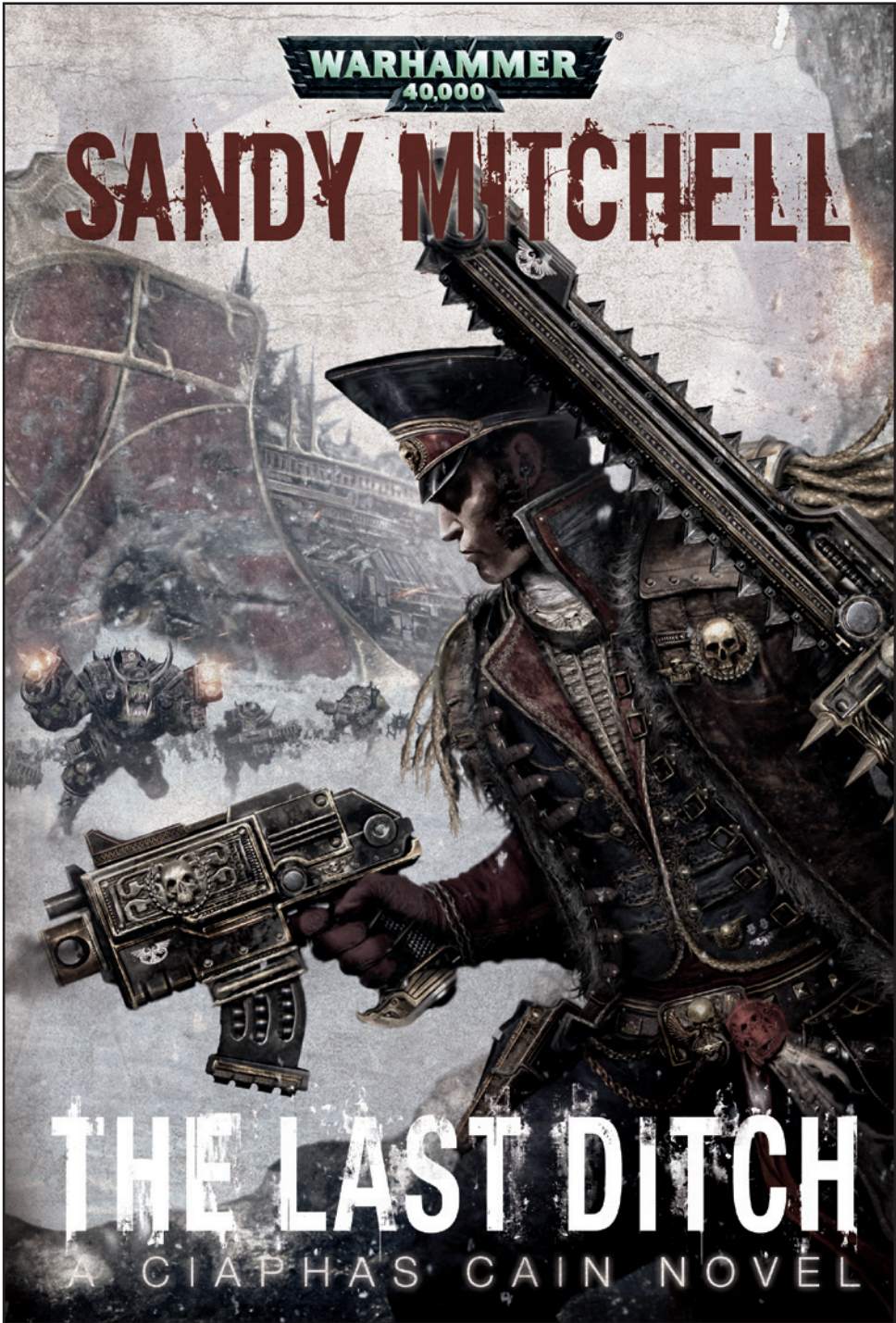


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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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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THE VIEW WAS certainly spectacular, although under the circumstances I didn't have much time to enjoy it. Unable to resist the temptation any longer, I glanced briefly back at the metallic escarpment behind me, lost for a moment in wonder that anything so huge had ever taken to the skies; even with the majority of it below the surface, it still seemed impossibly big, looming above me like a hab block or a manufactorum, seared and cindered by its passage through the atmosphere. Parts of it were rippled, where the metal had softened and flowed in the incredible heat, and, not for the first time, I found myself marvelling at the narrowness of our escape from certain death.

An escape which looked uncomfortably like being merely temporary. The rumbling of the approaching ork horde could be heard on the wind by now, and I turned to face them, an ominous sense of foreboding settling over me as if the darkening clouds above had descended to envelop my very soul.

'Looks like snow,' Jurgen observed, glancing in their direction as though that was the most pressing matter we had to deal with. He'd scrambled up the metallic slope downwind of me, so for once I didn't notice his approach until he spoke; then, not for the first time, his phlegmatic demeanour in the face of overwhelming odds heartened me, and I responded as casually as he had.

'Much of it?' I asked. A blizzard or two wouldn't disconcert the Valhallans, might even work to our advantage, given their ability to operate effectively in extreme weather conditions, but it wouldn't do a lot for me, and anything which reduced visibility would undoubtedly help the orks just as much. They knew precisely where we were, and not being able to see what they were shooting at wasn't going to degrade their usual lamentable standard of marksmanship to any great degree anyway; but we needed to be able to pick off as many as we could before they closed.

Jurgen shook his head. 'Fair to middling,' he said, unhelpfully, and turned to face the onrushing horde, which by now was approaching the shores of the lake, and showing no signs of slowing down. 'Nice we've got enough to go round for once.'

'I suppose it is,' I said, trying to recall the last time I'd seen him perturbed by the odds facing us, and, as ever, failing. 'Best get back under cover.' Greenskins were hardly the most observant of creatures, and we might yet retain some element of surprise if they weren't expecting to find any survivors.

'Right you are, sir,' he agreed, trailing me back behind the barricade with visible reluctance, no doubt disappointed that he wasn't going to get the first shot in as he'd clearly been hoping.

‘Everyone hold their fire,’ I counselled¹, taking up position behind the biggest and most solid-looking crate I could find, and drawing my laspistol. ‘Let them get close enough to make every shot count.’

‘We’ll do that,’ a familiar voice assured me, and I turned, to find a short, red-headed woman grinning at me with cheerful bloodlust. If she hadn’t found her way into the ranks of the Guard, by means I felt it best not to enquire about, but which I was fairly certain had something to do with the magistratum of her home world, Magot’s sociopathic tendencies would undoubtedly have found far less productive outlets; as it was, she’d tempered them into a useful tool, keeping them under control most of the time, and accepting the consequences of the occasional exception with unruffled good humour. We’d passed through a necron tomb together a few years ago, emerging from the experience reasonably intact and no less sane than before, and there were few troopers in the regiment I’d rather have with me when things looked really grim, so I returned the smile with a faint sense of relief.

‘I’m sure you will, corporal,’ I said.

Unfortunately the greenskins had other ideas. I’d been hoping our massed firepower would disrupt their headlong rush across the ice, doing enough damage to the front ranks to bring the whole mob of them to a shuddering halt, or, more realistically, break them up into smaller groups as they worked their way around the obstructions created by the fallen, which we could pick off a little more easily. It was a tactic that had worked well enough on Perlia, and on most of the other occasions I’d been unlucky enough to find myself in the path of a rampaging orkish warband; but on this occasion the vanguard of their advance was heralded by a sudden clattering roar, as a handful of crude flying machines burst out of the murk surrounding the charging horde and swooped towards us, the downdraft from their whirring rotors flinging up whorls and eddies in the snow beneath them.

Ignoring the great mass of vehicles behind them, which were still beyond effective range in any case, though not for much longer travelling at that speed, we concentrated our fire on the airborne scouts, hoping to bring them down before they were able to report back anything of use.

‘Keep firing!’ Kasteen bellowed over the clattering roar of the greenskin gyros, which were jinking all over the sky, trying to avoid a sudden storm front of ground to air fire. Most of what we were able to bring to bear were only small arms, of course, which wouldn’t discommode them much, the las-bolts plinking harmlessly from the metalwork of their fuselages, and the extraneous armour plate hung all over the airframes, apparently at random. Their one weak point was the open cockpit, which left the pilots exposed, no doubt to savour to the greatest possible extent the experience of travelling at speed so many of the creatures seem to crave; a fatal flaw, which soon saw a couple of them spiralling to destruction on the fringes of the icefield, the

1. A general instruction over the vox-net, presumably, though he doesn’t bother to mention that specifically.

orks crewing them dead before they even hit the ground.

I flinched as one of the ramshackle flying machines thundered towards us, the crude bolter welded beneath it chattering vindictively as it chewed a line of craters in the ice beside the ramp, and to my surprise I heard Magot chuckling as she slowly traversed the lasgun in her hands. 'Always knew the greenies couldn't hit the broad side of a starship,' she said, 'but I never expected to see it for myself.'

'He's finding the range,' I cautioned, as the line of explosive-tipped bolts began moving up the ramp towards us, although I'm bound to admit that the amount of damage it did was negligible compared to what we'd already done to the vessel ourselves. It would be a different story in a second or two, though, when the deadly rain began to find targets among the bodies of the troopers. I swung my arm, tracking the fast-moving target as best I could, but the chances of finding a weak spot or incapacitating the pilot with a relatively low-powered las-bolt from the handgun at this range were negligible.

'He doesn't have the head for it,' Magot told me, squeezing the trigger, and reducing the pilot's brains to a greasy mist, which the whirring rotors above him scattered in all directions. The suddenly pilotless gyro lurched wildly to the left, missing the open entrance to the docking bay by no more than a couple of metres, before crunching into the cliff face of metal, where it hung motionless for a moment before plummeting to the ice below, disintegrating as it fell.

'Nice shot,' I complimented her, and Magot nodded, before returning her attention to the advancing orkish ground force, which, displaying all the caution one might have expected from their kind, had just surged on to the ice without a second's hesitation, charging towards us intent on bloody slaughter.

'Take that frakker out!' Penlan urged her heavy weapon team, as the last surviving aircraft wheeled around, and began to pull away. It was moving relatively sluggishly, and after a moment I realised why; in place of the guns the others had carried, the ominous, rounded bulk of a large bomb was nestled under its belly, painted with the features of a snarling squig.

'Let him go,' I said. 'He's no threat if he's retreating. Concentrate on the trucks and buggies.'

'Sir.' She clearly wasn't happy about it, but relayed the order to her team with alacrity nonetheless. 'Retarget. Take out the ground vehicles.'

'Sarge.' The gunner acknowledged her with a nod, and depressed the barrel of his weapon a fraction. 'Nads, it's seized up again.'

'Let me.' Penlan gave the recalcitrant tripod a resounding whack with the butt of her lasgun. With a *crack!* of ionised air it discharged, and she flinched, glancing guiltily in my direction. 'I thought I'd left the safety on.'

'Good shot, sergeant,' I said dryly. The stray las-round had taken the fleeing pilot clean in the back of the neck; as I watched, fascinated, the uncontrolled gyro dipped, wallowed, and plunged straight into the middle of the onrushing mob of orks. As I got my first good look at them, my mouth went dry; there were far more than even my most pessimistic imaginings, turning the ice black, roaring forward in their collections

of mobile scrap, or bailing out of them to charge us on foot, every last one of them intent on being the first to make it up the ramp and get stuck in hand to hand. We could never hold off so many, I thought.

Then a plume of smoke, pulverised ice and shredded ork rose into the air from the site of the gyro crash, and I distinctly saw the ice around the bottom of the ramp shift and flex. A moment later a thin dribble of water seeped out, freezing solid again almost instantly. Dropping my weapons for a moment I raised the amplivisor, which, by great good fortune, I hadn't got around to returning to Jurgen yet, and which still hung around my neck.

Something odd seemed to be happening at the site of the explosion, the greenskins milling around in disarray, breaking away from it in all directions. Only when one of the buggies lurched, and abruptly vanished, did I finally divine the cause. Before I could pass on my discovery, however, the onrushing horde finally found the range of their weapons, and the air around me became thick with bolter and stubber rounds.

'Heavy weapons, target the ice!' I voxed, before grabbing my laspistol and chainsword again, safe once more behind the sheltering crate. The lake we'd created might be freezing over, but it was still a huge volume of water: as yet, only a thin crust of ice had formed, just barely strong enough to support the weight of the orks and their vehicles. The bomb from the downed autogyro had been enough to rupture it; if we could only repeat the trick, on a larger scale, it might still be enough to save our necks.

'What I wouldn't give for some air support about now,' Broklaw grumbled, and I nodded in agreement; a Valkyrie or two would do the job in a single bombing run.

'Or some artillery,' I agreed, with a hopeful glance at the regimental vox op, still hunkered down with her backpack transmitter, trying to raise the local command net. But we weren't going to get any fire support, that much was plain; surviving our fall from orbit had been miracle enough for one day.

We opened fire with a will, our lascannons, autocannons, and heavy bolters scything into the massed ranks of the enemy below us, but for every greenskin that fell another flowed in to take their place; we might just as well have been punching holes in water.

'This isn't working,' Broklaw said, and I was forced to agree. The gunners were doing their best to comply with the instructions I'd given them, but the sheer press of orkish bodies in the way was dissipating the energy of the shots I'd hoped would begin to break up the ice. He tapped the comm-bead in his ear. 'Heavy weapons engage the vehicles, small arms the greenskins on foot.' He glanced at me, and shrugged. 'Maybe if we can cook off a few more ammo loads, that might do it.'

'Might do at that,' I agreed, more in hope than expectation, then my eye fell on Federer, popping off rounds from a grenade launcher with every sign of enthusiasm. Leaving Broklaw to coordinate the almost impossible task of stemming the tide of greenskins now lapping around the foot of our makeshift ramp, I hurried off to talk to its architect.

'Should be easy enough,' he assured me, once he'd grasped what I was after. 'Couple

of satchel charges ought to do it. The thing is, they need to be below the surface for maximum effect.'

'And how do we do that, exactly?' I asked, with rather more asperity than I'd intended. Federer shrugged. 'Haven't a clue,' he admitted cheerfully. 'But I can rig the charges for you at least.'

'Well, it's a start,' I conceded. There was an obvious answer to my own question, but it wasn't anything I wanted to do. Fighting our way down the ramp to the surface, hoping our comrades could provide enough covering fire to keep the orks from gunning us down on the way, wasn't exactly an appealing prospect.

Then I noticed the power loader, still idling where Shambas had parked it, and another option occurred to me; it was hardly any better than my first idea, but at least it offered a minuscule possibility of success.