Governor Kasky, grabbed her and put the gun to her head. ‘Don’t you dare blaspheme,’ he hissed. ‘Where is he?’

‘Who?’

‘General Creed. You have him. I want him back.’

He had her held tight. ‘He’s dead,’ she hissed. She spoke quickly. ‘I tried to warn you all, but you wouldn’t listen. My men found his body and brought it back. They were attacked by escaped convicts.’

‘Show me!’

Two guards brought a black body bag forward and untied the fastenings. Kell kept his pistol trained on the governor. He looked down for a moment.

‘That’s not him—’ he started, and Kasky turned out of his grasp.

As she twisted free, a giant roared into the room. It was clad in red power armour and the symbol on its shoulder was a black claw. Small horns protruded from its forehead, and its eyes were red flames, its smile a gruesome line of needle sharp teeth. At the Chaos Space Marine’s belt hung five heads, one of them dripping thick blood down his left leg. In his left hand he carried a giant bolter that tracked about the room. Kell started moving. The bolter bucked one, two, three times and with each one a prison guard jumped and danced as the bolt rounds exploded within him, spraying the room with gore.

‘Down!’ Kell shouted.

Odwin was too slow. A bolt round hit him square in the chest and punched him from his feet. A second later his chest exploded. Kell was already throwing himself behind Kasky’s desk. The bolter rounds followed them across the floor, tearing gaping holes into the desk panels. One bolter round went straight through the desk and Drusus alike.

Kell tried to activate his power fist, but the battery was dead again, and the power field fizzled uselessly. ‘Frekk,’ he muttered and fired wildly over the top of the desk as Agemmon lobbed a grenade.

There was a deafening thud. Agemmon kicked a ventilation grate in the wall free. ‘Go!’ Kell hissed as the Space Marine thudded closer. It leered down at him as he pushed Agemmon through the hole and jumped after him.

The roar of bolter shells followed him as he twisted down and round, fell over and over, then suddenly there was open air and he was flying through it. He

landed on top of Agemmon, who grunted. It was pitch black. Whatever room they had fallen into had the feel of a wide open space. In the distance he could hear the hum of a generator turning over quietly. The note changed, as if the thing had sensed them. Kell's skin suddenly prickled. A shape began to form in the darkness.

'Sarge...' said Agemmon warily.

Kell looked up and as his eyes accustomed themselves to the darkness he started to make out a vast metallic shadow rearing over them. Agemmon's hand clutched at his sleeve.

'What in the name of the Golden Throne is *that*?'

'We have what we steal,' Sergeant Leder said as he threw back the tarpaulin. 'It's not much.'

Creed inspected their cache of weapons. They had a few autoguns, carbines, an antique las-lock and an assortment of knives, clubs and fire-hardened spears. Leder handed the weapons out. One between two. That was all they had. The last man lifted a battered old lasgun from the pile and held it up.

'Not bad. Mars pattern,' he declared, then checked the ammo pack. 'Thirty shots left.' It would have to do.

'Make them count,' Creed told him and turned to Leder. The scouts had come back from the hangars. 'Any word of my men?'

'Yes. But there was a strange tale to tell. The prison guards were dead. All dead, and seven of your men. The Chimera you spoke of was gone. The scouts who are watching the compound say it was abandoned a few kilometres north of the Kasky Compound.'

'No sign of any survivors?'

Leder shook his head.

Creed nodded and tried to make sense of it all. He put his hand on Leder's shoulder and spoke confidentially. 'Sergeant Leder. Your men took my pistols when I came into your company.'

Leder lifted his coat. In his belt were two pistols. 'Which do you want?'

'Both.'

'Both?'

'Yes,' Creed said.

'You need two when men are lacking?'

'I need them both,' Creed repeated. There was a moment's pause. 'They are my weapons. They have value to me.'

Leder pulled out the more ornate of the two, a fine piece, designed for an officer, with brass fittings to the handle and an aquila on the barrel.

‘And the other,’ Creed said.

The other was an old Mars-pattern model, battered and scratched. A faded serial number was stencilled in small white letters across one side. ‘This one?’ Leder said.

‘Yes. That one.’ Creed did not wait but took it from his hand. ‘I’ve had it a very long time,’ he said as he checked the grip and the battery pack, and that the barrel was clear, and then thrust it back into his right holster. ‘And it has saved my life more times than I can remember. Today it might save yours.’ He turned to the men. ‘All ready?’

They were ready. He could see it in their eyes.

‘Leder, will you lead us on the right path. Remember, men,’ Creed said as they filed out of the ice cave, ‘the Emperor is watching.’

They climbed for two hours through the scattered pine forests, picking their way as the sun slowly lifted from the horizon and grew bright enough to cast long shadows over the snow. At one point Leder put his hands up and stopped. Creed was at his shoulder. ‘Something ahead,’ he said. He crouched down and seemed to sniff the air. ‘I will go forward and see.’

Creed took out his battered old pistol just in case, but a few minutes later Leder came back with Darr Vel.

The one-eyed warrior had lost none of his anger. ‘I have brought as many men as I could. You have seen those in the hangars. They all wanted to come, but they are too weak. They would have died of exposure. I brought only the strongest. There are a hundred of them. They have called themselves the Lost Hoppers, though you have given them hope. They have no weapons, but their hands. No fear, but of failure. No cause, but yours.’

Creed squatted in the snow with Darr Vel and Leder as he planned the attack. They did not have the troops, the intelligence or the equipment he needed. They did not have time to lose. It felt good putting plans together.

‘They are few and we are many,’ he told the huddled men. They nodded. ‘Have faith in the Emperor and He will protect. Our numbers are our chief weapon.’ He grinned and they grinned back at him. ‘Remember. Forwards, men, always forwards!’

Creed took Darr Vel aside and gave him quick instructions on his diversionary attack. At the end he had the one-eyed warrior repeat them to him.

‘Right,’ he said. ‘Do you think you can do that?’

Darr Vel nodded. ‘Of course we can.’

Creed clasped his hands. He spoke in a low urgent voice. ‘I need you there.’

Darr Vel gripped his hands back just as hard. ‘Then we shall be there.’

They picked their way down the slopes. At last they came to rest half a kilometre from the compound perimeter. Creed was tense as he waited for the appointed time. There was fifteen kilometres still to go when there was a dull, distinctive explosion.

‘Damn!’ Creed cursed. He threw himself down. Smoke rose from the compound. But all was eerily silent. There was no sign of Darr Vel’s men. Whatever had happened was not linked to the Lost Hoppers. Creed could not stand the tension of waiting. It was as good a distraction as any.

‘Up!’ Creed commanded. ‘Up!’ The men leapt to their feet, clutching their weapons, and scrambled to the lip of the ditch. Plans never survived contact with the enemy. It was in the chaos of battle that Creed was at his best.

He was fast, decisive, and most importantly, he thought, touching his pistol butt, he was lucky.

‘What is the madman doing?’ Darr Vel said as he saw Creed’s greatcoated figure launching the attack from the heights. ‘Lost Hoppers forward!’ They were with him in a moment, scrambling to the lip of the hollow.

It was a desperate charge across the ice flats. They were halfway across when a heavy stubber opened up. Men grunted as they were hit. Creed could hear their bodies slamming into the ice like dumped sacks. He kept running. The ground was treacherous.

Creed’s men had weapons. They took the stubber out as Darr Vel’s Lost Hoppers stormed the compound. The defenders were a handful of prison guards. They seemed scared and witless as the tortured men gave vent to years of pain and tore them apart with their bare hands.

‘Here!’ Creed said, as they met at the compound gates. He tossed him a fresh battery pack. ‘Keep moving,’ he said. ‘We have to get inside.’

Darr Vel and Leder shouted to their men to gather whatever they could from the dead.

‘You have the bomb?’ Darr Vel shouted.

Creed handed him a melta bomb. The cold metal stuck to Vel’s hands. The convict ignored the pain as he slammed the bomb home and ducked back behind the entranceway. When the smoke had cleared the blast doors looked like a giant

fist had punched them through.

Inside the corridor a squad of Anckorites put up a stout resistance, but the Lost Hoppers outnumbered them ten to one. They took the facility by weight of numbers, storming each room, moving forward, always forward. As they cleared a storeroom, five Anckorites ran round a corner, and barely had a moment to react before Creed shot one clean through the forehead and then struck down the next two with repeated shots to the chest.

‘Guard chamber!’ Darr Vel shouted.

A frag grenade bounced down the corridor. It blew short, but Darr Vel was out and sprinting down the corridor. He clubbed the foe. The second had a belly full of shrapnel and was trying to reach his las-rifle. Darr Vel kicked him so hard his neck snapped. The third swung at him, and the major ducked and shoulder barged him. There was the whizz of an autogun round ricocheting off the wall as he plunged his knife into the Anckorite’s warm belly and sawed his guts open.

The Lost Hoppers hit the compound from every direction, and took each level, room by room. They blasted routes in where there were none, kept moving forward despite the opposition. At the top of a long metal staircase bolter rounds exploded about Creed. Shrapnel grazed his cheek.

Leder ducked back behind the bulkhead. ‘There is *something* there. Something I have not seen before.’

Creed nodded. There was always something more to kill. ‘Forward,’ he commanded.

‘We can’t!’ Leder shouted over the bark of more bolter fire. ‘Have you seen the size of it?’

Creed nodded. He had seen Space Marines before, and this was one, twisted and tainted and deadly, a monster in transhuman form.

‘It is evil,’ he said. ‘We must destroy it.’

‘They won’t follow me.’

‘They will,’ Creed told him, but he could see that Leder had lost his nerve. Fear overcame many men in the face of such unnatural horror. Creed turned to look the survivors in the eye. His look offered death and pain, but also victory over the enemies of mankind. ‘Men of the Imperium, will you join me?’ he asked, his voice hoarse.

Darr Vel stepped forward. The survivors about him nodded. They were bloodied, weary, fearless. Leder swallowed and nodded.

‘Right,’ Creed said, and flipped the setting of his laspistols to full power.

Darr Vel ripped a frag grenade's pin out with his teeth, tossed it along the corridor and held up his fingers ready for the charge.

'For Cadia!' Creed shouted. As the grenade exploded Darr Vel was up and running, the Lost Hoppers behind him.

Darr Vel's leg gave way in a bloody mess and he roared with frustration. A bolt round struck Leder's chest and tore a gaping hole as it exited his back. The Lost Hoppers raced forward as the bolter spat fire, and they danced a macabre dance as each took a bolt round. They fell almost as fast as they came forward, and the Traitor Space Marine laughed as he slammed another magazine home. He was half way through the second magazine when his laughter began to fail. There were too many of the Lost Hoppers and he was not killing them fast enough.

Creed was amongst the crowd of charging men. His voice was pushing them all on, raging against the heresy. 'Forward in the name of the Emperor of Mankind!'

Men were screaming to either side of him. The stock of his ornate pistol was hard in his hand. One eye was closed. The world was just the small circle of his pistol's target. Wherever it went it was filled by the size of his foe. His first shot fizzled against the thing's breast plate. The second left a pale scar on the power armour. He fired with such speed that the laspistol grew warm in his hand. The Lost Hoppers fell away about him. But still the rage drove him and those about him on.

The Space Marine recognised this and singled him out. The wide black barrel of the bolter trailed smoke as it pointed at him. Creed wondered about the expression behind the Chaos Space Marine's visor – doubt? Joy? Amusement?

Creed pulled his trigger again, but the pistol did not fire. His mouth went dry. The creature laughed.

'I was counting the shots,' it said, the voice harsh and metallic.

Fear clutched at Creed. For a moment he was a boy again, in the ruins of Kasr Gallan, blood on his cheeks, dead bodies lying all about him, and a power-armoured figure reaching down.

Pure rage flared within him, divine, white, incandescent rage, and he drew his combat knife and charged. The space marine laughed and stepped forward to swat him away. He backhanded Creed with a blow of such force that the Cadian was thrown violently against the wall.

Creed ducked back as the Chaos Space Marine activated a whining chainblade and swept it down. It opened his face up from his brow to his jaw. Blood blinded him. Creed reached down and pulled his battered old pistol from its holster. *Cadia*, he kept thinking.

‘Your head will hang from my belt, Cadian,’ the metallic voice rumbled. The chainblade whined and Creed braced as the blade came closer to sever his head.

‘Cadia!’ Creed spat, and pointed his pistol and fired.

The thing that held him laughed as it tore the pistol from his hand.

‘Too late, Cadian,’ it hissed.

He smiled. ‘My name is—’

‘*Creed!*’ Jarran Kell crashed through the wall, roaring his friend’s name. He seized the Chaos Space Marine’s chainsword hand, power fist-wreathed fingers driving inexorably through armour, flesh and bone.

He tore the hand from the arm, and the towering thing snarled, swinging with the other hand. Kell caught the other hand in his power fist. He could barely hold it still, even as he crushed the limb into another mess of blood and gore and burning power armour. It was like struggling with a statue. With a final effort Kell closed his fingers and tore the ruined arm free with a screech of power armour servos snapping and flailing. The thing swung its stump at Kell, and he ducked as he punched low through its power armour, grabbed whatever organs he could find, and pulled them out the front. The creature shuddered and fell to its knees.

Jarran Kell was panting heavily as he stood almost face to face with the thing. He pulled out his laspistol. He was formal about these things. He put his pistol to the thing’s head and said, ‘In the Name of the Holy Emperor of Mankind.’

Then he fired.

Agemmon stooped low over Creed.

‘Sir!’ he shouted. ‘It’s the general.’

Creed’s could feel blood running down his face, but he lived. He cursed as he tried to push Agemmon’s hands off, but his movements were feeble. At last he struggled to his feet and cast about for support.

‘Jarran, is that you?’

Kell gripped his friend’s hands. ‘What happened?’ he asked.

Creed waved a hand at the Chaos Space Marine’s brutalised corpse. ‘That. Thank you, Jarran. Come, we have much to do. Cadia is at risk. I have to stop Anckor, and then get back there and make them see.’

‘You could have been killed!’ Kell said.

Creed forced a smile. ‘We all die in the service of the Emperor eventually. Listen to me, Jarran, he’s here. I’m sure of it. Luciver Anckor is here. It’s where he was drawing his troops from. He had the same idea as me. He’s clever. Very

clever. And he clearly has help.'

Kell held up a finger, which still bore the traces of the distinctive blue cad-ore dust of Besana. 'We found his ship down below. I tore out the controls. If he's here, he's trapped.'

Creed laughed. 'Good work, my friend! But we *must* get him. We must know what is going on. With me.'

The temperature was dropping rapidly as they pushed through to the back of the complex. The female voice kept repeating, '*Environmental breach. Environmental breach.*' Ice was starting to form on the walls and ceiling.

The few remaining Anckorites were quickly overwhelmed by the tide of Lost Hoppers, who laughed as they killed their foes. They came to a door, which opened up to the ice.

'This way.' Kell called, venturing out into the cold air.

A hundred paces before them, five giants in red power armour stood in a circle and at the centre of that ring, like a sacrifice, stood a man.

He was robed in a cape of white fur, great brass bells hanging from his shoulders.

A hood was drawn low over his face and as Kell approached, he turned his face towards them. Kell stopped dead. It was not the face of a man, but a crude imitation with heavy brows, deep-set eyes, an aquiline nose and a mouth wide open as if in a long cry of grief. His hair was alive, like serpents. His eyes burned in the shadows of the face like two points of red fire. But the light was not angry. It was almost sad, longing, melancholy.

Creed arrived.

'It's over, Anckor,' he said. He shouted back to the men. 'Kill him, quickly.'

Agemmon put his rifle to his cheek and aimed, but the heretical Space Marines stepped close and shielded Anckor with their bodies. As Kell started forward there was a sudden roar from above. The ground shook and the air was full of flames. There was a bright flash and an explosion.

'Down!' Kell pushed Creed back as the air turned hot on their cheeks.

When the fire had passed, Kell saw a metal craft, a pod on insectoid legs, had landed above the circle of figures. Like a spider, the thing lowered its belly over the enemy, and as the legs straightened the Space Marines and Anckor were gone, swallowed up within the vessel.

Kell fired las-rounds as the pod's rockets reignited and it launched into the air. It rose slowly at first, and then was just a bright spark in the sky, rising out of

sight. Kell stopped shooting.

Calm returned to Lost Hope, the night broken by the coughs of the men, and the insistent klaxons within the complex. Creed sighed. 'He is gone. Again.'

Kell turned, furious and disbelieving, but Creed had taken out his lho-stub, and was tapping the charred unlit end into his palm.

'Is that all you can say?' Kell shouted.

Creed lit his stub and puffed. He seemed pleased.

'It's not all bad, Jarran. We have our penal legion, and we've tested their mettle. We've closed off the Anckorites' troop supply. And we know that we are close on his tail.'

The surviving Lost Hopers marched four abreast up the lander's wide rear-ramps. In the two days since Anckor's escape, their clothes had been burned, their heads shaved and they had been dressed in uniforms of penal legion blue.

Creed had just come from inspecting the lander that Kell had found deep in the vaults of the compound. His head had been bandaged and one eye – bruised and discoloured – peered out. Still he puffed slowly on a lho-stick. A fire was started nearby as men poured oil on the bodies of Kasky and her guards, and the Anckorites. Thick black smoke drifted skywards as the oil caught light.

'What will you tell House Kasky?' asked Kell.

Creed lit the end of his lho-stub with long slow puffs. 'I will suggest to them that they ought to provide me with more resources, or I will report their niece's activities here. It won't take them long to decide, I'm sure.'

As they stood some of the Lost Hopers broke off and started towards Creed.

There was a brief scuffle. 'Back!' their wardens shouted, brandishing their electro-goats.

'Stop!' Creed called across. 'Let them through.' He walked over to meet them.

'So, this is it. You're shipping us all out,' Darr Vel called out. He was on crutches.

'I am bringing you aboard my ship,' Creed said.

'Do you know how few of us are left?'

'I do, but there are plenty more men here to join you.'

'Are you going to free us?'

'I cannot do that, Major Darr Vel. I promised to free you from fear. I promised to take you from this planet. I promised you all a death worth living for. I keep my word.'

'That's it, then?'

‘For now. I will make sure you are all well cared for. As for your sentences, I’m afraid I cannot change them. You will die. But in the Emperor’s service you can choose how you die, and how you are remembered.’

Darr Vel saluted. It was an awkward gesture.

Creed saluted back.

‘What will you tell Warmaster Ryse?’ Kell said as they watched the last of the Lost Hoppers file up into the lander.

‘That I have located Luciver Anckor, and have raised three regiments of a penal legion, and expect to conclude the campaign within, say, two Terran months.’

There was a long pause. Kell couldn’t stop himself. He drew in a deep breath, and said, ‘What was that thing, sir?’

‘What thing?’

‘You know. That thing I killed.’ There was a long pause. Creed did not answer. ‘It looked like a Space Marine.’

There was a long pause. ‘It was, after a fashion.’

‘So why...’

Creed’s look stopped him. Creed took a puff of his lho-stub. ‘Jarran,’ he said. ‘You do not want to know. That you have been this long in the Astra Militarum and not encountered such horrors before is a wonder, but please believe me when I say that *you do not want to know*.’

‘Why?’

Creed stopped and looked at Kell. His face seemed strained. He looked tired again, sleepless. ‘Because my friend, sometimes ignorance is strength. And I need you strong for the storm that is coming.’

The lander started its engines, and they walked a little way back as the ripples of heat began to spill out towards them. It lifted from the ground, and the two of them stood as the roar of it faded, and it dwindled to being just a bright star in the morning sky. Creed offered him a lho-stub. Kell shook his head.

‘You did well, Colour Sergeant Kell. You almost trapped them, just as they trapped us. We will pour vengeance on them, you and I. We will clear up this mess, then I can speak to High Command. Personally.’

‘You really think Cadia is in danger?’

Creed’s eye was deep Cadian indigo. It stared out from a face discoloured: purple, blue, yellow. It gave Kell an odd feeling, as if he were looking into the swirling bilious maelstrom of the Eye of Terror.

‘I am sure of it,’ Creed said. ‘And I have to be there.’

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Justin D Hill is the author of the Warhammer 40,000 short stories 'Last Step Backwards', 'Lost Hope' and 'The Battle of Tyrok Fields', following the adventures of Lord Castellan Ursarkar E. Creed, as well as 'Truth Is My Weapon', and the Warhammer tales 'Golgfag's Revenge' and 'The Battle of Whitestone' for Black Library.

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