



INTRODUCTION

YOU QUITE FREQUENTLY come across the phrase 'this book changed my life,' usually on the cover of some dubious American self-help manual with a title like *I Was A Pathetic Loser Like You Until I Got Rich Preying On People's Insecurities*. I have to admit, though, that the experience of writing *For the Emperor*, the first Ciaphas Cain novel, had a pretty big impact on mine. I learned an enormous amount about the craft of authorship in the process, and have continued to do so as the series goes on; it's no exaggeration to say that without Cain I wouldn't be the writer I am today. (Whether or not that's a good thing I leave to your judgement.) Certainly, an awful lot of people seem to enjoy his adventures, something which continues to astonish me, as, like so many authors, I write purely to amuse myself. The fact that so many readers also find these tales entertaining, and the amount of enthusiasm for them they express at signing sessions, still surprises and delights me.

Ironically, when I wrote the first short story featuring Cain, I assumed that the idea of a self-obsessed commissar was a one-joke concept, and having told it I'd be turning my attention elsewhere. But Cain had other ideas, hanging around in the back of my head, and refusing to go away. Luckily, it seemed, he'd struck a chord with

the readers too; almost as soon as his first adventure, *Fight or Flight*, had appeared in the pages of *Inferno*! I was asked if I'd like to follow it up with a sequel, and no sooner had I written that than I was asked if I'd like to feature him in a novel for the Black Library.

The answer to that, of course, was 'Yes!' Since then, the redoubtable commissar has gone from strength to strength, with the fifth volume of his adventures appearing at the same time as this collected edition of the first three (plus some odd bits). Which is not to say that I'm getting in the least bit tired of the series; on the contrary, I already have another one planned (possibly even underway by the time you read this), and hope to continue chronicling his activities for years to come. Or at least until my long-suffering editors' patience finally gives out.

One of the questions I'm often asked is how I manage to get away with being humorous in a universe as relentlessly grim as the one of the 41st millennium. Part of the answer is that it's a natural human trait to take refuge from horror in humour, and Cain's dry and ironic narrative voice seems to me to be a perfectly reasonable one in which to be recounting his memoirs. One of the pleasures of writing stories set in the Warhammer 40,000 universe is that it's so rich and textured that it can be used to tell pretty much any kind of tale. In fact it's only because the background is so solidly developed that the books succeed at all; I doubt that Cain would have worked half so well as a character in any other environment. Occasionally, I must admit, I get carried away and cross the line into out-and-out comedy, but when this happens I'm lucky enough to have supportive and vigilant editors (hi Lindsey, hi Nick!) looking over my shoulder and pointing out tactfully that this is, perhaps, a joke too far. Another member of the team who deserves a public pat on the back is Clint Langley, whose wonderful covers do so much to enliven these books; his illustrations capture Cain's sardonic personality perfectly, and his rendition of Jurgen instantly became the image I see in my mind whenever he wanders into the story.

The other thing the Cain novels have which, much to the relief of the typesetters, none of the other Black Library titles do, is the notorious footnotes. Almost as soon as I began the first novel I realised that the narrative needed opening out in order to take in a much bigger picture than Cain would be able to experience personally: something of a problem with a hero who tells his story entirely in the first person! The solution was to add an editorial voice, which would interpolate additional material and explanatory footnotes; a

voice, moreover, which would be waspish, self-confident and opinionated, in contrast to Cain's frequently-expressed insecurities. To my relief the perfect candidate appeared in the story almost at once, and has continued to do sterling work throughout the series.

One of the many pleasures I've found working on the Cain stories has been the plethora of supporting characters who wandered onto the page for a paragraph or two and stuck around, becoming more rounded and developed as the series progressed. Following their growth from book to book has been fascinating for me, and, I hope, enjoyable for you. Especially the inestimable Jurgen, who, despite his lack of personal hygiene and social skills, has a pretty good claim to being the real hero of these adventures, if anyone ever noticed him.

Which brings me to the other question I'm most frequently asked about Cain – other than how you pronounce his Christian name (for the record, it's *kai-a-fass*, which, like his surname, is a rather self-indulgent biblical joke). Is he really the cowardly scoundrel he paints himself to be, or far more courageous than he gives himself credit for? To be perfectly honest, I don't really know, although I suspect a little of both; but that's one of the real joys of a writer's life. I may have invented him in the first place, inspired to some extent by Harry Flashman and Edmund Blackadder, but by now he's become enough of a personality in his own right to keep surprising me, and long may he continue to do so.

I hope you enjoy his adventures as much as I have.

Sandy Mitchell
January 2007

FIGHT OR FLIGHT

'Like any newly-commissioned young commissar I faced my first assignment with an eagerness mixed with trepidation. I was, after all, the visible embodiment of the will of the Emperor Himself; and I could scarce suppress the tiny voice which bade me wonder if, when tested, I would truly prove worthy of the trust bestowed upon me. When the test came at last, in the blood and glory of the battlefield, I had my answer; and my life changed forever.'

— Ciaphas Cain, 'To Serve the Emperor:
A Commissar's Life,' 104. M42

IF THERE'S A single piece of truth among all the pious humbug and retrospective arse-covering that passes for my autobiography, it's the last four words of that paragraph. When I look back over the past hundred years of cowardice, truth-bending, bowel-loosening terror, and sheer dumb luck that somehow propelled me to the dizzy heights of Hero of the Imperium, I can truthfully point to that grubby little skirmish on a forgotten mining world as the incident which made me what I am.

I'd been a fully-fledged commissar for almost eight weeks when I arrived on Desolatia IV, seven of them spent travelling in the warp, and I could tell right away that my new unit wasn't happy to receive me. There was a single Salamander waiting at the edge of the landing field as I stepped off the

shuttle, its sand-scoured desert camo bearing the markings of the Valhallan 12th Field Artillery. But there was no sign of the senior officers that protocol demanded should meet a newly-arrived commissar. Just a single, bored-looking trooper, stripped down to the bare minimum of what might pass for a uniform, making the best of what little shade the parked vehicle offered. He glanced up from his slate of 'artistic engravings' as I appeared, and shambled in my general direction, his boots kicking up little puffs of the baking yellow dust.

'Carry your bag, sir?' He didn't even attempt a salute.

'That's fine,' I said hastily. 'It's not heavy.' His body odour preceded him like a personal force bubble. The briefing slate I'd glanced at before making the joyous discovery that the transport ship was stuffed with crewmen still under the fond illusion that games of chance had something to do with luck had mentioned that the Valhallans were from an ice world, so it was no surprise to me that the baking heat of Desolatia was making him sweat heavily, but I'd hardly expected to be met by a walking bioweapon.

I overrode the gag reflex and adopted an expression of amiable good humour that had got me out of trouble innumerable times during my years at the schola, as well as into it as often as I could contrive.

'Commissar Cain,' I said. 'And you are...?'

'Gunner Jurgen. Colonel sends his apologies, but he's busy.'

'No doubt,' I said. The ground crew were starting to unload the cargo, anonymous crates and pieces of mining machinery larger than I was floated past on lift pallets. The mines were the reason we were here; to ensure the un-interrupted supply of something or other to the forge-worlds of the Imperium despite the presence of an ork raiding party, which had been unpleasantly surprised to find an Imperial Guard troopship in orbit waiting for a minor warpstorm to subside when they arrived. Precisely what we were defending from our rapidly dwindling foes would be somewhere in the briefing slate, I supposed.

The mine habs loomed above us, clinging like lichen to the sides of the mountain their inhabitants had all but hollowed out. To a hive boy such as myself they looked comfortably nostalgic, albeit a little on the cramped side. The total population of the colony was just a few hundred thousand, including elders and kids; just a village really by Imperial standards.

I followed Jurgen back to the Salamander, weaving through the thickening scrum of workers; he walked straight towards it, unimpeded, the miasma from his unwashed socks clearing a path as effectively as a chainsword. As I swung my kitbag aboard I found myself wondering if coming here had been a mistake after all.

* * *

THE JOURNEY WAS uneventful; nothing so assertive as a landmark interrupted the monotony of the desert road once the mountains had diminished behind us to a low smudge against the horizon. The only thing even approaching scenery was the occasional burned-out hulk of an ork battlewagon.

'You must be looking forward to getting out of here,' I remarked, enjoying the sensation of the wind through my hair and revelling in the fact that perched up behind the gunner's shield, I was mercifully insulated from Jurgen's odour. He shrugged.

'As the Emperor wills.' He said that a lot. I was beginning to realise that where his intellect should have been was a literally-minded adherence to Imperial doctrine which would have had my old tutors at the schola dancing with glee. If they'd ever deigned to do anything so undignified, of course.

Gradually the outline of the artillery park began to resolve itself through the heat haze. It had been sited in the lee of a low bluff, which rose out of the parching sand like an island in a sea of grit; the Valhallans having adapted their instinctive appreciation of blizzard conditions to the sandstorms prevailing here without too much difficulty. Bulldozed berms extended out from the rockface, extending the defensive perimeter into a rough semi-circle blistered with sandbagged emplacements and subsidiary earthworks.

The first thing I made out with any clarity were the Earthshakers; even at this distance they were impressive, dwarfing the inflatable habdomes that clustered around the compound like camouflaged mushrooms. As we got closer I made out batteries of Hydras too, carefully emplaced along the perimeter to maximise cover against air attack.

Despite myself, I was favourably impressed; Colonel Mostrue obviously knew his business, and wasn't about to let the lack of a visible enemy lull him into a false sense of security. I began to look forward to meeting him.

'So you'RE the new commissar?' He glanced up from his desk, looking at me like something he'd found on the sole of his boot. I nodded, picking an expression of polite neutrality. I'd met his sort before, and my preferred option of breezy charm wouldn't cut it with him. Imperial Guard commanders tended to distrust the political officers assigned to them, often with good reason. Most of the time, about all you could hope for was to develop a tolerable working relationship and try not to tread on one another's toes too much. That worked for me; even back then I realised commissars who threw their weight around tended to end up dying heroically for the Emperor, even if the enemy was a suspiciously long way away at the time.

'Ciaphas Cain.' I introduced myself with a formal nod of the head, and tried not to shiver. The air in the habdome was freezing, despite the furnace heat outside, and I found myself unexpectedly grateful for the greatcoat that went with my uniform. I should have anticipated Valhalla tastes would run to air conditioning which left your breath vapourising when you spoke. Mostrue was still in his shirtsleeves while I was trying my best not to shiver.

'I know who you are, commissar.' His voice was dry. 'What I want to know is what you're doing here?'

'I go where I'm sent, colonel.' Which was true enough, so far as it went. What I didn't mention was that I'd gone to considerable trouble finding an Administratum functionary with a weakness for cards and an inability to spot a stacked deck that almost amounted to a gift from the Emperor; who, after a few pleasant social evenings, had left me in a position to pick practically any unit in the entire Guard to attach myself to.

'We've never had a commissar assigned to us before.'

I tried on an expression of bemused puzzlement.

'Probably because you don't seem to need one. Your unit records are exemplary. I can only assume...' I hesitated just long enough to pique his interest.

'Assume what?'

I feigned ill-concealed embarrassment.

'If I could be frank for a moment, colonel?' He nodded. 'I was hardly the most diligent student at the schola. Too much time on the scrum-ball pitch, and not enough in the library, to be honest.' He nodded again. I thought it best not to mention the other activities which had consumed most of the time I should have spent studying. 'My final assessment was marginal. I suspect this assignment was intended to... ease me into service without too many challenges.'

Worked like a charm, of course. Mostrue was flattered by the implication that his unit was sufficiently well-run to have attracted the favourable notice of the Commissariat, and, if not exactly pleased to have me aboard, was at least no longer radiating ill-concealed suspicion and resentment. It was also almost true; one of the reasons I'd settled on the 12th Field Artillery was that there didn't seem much for me to do there. The main one, though, was that artillery units fought from behind the lines. A long way behind. No skulking through jungles or city blocks waiting for a laser bolt in the back, no standing on the barricades face to face with a screaming ork horde, just the satisfaction of pulverising the enemy at a safe distance and a quick cup of recaff before doing it all over again. Suited me fine.

'We'll do our best to keep you underemployed.' Mostrue smiled thinly, a faint air of tolerant smugness washing across his features. I smiled too. If you let people feel superior to you, they're childishly easy to manipulate.

'GUNNER ERHLSSEN. OUT of uniform on sentry duty.' Toren Divas, Mostrue's subaltern, glared at the latest miscreant, who had the grace to blush and glance at me nervously. Divas was the closest thing to a friend I'd made since I arrived; an amiable man, he'd been only too happy to hand over the chore of maintaining discipline among the troops to a proper commissar now one was available.

'Who isn't in this heat?' I made a show of reading the formal report, and glanced up. 'Nevertheless, despite the obvious extenuating circumstances, we have to retain some standards. Five days' kitchen duty. And put some trousers on.'

Erhlsen saluted, visibly relieved to have escaped the flogging normally prescribed for such an infraction, and marched out between his escorts, showing far too much of his inadequately patched undershorts.

'I must say, Cai, you're not quite what I'd expected.' Erhlsen had been the last defaulter of the day, and Divas began to collect his documentation together. 'When they told us we were getting a commissar...'

'Everyone panicked. The card games broke up, the moonshine stills were dismantled, and the stores tallied with inventory for the first time in living memory.' I laughed, slipping easily into the affable persona I use to put people at their ease. 'We're not all Emperor-bothering killjoys, you know.'

The habdome rocked as the Earthshakers outside lived up to their name. After a month here, I barely noticed.

'You know your job better than I do, of course.' Divas hesitated. 'But don't you think you might be a little... well...'

'Too lenient?' I shrugged. 'Possibly. But everyone's finding the heat hard to cope with. They deserve a bit of slack. It's good for morale.'

The truth was, of course, that despite what you've seen in the holos, charismatic commissars loved and respected by the men they lead are about as common as ork ballerinas; and being thought of as a soft touch who's infinitely preferable to any possible replacement is almost as good when it comes to making sure someone's watching your back in a firefight.

We stepped outside, the heat punching the breath from my lungs as usual, and were halfway to the officer's mess before a nagging sense of disquiet at the back of my mind resolved itself into a sudden realisation: the guns had stopped firing.

'I thought we were supposed to lay down a barrage for the rest of the day?' I said.

'We were.' Divas turned, looking at the Earthshakers. Sweat-streaked gun crews, stripped to the waist, were securing equipment, evidently more than happy to cease fire. 'Something's—'

'Sir! Commissar!' There was no need to look to identify the messenger; Jurgen's unique body odour heralded his arrival as surely as a shellscream presaged an explosion. He was running towards us from the direction of the battery offices. 'Colonel wants to see you right away!'

'What's wrong?' I asked.

'Nothing, sir.' He sketched a perfunctory salute, more for Divas's benefit than mine, a huge grin all but bisecting his face. 'They're pulling us out!'

'YES, IT'S TRUE.' Mostrue seemed as pleased at the news as everyone else. He pointed at the hololithic display. 'The 6th Armoured overran the last pocket of resistance this morning. They should have completed cleansing the entire world by nightfall.'

I studied it with interest, seeing the full dispersion of our units for the first time. The bulk of our forces in this hemisphere were well to the east, leaving a small, isolated blip between them and the mines. Us. The orks had fallen back further and faster than I'd expected, and I began to realise just how merited the Valhallans' reputation as elite shock troopers was. Even fighting in conditions about as hostile to them as they were ever likely to encounter, they had ground a stubborn and vicious enemy to paste in a matter of weeks.

'So, where next?' I asked, regretting it instantly. Mostrue turned his pale eyes on me in the same way my old tutor domus used to do at the schola, when he was sure I was guilty of something but couldn't prove it. Which was most of the time, incidentally, but I digress.

'Initially, the landing field.' He turned to Divas. 'We'll need to get the Earthshakers limbered up for transport.'

'I'll see to it.' Divas hurried out.

'After that,' the colonel continued, changing the display, 'we're to join the Keffia task force.' A fleet of starships, over a thousand strong, was curving in towards the Desolatia system. I was impressed. News of the uprising on the remote agriworld was only just beginning to filter back to the Commissariat when I'd been dispatched here; the Navy had evidently been busy in the last three months.

'Seems a bit excessive for a handful of rebels,' one of the officers remarked.

'Let's hope so,' I said, seeing the chance of regaining the initiative. Mostrue looked at me again, in evident surprise; he'd obviously thought he'd put me in my place the first time for having the temerity to interrupt.

'Do you know something we don't, commissar?' He still pronounced my title as though it were a species of fungus, but at least he was pretending to acknowledge it. That was a start.

'Nothing concrete,' I said. 'But I have seen indications...'

'Other than the size of the fleet?' Mostrue's sarcasm got a toadying laugh from some of the officers as he turned away, convinced he'd called my bluff.

'It was only gossip really,' I began, letting him savour his phantom triumph for a moment longer, 'but according to a friend on the Warmaster's staff...'

The sudden silence was truly satisfying. That the 'friend' was a minor clerical functionary with a weakness for handsome young men in uniform, when she wasn't sorting files and making recaff, was a detail I kept to myself. I went on as though I hadn't noticed the sudden collective intake of breath.

'Keffia might have been infested by genestealers,' I finished.

The silence lengthened while they digested the implications. Everyone knew what that meant. A long, bloody campaign to cleanse the world metre by metre. Virus bombing from orbit was the option of last resort on an agriworld, which would cease to be of any value to the Imperium if its ecosystem was destroyed.

In other words, years of rear echelon campaigning in a temperate climate, chucking high explosive death at an enemy without any means to retaliate in kind. I could hardly wait.

'If this is true,' Mostrue said, looking more shaken than I'd ever seen him, 'we've no time to lose.' He began to issue orders to his subordinates.

'I agree,' I said. 'How close is the fleet?'

'A day, maybe two.' The colonel shrugged. 'The astropaths at regimental HQ lost contact with them last night.'

'With the entire fleet?' I was getting an uncomfortable tingling sensation in the palms of my hands. I've felt it a great many times over the years since, and it never meant anything good. No reason why an Imperial Guard officer should find the lack of contact ominous, of course. To them the warp and anything to do with it is simply something best not thought about, but commissars are supposed to know a great deal more than we'd like to about the primal stuff of Chaos. There's very little which can cast a shadow in the warp so powerful that it can cut off

communication with an entire battle fleet, and none of them are anything I want to be within a dozen sub-sectors of. 'Colonel, I recommend very strongly that you rescind the orders you've just given.' He looked at me as if I'd gone mad.

'This is no time for humour, commissar.'

'I wish I was joking,' I said. Some of my unease must have been showing on my face, because he actually started listening to me. 'Put the whole battery on full alert. Especially the Hydras. Call regimental headquarters and tell them to do the same. Don't take no for an answer. And get every air defence auspex you can on line.'

'Anything else?' he asked, still visibly unsure whether to take me seriously or not.

'Yes,' I said. 'Pray to the Emperor I'm wrong.'

UNFORTUNATELY, I WASN'T. I was in the command post, talking to the captain of an ore barge which had made orbit that morning, when my worst fears were realised. He was a florid man, running slightly to fat, and visibly uncomfortable communicating with an Imperial official, even one as minor as me.

'We're the only thing in orbit, commissar,' he said, clearly unsure why I'd asked. I flipped through the shipping schedules I'd requisitioned from an equally bemused mine manager.

'You weren't due for another week,' I said. The captain shrugged.

'We were lucky. The warp currents were stronger than usual.'

'Or something very big is disturbing them,' I suggested, then cursed myself for saying it. The captain wasn't stupid.

'Commissar?' he queried, clearly considering most of the possibilities I already had, and probably wondering if there was time to make a run for it.

'There's a large Navy task force inbound to pick us up,' I reassured him, half truthfully.

'I see.' He obviously didn't trust me further than he could throw a cargo shuttle, sensible man. He was about to say something else, when his navigator interrupted.

'We're detecting warp portals. Dozens of them!'

'The fleet?' Divas asked hopefully at my elbow. Mostrue shook his head doubtfully.

'The auspex signatures are all wrong. Not like ships at all...'

'Bioships,' I said. 'No metal in the hulls.'

'Tyranids?' Mostrue's face was grey. Mine was too, probably, although I'd had longer to get used to the idea. Like I said, there wasn't much that could cast a shadow in the warp that big, and with genestealers

running rampant a couple of systems away it didn't need Inquisitor Kryptmann to join the dots. I turned my attention back to the freighter captain before he could cut the link.

'Captain,' I said hastily, 'your ship is now requisitioned by the Commissariat. You will not break orbit without explicit instructions. Do you understand?'

He nodded, somberly, and turned to shout orders at his crew.

'What do you want an ore scow for?' Mostrue looked at me narrowly. 'Planning to leave us, commissar?' That was precisely what I had in mind, of course, but I smiled thinly, pretending to take his remark for gallows humour.

'Don't think I'm not tempted,' I said. 'But I'm afraid we're stuck here.'

I called up the tactical display. Outside, the staccato drumbeats of the Hydras opened up, seeking the first mycetic spores to breach the atmosphere. Red dots began to blossom on the hololith, marking the first beachheads. To my relief and as I'd expected, the 'nids had homed in on the largest concentration of visible biomass: the main strength of the regiment. That would buy me a little time.

'Where did they come from?' Divas asked, an edge of panic entering his voice. I found myself slipping into my role of calm authority. All my training was beginning to pay off.

'One of the splinter fleets from Macragge.' The segmentum was full of them, fallout from the Ultramarines' heroic victory over Hive Fleet Behemoth almost a decade before. Scattered remnants, a tiny fraction of the threat they'd once presented, but still enough to overwhelm a lightly defended world. Like this one. 'Small. Weak. Easy pickings.' I slapped him encouragingly on the back, radiating an easy confidence I didn't feel, and indicated the data coming in from the ore barge's navigational auspex. 'Less than a hundred ships.' Each one of which probably held enough bioconstructs to devour everyone on the planet, but I couldn't afford to think about that just now.

Mostrue was studying the display, nodding thoughtfully.

'That's why you wanted the barge. To see what's going on up there.' Most of the regimental sensor net had been directed downwards, towards the planet's surface. 'Good thinking.'

'Partially,' I said. I indicated the surface readouts. Our air defence assets were doing sterling work, but the sheer number of spores was unstoppable. Red contact icons on the surface were beginning to make the hemisphere look like a case of Uhlren's pox. 'But we'll need it for an evacuation too.'

'Evacuate who?' The suspicious look was back on Mostrue's face again. I pointed to the mining colony.

'I'm sure you haven't forgotten we have a quarter of a million civilians sitting right next to the landing field,' I pointed out mildly. 'The 'nids haven't noticed them yet; thank the Emperor for underground hab zones.' Divas dipped his head at the mention of the Holy Name, pulling himself together with a visible effort. 'But when they do they'll think it's an all you can eat smorgasbord.'

'Will one barge be enough?' Divas asked.

'Have to be,' I said. 'It'll be cramped and uncomfortable for sure, but it beats ending up as Hormagaunt munchies. Can you get things started?'

'Right away.' Now he had something to do, Divas's confidence was returning. I clapped him on the back again as he turned to leave.

'Thanks, Toren. I know I can rely on you.' That should do it. The poor sap would take on a carnifex with a broken chair leg now rather than feel he'd let me down. Which just left Mostrue.

'We'll need to buy time,' I said, once the young subaltern was out of the way. The colonel looked at me, surprised by the change in my demeanour. But I knew my man; plain speaking would work better with him.

'The situation's worse than you were letting on, isn't it?' he asked. I nodded.

'I didn't want to discuss it in front of Divas. He's got enough to cope with at the moment. But yes.' I turned to the tactical display again. 'Even with every shuttle they can lay their hands on, it's going to take at least a day to get everyone aboard.' I indicated the main tyrannid advance. 'At the moment the 'nids are here, engaging our main force. When they notice the colony...'

'Or overrun the regiment.' Mostrue could read a hololith as well as I could. I nodded.

'They'll head west. And when they do we'll have to hold them for as long as we can.' Until we're all dead, in other words. I didn't need to spell it out. Mostrue nodded, gravely. Small crystals of ice drifted down from the ceiling as the Earthshakers got back to work, abrading the odds against us by the most miniscule of fractions. To my surprise he held out his hand, grasping mine and shaking it firmly.

'You're a good man, commissar,' he said. Which just goes to show what an appalling judge of character he was.

Now I'D SET everything in motion there was nothing to do but wait. I hung around the command post for a while longer, watching the red dots blossom in the desert to the east of us, and marvelled at the tenacity of our main force. I'd expected them to be annihilated within a

matter of hours, but they held their positions doggedly, even gaining ground in a few places. Even so, with the steady rain of mycetic spores delivering an endless tide of reinforcements, they were only delaying the inevitable. Mostrue watched tensely, stepping aside to afford me a better view as he noticed my presence. Under other circumstances I'd have gloated quietly over my sudden popularity, but I was too busy trying to suppress the urge to run for the latrines.

'We've you to thank for this,' he said. 'Without your warning they'd have been all over us.'

'I'm sure you'd have coped,' I said, and turned to Divas. 'How's the evacuation coming?'

'Slowly,' he admitted. I made a show of studying the data, and smiled encouragingly.

'Faster than I'd expected,' I lied. But fast enough. If I was going to join them I couldn't wait too much longer. Divas looked pleased.

'Nothing more I can do here,' I said, turning back to Mostrue. 'This is a job for a real soldier.' I gave him a moment to savour the compliment. 'I'll go and spend some time with the men. Try and boost morale.'

'It's what you're here for,' he said, meaning 'frak off and let me get on with it, then.' So I did.

Night had fallen some hours before, the temperature plummeting to levels the Valhallans were almost comfortable with, and the guardsmen seemed happier, despite the prospect of imminent combat. I wandered from group to group, cracking a few jokes, easing tension, instilling them with a confidence I was far from feeling myself. Despite my personal shortcomings, and I'd be the first to admit that they're many, I'm very good at that side of things. Which is why I was selected for the Commissariat in the first place.

Gradually, without seeming to have any specific destination in mind, I was heading for the vehicle park. I'd almost reached it when I ran out of time.

'They're here!' someone shrieked, opening up with a lasgun. I whirled at the distinctive crack of ionising air, in time to see a trooper I didn't recognise going down beneath a dark, nightmare shape which plummeted from the sky like a bird of prey. I didn't recognise him because his face was gone, eaten away by the fleshborer the thing carried.

'Gargoyles!' I shouted, although the warning could barely be heard above the unearthly shrieking which presaged a bioplasma attack. I leapt aside just quickly enough to avoid a seething bolt of primal matter vomited up by a winged horror swooping in my direction. I felt the heat on my face as it went past, detonating a few yards away and setting fire to a

tent. Without thinking I drew my chainsword, thumbing the selector to full speed, and waved it over my head as I ducked. Luck was with me, because I was rewarded by a torrent of stinking filth which poured down the neck of my shirt.

'Look out, commissar!'

I whirled, seeing it swooping back towards me in the light from the fire, screaming in rage, ragged entrails streaming behind it like a banner. Erhlsen was kneeling, tracking it with the barrel of his lasgun, leisurely, as if he was at a recreational target shoot. I threw myself flat, just as he squeezed the trigger, and the thing's head exploded.

'Thanks, Erhlsen!' I waved, rolled to my feet, and drew my laspistol left-handed. He grinned, and turned to track another target.

Time to be somewhere else, I thought, and ran as hard as I could towards the vehicle park. On the way I shot frequently, and swung my humming chainsword in every defensive pattern I could recall, but whether I hit anything only the Emperor knows. Apparently I struck a heroic figure, though, shrieking what was taken for a stirring battle cry rather than an incoherent howl of terror, which encouraged the men no end.

The Hydras were firing continuously now, stitching the air over the compound with tracer fire which looked dense enough to walk on, but the gargoyles were small and fast-moving, evading most of it with ease. Craning my neck around for potential threats, I saw most of the guardsmen taking whatever cover they could find; anyone left out in the open was in no condition to move by this time as the fleshborer fire and bio-plasma bolts rained down furiously. My attention thus diverted, I tripped, going down hard on something which swore at me, and tried to brain me with the butt of a lasgun.

'Jurgen! It's me!' I said, blocking frantically with my forearm before he could stave my skull in. Even over the smell of the gargoyle guts I could tell who it was without looking. He'd dug in between the tracks of a Salamander, protected from the blizzard of falling death by the armour plating above him.

'Commissar.' He looked relieved. 'What should we do?'

'Get this thing started,' I said. Anyone else might have argued, but Jurgen's dogged deference to authority sent him out into the open without hesitation. I half expected to hear a scream and the wet slap of a fleshborer impact, but after a moment the engine rumbled to life. I took a deep breath, and then another. Relinquishing the safety of overshadowing armour plate for the exposed deck of the open-topped scout car seemed almost suicidal, but staying here for the main assault would be worse.

With more willpower than I believed I possessed, I holstered the pistol, tightened my grip on the chainsword, and rolled out into the open.

'Up here, sir.' Jurgen reached down a grubby hand, which I seized gratefully, and swung myself up behind the autocannon. Something crunched under my bootsoles: tiny beetle-like things, thousands of them, discharged by the gargoyles' fleshborers. I shuddered reflexively, but they were dead, not having found living flesh to consume in their brief spasm of existence.

'Drive!' I shouted, and was almost thrown off my feet as Jurgen accelerated. I ducked below the gunner's shield, dropped the melee weapon, and opened fire. It had little effect, of course, but it would look good, and anyone seeing us would assume that the extra firepower was the reason I'd commandeered the vehicle.

Within moments we were beyond the camp perimeter, and Jurgen began to slow.

'Keep going!' I said. He looked puzzled, but opened the throttle again.

'Where to, sir?'

'West. The mines. As fast as you can.' Again, I was expecting questions, doubts, and from any other trooper I might have had them. But Jurgen, Emperor bless his memory, simply complied without demur. Then again, in his position I'd have done the same, relieved to have been ordered away from the battle. Gradually the noise and fireglow began to fade behind us in the night. I was just beginning to relax, estimating the time remaining until we reached safety, when the Salamander shook violently.

'Jurgen!' I yelled. 'What's happening?'

'They're firing at us, sir.' He sounded no more concerned about it than he did about making his regular report as latrine orderly. It took me a moment to realise that he trusted me to deal with whatever we were facing. I pulled myself up to look over the gunner's shield, and my bowels spasmed.

'Turn!' I screamed, as a second venom cannon blast scored the armour plating centimetres from my face. 'Back to the compound!'

Even now, after more than a century, I still wake sweating from dreams of that moment. In the pre-dawn glow the plain before us seemed to move like a vast grey ocean, undulating gently; but instead of water it was a sea of chitin, flecked with claw and fang rather than foam, rolling inexorably on towards the fragile defensive island of the artillery park. I would have wept with disappointment if I wasn't already too terrified for any other emotion. The 'nids had outsmarted me, sweeping round to cut us off and block our escape.

I bounced off the hull plating, falling heavily back into the crew compartment, as Jurgen threw one of the tracks into reverse and swung us around, practically on a coin. My head cracked painfully against something hard. I blinked my swimming eyes clear, and recognised it as a vocaster. Something like hope flared again, and I grabbed the microphone.

'Cain to command! Come in!' I screamed, voice raw with panic. Static hissed for a moment.

'Commissar? Where are you?' Mostrue's voice, calm and confident. 'We've been looking for you since we drove off the attack...'

'It was a diversion!' I yelled. 'The main force is coming from the west! If you don't redeploy the guns we're all dead!'

'Are you sure?' The colonel sounded doubtful.

'I'm out here now! I've got half the hive fleet on my arse! How sure do you want me to be?' I never found out, as the aerial melted under the impact of a bioplasma blast. The Salamander shook again, and the engine howled, as Jurgen pushed it up past speeds it had never been designed to cope with. Despite my trepidation I couldn't resist peering cautiously over the lip of the armour plate.

Merciful Emperor, we were opening the distance! The incoming fire was becoming less accurate as the scuttling swarm receded slowly behind us. Emboldened, I swung the pintel-mounted bolter around and fired into the densely packed mass of seething obscenity; there was no need to aim, as I could hardly miss hitting something, but I pointed it in the general direction of the largest creature I saw. As a rule, the larger the creature the higher it was in the hive hierarchy, and the more vital it was to co-ordinating the swarm. And seeding swarms, I vaguely recalled from some long-forgotten xenobiology lecture, tended to be thinly supplied with them. I missed the tyrant I'd spotted but one of its guard warriors went down, mashed instantly to goo by the weight of the swarm scuttling on and over it.

The compound was in sight now, ant-like troopers lining the fortifications, and, Emperor be praised, the Hydras rumbling into position to defend them, their quad-barrelled autocannon turrets depressing to face the oncoming tide of death. I was just beginning to think we might make it—

When, with a loud crack and a shriek of tortured metal, our howling engine fell silent. Jurgen had pushed it too far and we were about to pay for that with our lives. The Salamander lurched, slipping sideways, and slewed to a halt in a spray of sand.

'What do we do now, sir?' Jurgen asked, hauling himself up out of the driver's compartment. I grabbed my chainsword, suppressing the urge to use it on him; he could still be useful.

'Run like frak!' I said, demonstrating the point. I didn't have to be faster than the 'nids, just faster than Jurgen. I could hear his boots scuffing in the sand behind me, but didn't turn, that would have slowed me momentarily, and I really didn't want to see how close the swarm was getting.

The Hydras opened up, shooting past us, gouging holes in the onrushing wall of chittering death, but barely slowing it. Lasgun bolts began following suit; although the small arms fire would only be marginally effective at this range, every little helped. Return fire from the warriors was sporadic, and directed at the defenders behind the barricades rather than us, the hive mind apparently deciding we weren't worth the bother of singling out. Suited me fine.

I was almost at the berms, encouraging shouts from the men in the emplacements ringing in my ears, when I heard a cry from behind me. Jurgen had fallen.

'Commissar! Help!'

Not a chance, I thought, intent on reaching the safety of the barricades, then my heart froze. Ahead of me, angling in to cut us off, was the huge, unmistakable bulk of the hive tyrant, accompanied by its attendant bodyguards. It hissed, opening its jaws, and I dived to one side expecting the familiar blast of bioplasma, but instead a ravaging blast of pure energy detonated where I'd stood seconds before, throwing me to the ground. I rolled upright, moving as far away from it as I could, and found myself running back towards Jurgen. He was on the ground, a hormagaunt about to disembowel him with its scything claws, and its brood mates lining up to dice what was left. Caught between the 'gaunts and the hive tyrant the choice was clear; I had an outside chance of fighting my way through the swarm of smaller creatures, but going back would mean certain death.

'Back off!' I screamed, and swung my chainsword at the 'gaunt attacking Jurgen. It just had time to look up in surprise before its head came off, spraying ichor which smelled nearly as bad as Jurgen did. He rolled to his feet, snapping off a shot from his lasgun that exploded the thorax of another, which I'd barely had time to register was about to eviscerate me. Looked like we were even. I glanced around. The rest of the brood were hemming us in, and the tyrant was getting closer, looming huge against a sky reddened by the rising sun.

Then suddenly the tyrant wasn't there, replaced by shreds of steaming flesh which fell almost leisurely to the sand, its attendant warriors exploding around it. One of the Hydras had rolled around the edge of its emplacement to get a clear shot, the hail of autocannon rounds taking the entire group apart at almost point blank range.

I swung the chainsword to block a sweeping scythe from the closest 'gaunt, and missed as it abruptly pulled away. The whole swarm was hesitating, milling uncertainly, deprived of its guiding intelligence.

'Fire! Keep firing!' Mostrue's voice rang out, clear and confident from the barricades. The gunners complied enthusiastically. I swung the chainsword again, fear and desperation lending me superhuman strength, carving my way through the 'gaunts like so many sides of grox.

Abruptly the swarm broke, scattering, scuttling away like frightened rodents. I dropped the chainsword, trembling with reaction, and felt my knees give way.

'We did it! We did it!' Jurgen let his lasgun fall, his voice tinged with wonder. 'Emperor be praised.' I felt a supporting arm go round my shoulders.

'Well done, Cain. Bravest thing I've ever seen.' Divas was holding me up, his face alight with something approaching hero worship. 'When you went back for Jurgen I thought you were dead for sure.'

'You'd have done the same,' I said, realising the smart way to play it was modest and unassuming. 'Is he-?'

'He's fine.' Colonel Mostrue joined us, and looked at me with the old tutor domus expression. 'I'd like to know what you were doing out there, though.'

'Something didn't feel right about the gargoyle assault,' I improvised hastily. 'And I remembered tyrannids tend to use flanking attacks against dug-in defenders. So I thought I'd better go out and take a look.'

'Thank the Emperor you did,' Divas put in, swallowing every word.

'You could have assigned someone,' Mostrue pointed out.

'It was dangerous,' I said, knowing we'd be overheard. 'And, let's be honest, colonel, I'm the most expendable officer in the battery.'

'No one in my battery's expendable, commissar. Not even you.' For a moment I saw a flicker of amusement in those ice-blue eyes and shivered. 'But I'll remember your eagerness to volunteer for dangerous assignments in future.'

I'll just bet you will, I thought. And he was as good as his word, too, once we got to Keffia. But in the meantime he had one more favour to do me.

'I'VE BEEN THINKING, commissar.' Mostrue glanced up from the hololith, where the image of our newly-arrived fleet was enjoying a rare turkey shoot against the vastly outnumbered bioships. 'Perhaps I should assign you an aide?'

'That's hardly necessary, colonel,' I said, flattered in spite of myself. 'My workload's far from excessive.' That wasn't the point, though, and

we both knew it. My status as a hero of the regiment demanded some recognition, and assigning a trooper as my personal flunkey would be a public sign that I was fully accepted by the senior officers.

'Nevertheless,' Mostrue smiled thinly. 'There was no shortage of volunteers, as you can imagine.' That went without saying. The official version of my heroism, and my self-sacrificing rescue of Jurgen, was all over the compound.

'I'm sure you'll make the right choice,' I said.

'I already have.' Suspicion flared, and I felt the pit of my stomach drop. He wouldn't, surely...

My nose told me that he had, even before I turned, forcing a smile to my face.

'Gunner Jurgen,' I said. 'What a pleasant surprise.'