



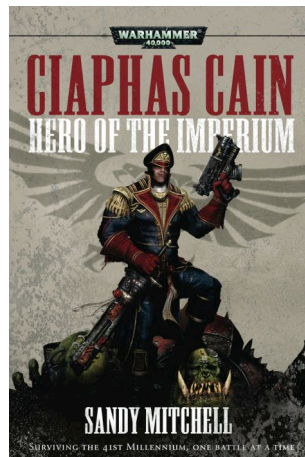
CIAPHAS CAIN: HERO OF THE IMPERIUM

A Warhammer 40,000 omnibus

By Sandy Mitchell

Contains the novels *For the Emperor*, *Caves of Ice* and *The Traitor's Hand*, plus three short stories and an introduction by the author.

Ciaphas Cain, commissar in the Imperial Guard, has only ever wanted a quiet life. But it seems the will of the Emperor is against him as time and time again he is thrown into the hellish warzones of the 41st millennium against orks, tyranids, the forces of Chaos, and worse. With his regiment of Valhallans, and ably assisted by his malodorous aide Jurgen, Ciaphas always manages to save the day through a combination of wits and courage, proving beyond a shadow of a doubt that he is a true Hero of the Imperium... whether he wants to be or not.



About the Author

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, television scripts, magazine articles, comics, and gaming material. Apart from both miniatures and roleplaying gaming his hobbies include the martial arts of Aikido and Iaido.

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• DARK HERESY •

Book 1 – *Innocence Proves Nothing*

The following is an excerpt from *Ciaphas Cain: Hero of the Imperium* by Sandy Mitchell.

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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 forgeworlds 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 Valhallan 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 scrumball 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.’

Erhlсен 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.’ Erhlсен 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 tyranid 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.

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