

FOR THE EMPEROR

A Ciaphas Cain Novel

by Sandy Mitchell

COMMISSAR CIAPHAS CAIN – hero of the Imperium and renowned across the sector for his bravery and valour – is sent to help maintain order on an outpost world on the borders of Tau space. But when the alien ambassador is murdered and the situation quickly spirals out of control, Cain and his regiment of Valhallans find themselves in the middle of a war. As the Imperial Guard struggle to contain worldwide civil insurrection, can the wily Commissar Cain identify the real villain before the planet is lost to the Imperium forever?



Sandy Mitchell is a pseudonym of Alex Stewart, who has been working as a freelance writer for the last couple of decades. He has written science fiction and fantasy in both personae, as well as television scripts, magazine articles, comics, and gaming material. His television credits include the high tech espionage series Bugs, for which, as Sandy, he also wrote one of the novelisations.

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from FOR THE EMPEROR

*Old friends are like debt collectors; they have a
tendency to turn up when you least expect them.*

– Gilbran Quail, Collected Essays.

AS I'VE RATTLED around the galaxy I've seen a great many cities, from the soaring spires of Holy Terra itself to the blood-choked gutters of some eldar reiver charnel pit, but I've seldom seen anything stranger than the broad thoroughfares of Mayoh, the planetary capital of Gravalax. We'd disembarked in good order, the freshly sewn banner of the 597th snapping proudly in the breeze that blew in gently across the rockcrete hectares of the starport as the Valhallans formed up by company, and I resisted the temptation to lean across and compliment Sulla on her needlepoint.

I doubt that she'd had anything to do with procuring it, but it wasn't that which dissuaded me. She just wasn't the kind to take a joke, and was still harbouring a germ of resentment at the organisational changes I'd instituted. We were a fine sight to behold, I have to admit, the other regiments glancing at us sidelong as they marched away; although that may just have been surprise when they realised we were a mixed unit.

'All present and accounted for, colonel.' Broklaw snapped a drill manual salute, and fell into place beside Kasteen. She nodded, inflated her chest, and then hesitated on the verge of giving the command.

'Commissar,' she said. 'I think the honour should be yours. This regiment wouldn't even exist if it wasn't for you.'

I don't mind admitting I was touched. Although I have overall authority in whatever unit I'm attached to, commissars are always outside the regular chain of command; which means I don't really fit in anywhere. By letting me give the order to move out, she was demonstrating in the most practical form imaginable that I was as much a part of the 597th as herself, or Broklaw, or the humblest latrine orderly.

The unaccustomed sense of belonging choked me for a moment, before the more rational part of my mind started gloating about how much that would mean in facilitating my own survival. I nodded, making sure I looked suitably moved.

'Thank you, colonel,' I said simply. 'But I believe the honour belongs to us all.' Then I filled my chest, and bellowed: 'Move out!'

So we did. And if you think that sounds like a simple proposition, you haven't thought it through.

To put it into some kind of perspective, a regiment consists of anything up to half a dozen companies – five in our case, most of which had four or five platoons. The exception was Third Company, which was our logistical support arm, and consisted mainly of transport vehicles, engineering units, and anything else we couldn't find a sensible place for on the SO&E. All told, that came to much the same thing in a headcount.

Factor in five squads a platoon, at ten troopers each, plus a command element to keep them all in line, and you're looking at nearly a thousand people by the time you've added in the various specialists and the different layers of the overall command structure.

Just to add to the confusion, Kasteen had decided to split the squads into five-man fire-teams, anticipating that any open conflict was likely to take place in and around the urban areas. Beating off the tyranids on Corania had convinced her that smaller formations were easier to coordinate in a city fight than full-strength squads.

All this made for a fine martial display as we moved out, you can be sure, with banners flying, and the band thumping and parping away at *If I Should Forget Thee, O Terra*, as though they had a grudge against the composer. There hadn't really

been time for rehearsals, what with all the excitement aboard the *Righteous Wrath*, but they were making up in enthusiasm for whatever they lacked in proficiency, and a high old time was being had by all. It was a fine fresh day, with a faint taste of salt in the breeze from the nearby ocean; at least until our chimeras and transport trucks started up and began farting promethium fumes into the air.

We intended to make an impression with our arrival, and by the Emperor, we surely did, setting out to march the ten kloms or so into the city. Most of the troopers were glad of the exercise, revelling in the fresh air and sunshine after so long between decks, and swung along the highway, lasguns at the slope. Being an old hive boy myself, it was all one to me, but I was affected by the general holiday atmosphere I think, and I don't mind admitting to a general diffuse glow of well-being as we got underway.

Kasteen and Broklaw couldn't march, of course, having to look grander than the common ground-pounders, and so trundled along at the front of the regiment in a Salamander, and I seized the excuse to do the same.

'Can't have the regiment's most vital officers plotting behind my back,' I'd said at the briefing, smiling to show I didn't mean it, and pouring everyone a fresh cup of recaf to show I was part of the team. So I lounged back in the open compartment at the rear of a scout variant, which Jurgen kept half a track's length behind theirs in the interest of protocol and reinforcing the impression of my generally assumed modesty, and took the opportunity to feel rather pleased with myself. The synchronised slapping of two thousand boot soles on the surface of the highway and the squarking of the band almost drowned out the throb of our engine, and we must have looked a splendid sight as we left the main cargo gate of the starport behind us and began to approach the city.

It was then that my palms began to itch again. There was nothing I could put my finger on initially to explain my gradually intensifying sense of disquiet, but something was definitely tapping my subconscious on the shoulder and whispering 'That's not right...'

As we entered the city itself my disquiet grew. I wasn't surprised to find the streets free of traffic, the local authorities

having cleared the way for us; a thousand troopers and their ancillary equipment take up a lot of room, and we were far from the first regiment to have disembarked. Indeed, the occasional muffled curse from behind me which cut through the din made it all too clear that the front few ranks would have preferred it if the Rough Riders could have been held back for a while longer instead of being sent through immediately ahead of us. Come to that, I don't suppose Kasteen was too thrilled about having to gaze at a street's width of horse arses for the duration of our march either. But the broad thoroughfares were a little too quiet for my liking, and a little too open as well. I'm not agoraphobic by any means, not like some hivers who never feel comfortable under an open sky, but there was something about those wide streets that made me think of snipers and ambush.

That made me scan the buildings as we passed, and my unease grew the more I saw of them. There was nothing wrong with them as such, not like the bizarre architectural forms of a Chaos incursion which seem to twist reality and which hurt to look upon, or the brutal slapdash functionalism of orkish habitations, but there was something in their sweeping forms which seemed vaguely inhuman. I was put in mind of some eldar architecture by their elegant simplicity, and then it finally hit me: there were no right angles anywhere, even the corners having been rounded and smoothed. But beneath this strange styling, the shapes were clearly those of warehouses, apartment blocks, and manufactoria, as though the whole city had been left out in the sun for too long and had started to melt.

That alone should have been enough warning of an insidious alien influence at work here, but before we reached our destination, I was to see far more than that.

'There's something seriously wrong here,' I said to Jurgen, who looked up briefly from the road ahead to nod in agreement with me.

'Something doesn't smell right,' he agreed, without a trace of irony. 'Have you seen the civilians?'

Now that he came to mention it, there were remarkably few of them lining the route. Normally a big military parade would have brought them out in droves, waving their aquila

flags and their icons of the Divine One, cheering themselves hoarse to see so many of the Emperor's finest ready to see off the foe so they could scuttle back to their meaningless lives without the fear of having to fight for themselves. But the pavements were half empty, and for every shopkeeper or hab-wife or juvie who cheered and waved, or smiled wanly at us with sidelong glances at their neighbours, there were just as many who scowled or glared at us. That put a shiver down my spine, awakening uncomfortable and all-too-recent memories of the mess hall riot, and the blood-maddened troopers a hair from turning on me.

At least no one was shouting, or throwing things. Yet. But I reached down unobtrusively, and loosened my laspistol and my trusty chainsword ready to be drawn in a hurry if I needed them.

And right on cue I noticed the first of the banners. 'MURDERERS GO HOME!' it said, in shaky capitals, hand lettered on what looked like an old bedsheet. Someone had strung it from a luminator pole so that it hung out across the street, comfortably above head height, but low enough to brush irritatingly over the head and shoulders of anyone riding in a vehicle.

Or on a horse, for that matter. As I watched, one of the Rough Rider officers reached up irritably and tore it down.

Bad move, I said to myself, expecting some trouble from the crowd, but beyond a little catcalling from a small knot of juvies nothing happened. But I was getting a distinctly uncomfortable feeling about all this. There was a perceptible undercurrent of tension in the air now, like a fainter echo of the incipient violence I'd felt aboard the *Righteous Wrath*.

'Go back to your Emperor and leave us alone!' a pretty girl shouted, her head shaven, apart from a single shoulder-length braid, and I felt as though I'd been doused with cold water. *Your Emperor*. The words had been unmistakable.

'Heretics!' Jurgen said with loathing. I nodded, still unable to credit it. Could the Great Enemy have a foothold here, as well as the tau? But common sense argued against it. If that were the case we'd have bombarded the place from orbit, surely, and the Astartes would have been sent in to cut out the cancer before it could spread.

Things weren't as far gone as I'd feared, however, as I turned back to look, a squad of Arbites forced their way through the crowd and began laying into the juvies with shock batons. Good order was still being maintained here, by the Emperor's grace, but for how much longer?

That, I very much feared, depended on us.

WE REACHED OUR staging area without further incident, fanning out through a complex of warehouses and manufactoria which had been set aside for our use. We weren't the only regiment quartered there, I recall, as the Imperium had been fortifying against an expected incursion by the tau for some time, and I gathered that the *Righteous Wrath's* complement (three full regiments apart from our own) brought the total up to around thirty thousand all told. That should have been more than enough to keep a backwater planet, even spread out across the whole globe, but rumour had it we could expect still more reinforcement, which worried me more than I wanted to show. With that amount of build-up it seemed the aliens wanted this place quite badly, and we'd more than likely be expected to hold it the hard way.

We were quartered next to one of the Valhallan armoured regiments – the 14th I think – but I couldn't tell you who most of the others were. There was definite evidence that the Rough Riders were still somewhere in the vicinity though, so you had to watch your feet, but apart from that I hadn't a clue. Except for one other unit I already knew well, of course, which I'll come to in a moment.

I was still feeling spooked from our journey through town, so I was relieved to come across Broklaw posting sentries around our corner of the compound as I left Jurgen to sort out my quarters and went for a wander around to get my bearings. I haven't reached my second century by not knowing where the best boltholes and lines of retreat are, and finding them was always a high priority for me whenever I found myself somewhere new.

'Good thinking, major,' I complimented him, and he gave me a wry grin.

'We should be safe enough here,' he said. 'But it never hurts to be careful.'

'I know what you mean,' I agreed. 'There's something about this place which really gets under my skin.' The warehouses around us all had that peculiar rounded-off look I'd noticed before, and the subtle sense of wrongness left a vague apprehension hovering around me like Jurgen's body odour. The major knew his business, though, setting up lascannon in sandbagged emplacements to cover the gaps between the buildings around us, and sharpshooters on the roof. I was just admiring his thoroughness when the ground began to shake, and a couple of our sentinels appeared, clanking and humming and swivelling their heavy multilasers as they took up position in front of the main loading doors which gave access to the ground floor where our vehicles were parked.

Somewhat reassured by this, I made my way across the compound, passing into areas controlled by other units, watching the familiar bustle of troopers coming and going, and finding the familiar air of controlled chaos and the constant background hum of vehicle engines and profanity curiously soothing. I wasn't sure quite how far I'd gone when an engine note both louder and deeper than the others cut through the babble of sound around me.

For a moment, I was assailed by that formless sense of recognition that you get when something you once knew so well it never registered consciously comes back to your notice after a passage of years, and then I turned my head with a nostalgic smile.

A Trojan heavy hauler, with an Earthshaker howitzer in tow, was growling its way across a vast open area which had probably once been used to park the private vehicles of the workers who toiled here in happier times, but which was now choked with equipment and supplies. I hadn't seen one of those up close in a long time, but I recognised it at once, having started my long and inglorious career in an obscure artillery unit. The flood of memories the sight brought back, a few of them even pleasant, was so overwhelming that for a moment I was unaware of the voice calling my name.

'Cai! Over here!'

Now, I've never been what you'd call oversupplied with friends, it goes with the job I suppose, but of the few I've

acquired over the years only one has ever had the presumption to use the familiar form of my given name. So, despite the changes that the years since I'd seen him last had wrought, there was no mistaking the officer who was running across the compound towards me, grinning like an idiot.

'Toren!' I called back, as he sidestepped another Trojan just in time to avoid being squashed into the tarmac like a bug. 'When did they make you a major?' The last time I'd seen Toren Divas he'd just made captain, and was nursing a hang-over as he saw me off from the 12th Field Artillery. I remember thinking at the time he was probably the only man in the battery who was sorry to see me go. 'And what in the name of the Emperor's arse are you doing here?'

'The same as you, I suppose.' He came panting up to me, the familiar lopsided grin on his face. 'Keeping order, purging the heretics, same old thing.' There were streaks of grey at his temples now, I noticed, and his belt was out another notch, but the same air of boyish enthusiasm still hung around him as on the day we'd first met. 'But I'm surprised to find you in a backwater like this.'

'Same here,' I said. I turned my head, taking in the bustle surrounding us. 'This seems like an awful lot of firepower to put the frighteners on a bunch of stropky provincials.'

'If the tau mobilise, we'll need every bit of it,' Divas said. 'Some of their wargear has to be seen to be believed. They've got these things like dreadnoughts, but they're fast, like Astartes infantry but twice the size, and their tanks make the eldar stuff look like they were built by orks...'

As usual, he seemed to be relishing the prospect of combat, which is easy to do when you're kilometres behind the front line chucking shells into the distance, but not so much fun when you're facing an enemy close enough to spit at you. And if that's all they've got in mind think yourself lucky, unless they're one of those Emperor-forsaken xenos that come equipped with venom sacs.

'But it won't come to that, surely,' I said. 'Now we're here they'd be mad to attempt a landing.' To my astonishment, Divas laughed.

'They won't have to. They're here already.' This was new and unwelcome information, and I goggled at him in surprise.

'Since when?' I gasped. Now I'd be the first to admit that I'm seldom that diligent when it comes to reading the briefing slates, but I was sure I'd have noticed something that crucial to my well-being in my cursory glance through it. Divas shrugged.

'About six months, apparently. They were already deployed on the planet when the *Cleansing Flame* dropped us off here three weeks ago.'

This was seriously bad news. I'd been looking forward to a nice brisk round of target practice on civilian rioters, or, at worst, a turkey shoot against the odd renegade PDF unit. But now we were facing a foe that could give us a real run for our money. Emperor's bowels! If half of what I'd heard about the tau and their technosorcery was true, we could be the ones getting our arses kicked. Divas grinned at my expression, misinterpreting it entirely.

'So you could see some fun after all,' he said, clapping me on the back. I could have killed him.

I DIDN'T, OF COURSE. For one thing, as I've said, I don't have so many friends that I can afford to waste them, and for another, Divas had been here long enough to pick up some vital information which I currently lacked. Namely, the location of the nearest bar we could get to without attracting too much attention to ourselves.

So we set out through the streets of Mayoh together, my commissar's uniform getting us through the guard on the compound gate without any argument, although he did give us a word of caution.

'Be careful, sir. There's been disturbances up in the Heights, they say.' That meant nothing to me, so I smiled, and nodded, and said we'd be careful, and checked with Divas that we'd be going nowhere near there as soon as we were out of earshot.

'Good Emperor, no,' he said, frowning. 'It's crawling with heretics. The only way you'd catch me up there is with a squadron of Hellhounds to cleanse the place.'

Needless to say, he'd never seen what incendiary weapons can do to a man, or he wouldn't have been half so keen on the idea. I have, and I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy.

Actually, there are one or two I would wish it on, come to think of it, and sit there happily toasting caba nuts while they screamed, but they're all dead now anyway, so it's beside the point.

'So where did they all come from?' I asked, as we made our way through the streets. Dusk was falling now, the luminators and the cafe signs flickering to life, and the swirl of bodies around us growing thicker as the night descended. Small knots of passers-by stood aside to let us pass, intimidated no doubt by our Imperial uniforms and the visible sidearms we carried – some with respect, and others resentful. Several of the latter had the curious tonsure the heretic juvie had sported, their heads shaved except for a long scalplock. The significance of it wasn't to dawn on me until some time later, but even then, I realised it was a badge of allegiance of some kind, and that those who bore it were liable to turn traitor if the shooting started. For now, though, they were content merely to mutter insults under their breath.

'They're local,' Divas said, not deigning to notice them, which was fine by me. Of all the ways I could have ended up dead over the years, getting sucked into a pointless street brawl would have been among the most embarrassing. 'The whole planet's infested with xeno-lovers.'

A bit of an exaggeration, that, but he was more or less right, as I was later to discover. To cut a long story short, the locals had been trading with the tau for several generations by now, which wasn't terribly sensible, but what can you expect from a bunch of backwater peasants? The end result was that most of them were quite used to seeing xenos around the place, and despite the sterling efforts of the local ecclesiarchy to warn them that no good would come of it, a lot of them had started to absorb unhealthy ideas from them. Which was where we came in, ready to guide them back into the Imperial fold before they came to too much harm, and all very noble of us too I'm sure you'll agree.

'The trouble is,' Divas concluded, downing the rest of his third amasec in one, 'the hard core are so far gone they don't see it like that. They think the tau are the best thing to hit the galaxy since the Emperor was in nappies, and we're the big bad bullies here to take their shiny new toys away.'

'Well, that might be a little more difficult now the tau are digging in,' I said. 'But I'm surprised they're prepared to risk it.' I followed suit, feeling the smoky liquor warming its way down through my chest. 'They must know we'll never allow them to annex the place without a fight.'

'They claim they're just here to safeguard their trading interests,' Divas said. We both snorted with laughter at that one. We knew how often the Imperium had said exactly the same thing before launching an all-out invasion of some luckless ball of dirt. Of course when we did it, it was true, and it was my job to shoot anyone who thought otherwise.

'One for the diplomats, then,' I said, signalling for another round. A nicely rounded waitress bustled over, full of patriotic fervour, and replenished our glasses.

One thing I can say for Divas, he knew how to find a good bar. This one, the Eagle's Wing, was definitely in the loyalist camp. The wide, smoky cellar full of Planetary Defence Force regulars were delighted to see some real soldiers at last, and fulminating at the governor for not letting them loose on the aliens years ago. The owner was a corporal in the PDF reserves, recently retired after twenty years' service, and he couldn't seem to get over the honour of having a couple of real Guard officers in the place. And once Divas had introduced me, and I'd been appropriately modest about my earlier adventures in the Emperor's name, there was no question of us having to pay the bill either. After signing autographs for some of the civilian customers – all of whom urged us to pot a few of the 'little blue bastards' on their behalf – and charming the waitress had begun to pall, we'd retreated to a quiet side booth where we could talk uninterrupted.

'I think the diplomats could be getting a little help on this one,' Divas said, tapping the side of his nose conspiratorially as he lifted the glass. I drank a little more slowly, acutely aware that we'd have to start making our way back through a potentially hostile city soon, and wanting to keep a reasonably clear head.

'Help from who?' I asked.

'Who do you think?' Divas dipped his finger in the glass, and sketched a stylised letter I with a pair of crossbars bisect-

ing it on the surface of the table, before erasing it with a sweep of his hand. I laughed.

'Oh yeah, them. Right.' I've yet to arrive any place where the political situation's fluid without hearing rumours of Inquisition agents beavering away behind the scenes, and unless I happen to be the errand boy in question, I never believe a word of it. On the other hand, if there aren't any rumours, then they probably are up to some mischief and no mistake about it.

'You can laugh.' Divas finished his drink, and replaced the glass on the table. 'But I heard it from one of the Administratum adepts, who swore he'd got it from... somewhere or other.' An expression of faint bewilderment drifted across his face. 'I think I need some fresh air.'

'I think you do, too,' I said. Leaving aside what I thought then were his ridiculous fantasies about the Inquisition, he'd still given me a lot to think about. The situation here was undoubtedly far more complex than I'd been led to believe, and I needed to consider things carefully.

So we took our leave of our kindly hosts, the waitress in particular looking sorry to see me go, and staggered up the stairway and into the street.

The cold night air hit me like a refreshing shower, snapping me back to alertness, and I glanced around while Divas communed loudly with the Emperor in a convenient gutter. Fortunately, the bar he'd steered us to was down a quiet side alley, so no one saw the dignity of the Imperial uniform being sullied. Once I was sure there were no more eruptions to come, I helped him to his feet.

'You used to be able to hold it better than that,' I chided, and he shook his head mournfully.

'Local rotgut. Not like the stuff we used to drink. And I should have eaten something...'

'It would just have been a wasted effort,' I consoled him, and glanced around, trying to get our bearings. 'Where the frak are we, anyway?'

'Dock zone,' he said confidently, hardly swaying on his feet at all now. 'This way.' He strode off towards the nearest illuminated thoroughfare. I shrugged, and followed him. After all, he'd had three weeks to get his bearings.

As we made our way through the well-lit street, however, I began to feel a little apprehensive. True, we'd been deep in conversation on our way to the bar, but none of the landmarks looked familiar to me, and I began to wonder if his confidence had been misplaced.

'Toren,' I said after a while, noticing a gradual increase in the number of scalplocks and murderous glances among the passers-by, 'are you sure this is the way back to our staging area?'

'Not ours,' he said, the grin back on his face. 'Theirs. Thought you'd like to get a look at the enemy.'

'You thought what?' I yelped, amazed at his stupidity. Then I remembered. Divas bought the myth of my purported heroism completely and without question, and had done ever since he'd seen me take on an entire tyrannid swarm with just a chainsword when we were callow youths together. Purely by accident, as it happened, I'd had no idea the damn bugs were even there until I'd blundered into them, and if I hadn't ended up inadvertently leading them into the beaten zone of our heavy ordnance and saving the day, they'd have torn me to pieces. Waltzing up to the enemy encampment and thumbing our noses at them probably struck him as the kind of thing I did for fun. 'Are you out of your mind?'

'It's perfectly safe,' he said. 'We're not officially at war with them yet.' Well, that was true, but I still wasn't keen on jumping the gun.

'And until we are, we're not going to provoke them,' I said, all commissarial duty. Divas's face fell, like a child denied a sweet, and I thought I'd better put a gloss on it that would match his expectations of me. 'We can't put our own amusement ahead of our responsibilities to the Emperor, however tempting it is.'

'I suppose you're right,' he said reluctantly, and I began to breathe a little more easily. Now all I had to do was manoeuvre him back to the barracks before he got any more stupid ideas. So I took him by the arm, and turned him around. 'Now how do we get back to our compound?'

'How about in a body bag?' somebody asked. I turned, feeling my stomach drop. About a dozen locals stood behind us, the street light striking highlights from their shaven heads,

a variety of improvised weapons hanging purposefully from their hands. They looked tough, at least in their own minds, but when you've been face to face with orks and eldar reiver slavers you don't intimidate that easily. Well, all right. I do, but I don't show it, which is the main thing.

Besides, I had a laspistol and a chainsword, which in my experience trumps a crowbar every time. So I laid a restraining hand on Divas's shoulder, as he was still intoxicated enough to rise to the bait, and smiled lazily.

'Believe me,' I said, 'you don't want to start anything.'

'You don't tell me what I want.' The group's spokesman stepped forward into the light. Fine, I thought, keep them talking. 'But that's what you Imperials do, isn't it?'

'I don't quite follow,' I said, affecting mild curiosity. Movement out of the corner of my eye told me that our retreat had been cut off. A second group emerged from the alley mouth behind us. I started calculating the odds. If I made a move to draw the laspistol, they'd rush me, but I'd probably manage to get a shot off. If I took out the leader with it, and ran forward at the same time, I stood a good chance of breaking through the line and making a run for it. That assumed they'd be surprised or intimidated enough to hesitate, of course, and I was able to open up a decent lead. With any luck they'd turn on Divas, buying me enough time to get away, but I couldn't be sure of that, so I continued to play for time and look for a better chance.

'You're here to take our world!' the leader shouted. As he came forward fully into the light I could see that his face was painted blue, a delicate pastel shade. It should have made him look ridiculous, but the overall effect was somehow charismatic. 'But you'll never take our freedom!'

'Your freedom is what we're here to give you, you xeno-hugging moron!' Divas broke free of my restraining arm, and lunged forward. 'But you're too brainwashed to see it!'

Great. So much for diplomacy. Still, while he was set on re-enacting Gannack's Charge, I might be able to make a run for it.

No such luck, of course – the surrounding heretics drove in on us as a concerted wedge. I just managed to draw my laspistol and snap off a shot, taking out half

the face of one of the group, which, I'm bound to say, didn't make much of a difference to his overall personal charm, before an iron bar came down hard on my wrist. I've been in enough mêlées to have seen the blow coming, and to have ridden it, which saved me from a fracture or worse, but that didn't help the pain, which exploded along my arm, deadening it. My fingers flew open, and I ducked, scrabbling after the precious weapon, but it was futile.

A knee drove up into my ribs, slamming the breath from my lungs, and I was down, cold, hard rockcrete scraping the skin from my knuckles (the real ones anyway), and knowing I was a dead man unless I could get away somehow.

'Toren!' I screamed, but Divas had problems of his own by now, and I wasn't going to get any help from that quarter. I curled up, trying to protect my vital organs, and tried frantically to get at my chainsword. Of course, I should have gone for that first, holding the mob at bay with it, but hindsight's about as much use as a heretic's oath, and now the bloody thing was trapped under my own bodyweight. I scrabbled frantically, feeling fists and boots thudding against my ribs. Luckily there were so many of them that they were getting in each others way, and my uniform greatcoat was thick enough to absorb some of the impact, or I'd have been in even worse shape than I was.

'*Greechaaah!*' something shrieked, an inhuman scream that raised the hairs on the back of my neck, even under those conditions. My assailants hesitated, and I rolled clear, in time to see the largest of them yanked back by sheer brute force.

For a moment I thought I was hallucinating, but the pain in my ribs was all too real. A face dominated by a large hooked beak was gazing down at me, surmounted by a crest of quills that had been dyed or painted in some elaborate pattern, and hot, charnel breath washed across my face, making me gag.

'You are comparatively uninjured?' the thing asked, in curiously accented Gothic. It's hard to convey in writing, but its voice was glottal, most of the consonants reduced to hard clicking sounds. It was perfectly understandable, mind you.

My stupefaction was due entirely to the fact that something that looked like that was able to talk in the first place.

'Yes, thank you,' I croaked after a moment. Whenever you don't have a clue what's going on, I've always found, it never hurts to be polite.

'That is gratifying,' the thing said, and threw the heretic in its left hand casually away. The others were standing around aimlessly now, like sulky schola students when the tutor turns up to spoil the fun. Then it extended the same thin, scaly hand equipped with dagger-like claws towards me. After a heart-stopping moment, I divined its intention, and accepted the proffered assistance in gaining my feet. As I did so, it turned to the sullen group of heretics.

'This does not advance the greater good,' it said. 'Disperse now, and avoid conflict.' Well, that was a challenge if ever I'd heard one. But to my surprise, and, I must admit, my intense relief, the little knot of troublemakers slunk away into the shadows. I eyed my rescuer a little apprehensively. He (or she – with kroot it's impossible to tell, and only another kroot would care anyway) was slightly taller than I was, and still looked pretty intimidating. They're tough enough to take on an ork in hand-to-hand combat, and I, for one, wouldn't be betting on the greenskin, but if it wanted me dead, it would only have had to wait a few moments. I retrieved my fallen laspistol anyway, and tried to get my breath back.

'I'm obliged to you,' I said. 'I must admit I don't understand, but I'm grateful.' I fumbled the weapon back into its holster with some difficulty. My arm was swelling up now, and my fingers felt thick and unresponsive. My rescuer made a curious clicking sound, which I assumed to be its equivalent of laughter.

'Imperial officers murdered by tau supporters. Not a desirable outcome when the political situation is tense.'

'Not a desirable outcome at any time when one of them is me,' I said, and the xeno made the clicking noise again. That reminded me of Divas, and I staggered across to check on him. He was still breathing, but unconscious, a deep gash across his forehead. I'd picked up enough battlefield medicine to know he'd recover soon enough, but have the Emperor's own

headache when he woke, and that was fine with me – serve the idiot right for nearly getting me killed.

‘I have the honour to be Gorok, of the Clan T’cha,’ the creature said. ‘I am kroot.’

‘I know what you are,’ I said. ‘Kroot killed my parents.’ And thereby got me dumped in the Schola Progenium, and thence into the Commissariat, instead of following my undoubted true destiny of running some discreet little house of ill repute for slumming spirers and guilders up from the sump with more money than sense to splash around. I vaguely resented that, far more than the loss of my progenitors, who hadn’t been all that much to have around while they were alive, to be honest. But it never hurts to grab the moral high ground. My new acquaintance didn’t seem terribly concerned, though.

‘I trust they fought well,’ he said. I doubted it. They’d only joined the Guard to get out of the hive ahead of the Arbites, and would certainly have deserted the first chance they got, so there must be something in genetics after all.

‘Not well enough,’ I said, and Gorok clicked his amusement again. It was a slightly unnerving experience, feeling that something so unhuman was able to read me more readily than my own people.

‘Go carefully, commissar,’ he said. ‘And feed on your enemies. May we have no cause for conflict.’

Well, thank the Emperor for that. But somehow I doubted that it was going to happen, and of course, I was right. I was surprised, though, by how quickly the crisis came upon us.

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