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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sandy Mitchell is a pseudonym of Alex Stewart, who has been writing successfully under both names since the mid 1980s. As Sandy, he's best known for his work for the Black Library, particularly the Ciaphas Cain series. He's recently finished an MA in Screenwriting at the London College of Communication, which left far less time than usual for having fun in the 41st Millennium, and is looking forward to spending more time in the Emperor's service now that it has concluded.

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It's NOT OFTEN I'm happy to find myself heading into a war zone as fast as the warp currents can carry me, but in the case of the Viridia Campaign I was prepared to make an exception. My journey there had been eventful, to say the least. Having taken passage on an Adeptus Mechanicus transport heading in roughly the right direction, I found myself fleeing for my life through a necron tomb world, which my hosts had been incautious enough to start poking around en route. If it hadn't been for the fortuitous arrival of a ship from the Reclaimers Astartes Chapter, there would have been no survivors of the affair at all. As it was, I'd escaped by the skin of my teeth, and more luck than anyone has a right to expect. I don't suppose anyone will believe a word of it, though, so I'll get on with a tale I can prove. As I doubt anyone's ever going to read these ramblings of mine, it's all academic in any case.

I can't say I remember much about my first few days aboard the strike cruiser *Revenant*, but that's hardly surprising given the condition in which I boarded it. When I came to, it was to find myself in a spartan sanatorium, occupying a bed which seemed far too big for me, while faces I didn't recognise swam in and out of the mist which seemed to be hovering just in front of my eyeballs.

'Commissar,' a voice which sounded impossibly deep, rich, and resonant asked. 'Are you awake?'

For a moment I doubted that, still comfortably insulated from reality by the pharmaceuticals cluttering up my bloodstream. To my drug-addled mind, the voice sounded like that of the Emperor Himself, and I found myself wondering if I should have spent a bit more time in the temple, and a bit less in bars, gambling dens and bordellos, but it seemed a little late to be worrying about that now. If I had indeed arrived at the Golden Throne, I'd just have to hope its occupant was in a good mood, and try to steer the conversation on to safer ground at the earliest opportunity. Then one of the indistinct faces swam close enough for me to focus on, and memory belatedly kicked in.

'I think so,' I husked, vaguely surprised by how thin my voice sounded. For a moment I wondered if it was due to disuse, and feared I'd been unconscious for weeks, but as my faculties began to trickle back, I realised that it simply sounded feeble in comparison to the one which had addressed me. Almost at once, memory followed, and I relived my desperate dive through the necron warp portal, and my arrival aboard their ship just in time to encounter a Space Marine boarding party. 'The metal creatures,' I asked urgently.

'Are they dead?'

'A debatable point,' one of the trio of giants surrounding me said, and smiled, in a somewhat unsettling manner. A mechanical claw, which looked as though it would have been more at home attached to a power loader, hovered behind his shoulder, in the manner of a tech-priest's mechadendrites.

The one looming over me shot him a reproving look and turned back to the bed I was lying on. Though thinly padded, it seemed damnably hard for an infirmary.

'You'll have to excuse Drumon's sense of humour, commissar. It's not always appropriate.' A hand as broad as a dinner plate slipped behind my shoulders and helped me to rise to a sitting position, bringing more of my surroundings into view. Gleaming metal surfaces, burnished like a drill sergeant's boots, were everywhere, making the place feel more like a Mechanicus shrine than a place of healing. If it hadn't been for the pervasive aroma of counterseptics, and the icon of the Emperor, in His aspect of the Great Healer, gazing at

me sternly from the wall opposite, I might never have realised I was in a sanatorium at all. Most of the equipment I'd expect to see in such a place was absent, perhaps tidied away in the featureless metal lockers ranged against the wall, and what little there was still visible meant nothing to me.

'I'm Apothecary Sholer, of the Reclaimers. And in answer to your question, their vessel was destroyed.'

Which didn't exactly answer the question, of course, but it sounded good enough to me at the time. (Knowing what I know now about the necrons, I wouldn't even have bothered to ask, but it was the first time I'd encountered them, don't forget. These days I wouldn't count them out if the entire planet they were standing on had been razed.)

'Ciaphas Cain,' I said, inclining my head courteously and immediately wishing I hadn't. 'I believe I'm your new Imperial Guard liaison officer.'

'That's my understanding too,' the third giant said, speaking for the first time. Like the others, he was dressed in ceramite armour of a dull, off-white colour, with yellow gauntlets, although his was inlaid with a great deal more ornamentation than the suits of his comrades. He bowed his head. 'Captain Gries, commanding the Viridian Expeditionary Force. It appears your reputation was less exaggerated than we believed.'

'Indeed,' the Techmarine Sholer had introduced as Drumon said, his mechanical claw flexing slightly as he spoke. 'Few men could have escaped unscathed from a necron tomb world.'

'Hardly unscathed,' I said, suddenly remembering two of my fingers being ripped away by a glancing shot from the metal killers' hideous weapons. Nerving myself for the sight, I lifted my right hand into view, and found myself staring at a formless bundle of bandages, so bloated with padding that no shape hinting at whatever they might conceal could be discerned. As if being reminded of its existence had flicked a switch, I suddenly found my entire hand itching abominably.

'The augmetics are knitting in well,' Sholer assured me, as if I had the faintest idea what he was talking about. Before I could ask him, Drumon cut in again.

'You alone survived,' he said, 'when scores of your fellows perished. Two fingers seems a small price to pay.'

'If you put it like that,' I said, 'I'm forced to agree. I didn't even notice they'd gone until I was waving goodbye to the creatures in the tunnel.' The jest was feeble enough, I'll admit, but I was hardly at my best under the circumstances, and it did the job, which was to convince my listeners that I was modest about my so-called heroism. Time and again, I've found, the more I appear to be trying to play down my unmerited reputation, the more people seem to believe it.

Drumon seemed surprised at my flippancy, but agreeably so. His broad face, seamed with a faint tracery of scar tissue, widened for an instant with a barely perceptible smile, before returning to its previous immobility.

Gries didn't react at all, but returned to the point as though no one else had even spoken, with the single-mindedness of a servitor attempting to follow a simple set of instructions. 'I would like a full report of your experiences on Interitus Prime at your earliest convenience,' he said.

Technically, I suppose, I could have told him to keep his thinly veiled orders to himself, as the only people I answered to were the Commissariat, but that would hardly have been polite, or politic. I was going to have to work with him, or the people who reported to him, for quite some time, and putting his back up before we'd even officially begun wouldn't exactly help matters.

Besides, I'd have to come up with something for General Lokris and his staff back at brigade headquarters, to explain how I'd managed to mislay an entire starship,

and since both it and the expedition it carried had belonged to the Adeptus Mechanicus, I was pretty sure they'd be taking a keen interest in whatever I might have to say about it too.

There certainly didn't seem any harm in letting the captain of the Reclaimers have a copy as well; the wider I could spread my version of events, the less likely it seemed that anyone would be able to claim I'd been somehow culpable. (Which, for once, I hadn't been, just in the wrong place at the wrong time, as seems to have happened inordinately often during my long and inglorious career.) So I simply nodded again and tried to ignore the firecrackers going off behind my eyes as a result of the incautious movement.

'If someone could find me a slate, I'll get right on it,' I said. 'It's not as if I've got much else to do while I'm in here.'

As jobs of makework go, reliving the nightmare I'd so recently been through was hardly the most congenial I might have chosen, but as I progressed, I found myself setting out events with greater ease and more fluency, recalling them in greater detail than I'd expected. No doubt it helped that I had an unexpected ally in this endeavour, Drumon having taken it upon himself to debrief me, and making several visits to the quarters I'd been assigned on leaving the sanatorium for the purpose. As I recounted my experiences, he would ask questions about the equipment the tech-priests had been using to probe the ruins, and such blasphemous artefacts as I remembered seeing in the depths of the tomb world. I had no illusions about the fact that his interest lay in whatever technotheological insights I was able to provide, rather than my company, but as the voyage progressed, our conversation gradually widened to encompass other topics, and I can't deny that he was rather more congenial than the other Astartes I'd so far encountered.

I wasn't the only unenhanced human aboard, of course: in fact, the few dozen Reclaimers were outnumbered three or four to one by the Chapter serfs who crewed the vessel. I found these servants tedious company at best, however, even more so than the skitarii I'd met aboard the Ommissiah's Bounty. Their reverence for the Astartes they served seemed second only to their devotion to the Emperor, and, unused to the society of anyone outside their enclosed little world, they remained distantly polite, rebuffing any attempt at conversation with formal and strictly factual responses.

The one assigned to look after me, a youth named Gladden, was efficient, unobtrusive and unexceptionable, so much so that I found myself missing the presence of Jurgen more than I would have thought possible. True, my aide was a walking insult to the uniform of an Imperial Guardsman, who made the average ork seem fastidious and fragrant by comparison, but I'd learned to trust his dogged loyalty, and he'd become an invaluable bulwark against the more onerous aspects of my job. After some consideration, I'd decided to leave him back at brigade headquarters, however; partly because the notion of Jurgen in close proximity to the finest warriors the Imperium had ever produced made even my mind boggle, and partly because I'd got an inkling that Lokris had me earmarked for another assignment fit for the hero he fondly imagined me to be, and I wanted my aide in place to head it off with his usual obdurate refusal to deviate from protocol.

The upshot of which was that Drumon was the closest thing I was likely to find to a tolerable companion before we reached Viridia, and I found myself looking forward to his occasional visits. On the last occasion he dropped by my quarters he found me annotating a hardprint of my report with an inkstick, and the faint smile I'd seen a few times before drifted across his face.

'The new fingers appear to be satisfactory,' he said, a trace of pride entering his voice.

'They are indeed,' I agreed, laying the tedious job aside with a sense of relief and flexing my newly acquired augmetics. I still found their altered appearance a little disconcerting, but they'd started to feel like part of my own body at last, and I was able to grasp things again without looking to make sure I'd judged the distance correctly instead of over- or under-reaching by a millimetre or two. Drumon, it transpired, had constructed them himself, collaborat-

ing with Sholer on their installation, so it seemed I had a lot to thank the Techmarine for. I nodded at the pile of papers. 'At least I got this finished before we left the warp,' I added.

'The brother-captain will be pleased,' Drumon said.

As usual he remained standing, and seemed perfectly comfortable doing so. In my time with the Reclaimers I seldom saw any of the Astartes sitting down, and when I did it was almost invariably for some practical reason, such as driving or riding in the back of a Rhino. 'There will be little time for paperwork when we reach Viridia.'

'I suppose not,' I agreed, pouring myself a much-needed measure of amasec. In actual fact I was planning to do as much file-shuffling as possible, in preference to visiting any of the battlefronts, but I wasn't about to admit that to one of the Emperor's finest.

As things were to turn out, though, the insurrection had continued to grow while we'd been transiting the warp, and by the time we arrived, notions like fronts and rear areas had ceased to have any military meaning at all. The entire system was one huge cauldron, seething with conflict, and we were about to drop into the middle of it. 'Have you found time to analyse the strategic review?' Drumon asked, and I nodded towards the dataslate on the desk beside me.

'I've skimmed it,' I admitted, which was the best anyone could have hoped for, and a great deal better than I normally managed with the briefing documents provided by the Munitorium. Usually, I found far more pleasant ways of spending my time aboard ship than wading through the turgid prose of Administratum drones, whose conclusions would invariably turn out to have been overtaken by events while we were transiting the warp in any case, but the Revenant was conspicuously lacking in recreational opportunities.

'Pacifying Viridia looks simple enough.'

At the time my confidence seemed more than justified. Rebellions in backwater systems like this one tended to be sparked by grievances against the planetary government rather than the Imperium itself, and the arrival of a few Guard regiments was usually enough to bring both sides to heel. So far as I could see the situation hardly merited the deployment of the Astartes at all, and the Reclaimers would undoubtedly have found better uses for their time if it hadn't been for the fact that the Viridia System was a major supplier of food and raw materials to the hive-worlds of the sector: unless the flow of tithes was restored in pretty short order they'd begin to suffer socially and economically in turn, leading to a wave of instability which, left unchecked, would drag down a dozen worlds within a decade. The manpower and resources required to deal with that would be incalculable.

'I concur,' Drumon said, with all the confidence I would have expected from one of the Emperor's chosen, and I must admit that I considered it more than justified. The average insurrectionist rabble wouldn't last five minutes against a couple of dozen Guardsmen, let alone the genetically enhanced Space Marines. He might have been about to say more, but the familiar disorientating sensation of a starship slipping through the barrier separating the material universe from the warp swept over me at that point, leaving both of us disinclined to further conversation.

'I don't suppose I'll ever get used to that,' I said, little knowing at the time how far and frequent my travels were to become in the ensuing years, to the point where I was able to shrug off the lingering nausea almost at once. On this occasion, however, I was more than grateful for the amasec I'd poured a few moments before, and drained the goblet in a couple of swallows.

I was just beginning to feel relatively normal again when the lights flickered, and a faint tremor ran through the deck plates beneath my feet. Memories of my experience aboard the Hand of Vengeance a few years before sent my heart racing, and I was already reaching for my weapons when, after listening to the comm-bead in his ear for a moment, Drumon told me what I'd already deduced for myself. 'We appear to be under attack,' he said.