

**WARHAMMER**  
**40,000**



**THE BATTLE OF**  
**TYROK FIELDS**

**AN URSARKAR CREED STORY BY**  
**JUSTIN D HILL**

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# CONTENTS

Cover

The Battle of Tyrok Fields - Justin D Hill

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# THE BATTLE OF TYROK FIELDS

Justin D Hill

'Damn it, Creed!' Major Janka of the Cadian 840th was angry. 'There's no point being right if no one listens to you!'

Janka and his companion reached the flight deck of the *Excubitoi Castellum*. The pride of Cadia, the Capitol Imperialis was a behemoth of steel and brass, and had been the governor of Cadia's personal transport since – well, for as long as anyone could remember.

Ursarkar E. Creed – Lord General of the Cadian Eighth regiment of the Astra Militarum and newly-appointed Castellan of Kasr Rorzann – stopped as a flight of eight heavy Thunderbolt fighters, in Cadian field grey, roared overhead. They tipped their wings in a salute and the vast bronze horns of the *Excubitoi Castellum* blasted in response. About them came the answering horns of the seven escorting Leviathans. From their lofty position, the sounds seemed distant and tinny in comparison.

The breeze tugged at Creed's greatcoat. He stared out across the vast flats of the Tyrok Fields where they faded into the fens, a misty green line obscuring the southern horizon. On the landing fields were neat squares and columns of men, armour, tented camps: the preparations for warfare on a planetary scale. His mind drifted back to the briefing hours before, and how he had interrupted General Gruber as the governor's strategy was laid out. It had been neat, precise and too damn predictable, and Creed hadn't minced his words. General Gruber had peered through his monocle and sneered. 'What do you know, *Castellan* Creed?'

Creed slammed the guard rail with an open palm. 'They're idiots!'

'They're following Governor Porelska's orders.'

'Porelska is an idiot! Look at this place. He's packed the *Excubitoi* with bean counters. Have you ever seen so many equerries? All horsehair plumes and lines of medals for wars they never fought in. Damn it. They're sitting in the corridors. You can't go anywhere without some middle-ranking clerk trailing his calculations in your face. They wouldn't know a bayonet from a fish knife.'

He slammed the rail twice more in his fury.

'Well, you didn't have to tell the governor quite so bluntly,' Janka said, absent-mindedly polishing the steel part of his skull with his cuff. The major had taken a head wound putting down a rebellion on Enceladus. The steel replacement was supposed to have been temporary, but that was seven years ago. Janka had been in the field ever since. 'What could the rest of them do but shut you down?'

Creed turned to his friend. 'Janka,' he said quietly, 'this is too serious. This is *Cadia*.' The centre of the landing zone was still being cleared for tomorrow. It was a smudge of smoke and activity. 'We – the men and women of Cadia – we are the only thing that holds the enemy back.' Creed turned away, slammed the rail again and cursed into the wind.

'You have to be politic,' said Janka.

'Not even Ryse would support me in public. I've been telling him for three years now and all he's been fussing about is his crusade. Now look at it! Deucalia has fallen, we've lost Besana. Luciver Anckor has not been caught. The whole thing is,' he paused, then said, '*chaos*.'

Janka gave him a warning look. It wasn't a word that should be spoken.

'Sorry.' Creed put a hand to his head. 'But no one gives a damn about Warmaster Ryse's precious legacy, because the whole Imperium is now creaking. On Cadia we get shipments regularly, but remember Deucalia? We used to get supplies every two months. Then it was three. These little changes add up on the front line. You know that! Porelska is out of his depth. He's been governor so long he's gone soft.'

Another warning look. Soft was not something often said of a Cadian.

Creed sighed. 'Well. Not soft. Just... out of touch.'

Janka inspected his cuff.

'Did you hear about Belisar?' Creed asked.

Janka shook his head.

'It's bad.'

'How bad?'

'Bad,' Creed said.

An hour later, Creed and Colour Sergeant Jarran Kell were sitting in the back of an Arvus lander. It had recently been ferrying recaff, judging by the smell and the fine black dust on the floor. It was hardly the kind of transport that the governor of Cadia normally bestowed upon his generals. But then these were clearly not normal times.

Kell sniffed. 'So,' he said, 'what did you do to deserve this?'

Creed said nothing.

Kell mimicked Warmaster Ryse's baritone boom, something he usually only did to entertain the junior officers. 'Young Creed, you're an arrogant whippersnapper. As punishment, you'll deliver a shipment of recaff for me.'

Creed shook his head. 'I told Governor Porelska that his plans were pathetically incompetent. And I told Lord General Maximus Gruber that his strategy was so needlessly precise that a single broken down battle tank could throw it off course. And I told them that we are facing an onslaught that has been years, decades, perhaps centuries in the planning.'

Kell said nothing.

Creed closed his eyes as he recalled the details. 'The Malin's Reach uprising. The Guild cultists. Morten Quay. Aurent. Moab.'

Kell had never heard of any of these places. But it didn't matter, events had an odd way of proving Creed right. But still... he'd been predicting a major attack on the Cadian Gate for years now. Kell sniffed again. There were a lot of pressures on Creed. In the last years of the Deucalion Crusade, Warmaster Ryse had kept the general close by his side. The warmaster had leant heavily on the younger commander, putting much of the crusade under his direct command. Some of the junior officers had even whispered that Creed should be in charge, not Ryse.

Creed had put a stop to that talk.

The Arvus bucked as it encountered some turbulence, but Creed didn't seem to notice. The general lay back, rolled up an empty sack and used it as a pillow.

'Wake me when we get home,' he said.

Home was Kasr Rorzann, a spear of rockcrete, ceramite, gun-gargoyles and laser defence batteries. Set on granite crags surrounding landing fields, the foundations of its central tower were as deep as those of the mountain itself. The ancient ramparts were buttressed with gun-turrets, vaulted landing zones and sally-ports with armoured blast doors wide enough for three Lemman Russ battle

tanks to drive out, guns blazing.

It was one of the twelve cathedrals of war that guarded the landing fields of Kasr Tyrok, the seat of one of the twelve castellans of Cadia. Each fortress was the home of one of the founding regiments of Cadian shock troops.

Kasr Rorzann was the citadel of the Cadian Eighth, the Warmongers.

A vast V-shaped redoubt had been thrown about the base of the tower, and it was on top of the central gate that the Arvus came to rest with a clang of landing gear and the rusty scrape and thud of its ramp.

Kell was first out. *Clear*, he signalled.

They crossed the empty flagstones towards the gates of the tower. A squad of kasrkin in green, white and black camo carapace armour came smartly to attention. Creed was expected. His equerry, Castor, was waiting just inside the foot-thick ceramite gates. Castor was dressed in the same simple camo pattern. Creed was not one to waste men's time on polishing brass buttons and shining boots. As long as they stood firm and could shoot and reload faster than their comrades he was happy.

Castor's breath steamed in the vast empty space as he handed Creed the latest reports, sealed inside the official red leather folders. Creed pulled the sheaf of papers out without comment. His lho-stub was unlit in his fingers as he flicked through the top pages.

Kell tried to read the two men's faces.

'Anything important?' Creed asked.

'More of the same,' Castor said.

Creed studied the sheaf of reports. They were all stamped Code Vermillion. Everything was Utmost Secrecy these days.

'I'll be in my office,' Creed said.

'What is it?' Kell said as he heard a tentative knock on his door.

One of his junior sergeants came in. 'Sergeant Fesk,' the young man saluted. 'Seventh Company.'

Kell stared at him for a moment. 'Ah yes! Fesk. Come in. Besana, wasn't it?'

'That's right, sir,' Fesk said and saluted again. He'd earned his promotion from Whiteshield on Besana three years earlier. Fesk had done well. Now he had sergeant's stripes, an augmented eye, and the look of a shock trooper: scarred, tough, fearless.

'You're in the sentinels now?' Kell could tell from the crossed lascannon cap badge. 'Tank hunter?'

Fesk grinned. 'Yes sir! Achilles Squadron.' It was a dangerous and deadly job. Fesk clearly excelled to have risen so quickly to the rank of sergeant. 'I know you're busy, sir. But the men are talking.'

Kell sighed. 'Sit down,' he said. 'Tell me what they're saying.'

He let Fesk talk. It was all the same. As Colour Sergeant of the Cadian Eighth, the care of the regiment was his responsibility. He spent each evening like this, reassuring sergeants, captains, even some of the more senior officers of the Eighth. The problem was that there had been squads and units all over the sector, adding a bit of steel to the boot of the Imperium, a bit of iron into their fist. And then they had all been recalled, every Cadian unit within three months of warp travel.

Fesk said it before Kell. 'They say it's coming... The last great battle for Cadia.'

Kell leaned forward. 'Listen,' he said, in a quiet voice. 'In this system alone there are the three fortress worlds of Sonnen, Holn and Partox, all the hive scum of Macharia, training grounds on Prosan and Vigilatum, and if we need more bodies then there's the prison world of St Josmane's Hope. Who could come against us without us knowing? And even if they got through all the orbital defences, battleships and cruisers and they actually land here, on Cadia...' He sat back. 'Then they come up against men like you and me. The finest soldiers in the Imperium of Mankind. There are ten thousand of us in *this* citadel. Eleven more citadels about Tyrok Fields. Hundreds more across the planet. We are the shock troopers of Cadia. We crush the enemies of mankind under boot and tread.' He smiled. 'Do not spread the words of the enemy. Do not let the words of the enemy weaken your resolve. Do not doubt yourself, your brothers, your leaders. Understand?'

Fesk's cheeks were coloured. He stood smartly and saluted. 'Thank you, sir!'

It was midnight before Kell's last meeting was done. His head ached and his shoulders were tight as he padded through the windowless rockcrete corridors towards the officer's habs in the heart of the tower. The walls of Kasr Rorzann were so thick you could be a mile underground and not know. Nothing was signposted – you had to know your way. Each kasr was unique, and each fortress kept its own secrets. It was one of the first things recruits from the Whiteshields were taught.

All he could hear were his own footsteps. All along the walls black marble plaques marked the graves of soldiers from the Cadian Eighth whose exemplary service had earned them this great honour: to be interred in the very fabric of

their home fortress.

Some of them were old beyond memory. Creed claimed to know them all, to have learned each name, each award, each victory, as he wandered the corridors when he was a foundling, the company mascot, just another of Cadia's many orphans. Kell claimed no such memory, but he knew the way back to his billet.

He passed Major Galan, M36, Gold Aquila, Lost on Zaga IV, turned left at the gold-edged plaque of Colonel Jerami, Ward of Cadia, Urdesh Reclamation, 771.M41, and gave a brief nod to the long bas-relief with inset candles, which declared in High Gothic that it housed the 207 skulls of the 17th Company, 'Firebrands', Merit of Terra – 'Each Man Gave His All. We Left None Behind'.

The newest grave was barely a year old. Major S. Shaw-Hedin, Armageddon, M41.998. Kell and Creed had served with Shaw when they were both fresh recruits. They remembered him fondly. He was a tough, mean bastard of a commander, but he knew how to win battles. Whatever it took, he gave it.

There were kasrkin at each intersection now. They saluted as Kell marched past, all alert, awake and unafraid.

Kell almost walked past Creed's office, but he saw the light was on and listened for a moment before knocking quietly. There was no answer.

He knocked again. 'General Creed?' he called out.

The door was unlocked. The room seemed empty. Creed's reports lay scattered across the table. One lay at the top from the prison world of St Josmane's Hope. There was a long report, and a blurred pict-image of a hooded man, a giant, standing amongst a crowd of convicts. The sight made Kell shiver. He looked about. There was a murmur from behind the desk. Kell drew his laspistol.

He saw the feet first. It was Creed, lying face down, hand raised as if to ward off a blow.

'Ursarkar!' Kell hissed as he turned the general over. He smelled amasec, and in his irritation he let Creed drop. He straightened and ran a hand through his hair. 'You idiot!' he said.

'Drink this,' Kell said, when he had finally got Creed into bed. He kept a flask of stimms and triple shot recaff for times like this, and those times were getting more and more frequent these days.

'Jarran?' Creed slurred.

'Drink!' Kell said.

'They're idiots!' Creed said.

'Yes,' Kell said.

'It's him,' Creed said. 'He's on St Josmane. He's come back for me.'

Kell said nothing this time. Creed finished the flask and fell back.

Kell left a full glass of water by his commander's bed, and went to the door. A dark shape in the doorway made him start. He reached for his pistol and stopped himself, thinking it would be Castor. But it was not. Commissar Aldrad stepped into the light, his young face lean and unscarred.

Aldrad had been with them six months, and he'd spent half of that on a troop transport. He'd been with the Crinan 93rd before joining the Cadian Eighth. The Crinan regiments were drawn from the thick asteroid belts on the spinward edges of Deadhenge. They were tough puritanical mining types that had to be held back from the enemy. Not much call for a commissar there. Not much call for one in the Cadian Eighth either, Kell thought. Aldrad hadn't shot anyone yet, and Kell was happy for it to stay that way.

The commissar had proved his worth on the fortress moon on Helicus Rex. Kell didn't mind him normally, but he didn't like him being *here*. Not now.

'Commissar Aldrad. Can I help you, sir?'

Aldrad looked over at Creed. 'Is he alright?'

'He'll be fine,' Kell said.

Kell had the suspicion that Aldrad had petitioned for an appointment to the Cadian Eighth so that he could serve under Creed. From Aldrad's expression it seemed Creed was turning out to be something of a disappointment.

'Has he been...'

'Leave him with me.' Kell was tense. Too tense. He sighed. 'It happens.'

Aldrad looked almost hurt. 'But tonight of all nights? Will he be fit?'

'What for?'

'Tomorrow.'

Kell didn't know what he was talking about, and said so.

'The landings,' Aldrad said. 'We're part of the honour guard.'

Kell closed his eyes and sighed. All the pomp and meetings and brass band stuff wasn't his style.

Aldrad paused in the doorway.

'Creed didn't tell you?' he asked.

'No,' Kell said. 'He didn't tell me. Who is landing tomorrow?'

'The Volscani Cataphracts,' Aldrad said.

'Never heard of them,' Kell said. He gently pulled the door to, heard the click of the lock falling shut, let out a sigh. 'I'll sort it out.'

Dawn was throwing a thin light down through the ventilation shafts as Archivist Orsani Rudvald looked up from the leather-bound tome on the carved rosewood stand in front of him.

The footsteps came slowly, and without any pretence at silence, down the long rockcrete staircase. He knew the tread of those feet and waited till they had almost reached the bottom of the stairs.

'Ursarkar!' He was one of the only men who was allowed to call Creed by his first name. The general came forward into the light. He knew his old mentor would be here. Orsani found consolation in the vaults, amongst the carefully inscribed journals, battle diaries and commanders' letters. It was so early that the kasr lumens were still set at half-light. One of them, a long way down the stacks of shelves and rolled vellum data sheets, flickered as it tried to light.

'Have you slept?' Orsani said. 'You look terrible.'

'I slept.' Creed winced. He could not remember being this hungover, since, well, the last time. 'I think. Passed out might be closer to the truth.'

Creed looked over Orsani's shoulder. He was reading *A Shorter History of the Scarus Sector, Volume III*. 'Good?' he asked.

Orsani frowned. 'There are inconsistencies,' he said, 'with what is written in the journals of our commander in those days.'

'Valens?' Creed said.

Orsani gave an almost imperceptible tut. He had been teaching and testing Creed since he had found him, under a bed, in the blood-splattered ruins of Kasr Gallan. 'Wulfic,' he said.

Creed slumped down in a leather chair, closed his eyes, and weakly waved a hand. His head hurt too much for history. He thought he might still be a little drunk. He rubbed his face with both hands and looked almost imploringly up at the frail old man. Orsani had taken to growing long military moustaches. They weren't a Cadian fashion, but something he had picked up fighting alongside the Vostroyans, and now took a perverse delight in. But take away the augmetic eye, the battle-scarring, the long white moustaches, and it was the same gaunt face that had looked down on Ursarkar as a child.

'They're screwing it up,' Creed said. 'I just know it. The top brass. They're not up to the job.'

Orsani carefully lifted a red silk ribbon, laid it gently down the middle of the book, and closed it. He sat, letting his augmetic legs wheeze slowly as they lowered him into his cradle.

'Look at the data,' he said.

'Everything is about data to Porelska. So many millions of troops. So many tanks. So much ordnance. He has a team of pen-pushers running about HQ. There's not a warrior among them.' Orsani gave him a look. 'Well,' Creed said, 'not a *real* warrior. They've been on Cadia too long.'

'So they need someone like you?'

'Someone like Ryse. Someone. Anyone who has fought in a battle recently. Porelska must be four hundred years old! When was the last time he held field command?'

'938.M41,' Orsani said. 'Hydator Prime.'

Creed gestured. 'Exactly! Porelska and his like are honourable men. But this is a crisis.'

'Crisis,' Orsani said, and nodded. 'There used to be a special title, for times of crisis on Cadia.' He wheezed across to the bookshelf, reached high to bring a tome down, laid it onto the table and gently turned the illuminated pages. 'It was a special rank. It allowed the bearer to put the governing councils aside and rule Cadia as a general.'

Creed puffed out his cheeks. 'One man in command?'

'Ah! There. The bearers were called 'Lord Castellan'. To answer your question, yes. One man ruling Cadia, answerable only to Terra.'

Creed rubbed his jaw. He ought to shave. 'That is how we weather this storm. A commander commanding!'

'It is a serious measure.'

'We should make Ryse the Lord Castellan. How does it happen?'

'I don't know. This book doesn't say.'

There was a long silence. Creed shut his eyes again. He seemed deflated.

'You think a storm is coming?' Orsani said.

Creed looked at him. His jowls were heavy, his eyes pink, his cheeks heavily stubbled. 'I've known it for years,' he said. 'And I've had dreams.'

The air in the room seemed to grow cold.

'He's back,' Creed said. 'I saw a pict-slate from St Josmane's Hope. He's calling himself 'The Voice'.'

'You think he is coming for you?'

'I don't know what to think,' Creed snapped. He stood up, and paced back and forth. 'I'm sorry. My head is killing me. I think the stimms are wearing off.'

High up above, a bell rang. It was the sixth hour of the day. The guard shifts were changing.

'Throne,' Creed said. 'We're on parade today. The Volscani are landing.' He

paused. 'I'll try and see Ryse.'

Creed stood and looked at the frail remains of the man who saved him so many years before. He was the last surviving man of that company, and war had ravaged him. Only his mind was as sharp as ever.

Creed was half way across the room when Orsani called out, 'I found this yesterday.'

He opened a drawer on his reading stand, and pulled out a book. It was the size and shape of the Uplifting Primer, and bound in red leather, such as the kind of book a line officer might keep in his pocket. The spine was unmarked and the marbled boards held the hand-written title *De Gloria Macharius*.

He held it out and Creed turned the book over in his hands. This had been his favourite book as a lad. How the men had laughed, all through the Gallan campaign, as the eight-year-old Creed sat barefoot in the corner during bombardments, reading *De Gloria Macharius*.

Creed felt tears coming and shook his head. If that boy had known what he would grow up to do, he would have been amazed. So why was it that he had a sense of his life being wasted? He was meant for more than this. He offered it back to Orsani.

'Keep it,' Orsani said.

Creed smiled, despite his headache.

'I will,' he said. 'Thank you.'

'Ursarkar.'

Creed paused at the door.

'Do you think Ryse would make a good Lord Castellan?'

Creed paused. 'No.'

'You could ask for it yourself?' Orsani said.

Creed laughed and held up the book. 'Thank you for this.'

'That's a damned fine entrance,' Ryse said as the shrill blasts of saluting Leviathans drowned out the cheers of ranks of men, horns of Lemman Russ battle tanks, and even the honour salute from the 190th and 210th Artillery Regiments. Creed nodded. It certainly was. The whole parade was. Ryse's Leviathan, *Sacramentum*, was right next to the Governor's *Excubitoi Castellum*. Ryse was suitably proud of the honour and was speaking in a loud, expansive manner.

The last Leviathans were reversing into position as the landers slowed their descent on full retro burners, touched down, and came to rest before the honour guard of Major Janka's 840th. The assault ramps slammed down. Volscani

armoured companies swarmed out, and from the central lander came a command Baneblade, with two more super-heavies flanking.

'Magnificent!' Ryse said. He was flush with the pomp and display. Creed looked away, uncomfortable with something, some detail. He was distracted by a flash from somewhere in the fens. He stood at Ryse's shoulder, shielded his eyes, and wondered what it was. Then it hit him.

'The banner...' he muttered. No one heard. He took his magnoculars and focussed on the banner that flew from the lead Baneblade. He gagged. It was covered in glyphs that seemed to be moving. He gagged harder. For a moment he almost put it down to his hangover. Then the Baneblade's turret began to slowly move.

'Back!' Creed roared. 'Back!' The officials in their smart dress uniforms looked as if he had gone mad.

Void shields down, the Cadian Leviathans were sitting targets. The Volscani tank turrets all swivelled to face the *Excubitoi Castellum*. Battlecannons, demolisher cannons, lascannons. It was a firing squad. An execution. Kell dragged Ryse away from the edge and Creed fell backwards as *Sacramentum* rocked with impacts, and suddenly all about him was flames.

Gunner Lina was sitting in the cramped Executioner-class Leman Russ *Pride of Cadia III*, playing Black Five with her fellow gunners. She had three blacks, a blue and a red heart, and a pile of cash. She was about to clean Callen out. He was sweating. Linday had a cocksure look. He was bluffing. The tank's commander, 'Hot Hands' Ibsic, was wistfully inspecting the unlit stub of his lho-stick. Gannesh, their driver, was sulking about something.

The tank rattled as the distant Leviathans sounded off. Engines roared. Linday was trying to peek. Lina curled her cards in, sniffed nonchalantly. 'Have they landed yet?'

Gannesh looked up from the prayer logs through the driver's vision slit.

'Yes,' he sniffed. 'They're unloading.'

'Regent,' Linday said, putting his first card down. 'Sure you want to keep going?'

'Yes,' Lina said. She held his eyes the whole time she put her first card down. He had been flirting with her ever since she had got this promotion to sponson gunner on the *Pride of Cadia III*. The last person in this position had let his gun overheat, and hadn't survived the experience.

'Gotta say the prayers right,' Ibric had told her when she joined the crew. 'And

you got to be lucky,' he said. 'Because every so often the plasma tanks just blow up in your face.' Both his hands were augmented. He hadn't been lucky once, though lucky enough to survive.

She felt the vibrations as the ramps of the landers came down. The tank shook, and fine dust rained down from the plasma reactor. She swept it off and looked to Callen.

'You can quit you know,' she said.

Callen bit his lip, picked a card and laid it down almost reluctantly. 'Black Ace,' he said.

Lina swore. The *Pride of Cadia III* shook more violently. Gannesh slammed the prayer logs closed.

'What is it?' she asked. Ibsic stuck his head out the top. They could see flashes in the sky through the hatch.

'They're freaking shooting!' he said, and ducked down. He had a way of speaking quietly when things got scary. 'Gun stations. This is for real.'

Ibsic and Callen went through the routine with practised speed. They pulled the dust covers off the plasma destroyer, slammed the emergency vents open and locked the heat shield in place as the photonic fuel cells began to wine.

'Fuel cells.'

'Check.'

'Secondary vents.'

'Check.'

'Power her up!'

'Check.'

The space in Lina's plasma cannon sponson was tight, and it was already getting warm. She sniffed as she locked the heat shield down.

'Port sponson primed,' she called, and felt a thrill as she beat Callen to it by half a second.

'Starboard sponson primed,' he said and made a rude gesture.

She returned it.

'Say your prayers,' Ibsic called.

They intoned the Rituals of Plasma as Ibsic pulled the activation switch. There was a whine as pure energy boiled in the tanks about them. 'Right, Gannesh, get this baby moving.'

Gannesh let the throttle out, and the ancient battle tank rumbled forward.

'Reporting in,' Ibsic called on the vox. It answered with a roar of static. 'This is *Pride of Cadia III*! Active. On duty.'

Sergeant Fesk of Achilles Squadron had left his vox-unit on broadcast so he could shut his eyes and listen to the comms-traffic. It was lonely in the sentinels, especially the armoured tank hunters. It took a certain mentality, which suited him fine. Disconnected voices in a vox-unit gave him just the right amount of company.

As the Volscani landers came down he was sitting, hunched forward, hand pressed to the side of his skull. His augmetic eye was still embedding. He kept seeing motes of light that weren't there, and they made his head ache after a while. He had his good eye shut when a cacophony of voices filled his cabin.

He slammed the volume down on the vox-unit and stood on the seat just in time to see a Leviathan war machine's plasma core overheat. It filled the sky with fire. He slid down into his seat and flipped his lascannon to live. His augmetic eye blinked for a moment as it connected with the lascannon's systems. The motes of light were still there, but a blue target eclipsed his vision.

*Searching*, the systems reported.

He started forward, not really sure which way to go.

At the command post, Aldrad had his pistol out and primed. He was looking for someone to shoot, as the men put it.

'What the hell is happening?' Aldrad roared. 'Where is Creed?'

'He went to speak to Warmaster Ryse,' Castor shouted. They both looked at the plumes of smoke and fire around the Leviathans.

'Damn it!' Aldrad said. 'Find him! His position is here. Any failure to return will be a dereliction of his duty!'

'Yes, sir!' Castor saluted as another Leviathan began to explode. He picked the headset up again. 'I'm looking for General Creed,' he shouted. 'No, I don't know where your company is!' He slammed the hand piece down. 'I'll find him. If he's alive.'

Aldrad ran through Imperial doctrine. Dereliction of duty deserved the most stringent punishment. He could hear his Schola Progenium master beating the blackboard with the butt of his bolt pistol. *Command without doubt. Obey without question. Punish without hesitation.*

'Who's second in charge?' he asked.

'Major Troilus.'

There was the roar of an incoming squadron. Aldrad guessed they were Thunderbolts, from the deep note of their twin engines.

'Are those friendlies?' he shouted, but he could tell from the way they came in

on the attack run that they were not.

'Fire!' he shouted, but the men manning the autocannons were too slow in responding. The ground erupted about him as the fighters opened up with their nose-mounted quad autocannons. All about him were the shouts of wounded men. He stood alone, defiant, his black leather stormcoat flapping angrily about his legs.

He cursed. Where the hell was Creed?

Sacramentum's void shields finally fizzed into place and Creed felt the hair on the back of his neck stand. A table had overturned, spilling bottles of Arcady Pride and pre-filled crystal shot glasses across the viewing platform. They crunched underfoot as he waded through the uniformed administrative staff, thrusting them aside as they gaped. He parted the squads of masked kasrkin who rushed along the corridors.

'We have to reach the flight deck!' Kell shouted.

Kell was right behind him, but he could barely hear what he was saying.

'Brace for boarding!' the command sirens blared. Creed shoved his way through the panic, up to the top deck. Smoke filled the corridors. The whole Leviathan shook.

The last flight of metal stairs brought them at last to the armoured roof batteries. There was pandemonium. Gunnery sergeants were bawling into the comms for the ordnance bays to be manned and the ammo lifts loaded, while pilots were rushing to their craft, still shoving their arms into their flight jackets, pulling their comms sets over their heads.

Creed grabbed a naval officer by his flying jacket.

'I need a Valkyrie,' he said and thrust him towards one of the waiting craft.

'We've got to get her loaded!' a gunnery officer shouted, but Creed shoved the loading servitors out of the way and as soon as the pilot's hatch closed, he climbed up and banged on the inside panels. 'Up! Up! Up!'

Within moments the engines fired up, the missile cradles fell away, and the world tilted and banked. 'Take me up high!' Creed shouted into the comms bead. 'I need to see what the hell is happening!'

The Valkyrie corkscrewed above the battlefield.

Creed felt sick. Sick from last night. Sick from the stimms, and sick at the sight of the destruction below. Companies were pouring out of the Volscani vehicles – already one of the Cadian war machines was gone, and another was smoking dangerously.

'I've got him!' Castor shouted triumphantly as artillery shells started raining dangerously close to their left flank. The Cadian Eighth's tanks had formed a protective barrier to the left and sentinel squadrons were scouting forward. One of the tanks was hit. It burned. No one came out alive.

Aldrad seized the comms as another Thunderbolt roared overhead. Its quad autocannons rattled as it wheeled after an enemy fighter.

'Creed!' Commissar Aldrad shouted. 'Creed! Where are you?' He had been full of fury and frustration, but now, as he heard Creed's voice – calm, assured, confident – he felt his panic lessen.

'Good,' he said at last. 'Yes. I will. As quick as you can. Your place is here. We need you *here!*'

There was another pause.

'I shall,' Commissar Aldrad said, and returned the comms set to Castor. His training reasserted itself. *Command without doubt. Obey without question.*

'One last time,' Creed shouted.

'Roger,' the pilot said, and they swung round for a third time.

Creed had to see it with his own eyes. Heresy on Cadia.

Kell stood at Creed's shoulder, his hand on the door-rail above his head. The wind was full of cordite, ozone and thick black promethium smoke. All they could hear was the roar of the engine and the wind in their ears. Neither of them spoke. They were the still centre of a raging inferno. A battle of titanic proportions, fought here, on the most sacred soil in the segmentum.

All about them, fighters of the Imperial Navy – loyalist and heretic alike – were strafing, diving, pitching, rolling, dying. On the ground, the Volscani landers released ravening hordes of traitors as their Leviathans and companies of hardened veterans charged towards the Cadian lines.

*Willelm Dux* was already being boarded. Sacramentum's weapons were the first to return fire, crippling one of the enemy Baneblades. Volscani armour had been landing for days. A division was already swinging about their left flank. The fens, where penal legions had been camped, were aflame.

Here and there, as individual Cadian units regrouped, the ground was lit with ferocious las-battles: the criss-cross stitching of searing bolts created almost continual light. A flight of Vendettas made a desperate attack on the lead Volscani Leviathan. The last one was still firing as its wings were torn away by flak batteries mounted on the brass beast's sides. Void shields flared as its carcass crashed in a ball of flaming promethium. A heretic Thunderbolt, rolling in for

another attack on *Excubitoi Castellum*, misjudged and hit *Claves* in the exposed upper deck, just as the crew had brought an earlier blaze under control.

The fireball disappeared behind them as the Valkyrie banked. The earth below exploded as an artillery battery opened fire.

All across the battlefield Creed could see similar vignettes. Tank squadrons blundered forward, firing on friendly forces, artillery captains shouted for a position, and infantry fixed bayonets and charged. Brave but futile, uncoordinated and easily crushed. Confusion – that ragged imposter – reigned on Cadia. The men looked to the *Excubitoi Castellum* for leadership, but there was none. The ancient warhorse of Cadia was burning. The governor of Cadia was silent.

'Take us down,' ordered Creed. 'I've seen enough. It's time to turn the tide.'

'Creed!'

Aldrad strode towards the Valkyrie as it touched down, nose first. Castor was right behind him. 'Creed!' Aldrad shouted. His head was lowered, his cap pulled low, his bolt pistol drawn.

'Later!' Creed told him. He took Aldrad's rehearsed words away. 'Castor, get the comms teams to me now!'

'Sir!' Sergeant Agemmon came forward, vox-caster in hand. 'Major Barker.'

Creed made a face. 'Barker? Listen. Cadia's survival depends on you. Get through to the 190th. Creeping barrage. My man will give you the coordinates. As soon as you start I will strike straight forwards. We must throw the enemy off balance.'

Creed stood with a vox in each hand, relaying orders, giving instructions, keeping control, spreading calm through the Cadian officers. 'Are the 210th near you? Well tell Klude to get his men firing. At what? At the Volscani!'

One by one Creed gave commands, picking up the scattered regicide pieces and starting a fresh game.

'They're coming,' Kell shouted. Creed looked up. He could see a dark line of Volscani making their way towards them, sentinels at the fore, crimson banners marking the commander of this assault.

'Right. Let's go!'

Agemmon shouldered the vox-unit as Creed strode forward to where the Cadian Eighth had formed up in battle lines. Six thousand Guardsmen with tanks, sentinels and heavy weapons teams, all ready, all looking to Creed as the dark mass of heretics slowly took shape, moving towards them at assault speed.

Creed looked back at them. His men, his brothers. He had no words, but took them all in with a steely glance, knelt, and pressed an open palm to the ground. His planet, his home soil. Cadia. It spoke to him. It shook like a weeping body. He could feel the vibrations of shells exploding, the dull rumble of the Volscani Leviathans as they pressed forward. The hateful press of the traitors' landers on her soil. The bloody tramp of heretical feet. The spiked tracks of their armour.

Each shell that landed, each footstep on Cadian soil, was like his own body was being torn, plundered, violated.

'We are Cadia,' he said quietly. 'Cadia is us.'

'They're coming,' Kell hissed.

Creed stood abruptly. 'Fix bayonets!'

'Fix bayonets!' Kell repeated through his parade-speaker. In a magnificent display of dress discipline, the Cadian Eighth moved as one. Their banner was brought forward and presented to Kell. He took it in his power-fisted hand and raised it high.

'For the Eighth! For Cadia!' Creed shouted.

'For Cadia!' the roar came back, and the Cadian Eighth turned together. A loudspeaker started up the tune *Imperium Gloriam*, and the men all started to sing as one. Sentinels leading, tanks on either wing, they plunged into the smoke and fire of battle.

In the distance, Lina could see massive war machines knocking chunks of burning armour off each other. But here, where it was kill or be killed, she couldn't see anything but smoke and wreckage.

'Still no damn targets,' she reported.

On the other side, Callen's plasma cannon was close to overheating. There was no shortage of targets on his side. He was cursing Gannesh's driving.

'Stay calm,' Ibsic said.

'Yes, sir!'

Something went just over their heads. It whined as it passed and they could all hear the air being sucked through the vents.

'What was that?' Callen hissed.

Gannesh and Linday spoke at the same time: 'Krak round.' 'Contact!'

'Where did that come from?' Ibsic hissed.

Lina felt a wave of fear as the others scrambled to get the main weapon charged. Something hit the tank on her left. It was a Vanquisher, *Imperialis X*. Lina knew the crew. They were a tight bunch. The commander, Jovian, had

looked out for her since she joined the company.

'They're hit,' she hissed. 'It's smoking.'

She willed them to disembark. 'Yes!' she shouted as a sponson hatch was thrown open and Oleg and Luord fell out. Luord was burning. 'Come on. Get out!' she croaked. 'Get out!'

Luord rolled on the ground. Oleg bent to pick him up. He ran back to the hatch. Jovian was still inside. *Come on! Just get the frekk out.*

*Imperialis* exploded and Lina slammed the front of her sponson hatch. The Vanquisher's turret spiralled up into the air. Vents blew out and roared with furnace flames as the ordnance chambers ignited within the confines of the tank. She slammed the inside of her sponson again. 'Damn it!'

'No survivors,' Ibsic reported a few moments later.

Lina slammed the panel before her again. She wanted to kill now. 'Swing me round,' she said. 'I want to get whatever killed them.'

'No time,' Ibsic said. 'Main gun. Charge.'

'I want to kill it,' she said.

'No time. Charge!'

Lina slammed the heat shield down and pulled her sponson about as far as it would go, straining for a target. They chanted the prayers together, and then Ibsic fired the main gun. Lina turned her head as the enemy tank gouted flames and the glare washed her screens out. Gannesh slewed the tank round. Lina saw a line of Volscani armour, track to track, battlecannons flaring.

'I'll take the cannon,' said Linday. He dropped into the front gunner seat and charged the lascannon. It sapped energy from the plasma destroyer, but this needed something with a bit more penetration, as Linday liked to say.

'Need heavy support,' Ibsic reported back to whoever was commanding this mess.

'Got one!' Linday laughed. He turned to Lina. She winked.

'Good work,' Ibsic said. 'They're bringing in fire support. Tank hunter heavy weapons. Lascannons.' There was a pause as Gannesh pulled them round. Ibsic whistled through his teeth. 'Fire at will,' he said.

Lina was already recharging her plasma cannon. She could see a group of Taurox transports trying to outflank them. She sighted, prayed, slammed the heat shield down and fired. The plasma shot went straight through the transport's driver's slit. It lit up from the inside, liquid plasma shooting out of the top hatch and the side vision ports.

Gannesh pushed forward. Lina lost count of how many times she had fired.

Suddenly there were troops all about them. Friendlies. Lina saw them setting down their lascannon tripods. Someone climbed onto the back of the *Pride of Cadia III* and rapped the Eighth's motto on the hull: three short taps, two long. Ibsic unlocked the turret. A head blocked out the light. He wore the uniform of the Cadian Eighth.

'Creed says we can't stop. Push forward,' he said. 'Keep outflanking them.'

Gannesh let out a long breath.

'You heard him,' Ibsic said.

Gannesh slammed the gears and they started forward again. 'Say your prayers,' he muttered.

Fesk's sentinel was hidden in the fringes of the fens, the thick sorghum heads brushing gently against his cabin. He risked a brief look up, and his augmetic retina flashed red as his lascannon locked on: five squadrons of sentinels pacing along the fen margins, looking in the other direction.

He fired a short burst of lascannon shots. One kill, he noted as his mount's left foot dragged out of the mud and lurched forward. His retina flashed red again.

Two more shots. Two more kills.

'Forward!' Fesk said, his sentinel lurching again. 'Achilles Squad forward. Keep in the fens. We'll keep pounding anything we see.'

It had been a few minutes since he had had any response from Achilles Squad, and he had the feeling that there was no one else left, but it reassured him to still be giving orders.

A warning ping made him look up as a Leman Russ in field brown appeared through the smoke on his right, autocannons blasting. The vox erupted as a sentinel that had strayed too close to the dry land exploded.

'I'm hit!' someone shouted. Fesk was too busy staying alive to notice who. Everyone was talking. The leg gears crunched as he swung his sentinel round, searching for better cover. The rough landscape was funnelling the enemy into a tight mass so dense that everything was a target.

Fesk listened. He couldn't tell what the hell was happening. He counted to twenty then moved his sentinel forward. He could feel his walker's legs sinking deep into the mud. The sentinel swayed dangerously as the leg mechanisms laboured.

'I've gone over,' someone reported over the vox. He thought it was Garret, from the Kasr Gallan accent.

Fesk kept moving. He could feel the rumble of the approaching Volscani

armour. They were getting dangerously close.

'I can see them,' Macrinus said.

The shooting started and the vox chatter was like a sudden storm. Someone was whooping. Someone was dying. 'Leave some for me,' another voice called out. Fesk kept contact with his own squadron, screened the others out. He kept moving. He could feel the ground grow firmer. He could smell the ozone now. Stray rounds whizzed overhead.

'Heading out, Achilles Squad. Cover me if you can,' he called out.

The vox unit crackled back.

*Searching*, his targeter read.

He came out near a burning Chimera. A rough picket of tank hunter sentinels were moving through the margins of the water, ducking into cover, positioning to get rear and flank shots, picking off Volscani armour. From the chevrons on the hatches it looked like Trewin, Karma and Longe Squadrons.

As the smoke cleared he caught a glimpse of a Leman Russ, its rear to him. His targeter blinked red.

Fesk fired as the turret swung towards him. He missed, swore and felt his palms slip as he gripped the joystick trying to get a targeting fix. He stepped to the right as the tank opened up and the autocannon rounds whistled through the sorghum stalks. Fesk ducked his sentinel down and could not believe that he was still alive.

Fesk flicked a switch and engaged his auxiliary weapon before standing the walker up again. His system pinged: *lock on*. The sentinel's cabin rattled as the hunter-killer missile ignited and launched. It seared a white spot in his retina as it wound out from the tall stalks towards the tank. He blinked too late and cursed as his vision flared white with the explosion. He reversed his sentinel and felt the left leg plunge deep into the one of the sink holes. His fingers scrabbled for the smoke launchers.

Rounds rattled against his front armour. He kept the smoke launchers pumping and started to pray.

The Cadian Eighth were drawn up in ranks: there was a skirmish line flat on the ground, behind them were special weapon squads, their tank-busting plasma and grenade launchers primed and ready, then came the massed body of heavy weapons and infantry squads. In the middle of the formation, black stormcoat flapping, Commissar Aldrad stood with Major Troilus.

Tracers lanced out. Explosions ripped through the enemy lines as the Eighth

opened up with multi-lasers, spitting out streams of livid red light. Sergeants shouted, pointed, slapped men's backs, and urged them to fire faster. The air was thick with grunts and the click of magazines being fixed into place, with empty clips being discarded and new ones brought forward.

'More ammo!' someone shouted.

'Get it here!' came a sergeant's voice. 'What are you waiting for? The Emperor himself?'

Aldrad marched up and down, exhorting the men with texts that inspired them. Each regiment had their favourites.

*'Be strong in your ignorance!'* he shouted. *'By your death shall we know you. Soldier, you and I are sons of one faith, and it is the lasgun, the ammo pack, the dead heretic.'*

Commissar Aldrad stopped, held firm his faith against the foe. The ground was thick with brass autocannon cartridges. Similar piles showed where the heavy weapons teams had fired and moved forward. Constantly forward. *'A sitting duck is a dead duck,'* as Creed liked to say.

The general was off to the right along the banks of the fens, taking personal control where the fighting was fiercest. Troilus kept looking that way.

'Will they hold?' Aldrad shouted.

'They'll hold,' Troilus said. 'Creed will make sure of that.'

Fesk was lost. His head ached, the white motes kept dancing even when he closed his eyes, and when he opened them he was still lost.

He locked the sentinel's legs, threw open the top hatch and stood on the back of his seat. Smoke was billowing up from all around him. The whole planet seemed to be on fire.

He dropped back into his seat and flicked on his auxiliary battery. It blinked red. He'd fired both missiles, and seemed to be the only sentinel from his squadron still standing.

'Well,' he said to no one in particular, 'best keep going.'

He unbraked the walker's legs and turned towards what he guessed was the main battle. The sorghum was thinning. He lurched up out of the mud onto the ridge. A regiment was moving up ahead of him. They were dressed in the plain blue drab of penal legionaries. A group was sitting down, eating a meal.

Of all the times, he thought. Didn't they know there was a war on?

The troops turned. They dropped what they were eating. He stopped. There was blood on their lips. They were hunched over a dead body. A human body. One of

them pointed and shouted and suddenly the whole ridge seemed to sprout with standing men. A thousand faces were staring at him. Someone fired a lasgun but the beam fizzed overhead. Fesk desperately turned his sentinel around. It lurched dangerously as it splashed back into the mud.

There was a thud and his walker swayed. The hatch was wrenched open. A heretic stared down at him, cheeks had been carved with sickening symbols. Fesk fumbled for his laspistol and fired. The heretic fell from the sentinel, but two more took his place. One grabbed Fesk by the chin, and a blade stabbed down.

Blood poured down Fesk's front. It was his own.

With his last thought, he wished he'd managed to warn his fellows.

Lina watched as Ibsic tore off his protective jacket and stood naked to the waist, head pressed to the targeting array. The *Pride of Cadia III* was hull down in a crater shell. The main body of Volscani were charging towards the centre. He wound the targeting wheel round a few turns.

'Got them,' he said quietly.

'Pushing forward to engage,' Gannesh said. The tank lurched as it came out of the crater.

Ibsic focussed the view-port. 'Charge the guns.'

Their squadron was on the extreme left of the Cadian lines, facing back across the battlefield, fens in the far distance. Lina swung her sponson gun around, looking for a target, but all she saw was the centre tank of their impromptu squadron moving cautiously forward. *Rex Augustus* was Commander Erick's Punisher. On the far side of her was the Demolisher, *Celestine Inferno*.

'Keep flanking,' Ibsic said.

Gannesh cursed as a shell landed too close. 'Taking us into another crater,' he said, and Lina braced herself as the tank tilted forward and down.

Callen cursed. 'Have you seen how many there are?'

'I can't see them,' Lina said.

'Oh, you will,' Callen laughed.

As Gannesh brought the tank round to face the enemy, Lina whistled. 'Holy Throne!' she said, slamming her charge lever to full.

Ibsic had his face still pressed to the targeting array. 'Can't miss,' he said.

'Tell that to Callen!' Lina said. *Rex Augustus's* gatling cannon span as it fired off a few short bursts to warm the mechanisms up. Ibsic had his eyes pressed to the range finder, comms unit on one ear. He counted down.

'Let the frying commence,' he said, and then the squadron opened up.

Superheated globs of incandescent blue plasma arched towards more Chimeras than Lina had ever seen. They melted puncture holes through the turrets and side armour. Superheated shot fused the tracks, dripped through exhaust vents and filled engine mechanisms with liquid metal. Cramped driver cabins filled with poisonous fumes as plasma globules sprayed through stifling troop compartments and cooked the troops inside. Lina could see the *Celestine Inferno* from the corner of her eye. The gaping black demolisher cannon fired a rocket-propelled shell that tore holes in the enemy, while the air about her quivered with heat as its multi-meltas seared holes through man, metal and tank alike.

She blasted a Chimera in the flank as it spewed las-bolts towards them. She hit a second, and watched it slew to a halt and the back ramp slam down. A heavily armoured Volscani squad came out at a run. She fired at them again, missed and cursed.

'Meltas. Port side. Twenty degrees,' she said. 'Need me up top?'

Ibsic didn't look up from the targeter. 'Not yet. Erick,' he called across the vox. 'See them?'

She could hear the tinny crackle of Erick's voice answering. *Rex Augustus'* Punisher gatling cannon started up: thousands of metal slugs shredded the traitors, leaving a red mist hanging where they had once stood. She could picture Erick bracing himself against the back of the turret as he fired. Lina laughed. There was nothing like a Punisher gatling to strike fear into the enemy, except maybe a squad of Space Marines.

Something exploded to her left. She threw back the vision slit.

Black smoke billowed into the sky. The *Celestine Inferno* was a burning wreck. Callen threw the top hatch open to see. 'Demolitions squad,' he shouted down as he dropped back into the cabin. He dragged the heavy stubber out, and pushed it up through the cupola, slamming it into its mounting. He threw his body round. Something metallic hit the hull and Lina felt a sudden chill.

'I can't see them,' she said.

'Get them!'

'I can't *see* them.'

'Gannesh?'

There was an explosion. Callen was shouting. Everyone was shouting.

'Shut up!' Ibsic yelled as Gannesh reversed them out of the crater. 'Lina, to the front!'

She scrambled into the nose gunner seat and charged up the lascannon. She saw

the demo squad and cursed as she panned the cannon round and opened fire.

'Got 'em!' she shouted, as she fired the last. 'Where did they come from?'

'Let's get out of here.' Gannesh slammed the tracks into reverse.

'Stop!' Ibsic said. 'Keep pushing forward.'

'Have you seen how many there are?'

'Creed's orders!' Ibsic said.

Gannesh swallowed and nodded.

*Pride of Cadia* and two more squadrons kept firing and outflanking on the right. Firing, outflanking. Lina's world narrowed to the view along her lascannon. Some time later – though she had no idea how long – the *Pride of Cadia III* was still pushing forward. They were all firing so fast there was no time for prayers. The plasma destroyer was glowing. The tank was like a sauna.

Gannesh's nerves were shot. 'It's going to blow,' he shouted as they sighted more enemy armour.

'Tanks,' Callen said.

Lina cursed silently.

Ibsic found them. 'Charge,' he said. Linday locked the heat shields down.

'It's going to blow. You'll kill us all!' Gannesh shouted as the main gun fired again. The lights flickered.

They were still alive. Lina grinned as she detonated an ammo container with a pinpoint shot and took a squad of Volscani out.

'Good shooting, Lina,' Ibsic said.

She risked a glance. He'd taken a plasma burn to his shoulder. The flesh was raw and bloody. Sweat was running like a stream down his back. He started another cycle.

Gannesh turned in his seat. 'Let it cool!'

Ibsic panned the turret for another target. 'Ready,' he said.

Gannesh made the sign of the aquila and cursed as steam vented into the cabin. 'Shut it down! It's overheating.'

Ibsic threw levers, pressed buttons and shut down the main gun. He counted to three, then charged it up again.

'Don't! It's too soon!' Gannesh squealed, pulling at his restraints.

'Have you seen what's out there?' Ibsic said quietly. 'We keep going. Either we fry them or we fry ourselves before they can kill us.'

He panned the turret round again. Lina puffed her hair out of her face. The reactor wound up for another shot. Ibsic zeroed in on his target. 'Say your prayers,' he said. Lina did so. The lights went out.

Someone screamed.

Field commanders had given up trying to reach *Excubitoi Castellum*. They were all calling Creed directly now. He had seven vox-operators trailing after him as he gave out orders. He looked over at Kell.

'Are you alright?'

Kell's face was pale. He nodded. His neck had been grazed by a las-bolt meant for Creed. Targeted air strikes had silenced the Volscani snipers after that.

'It's nothing,' Kell said, rubbing the blood from his fingers onto his webbing.

'Sure?'

'Sure,' Kell said.

Creed climbed up on a ruined sentinel and looked about. To the north, the Leviathans had moved into a great melee of monstrous behemoths. The air fizzed with void shields and ordnance. The Volscani landers loomed overhead and the legions were now dark on the plains before him.

He looked behind their formation at another mass of Cadian troops. 'That's the Seventh?'

Castor nodded. 'Yes, sir!'

'Get me Xander,' he said.

'Xander's dead.'

'Who's their second?'

'They've lost four of their commanders, sir.'

'Careless,' Creed said. 'Well, get me someone who can speak for them.'

'Yes, sir!'

He gave them orders. One by one, Creed spoke to the leaders of fragmented and confused units, and gave them direction and purpose. He made contact with a major named Benedict, of the Cadian 101st, an armoured company with a Stormsword super-heavy tank.

'The *Hammer of Mezanoid*?' Creed said. He started chuckling as he spoke. 'Good! Bring her up, man! Bring her up with all speed! We need her holy strength with the enemy before us! Repeat,' he shouted down the comms. 'All speed!'

Creed handed back the comms and lit his lho-stub. He looked about him and nodded, took a few puffs and stepped down from the Volscani sentinel. He felt his boot slip on something soft. He did not look down. Kell steadied him.

Creed looked about at the faces of his men. Half an hour before they had been white and stunned. Now they were bloodied and dirty, but the fear and the shock

had gone. They were staring at him, grim, determined, fearless. He looked each of them in the eye and gave them a brief nod.

On the right, the Volscani armour was pinned down and being steadily picked and pounded along the fens. The division on the left was burning and being driven back towards the bulging central line. The Volscani Chimeras were running almost track to track. Cadian heavy weapon squads, dug into craters and behind wrecks, were already throwing the front runners back. On the right, Waylon's siege breakers were advancing behind the barrage of Medusa shells; on the left a squadron of the 71st's Hydras had lowered their quad-guns and were using them to hose high velocity autocannon rounds into the Volscani Chimeras.

Creed's grip was tightening on this corner of the battle. He could feel it. Piece by piece he was putting the fragments of the Cadian army together to form a workable defence.

'Troilus!' Castor said, handing him a vox.

'What is it?'

'Creed!' Troilus shouted. 'Penals. From the fens. Thousands of them.'

'Can you hold them?'

'Maybe,' Troilus said. Creed heard his orders being relayed. His right wing was castling up in a tight defensive formation.

'Do your best. I'll find something.' Creed closed the link. 'Castor!' he shouted. His equerry ran over. 'We need ordnance. Got someone?'

'Yes!' He handed Creed a vox unit. 'The 810th.'

'This is General Creed. Cadian Eighth. Yes. I need fire support. Urgently.' He cupped the comms unit with his hands. 'Castor, what are our coordinates?'

Creed repeated them down the vox. 'Right. Ready. Give me a ranging shot.'

From far back, a single Basilisk fired. The shell landed in the fens and a great gout of water sprayed up.

'Too far to the left,' Creed shouted. 'Bring it back five hundred meters and go for it. Creeping barrage forward.'

'Roger,' the response came.

'Troilus!' Creed shouted. 'Keep your heads down. We're carpeting all about you, then we're going ahead.'

'Roger,' Troilus said.

Creed was already pointing and shouting. 'Artillery!' Castor handed him a vox link. 'Right. Start moving forward from that position!'

Commissar Aldrad paused to savour the moment as the drum roll of artillery started gathering pace till it was continuous roar, a single sound of terrible

ferocity. He watched as the ground came to life, hundreds of flowers of earth blooming before him. It was a maelstrom of high explosives that tore the massed formations to shreds.

The barrage began to creep forward. The Cadian 190th started pounding a division of Volscani armour that appeared on their extreme right. Creed re-established contact with six units of the 210th, whose Manticores were over forty kilometres behind the lines, and had their weapons zoning onto the foe. Their storm eagle warheads streaked the sky with white contrails that split and divided as they angled down, and then the ground exploded with great white puffs of smoke. The warheads plunged through the lighter top armour, and the crews inside were vaporised in the explosions.

'Battle is all about the application of overwhelming force,' Creed said to Kell and Aldrad. 'We've hammered the Volscani wing into oblivion. Now a hole is opening up. And we're about to tear it wide open.'

The earth was still steaming as Creed led them forward. It stank of ash and high explosives. All about them were disordered shells of ruined armour, dead men, burning pools of oil and melted rubber. Rank upon rank of ruined Chimeras were joined by dead and dying Volscani, their bodies thrown about by the ferocity of the bombardment, crumpled, torn, ripped to shreds of meat that hung, still dripping blood, from the wrecks of their transports.

As they came through the field of the dead, the Cadians sighted the stunned heretic survivors, forming a desperate circle around their banner.

'There are the men who brought this hell to our planet!' Kell raged, breaking into a run as he led the charge. Creed was beside him. A tight knot of kasrkin guards paused, aimed, fired.

A wedge of Cadian ochre and green punched deep into the mob of Volscani. A flamer roared. Men screamed. Aldrad ran to keep up. His bolt pistol bucked as he emptied the magazine, punching the Cataphracts back off their booted feet. He pistol whipped one Volscani, shattering the man's blast visor. Shards of plastek and sharpened teeth sprayed into the air. He plunged his power sword into the heretic's chest and pulled it out to parry a serrated battle axe, then twisted the blade to slash open the attacker's guts, spilling them in a stinking pink mess.

The Volscani officer kept fighting, even as he stepped on his own insides, his fury knocking Aldrad back for a moment. The commissar ducked the first swing and the second, sidestepped a third and beheaded his foe. He shot another

through the chest and strode on, hacking and cutting.

Volscani berserkers threw themselves at Kell. The Cadian shock troopers surged around him like a wall of bodies. Creed fired both pistols as fast as he could pump the triggers, hotshot rounds searing holes through foe after foe. Stimms, heresy, hatred and madness drove the Volscani forward. The Cadians knelt and fired until their lasguns glowed red, until the dead were piled one upon the other, a wall of twitching flesh.

Through the confusion came a phalanx of armoured vehicles, the red banner of the Volscani flapping wetly from the lead Chimera, wet human scalps and faces hanging off it.

One of the Chimeras spewed out a great gout of flame. Creed tumbled back as the nearest men took the full brunt of the torrent. A plasma shot from the Cadian ranks knocked out the tracks and the transport slewed to a halt before a meltagun shot tore the turret and flamer apart, and the promethium tanks exploded.

The rear ramp slammed down and Volscani Cataphracts stumbled out, prayer cloths wrapped close about their faces. Behind them came a giant of a man, tall with a cape of white about his shoulders, his hood thrown back to reveal a hideous mask, his scalp crawling like snakes. He pointed towards Creed, his red eyes burning like fires.

'Luciver Anckor!' Creed hissed. He shoved Aldrad aside and stepped towards the enemy's bodyguard. He raised his pistol to shoot the foe he had hunted for three years.

Luciver Anckor lifted a hand and the air turned cold.

'He's a psyker!' Creed gasped. He strained to fire, but his hand was turning back on himself. He felt his guts contract as the air was crushed out of him. Ice rimed the Chimera's hull as the temperature dropped. Creed fell to his knees. He reached out with his other hand to pull the laspistol down, but it wouldn't move. He could feel the cold circle of steel at his temple. Around him, he heard his men engage the Volscani, and felt pride.

+Fire,+ a voice in his head commanded, but his finger would not pull the trigger. Anckor's eyes burned with hatred as he strode through his men towards Creed. At the edge of his perceptions, he heard Kell calling his name.

Snow began to fall.

+Fire.+ The command came again. His finger tightened on the trigger as he desperately fought to drop the pistol.

'For Cadia!' a strangled voice called out. Commissar Aldrad pushed forward and sliced at Anckor with his blade, driving him back. The Chaos psyker hit

Aldrad in the chest with a single thrust of his clawed hand and the force of the blow crumpled the commissar's breastplate, flinging him ten feet back. He slammed against a ruined Leman Russ.

The spell broke.

Creed snarled and dragged the pistol from his forehead. He staggered to his feet. Too late, he thought, as Luciver Anckor stepped towards him, claws outstretched.

Jarran Kell's power fist sizzled as he back-handed a Volscani, obliterating his chest. The stench of super-heated flesh filled the air as he messily decapitated another. He drew his power sword and executed two more of the enemy as he pushed through the melee towards Creed.

'For Cadia!' Kell shouted. Luciver Anckor turned. Kell kicked him in the chest, sending him reeling, then stepped forward, power fist blazing with energy. Anckor's black-masked face came towards him. The stench of his breath was overpowering and his hair was alive with writhing blue worms.

'You don't understand,' the psyker hissed.

Kell knew better than to engage servants of the enemy in conversation.

He punched Anckor in the chest with his power fist, feeling it hit the man's spine. Luciver Anckor shrieked as he fell with a wet slap onto the frost-covered ground.

Kell turned to see Creed stumbling over towards him. 'Is he dead?'

Kell raised an eyebrow.

Creed laughed weakly. 'Thank you, Jarran,' he said. He leant on Kell's arm as the colour sergeant took the banner of the Eighth from its bearer and thrust it high.

'Is it over?' Castor asked, as a flight of Vendettas swept in from the west, strafing the fleeing Volscani.

There was a clap of thunder. Great gouts of burning soil were flung high into the air. Burning objects fell from the sky.

'It's not over,' Creed said quietly.

Aldrad joined them, limping slightly. Kell glanced at him, and he nodded.

'What is that?' the commissar asked.

Creed was looking up. 'The real attack,' he said simply.

*Pride of Cadia III* was full of fumes. The plasma destroyer had overheated and sprayed liquid coolant through the cabin. Linday lay on the floor, groaning. Ibsic held his augmetic hands out. They were fused and smoking. He started laughing.

'Shut it down,' Lina said. There was no answer, so she clambered out and did it herself while Callen hosed Ibsic's hands down with flame retardant. The steel tendons hissed.

'Can you move?' Lina asked. 'Come on.' She opened the top hatch and looked out. Before her was a scene of utter devastation: smoke, death, ruin.

She ducked back down. Gannesh lay over his drive controls. Guts, blood and body fluids oozed from where a globule of plasma had burned a fist-wide hole straight through him.

Lina put a hand to his neck and checked for a pulse, then let his head fall back onto the control panels and dragged Linday off the floor.

'Let's get out of here,' she said.

Ibsic nodded, still holding his fused metal hands out.

Lina threw her hatch open. She slid through and helped Linday out. He was moaning. 'You'll be fine,' she told him. His left leg had been seared to a shard of bone, blackened and blistered. The red marrow showed. She gagged. 'Don't look,' she said.

Something roared overhead and they ducked, but it wasn't ordnance. It didn't explode. It *landed*.

It was like a metal flower. Petals opened, slamming down into the ground, and power armoured figures emerged. Callen stopped. He laughed and stood up. 'Space Marines!' he said, awe in his voice. 'Space Marines!'

Lina had never seen warriors of the Adeptus Astartes before. She stared in wonder as eight giants in ornate black power armour chased with bronze stepped towards them. Linday leant on Lina as Callen ran forward, waving his arms over his head.

'Here!' he shouted. 'Here!' Ibsic stumbled after him. One of the giants turned towards them. There was a noise and a flare from the huge boxy weapon he carried.

Callen's head exploded.

Ibsic grunted as he flew backwards, his ribs exploding out of his body. Linday threw himself sideways, grunting in pain. Lina fell with him, and saw the black-armoured Space Marines turning away, moving towards the distant banner of the Cadian Eighth.

'Traitors!' she tried to shout, but Linday was on top of her, and her voice was muffled, and no one heard.

Commissar Aldrad ducked down behind the wreck of a Chimera as Cadians

were torn apart by bolter rounds.

'Heretics!' Kell shouted, the first to react. 'Open fire!'

The Cadians dropped to their knees, put their lasguns to their shoulders and fired, but the treacherous Space Marines were already in the maze of ruined armour.

A black armoured giant turned the corner of a burning tank, roared, and ran towards the commissar, a chain-axe whirring in its hand. Aldrad knew this was his death and he stood alone, defiant, bolt pistol bucking. His shells only chipped the ornate ceramite.

The teeth of the Space Marine's chain-axe blurred as the engine revved and droplets of blood sprayed off in a fine red mist. Aldrad felt fear, but years of schooling had left their mark. He stood firm. He would not yield. He would not fail.

'Faith in the Emperor,' he said quietly. 'By their deaths shall we know them.'

'Fire!' someone behind him shouted, and the air was suddenly bright with massed las-fire. The power armoured figure came on in slow motion. The bright beams had no more effect than rain.

Aldrad could smell the stench of blood, old and new. His bolt pistol bucked three, four times.

He half-acknowledged a squad of kasrkin who moved up, knelt beside him and added their hotshot rounds to the fusillade.

The traitor Space Marine slowed. One leg dragged, then the figure stumbled. It slammed into the ground at Aldrad's black-booted feet. He fired into the back of its helmet and heard the dull wet thud as the explosive round went off within the skull, throwing up a spray of blood, brain matter and scalp.

Aldrad turned to face the kasrkin. The men about him met his gaze. No one spoke. Together they had killed it. Aldrad drew in a deep breath to say something profound. He felt a hand grasp his foot.

'For the Emperor!' he roared, and fired again.

Four Chaos Space Marines hit the group of Cadians clustered around Creed. The Cadians fell back as the giants strode amongst them. Jarran Kell made sure Creed was safe, surrounded by a kasrkin guard, then led the counter-attack, power sword sizzling with traitor blood. Around him, men died bravely, throwing themselves at the massive warriors, firing point-blank las-rounds into armour joints, smashing at them with rifle butts, stabbing the weak points in their armour.

The Cadian dead were two deep, but the living did not falter and numbers were on their side. One by one the enemy slowed, stopped, and began to fall back. Kell crushed a bolter with his power fist and ducked as the weapon exploded in its bearer's hand. He spun and drove his power sword through a Space Marine's chest. The massive warrior fell, before another was brought down by two squads of Cadians working together.

The last two traitors made a stand, back to back, their bolter shells ripping men apart, but they were surrounded in a sea of ochre and green. Hotshot rounds burned neat holes through their power armour. Steel blades found the joints of their armour. The cost in Cadian lives was great, but eventually only one traitor still stood, its right arm useless.

It pulled off its helmet to reveal a pale, hairless face, knitted with scars. It glared at Kell, hatred in its eyes. Its lipless mouth hissed, 'Death to the False Emperor!' as Kell charged.

Kell drew his power sword from the fallen giant's chest. He looked up over the dead body of the Space Marine, and his eyes turned towards the fens. There was fighting going on there as well.

The earth started to shake.

Creed looked around as one of the Volscani landing craft in the distance started to rock. Armour plates buckled and bent. The metal contorted like a living thing as it birthed something terrible. Creed watched in horror as a hulking, twisted Warhound Titan stalked out onto Cadia with a baying howl.

A Reaver Titan burst from another lander and started forward. Two more Warhounds joined it.

'Titans,' Creed hissed. As he spoke the sky went dark. More drop pods rained down upon Tyrok Fields. The true assault had begun.

'Raise the crew of the *Hammer of Mezanoid!*' Creed shouted. His hand was trembling, but his voice was steady.

One of the Titans sighted something a kilometre to their left, and fired three stabbing pulses of bright energy. Creed put his arm up to shield his eyes. He felt the earth tremble and grabbed a vox-unit to start giving orders. The situation had changed and the plan had to as well.

A signals officer stood next to him with magnoculars pressed to his eyes. He was giving Creed a running commentary and his voice was tense with thrill and expectation as an armoured column moved up in tight order about the *Hammer of Mezanoid*, shielding the Stormsword from fire.

One of the Warhounds charged forward and crushed a tank with a stamp of its three-clawed foot. The remaining tanks turned their turrets onto it as it thundered towards them, the focal point of a hundred threads of tracer and weapons fire. Its void shields began to glow, then flared blue lightning as they approached overload.

Creed's knuckles were white about the vox-unit as he spoke calmly and quietly.

The Warhound's shields flickered once, twice and then popped with a dull boom that made the whole battlefield shake.

At that moment the Stormsword surged forward, engines whining. The Titan came to meet it with all the swagger of a street brawler. Its giant gatling gun whirled. The hail of rounds thudded into the Stormsword's forward armour.

The massive tank paused and its siege cannon fired. It was built for levelling whole blocks in the tight and furious confines of urban warfare. As the round shot forward, its rocket fuel ignited and it accelerated. Its fire hit the Titan low in the belly, where legs and torso connected. It rocked the thing back, and then detonated with concussive force. The explosion tore through armour plating and mechanisms, and blew the Warhound Titan apart. The Warhound hung in the air for a moment then collapsed.

There was a brief moment of joy, then almost casually the Reaver's weapon stabbed down – a searing bolt of red – and the *Hammer of Mezanoid* exploded.

A hail of drop pods fell onto Tyrok Fields and Chaos Space Marines stamped onto Cadia's soil. Attack craft swooped down. Tracers arced up into the sky. The Leviathans – Cadian and Volscani – remained locked together in a stalemate. Along the fens, a battered and bloodied Cadian coalition stood about Creed.

Commissar Aldrad looked to Creed to see what he would do. The general was standing and gesticulating wildly as he shouted into a vox unit. Aldrad felt the earth tremble again and looked up.

A shadow fell over the battlefield. Creed looked up and dropped the vox-unit. Through the fens a shape appeared. Another maniple of Titans, dark against the sky. Around their feet swarmed a horde of blue-clad penal troopers.

Aldrad pushed his way through the men to Creed in time to hear the general speaking to Kell in a low voice.

'We're doomed,' Creed was saying. 'How can the foe land such forces here, on Cadia itself, unless our own have turned against us?'

Kell gripped his commander's shoulder. 'We shall fight here together. And die together.'

'Well said, Colour Sergeant,' said Aldrad. 'If we are to die, we will die with our heads held high.'

Creed looked at them both and nodded. 'So it ends here,' he said. He raised his voice. 'Castle up!' he ordered. The Cadians obeyed, forming a series of gunlines facing both the threat from the landing fields and the new arrivals as the first of the penal legionnaires broke the fens.

All along the line officers gave orders and hefted their weapons. 'Take aim!' they shouted.

Weapons were readied and the world seemed to pause in anticipation of the slaughter to come.

'Hold fire. We need them massed out in the open,' Creed said.

More and more of the enemy broke the cover of the fens.

'Hold fire,' Creed said again, then after a moment, he started to push forward towards the approaching men. 'Hold fire!' Something in his voice was different. Aldrad followed him, trying to see what had caught Creed's attention.

At the head of the penal legionnaires strode a single warrior, carrying a banner. It didn't bear the sigils of Chaos but the symbol of the Imperium: the aquila.

'Darr Vel!' Kell whispered from behind him.

Creed stopped and raised his arms. 'It's Darr Vel!' He laughed. 'Damn me, Kell. It's the Lost Hoppers!'

The man approached and planted the banner into the blood-soaked ground. He saluted Creed, who pulled him into an embrace and laughed as he slapped his back.

'Darr Vel!' Creed said. 'We were about to cut you all down! What the hell is happening out there?'

'I was going to ask you the same, sir. We woke this morning and there were heretics rampaging through the camp. The guards wouldn't give us weapons. The whole place is swarming with them. We had to fight our way out. The guards wouldn't give us weapons. We only have what we could capture. It was just enough.'

'See what you can gather from the fallen.' Creed had to shout to be heard over the thunderous footfalls of the approaching Titans. 'What about your friends here?'

Darr Vel looked up as an officer shouldered his way through the crowd of confused Cadians and handed a vox-unit to Creed.

'Sir,' the man said, awe in his voice, 'Princeps Nakatana of the Legio Ignatum wants to talk to you.'

Creed took the handset and as he started to speak the lead Titan turned towards him and dipped its head. Aldrad smiled at the odd image of Creed standing talking to this monstrous lord of war.

'Princepts, yes, it is Lord General Creed. I do remember you indeed, from the Dreen Salient,' said Creed. 'Yes. I need two things from you, my old friend. Destroy their Titans and stop more of their troops from landing. If you can do that, we will do the rest.'

The Titan dipped its head again, and then turned to look across across the battlefield to the enemy. It blasted its loudhailer and started forward, opening fire on the drop pods that were still falling.

Aldrad turned his attention back towards the heart of the battle. The enemy were landing all about the *Excubitoi Castellum*.

'The governor,' he said. 'They're trying to kill Porelska. General Creed, we have to do something.'

Creed nodded. 'We are, commissar. Castor, get me a link to Admiral Elen.'

It took almost a minute to raise the fleet. 'Give it to me,' Creed said as the men regrouped. He pressed the vox-unit to his ear. 'Who is this?'

He listened for a moment.

'I am General Ursarkar E. Creed of the Cadian Eighth. I need to speak to Admiral Elen.' There was another pause. 'Admiral. There are heretics among us. You have to stop anything else from landing on Cadia. I repeat. We are under attack. Nothing must land.'

His face became grim as he listened to the admiral. 'I understand you have your own battle to fight, Admiral. But it is imperative that any more landings be prevented. On whose authority? On the authority of Warmaster Ryse.' Creed spoke quickly. 'Yes, of course you can speak to the warmaster.' His face was pale as he turned to Kell, 'Warmaster Ryse,' he said. 'The admiral would like you to confirm your orders.'

Kell held out a hesitant hand. Creed nodded towards him and thrust the vox-unit into his hand. He took it, closed his eyes, drew himself up in the slightly pompous way Ryse had, and began to impersonate the warmaster.

'I must protest!' Aldrad said.

Creed shook his head. 'Commissar Aldrad, you are not hearing or seeing this.'

'But I am,' the commissar said, hand on his bolt pistol holster.

'Commissar, look about you. There is nothing between us and defeat here. If you think we have stopped the attack on Cadia, you are wrong. This is just the beginning. A decapitation assault, designed to cripple our resolve before the

battle has begun. What did they teach you of Imperial History in the Schola Progenium? Did you ever hear of Horus?'

'Yes,' Aldrad said, but he sounded hesitant.

'What did you hear?'

'He was a traitor and nearly tore the Imperium in two. What has this to do with anything?'

Creed stepped in close. His voice was low and deadly serious. 'It has *everything* to do with what is happening now. Horus was the Warmaster. He was the primarch of a Space Marine Legion. The Emperor slew him. But his favourite son survived. His name is Abaddon, and you *have* heard of him. Yes, the Despoiler. He is twisted, evil, Chaos. This is *his* work. As we argue his forces are wiping out Cadian High Command. We must stop him! Now.'

Aldrad took a deep breath and stepped back, taking his hand off the holster. He nodded.

'Yes, sir.'

The battle raged across the landing fields as heretic and loyalist alike fought and died. At its heart were the vast Leviathans, locked together. It was like the swirling vortex of a vast storm, the crack and flash of explosions like lightning and thunder on a summer's day.

It was into this dreadful conflagration that Creed led his men in a growing convoy of armour and transports. Creed himself stood on the back of a Cadian Chimera with Kell by his side, the banner of the Eighth flapping in the wind. All men who saw them flocked to their side, and soon he led a great army of scattered regiments across the battlefield.

Creed was orchestrating the whole strength of the Imperium on Cadia to work as one. The last few heretic landers careened dangerously towards the earth as Imperial Navy vessels sped into low orbit, their batteries and lance platforms flaring in the heavens as they sealed the skies above the landing fields. The landers split apart under the sustained fire.

'We have them!' Creed roared. He was filled with a virtuous fire. It didn't seem so clear to Kell at that moment. 'We have them now!'

Lina and Linday had been swept up. They had caught a ride on a Chimera. Troops clung to it. They were all saying that victory was at hand, that Creed was going to save the day. They saw him standing tall at their fore and believed.

Cadia was waking and recoiling at the touch of heresy on her soil. She had more to give. Creed could feel it. He felt her fury, and as the wind whipped up,

he heard the distant moan of the pylons urging them all on. The ground shook as the Titans engaged.

He sang the sacred words as Lightning fighters wove and soared, chasing the steaming contrails of invading drop pods. Thunderbolt squadrons swirled around the heads of the heretic Titans. Flights of Vendettas, wing to wing, came in low to the ground and tore into the Chaos forces. Elite kasrkin airborne regiments deployed on grav-chutes, firing on rampaging warbands as they landed.

And through the maelstrom, Creed led his men. Scattered squads swelled his numbers. Among them was the familiar figure of Major Luka, who was leading an honour guard of five hundred handpicked Whiteshields.

'Luka!' Creed yelled as the old man saluted him.

'Ursarkar, I'm glad to see you. Where do you need us?'

Creed did not pause. 'We have to save the governor.'

They smashed through a picket line of heavy weapons, then outflanked a Volscani Baneblade, luring it out from its support units and hitting it on both flanks as a company of Hydras kept the skies above them clear.

But the closer Creed's army got to the centre of the storm, the tougher the resistance became – and soon they were no longer fighting Volscani heretics, but power-armoured warriors.

The traitor Space Marines were few in number – fewer than the quantity of drop pods would have suggested – but they were tough. Creed cracked them nonetheless, outflanking, outnumbering, out-shooting. Always on the move, the Cadians were soon within the smoke cloud cast by the burning Leviathans.

Creed pointed towards the *Excubitoi Castellum*, which rose above the carnage. It was beset, besieged, but still standing defiantly.

'Keep moving!' he roared. 'We are not too late!'

But the enemy had taken note.

Through the choking black smoke stalked a huge, hunched figure, black smoke billowing about its baroque brass armour, which dripped with the blood of the corpses chained to its carapace. It snorted fire from its nostrils and stamped a clawed foot. There were cries of panic.

Darr Vel's Chimera appeared through the smoke and slewed to a halt. The former prisoner had a plasma pistol thrust into his belt and a harness of melta bombs over one shoulder.

'Darr Vel!' Creed shouted. 'It's time to make your peace with the Emperor. I promised you that chance. I need you to slow that Titan down!'

The man nodded solemnly and turned to issue orders to his troops.

It was like hunting for food on Lost Hope. Just... bigger. Darr Vel's skin prickled. The air roared. Fire blasted behind him and he shouted a warning, too late. He pressed himself against the hull of his Chimera. His hair caught fire, but he barely noticed, as the roar of the flame drowned out most of the screams of his Lost Hoppers. Most. Not all.

He patted out the fire and prepared to move. 'With me!' he shouted.

The remaining Lost Hoppers charged forward, heads down, Darr Vel at their fore. The flamer flared again.

More screams in the darkness of billowing smoke. Somehow Darr Vel's small group, lying flat in a crater, were still alive. They jumped up and sprinted forward. To the left, Jovet's mob was almost in range.

'Go!' Darr Vel indicated them forward. A meltagun fired. An explosive went off. The Titan stamped down. As the foot lifted, Darr Vel glimpsed the glistening remains of Jovet's men before the swirling smoke hid them all.

He looked up. Only six men were still with him. He laughed, realising that this was how he would end.

'Damn you, Creed,' he shouted. 'From ice world to a fiery death! Let's get it!'

He started running. He heard the roar of another flamer blast, then all there was was his own breath, labouring as he gripped the bandolier of melta bombs in his right fist. Within seconds he was in the shadow of the Titan.

'I've got you now!' he screamed.

A three-toed metal foot swung forward through the gloom. He could smell lubricants and taste the plasma boiling furiously. The foot crunched down twenty feet to his left, the toes, each larger than him, pressing into the earth as the Titan's weight shifted forward. He was alone. It was up to him. Creed was depending on it. He made his break and felt the other foot swing over his head.

He could see pistons the size of tanks. The inhuman toes, bending and flexing, the metal creaking as it took the full weight of the Titan. Darr Vel caught one of them. It almost threw him as it lifted up for another ponderous stride. He clung on with both arms. The piston dragged him down and up as the toe flexed. He lost sight of the ground, did not know how much longer he could hold on. He got one hand onto a melta bomb, and set the charge.

The warning light flashed, slow at first, then more rapidly.

'The Emperor Protects.' Darr Vel closed his eyes as the melta bombs detonated.

Creed watched as a foot was torn off the Titan. The behemoth stumbled forward on its ruined leg, metal superstructure groaning as it lost balance and fell nose-

forward into the earth. Its machine-spirit wailed as explosions tore through the superstructure, and then its plasma reactor overheated, and one last cataclysmic explosion threw debris spinning across the battlefield.

Creed hoped Darr Vel was with the Emperor now.

'Keep moving!' he yelled.

The ground was thick with empty enemy landers, their armoured ramps open and still. The *Excubitoi Castellum* rose up like a cliff face before them. Her bottom decks were ruined and broken. Pipes leaked bloody fluids, small fires burned and there were dead Cadians everywhere – shot, disembowelled, decapitated, hanging from windows, slumped against broken blast heads, drowning in their own blood. Hatches lay open.

'Inside!' he shouted. 'We take it back.'

Kell strode through the corpse-choked corridors behind Creed.

They turned a corner to see a grotesquely armoured Space Marine lying amongst a heap of human dead. 'Do not look at it!' Creed warned in a low voice, but Kell could not help himself. The sickening symbols made his head spin. The spiked armour was studded with fresh heads. He gagged and turned away, up a ruined staircase that was slick with blood, keeping to Creed's side.

As they rose the din of battle grew louder.

'Quicker!' Creed urged them as they mounted the ornate stairs.

They heard a howl and turned. Three traitor Space Marines sprinted towards them, chainswords buzzing.

Kell stepped before Creed and gestured towards the foe. A bodyguard of kasrkin ran forward, firing from the hip. Hotshot las-rounds punched through power armour with puffs of bloody steam. They riddled the enemy, and one by one they fell.

The carapace-armoured shock troops took each corridor, each staircase, each room, and the rest of the force followed, securing the chambers and holding them against enemy counter-attack.

Creed drove the Cadians forward. '*Save the governor!*' became their war cry as Kell carried the banner of the Cadian Eighth into the very heart of the *Excubitoi Castellum*.

'Closer!' Creed urged them as they reached the bridge antechamber. 'Forward!'

The damage to the ancient artefact was terrible to behold. Ancient banners, some from the founding of Cadia itself, lay torn and ruined on the floor. Relic caskets had been shattered. The bones of saints and Imperial heroes had been

slashed and broken and vellum leaves swirled in the breeze from the open bridge doorway. The floor was slick with blood.

Creed marched across the antechamber and stopped on the threshold to the bridge. He turned away, face pale, and Kell stepped up to see what was inside.

Shreds of flesh, guts, dress uniform and gold braid hung from the walls. A pile of fresh heads filled the room. Kell knew many of them. Staff officers. Colonels. Equerries. Even the distinctive white-bearded face of Lord General Jaquias.

A power armoured giant stepped into the opposite doorway. In one hand, a chain-axe revved. In the other it held the bloody head of Governor Marus Porelska. Its voice came through its vox grilles: inhumanly deep and impossibly ancient and hate-filled.

'I knew you would come,' the creature laughed as it tossed Porelska's head towards them. It landed with a splash in a puddle of blood. The chain-axe revved again as the Chaos Space Marine strode towards them. 'But you're too late.'

'Who are you?' Creed demanded.

'I am the future,' the thing said. 'I am war. I am death. I am carnage.'

'You are dead, traitor,' Kell roared.

The Chaos Space Marine laughed. Its chain-axe buzzed in its hand as it roared and charged, fast and furious. Kell lashed out and caught the axe in his power fist as it swung down. There was a screech of tearing metal and the weapon exploded, hot metal teeth scything through the chamber. The traitor Space Marine staggered back and Kell swung and stabbed low. His power sword sheared through armour and flesh to hit bone, but his foe seemed to feel no pain. It roared again and kicked Kell aside, sending him thudding into the wall. The colour sergeant's power sword fell and hit the ground, the energy that wreathed it extinguishing.

The Space Marine turned on Creed and swiped at him with gauntleted hands. Creed ducked once, twice, and then threw himself backwards.

'The sword,' Kell moaned as he tried to push himself up from the floor.

Creed's looked around and threw himself in the direction of the blade. He fumbled, and then his fingers closed around it. He saw movement and brought the sword up to parry, but it wasn't his enemy that approached. He looked up into the face of Commissar Aldrad. The commissar was ragged and bloodied and a rough bandage was tied around a stump where his left hand had been. In his right was his bolt pistol, and it was pointed at the traitor Space Marine.

'Aim!' Aldrad spat. The Cadians behind him levelled their lasguns. Creed pulled himself to his feet and held up a hand.

'No!' he said. 'This one is mine. Let me send it back to the hell from whence it came.'

It had been a long time since he had handled a sword in battle, but the old training came back to him. He held the sword two handed. It was a standard pattern, with familiar balance and familiar weight. He thumbed the activation stud and it leapt into life. It was good to feel the static in the air as blue light flickered along the blade. He began to drive the Chaos Space Marine back with sweeps of crackling energy.

His opponent bulled forward and Creed parried a punch, relishing the growl of pain as the glowing blade sliced through the Space Marine's gauntlet and bit flesh. The traitor pulled back again and Creed pushed in. His first stroke tore a spike from its armour. The second failed to connect. The third opened a wide gash in the chestplate. Creed ducked a fist, sidestepped, and made a wild stab that went through armour, belly, and armour again. He dragged the blade out, and a flood of black blood and bile poured out of the wound as the traitor Space Marine fell to its knees.

'You cannot win,' it said.

'Then we shall die trying!' Creed snarled.

He swung once more. The head of the traitor tumbled from its shoulders. The headless torso swayed and Creed gave it a contemptuous kick backwards.

'Here!' he said, and helped Kell pick himself up from the floor. The colour sergeant's face was pale and his right arm hung useless by his side. Together they limped through the bridge. The carnage was appalling. Creed could feel the horror of the last battle here.

'Hundreds of men...' he said, visualising what must have happened. 'They tried to barricade the blast doors... When the traitors broke through they protected Governor Porelska with their own bodies...'

'And they all died,' said Kell. 'Bravely. Like heroes.'

Creed put a hand against the wall to steady himself, but touched blood, wet and warm. He pulled his hand away and wiped it clean on his fatigues. 'Cover them up,' he said.

'By their deaths shall we know them,' Kell said and made the sign of the aquila.

Creed was spent. 'I need fresh air,' he said. 'If there's any out there.'

He picked his way over the body of a dead kasrkin to the balcony doors, where the gold-worked red velvet curtains hung in strips. He pushed them aside and stepped over the threshold.

All across the Landing Fields, heretics were making their last stands.

'The battle is won, but the killing never ends,' said Creed bitterly. He walked over to the railings and looked down. He saw devastation and ruin – wrecked armour, the slag of burning Titans, wounded and dying men.

He watched as a Legio Ignatum Reaver casually pumped three shots from its volcano cannon into the last intact Volscani Leviathan. On the third hit the Leviathan exploded. The blast of heat was so intense it warmed his face.

But Ursarkar E. Creed felt nothing. All he could see before him was defeat, death, disaster.

Kell stopped on the threshold and looked out at Creed. The general looked small, broken. Kell turned to go back inside.

'Stay, Jarran,' Creed said.

Kell stepped forward. He heard a noise behind him and looked round to see Aldrad, pale from blood loss. The colour sergeant motioned him forward. Together, the three men looked out at the ruin of Tyrok Fields.

'We failed,' Creed said. 'We won the day, but we failed.'

Kell took in a deep breath. He tasted blood and smoke and burning flesh. He had nothing to say. In the distance, one of the last traitor ships fired into the clouds.

'Why are they fleeing?' Aldrad asked.

Creed shrugged. 'Their job was done.'

There was a cough behind them. Kell turned to see Castor carrying a vox-unit. 'General, you should take this,' he said. Creed took it and listened intently.

There was a moment's pause, then Creed said, 'No. Governor Porelska is dead. I am Castellan Creed of the Cadian Eighth. I led the counter-attack on the *Excubitoi Castellum*. We... were too late.'

There was another pause.

Kell looked out. Far below a flamer flared. He could not tell whose it was. A Valkyrie hovered and fired off a salvo of anti-personnel rockets. They were so distant the flashes came almost a second before the firecracker patter of explosions.

'Yes, Warmaster Ryse,' said Creed. 'I will secure the *Excubitoi Castellum* and establish who is still alive, then await your arrival.'

Creed handed the vox-unit back to Castor and waited until the trooper had gone back inside.

'Jarran, Aldrad,' Creed said. 'Ryse told me that the Governor Secundus is also feared lost. All attempts to contact him at Kasr Vazan have failed.' He gripped

the railings with both hands. 'They have struck the Imperium at our most defiant citadel, and found us lacking.'

The sun was setting. It was a dull red disk through the smoke and dust of battle.

Creed's face was grim. 'Look. Day has ended on Cadia. The long night has begun.'

The Eye of Terror filled the sky with a sickening bruise of purple light.

Baleful red fires still burned across Tyrok Fields, and the moaning of wounded men drifted on the air as medicae teams did their best to find and treat survivors.

It was two hours after sunset when Creed arrived at the warmaster's Leviathan, *Sacramentum*, with Kell and Commissar Aldrad in attendance. The battle had been so intense that it felt strange to be walking down unruined corridors to stand in an intact room amongst men who were not the enemy.

Creed limped as he climbed the steps. A thumb-sized piece of shrapnel had been removed from his thigh. He hadn't felt it until the battle was over, but now every muscle in his body ached. He had eaten nothing and drunk only a flask of water all day. His hangover was returning with a vengeance.

'See if you can find something to drink,' he muttered to Kell as they saluted the two kasrkin who stood at the entrance to the *Sacramentum*'s feast hall.

The room echoed as Creed strode in. Some of the fresher looking officers had flown in from the more distant kasr. They looked almost panicked and unsure. They had not been in the battle. They had not seen it. Creed could tell from their eyes that they hated not having been there.

The survivors had a weary look about them. Warmaster Ryse was trying to be jocular with his left arm in a sling, and a lump torn off his left ear. *Sacramentum*'s crew had repelled boarders. The warmaster had fought with great bravery, so his staff reported.

Creed had heard all about it, but he had been too weary to take it in. Everyone on Tyrok Fields that day had a tale to tell. *Everyone* had been through hell. Some had been lucky enough to survive.

Too many had not.

Around Warmaster Ryse stood the few surviving members of the Cadian governing council, retired generals and castellans. Lord General Gruber was there, his head bandaged, but his monocle unbroken. Had it really only been the day before, Creed thought, that he and Gruber had clashed aboard the *Excubitoi Castellum*? He met the man's cold blue stare with defiance, only looking away when Ryse boomed out, 'Creed! Good to see you! Unwounded?'

Creed patted his leg, and pulled a face. A lump of shrapnel was as good as untouched.

Ryse nodded. 'Now are we all here?' He made a signal and the feast hall doors were closed. Ryse's voice lost its jocular note. 'Well. Welcome. I am glad to see you all. For those of you who are unaware, Governor Primus Marus Porelska was killed today in defence of Cadia. Governor Secundus Karwyn is feared lost.'

He listed the dead – the higher ranking ones anyway. Creed bowed his head. Each name brought back the memory of the gory trophy on the *Excubitoi Castellum's* bridge.

He looked round to see Kell carrying a shot glass and a bottle. He took the glass and knocked it back.

He felt warmth spread through him. 'Thank the Throne,' he said quietly.

'So that is the situation,' Warmaster Ryse concluded. He looked grave. 'As far as we know there have been no other landings. Admiral Elen has locked the planet down. I have sent an astropathic signal to the High Lords on Terra. We await their response.'

Creed listened in silence to the responses. They all focussed on the Volscani, expressing disbelief that they could have masterminded such an attack. Creed handed his empty glass back to Kell. Kell returned it refilled. Creed knocked it back again.

'This wasn't the work of the Volscani,' he heard a voice say.

Creed's thigh stung. He realised he had stood up, and as everyone was staring at him, he realised that it was he who had spoken. He cleared his throat.

'My men killed General Klief of the Volscani. We killed Luciver Anckor, who was with them as well. Both men died in the first hours of the battle, and it continued without them. They were not the masterminds here. They were pawns. Decoys.'

'What do you mean?' General Gruber demanded.

Creed spoke simply. 'This is war on a scale we have never seen. This, gentlemen...!' He paused to look around the room. 'This is a *Black Crusade*.'

There was a murmur of disapproval. 'Hush!' Gruber said.

Creed would not stay silent. 'Yes. Fellow officers, we are not fighting a heretic general or a small warband of traitor Space Marines. We are facing the most ancient of enemies. Abaddon the Despoiler.'

Ryse scowled. 'You should not speak that name,' he said.

'If not naming him would help us, I would not. But let us all be clear. This is the scale of the threat against us. It is the Imperium's most ancient foe.'

'Can it really be him?' A tall, trim equerry in the polished breastplate of the Cadian 101st spoke in an awed whisper. 'After so long. How can he still be alive?'

'I do not care to know the ways of heretics,' Creed said. 'But I am sure we have all seen things that should not be. That reason tells us *cannot* be. All we have are our lasgun, our armour, and our faith in the Emperor.'

Creed felt the mood of the room waver. He stared at the officers. 'I warned you all about this yesterday. None of you listened, despite the evidence. I have no supernatural powers. All I have is the strength of my faith. The power of my troops. The courage of a soldier.'

Warmaster Ryse stepped forward. 'I did not bring you here to argue. I brought you here because we have a great duty upon our shoulders. We have always had two governors on Cadia so that if one was killed the other could rule. Now we are leaderless. Both of them are dead. Until the High Lords appoint another, we need an interim governor.'

'You are suggesting yourself?' Gruber asked.

'No.' Ryse sighed. 'I have been warmaster for seven years. To command Cadia now... It would be too much.'

'Then who?' Gruber turned to face the room. 'General Flowerdew?' The one-eyed commander of the Cadian 910th Airborne regiment shook his head. One by one Gruber went about the room, picking out officers. Each one shook their head. He studiously ignored Creed. At last Gruber turned back to Ryse. 'Then I humbly submit myself.'

'No,' Ryse said. 'I think not.'

'Then who?' snapped Gruber.

Warmaster Ryse sighed. 'I do not know.'

A voice piped up from the shadows. 'May I be permitted to speak?'

Creed knew the voice and turned as the figure stepped out from the shadows. It was Commissar Aldrad.

Even Lord General Gruber straightened up as the commissar stepped forward. Old habits died hard, and commissars were figures of fear, even ones so young.

Aldrad stopped in the middle of the room. His uniform and his very visible injury gave his words gravity. 'I am not a Cadian. I am not even technically a Guardsman. But I alone here represent the *Militarum Tempestus*.' He lifted the stump of his arm. 'I saw the battle unfold today from the sharp end. I fought all the way from the fens to the very bridge of the *Excubitoi Castellum* where we found the governor dead.' He paused and looked around.

'But for one man in this room, I guarantee that none of us would still be alive. One man commanded Cadia today. It was not Governor Porelska. And it was not you, Lord General Gruber. Nor, with the greatest respect, was it you, warmaster. I have no doubt you defended your Leviathan with great skill and courage, but while you were fighting a private battle here, one man brought the shattered forces of Cadia together. One man combined the Imperium's resources. One man pitted himself against the enemy.

'And he won. Yes, we lost much today. But we were not defeated. We achieved a great victory. We stand.'

'Who are you talking about?' Gruber asked.

'Warmaster, lord generals, I nominate General Ursarkar E. Creed, Castellan of Kasr Rorzann, for the post of interim governor of Cadia.'

There were cheers from scattered officers, but Gruber stepped forward. 'You cannot be serious, Commissar.'

'I am,' Aldrad said.

Warmaster Ryse let out a long breath. He turned to Creed. 'Ursarkar, you have always been a fine and loyal servant. I have learned to trust you more than any of my other commanders. I think this commissar has spoken truly, and I will heed his recommendation. And so I ask you, will you lead us in this, our hour of greatest need?'

'No,' Creed said. 'I do not want to be governor of Cadia.'

'Ursarkar,' Ryse said. His voice teetered between affection and exasperation. 'This is a great honour we are offering you.'

'No, it is not,' Creed said. 'You want to hold me up like a puppet. Cadia needs a commander who has the ability to *lead*.'

Ryse slammed his good hand down onto the table. 'Damn it, Creed. What do you want?'

'What I want is simple, Warmaster Ryse. That I alone rule Cadia until the forces of Chaos are driven from this planet, and from this system.'

'That can't be done!' Gruber roared. 'You want to be a dictator.'

'It can be done,' Creed said. 'It has before. A rank exists. What Cadia needs, gentlemen, is not a governor, but a lord castellan.'

There was stunned silence.

Creed stared them all down. 'It is what Cadia needs. She demands it of us.'

Bodies were piled five deep all along the side of the *Excubitoi Castellum* as Lord Castellan Creed led his commanders to the bridge. It had been sluiced down to

get rid of the blood, but it still stank of slaughter. He paused at the threshold of the command deck. He could hear the Cadian troops below. Each crowd had its own note, and this one sounded angry, confused, hurt, leaderless.

Creed had no words ready. He looked around. Warmaster Ryse stood next to him. Kell stood right behind Creed, the banner of the Cadian Eighth in his hand, furled tightly around its pole. He smiled grimly and Creed returned the gesture and stepped over the threshold. He walked alone to the railing, and looked out and down. Arc lumens lit the crowd. The note of the murmuring changed a little as he showed himself. It was expectant now.

Creed felt something being placed in his hand. He looked at it, and saw that it was a voice amplification unit. He swallowed.

'Men and women of Cadia,' he started. He did not know what he was going to say, but he knew he had to say something. 'We lost many today. Friends. Sons. Mothers. Daughters. Comrades. We withstood fire, bombardment, treachery and cowardice. And we did not flinch. We did not turn to ask if another would step up and take our place. We stood, we fought, and we strode forward into battle.'

As he spoke he felt the note of the crowd changing, and for the first time, he had a feeling that Abaddon had not won that day. Yes, he had decapitated Cadia, but Cadia had a new head. And it was stronger, fiercer, more deadly. As the cheers died down, Creed waved a hand.

'Today the High Command have asked me to serve as Lord Castellan of Cadia. I have accepted this weighty honour. Today we have driven the enemy from our home. But the months ahead shall be hard. I offer you nothing but blood and battle. This is our part in a war that has lasted ten thousand years. And today, brothers and sisters, today we – you – have won a great victory that will be remembered for another ten thousand years, or as long as the Imperium of Mankind shall last!'

Creed left the crowd cheering as he walked back inside.

'Lord Castellan.' Castor saluted and fumbled in his breast pocket for a thick silver case, which he opened. Inside were lho-stubs. 'The finest that the Munitorum has to offer,' he said.

Creed took one, and bit it between his teeth as a lucifer was struck and puffed it to life.

'You asked for the maps to be brought here,' Castor continued.

'Yes,' Creed said. 'Thank you.'

Kell handed him a silver tankard. It was full of amasec. Creed barely tasted it as

he stood over the table, pulled out the system map and saw it all as he had described it to Porelska just the day before. He saw the terrible brilliance of it all, all the regicide pieces not just of the war on Cadia, but of a Black Crusade like a many-tentacled creature seizing the Imperium in its grip.

'The official records,' he said. 'All reference to traitor Space Marines must be extinguished. This was a treacherous attack by General Klief of the Volscani, aided by the traitor Luciver Anckor. Both were killed in the attack. The Volscani Caraphracts have been destroyed. Governor Marus Porelska died valiantly, fighting on the bridge of the *Excubitoi Castellum*.'

'Yes, sir,' Castor said gravely.

Creed looked up and met the eyes of every man present. 'You shall all keep to this official record. No one will speak of Horus' scions on Cadia's holy soil. Is that clear?'

The men nodded. Creed leafed through the latest reports. He did not know how long he stood there. An hour perhaps. Maybe two. The other men were silent as he went through all the reports that Porelska had been keeping from them. Things were worse than even he had guessed. But as he stood and worked through the data sheets, he felt he was getting a sense of the enemy's strategy.

Strange asteroid activity in the Scarus System. Warp storms off Belial. Contact lost with Chinchare. Sabotage on Belis Corona. Uprisings on St Josmane's Hope.

He stopped at that and took a sip of the amasec. Arcady Pride. He smiled, and felt the eyes of the men in the room on him.

'The Voice' was on Saint Josmane's Hope. He shivered and remembered the figure that had found him in the ruins of Kasr Gallan. 'Get me Admiral Elen.'

Castor nodded. He relayed the command, but paused. 'There's something else. The men want to rename the regiment.'

Creed looked up.

'What do they want to call it?'

'Lord Castellan's Own,' Castor said.

Creed half laughed.

'Do they have your permission?'

'Yes,' Creed said. 'If that is what they wish.'

He took another sip, pulled out another chart and puffed on his lho-stub. He, a mere man, was pitting his skill against the most ancient evil in the galaxy. He drew in a deep breath and thought of all those who had died that day, of the men he had sent to certain deaths. If the Imperium of Mankind stood a chance, then here on Cadia the war would be won or lost. And to win it he had to be harder,

crueller and more brutal than his foe.

Creed could feel Cadia as if she was a spirit in the room, standing at his shoulder. Approving. Resolute. Defiant.

'Where is Admiral Elen?' he demanded.

'Sorry sir!' Castor brought a vox-unit. Creed took it.

'Admiral. This is Lord Castellan Creed. There is heresy upon St Josmane's Hope. You will order a fleet there and destroy the planet and all upon it. No. No evacuation.'

The admiral questioned the order, and Creed repeated it. The room was silent, the atmosphere tense. Creed could only imagine what was going through the heads of the assembled officers.

'Yes,' he said, his voice harder. 'Destroy St Josmane's Hope and all on it, admiral.'

Colour sergeant Jarran Kell listened dispassionately. It was chilling hearing his commander – his friend – commit a planet to extinction, but Kell felt hope flare within him too. Creed could win this. Kell now understood why he had always felt so strongly that he had to keep Creed alive. It was for this moment. Because Creed alone could save Cadia, and perhaps the Imperium.

Creed put the tankard down and looked around. His gaze lingered on Kell. Kell nodded, and Creed nodded back.

'Next,' he said, and took another report from Castor's trembling hand.

## 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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