

THE TRAITOR'S HAND

A Ciaphas Cain novel by Sandy Mitchell

COMMISSAR CAIN AND his regiment of Valhallans are sent to the planet Adumbria Prime to bolster the Imperial lines and repel an impending invasion by the forces of Chaos.

However, nothing ever goes to plan for Ciaphas Cain and his hopes for an easy tour of duty are once again dashed. Even the wayward forces of Chaos are behaving oddly, and the commissar has to unravel the mystery of what is happening on the planet before the Imperial troops can hope to stop it.

This the third Ciaphas Cain novel is packed with action, tension and dark humour.



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 THE TRAITOR'S HAND

I'VE HAD MORE than my fair share of unpleasant surprises over the course of a century or so of fighting the Emperor's enemies, whenever running away and hiding from them wasn't an option, but the sudden appearance of Tomas Beijs in the corridors of the *Emperor's Beneficence* is one I still can't recall without flinching. Not because the situation was particularly life-threatening, which I suppose made it unusual enough given the kind of surprises I usually got, but because of the associations the memory of it still triggers: a curious amalgam of anger at his subsequent pig-headed stupidity, which almost ended up handing an Imperial world to the Ruinous Powers neatly gift-wrapped with a pretty pink bow, and, more importantly, could have resulted in my ignominious execution had events not turned out as they did; and the flood of unpleasant memories his presence stirred up in me at the time. I hadn't liked him when we were commissar cadets together at the Schola Progenium and I suppose I would have disliked him still if I'd spared him so much as a single thought in the years since we were judged fit to inflict ourselves on a regiment somewhere and sent off elsewhere in the galaxy. (Or in my case, I strongly suspect, handed a scarlet sash and politely shown the door because it seemed the easiest way of keeping my tutors from resigning *en masse*.)¹

'Ciaphas.' He nodded a greeting, as though we'd always been on good terms, and a smile as sincere as an ecclesiarch distributing alms in front of the pictcasters smeared itself across his pudgy features. 'I heard you were on board.'

That didn't surprise me. By that point in my career, my reputation preceded me wherever I went, smoothing the way in a fashion which often made my life a great deal easier, and, as if to balance things out in some way, periodically dragging me

into life-threatening situations of bowel-clenching terror. No doubt by now, three days out from Kastafore², the entire ship would be aware that Cain the Hero of the Imperium was aboard, and either pretending not to be impressed by that sort of thing or trying to find some way of scraping an acquaintance in order to further their own careers by coat-tailing on mine. Well good luck to anyone daft enough to try the latter, I thought.

'Beije.' I returned the nod curtly, irked by his use of my given name. We'd never been friends at the schola and I resented the presumption now. Come to think of it, I don't recall that he'd ever had any friends, just a small group of cronies as pious and self-righteous as he was, always whining on about the grace of the Emperor or running to the proctors with tales of the minor infractions of other students. The only time anyone was ever pleased to see him was on the scrumball pitch, where he got tackled enthusiastically at every opportunity whether he had the ball or not. 'I had no idea you were part of this little jaunt.'

The smile curdled a little as he registered the snub, but he was bright enough to realise that making an issue of it in public wouldn't be a good idea. The corridors were filling with senior Guard officers, the black coats and scarlet sashes of a handful of other commissars among them, all drifting towards one of the recreation halls where the lord general himself was expected to brief us in a few minutes' time. Not in person, of course, as he'd be travelling in some style aboard the flotilla's flagship, but the tech-priests had apparently rigged up some method for him to pictcast all the vessels in the task force simultaneously before we made the transition to the warp.

'I'd hardly describe facing the enemies of humanity as a jaunt,' he said stiffly. 'It's our holy duty to preserve the Emperor's blessed domains from the merest taint of the unclean.'

'Of course it is,' I replied, just as unable to resist teasing the pious little prig now as I had been nearly thirty years before. 'But I'm sure he wouldn't mind if we had a bit of fun while we're doing it.' Of course, facing whatever horrors might be waiting for us wherever we were going was about as far from

my idea of fun as it was possible to get, but it was the sort of thing a hero was supposed to say and it went down well with the crowd around us, most of whom were trying very hard to look as if they weren't listening to the conversation.

'I'm sorry to interrupt your socialising, commissar.' Colonel Kasteen cleared her throat and glanced at her chronograph with studied nonchalance. 'But I believe it would be impolite to keep the lord general waiting.'

'Thank you, colonel,' I responded, grateful for the intervention and conveying that fact with a glance no one else present other than Major Broklaw, her second-in-command, would have been able to pick up on. Our years of service together¹ had given us a rapport which came as close to friendship as our respective positions allowed and which helped no end in the smooth running of the regiment.

'This is your colonel?' Beije asked with undisguised incredulity. Kasteen's jaw knotted with the effort of reining in her instinctive response, which from long experience I expected to be short, pithy, and anatomically improbable.

Happy to return the favour she'd just done for me, I nodded. 'She is indeed,' I said. 'And a damn good one too.' Then I laughed and patted Beije on the back, which I remembered from our days at the schola was something he'd always detested. 'Surely you haven't forgotten how to read rank insignia?'

'I hadn't noticed them,' he muttered, his face slowly crimsoning. Well, maybe that was true. Kasteen had quite a spectacular figure, in a trim, well-muscled sort of way, and perhaps he hadn't bothered to look that high. 'She was standing behind you.'

'Quite,' I said, unable to resist prolonging his discomfiture a little longer by making introductions. 'Colonel, may I present Commissar Tomas Beije, an old classmate of mine.' Kasteen nodded a formal greeting, which Beije echoed a little over-eagerly, trying to make up for his lapse in good manners. 'Beije, this is Colonel Regina Kasteen, commanding officer of the 597th Valhallan. And Major Ruput Broklaw, her executive officer.'

'Commissar.' Broklaw stuck out a hand for Beije to shake, which he did after a moment's hesitation, wincing as the

major closed his grip. He'd tried the same thing on me the first time we'd met and I'd been grateful for the augmetic fingers on my right hand. 'Any friend of Commissar Cain is always welcome in our quarters.'

'Thank you.' Beije retrieved his hand, although whether he was astute enough to realise Broklaw's tone effectively ruled him out of that general invitation was unlikely. Trapped by social convention, he flapped it vaguely at the two men flanking him. 'Colonel Asmar of the Tallarn 229th, and Major Sipio, his second-in-command.'

I glanced back at Kasteen and Broklaw, amused at the contrast between the two groups. While the Tallarns were both short and dark-complexioned, swathed in the loose tunics of their desert home world, the Valhallans were about as physically different as it was possible to be. Kasteen was wearing her red hair drawn back in a pony tail, blue eyes as clear as the skies above the ice fields of her home world, while Broklaw's flint-grey gaze perfectly mirrored the night-dark hair which framed it. In deference to what they considered to be the stifling heat outside the areas assigned to us, which, as usual, they'd had refrigerated to temperatures which left the breath smoking, they were dressed in simple fatigues, only the rank pins on their collars denoting their status. So to be fair, I suppose Beije could have been forgiven for not realising who they were at first, but that wasn't going to stop me enjoying his embarrassment.

'A pleasure.' I nodded to the two officers. 'You have a formidable reputation as warriors. I look forward to hearing of the glorious victories of the Tallarn people.'

'We prevail by the grace of the Emperor,' Asmar said, his voice surprisingly mellifluous. Beije nodded, a little too eagerly.

'Yes, absolutely. Faith is the strongest weapon in our arsenal, after all.'

'Maybe so,' I said. 'But I'll still take a laspistol to back it up.' It wasn't the wittiest remark in the galaxy, I'll admit that, but I was expecting at least a smile. Instead, to my surprise, the Tallarns' expressions hardened imperceptibly.

'That would be your choice, of course.' Asmar bowed formally once and turned away, followed by his number two.

Beije hesitated a moment, as if debating whether to go with them straight away, but just couldn't resist getting the last word in.

'I'm afraid not everyone shares my appreciation of your sense of humour,' he said. 'Our Tallarn friends take their faith very seriously.'

'Well good for them,' I said, beginning to understand why no one had shot him by accident yet. By luck or somebody's good judgment, he'd been assigned to a regiment of Emperor-botherers as humourless as he was. Of course, at that point, I didn't know the half of it; they had Chaplains like the rest of us had Chimera drivers, all of the kind that make Redemptionists look well-balanced by comparison¹. Had I realised the consequences that were to flow from the impulse to irritate Beije and unwittingly offending his friends in the process, I suppose I'd have held my tongue, but at the time I remained in blissful ignorance and went into the briefing feeling rather pleased with myself.

Because of the delay in the corridor, Kasteen, Broklaw and I were among the last to arrive, but once again my reputation worked to our advantage and a trio of seats had somehow been kept clear for us despite there being not quite enough to go round. Beije and his Tallarns, I noticed in passing, were among those squeezed in at the back, standing uncomfortably and gazing resentfully at us as we made our way down to the front of the auditorium.

There were five regiments in all aboard the *Emperor's Beneficence*, an antedeluvian Galaxy-class troopship which seemed to be kept functioning entirely by the constant activity of her tech-priests and engineers, and the senior command staff of all of them came to a tidy total; most had sent their entire complement to save the effort of repeating the exercise later on, and I was able to spot all of our own company commanders and their immediate subordinates scattered among the crowd before I sat down.

Apart from us and the Tallarns, the ship was carrying a Valhallan armoured regiment whose Leman Russes I had been delighted to see stowed in the hold next to ours (and who in turn seemed equally pleased to have found themselves travelling

with another unit from their home world) and a couple of infantry regiments newly raised on Kastafore. The officers from there were easy to spot, thanks to the newness of their uniforms and the expressions of alert interest they directed at everything which caught their attention (most of which seemed to be the women from the 597th).

The cogboys¹ had been busy, there was no doubt about that. Wires and cables snaked across the floor of the chamber, being tended to by white-robed acolytes chanting the appropriate rituals of activation, terminating in what I recognised as a hololithic display unit of remarkable size and complexity. At the moment, it was projecting a rotating image of the Imperial eagle, which hazed and sputtered in the familiar fashion of all such devices, accompanied by jaunty music of staggering vacuity.

'Did anyone remember the caba nuts?' I asked, reminded of a public holotheatre, and a few of the nearby officers chuckled sycophantically. After a moment, the hum of conversation died away as the lights dimmed, the senior tech-priest ceremoniously kicked his control lectern and the familiar face of Lord General Zyvan replaced the aquila, looming down at us like an out-of-focus balloon. After a moment of heated discussion among the tech-priests, somebody yanked a couple of wires out of their sockets and the music stopped abruptly, enabling us to hear him.

'Thank you all for your kind attention,' the balloon said, its voice sizzling with static. It had been some time since I'd spoken to the lord general in person, our paths having crossed rarely since our first meeting on Gravalax about six years before, and most of those occasions had been fraught to say the least, occurring as they did in the middle of either a war zone or a diplomatic crisis. Nevertheless, we'd always got on tolerably well and I respected his concern for the welfare of the men under his command, which, since they included me, I thought was a decided asset in a military leader. 'No doubt you've been wondering why we've mobilised in such a hurry following the success of our campaign against the orks on Kastafore.' A few of the officers from there raised a cheer, which trailed off into embarrassed silence.

'Here it comes,' I murmured to Kasteen, who nodded grimly. Normally we would have expected to remain on the newly-cleansed world for some months at least, helping to rebuild the bits the greenskins had put a dent in, making sure the local PDF was back up to strength, and generally enjoying a bit of a breather before moving on to the next war. But instead we'd been hurried aboard the *Emperor's Benificence* almost as soon as we'd reached our staging area, the first shuttles already waiting to ferry our vehicles up to orbit as we'd arrived. One of the new Kastaforean regiments had already preceeded us starside. Fortunately they were too green to have staked out the most comfortable quarters and accessible mess halls for themselves and were easily displaced by the veterans of the 597th, so our troopers were as happy with the situation as it was possible to be. Which wasn't much: a mobilisation that rapid had to mean trouble had blown up without warning in a relatively close system and we were being sent to deal with it. That meant we'd be going in hot, with little idea of what we'd be facing, and already caught on the back foot. Not a situation any warrior likes to be in.

Zyvan wasn't too happy about things either, I could tell, although I suppose being personally acquainted with him gave me an advantage in that regard. He was hiding it well, though, his usual air of bluff competence barely impeded by the distortions of the hololith. Certainly most of the people around me were buying it.

'Ten days ago we received an astropathic message from a naval task force hunting a flotilla of Chaos raiders on the outer fringes of the subsector.' As I'd expected, Zyvan's face disappeared to be replaced by a map of the local star group. Kastafore was off to the bottom left, almost at the edge of the display, and a small cluster of contact icons overlapped it, marking the positions of our fleet.

I drew in a deep breath. If I'd read the runes correctly, we were the only troopship on the move, accompanied by a handful of the warships. The rest were still sitting in orbit, twiddling their thumbs, no doubt feeling mightily relieved that for one reason or another they weren't quite ready to go. That meant we were the spearhead, first into whatever might

be waiting for us, which in turn meant we were likely to soak up the bulk of the casualties. My stomach tightened at the thought. I didn't have long to digest the implications, though, as the display lurched suddenly, skipping a couple of parsecs to the right and dumping Kastafore ignominiously into the void outside the projection field. A couple of tech-priests started arguing in urgent undertones and one of them disappeared under the lectern, his mechadendrites twitching.

'They've been tentatively identified as a group calling themselves the Ravagers,' Zyvan's voice continued, blissfully unaware that the starfield in the hololith was now bouncing like a joygirl on overtime. The image steadied itself as a shower of sparks erupted from the control lectern and the tech-priest emerged from beneath it, looking slightly singed. After a final wobble, it zoomed in on a cluster of contact icons bearing the runes of Chaos forces.

The hairs on the back of my neck prickled at the sight. Emperor knows I've faced a lot over the years, but the thought of the Great Enemy still disturbs me more than most. Perhaps it's because I've seen so much of what they can do, but I think it's their sheer unpredictability which makes them so worrying. Most enemies are rational, at least in their own terms: tyranids want to absorb your genetic material, orks want to kill you messily and loot your corpse, and necrons just want to kill every living thing in the galaxy¹. But Chaos is random, by its very nature, and even if you can work out what it is the enemy's after, half the time only the Emperor knows why they want it in the first place.

'They've been hitting isolated systems and merchant convoys sporadically for the last few years,' Zyvan went on, while a red line considerably tracked the path of their depredations. 'Typical Chaos tactics, hit and run mostly, inflicting the maximum number of casualties, then withdrawing before the fleet arrives to give them what for.'

'Sounds like a Khornate cult,' I whispered to Kasteen and Broklaw, who looked a little puzzled, before remembering they hadn't encountered any minions of the Ruinous Powers yet and I was probably the only one in the room with much

idea of the divisions within the ranks of the Great Enemy. That was some degree of comfort, anyway. In my experience they were the easiest type of renegade to deal with, having little ambition beyond getting into combat as quickly as possible and killing as many of our people as they could before being cut down themselves. That made them particularly susceptible to ambushes and flanking attacks, which would work to our advantage, particularly if we could stick the Kasteforeans out in front as bait.

'The Navy finally caught up with them on the fringes of the Salomine system, inflicting severe losses on their fleet,' Zyvan continued. I wasn't surprised, recognising the blue icon of a tau colony world, where the Ravagers were sure to have met far stronger resistance than they expected. That would have given the fleet time to catch up and join in slaughtering the heretics in the name of the greater good. The tau would have loved that, I was certain, until it dawned on them that they now had an Imperial fleet squatting on their doorstep instead, and the heretics had already weakened their defences. 'Several vessels did manage to flee into the warp, the exact number and type remain to be determined.'

'Which affects us how, exactly?' Broklaw murmured, with the groundpounder's typical disdain for anything the Navy might be doing. A Guardsman to the core, his only interest in starships was how quickly and comfortably they could move the regiment to the next planet we were supposed to kick nine shades of hell out of to maintain peace and stability in the galaxy.

As if to answer his question, Zyvan reappeared, pointing to an insignificant dot which looked to me pretty much like any other system.

'Our navigators consider it highly probable that they'll end up here, in the Adumbria system, especially if their warp engines have been damaged. Apparently the warp currents are particularly strong and turbulent around Adumbria Prime and they're likely to be drawn there.' He shrugged. 'Unless they're setting course for the place on purpose, which the fleet navigator thinks is quite possible, given their previous heading. What they might be after on a backwater like that is anybody's

guess. It could just be the next convenient target on the list.' His voice hardened in the manner that I knew from experience meant he'd made up his mind about something and wouldn't be dissuaded by anything short of a direct command from the Emperor himself (or possibly a quiet word from the Inquisition). 'In any case, when they arrive, they're going to be in for a surprise. If the warp currents remain favourable, we'll be there ahead of them. If we're really lucky, the rest of the task force will have had time to catch up too.'

I don't mind admitting it, the last sentence sent a chill down my spine. What he meant was that barring a miracle, we'd be on our own, facing anything up to a full-scale invasion fleet with just five regiments and a handful of ships.

'And if we're not?' Kasteen asked quietly, clearly coming to the same conclusion I had.

'Then things are about to get very interesting,' I said, keeping my voice steady by a preternatural effort of will. As it turned out, that was to be one of the biggest understatements of my life, although even in my most pessimistic imaginings I never thought we'd find ourselves embroiled in a plot so diabolical as to threaten the very fabric of the Imperium itself.

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