

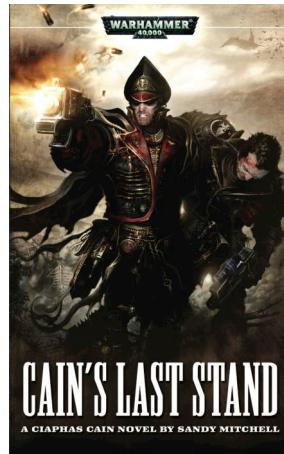
BL PUBLISHING

CAIN'S LAST STAND

The sixth Ciaphas Cain novel

By Sandy Mitchell

On Periremunda the populace are rioting. With local forces unable to contain the widespread civil disorder, Commissar Cain and his regiment of Valhallans are called in to help. However, it seems there is more to the rebellion than first appeared and Cain suspects sinister forces at work behind the scenes. When the commissar is reunited with Inquisitor Amberley Vail his fears are realised as he is thrown into a deadly conspiracy that even he might not be able to emerge from alive.



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 in both personae, as well as 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, and pottering about on the family allotment.

• **CIAPHAS CAIN** •

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(Omnibus containing books 1-3 in the series: *For the Emperor*,
Caves of Ice and *The Traitor's Hand*)

Book 4 – *Death or Glory*

Book 5 – *Duty Calls*

Book 6 – *Cain's Last Stand*

• **DARK HERESY** •

Book 1 – *Scourge the Heretic*

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THERE'S AN OLD Valhallan proverb, which I first heard back in my days with the 12th Field Artillery,¹ which quite accurately states that 'things can always get worse.' Indeed, I sometimes feel that my entire career has been little more than a practical demonstration of the adage, although it's seldom proven quite so comprehensively true as it was about to on this occasion.

Almost a week had gone by since our first clandestine council of war, and although none of us was sufficiently indiscreet to mention it, or any of the matters we'd discussed, when we encountered one another around the schola, it was more than evident that my co-conspirators were becoming as edgy as I was. The rumours continued to fly, the general populace was getting steadily more restive, and beyond trying to ensure that a relative handful of callow youths were a little more prepared for the gathering storm, there still seemed to be nothing we could do about it.

That may seem a little strange, I suppose, given my ridiculously inflated reputation among the Perlians; I could certainly have marched into the Governor's palace and demanded an audience, or descended on the high command of the PDF like the wrath of the Emperor, and started trying to get the imbeciles there to take the matter more seriously, but caution held me back. If the unrest really was being orchestrated by a secretive cabal of Chaos sympathisers among the ruling oligarchy, then letting them know we suspected their existence would be unwise in the extreme. At the very least they'd try to hinder what little good we'd be able to do by exerting

their influence against us, and at the worst they'd resort to more direct methods; I'd already survived enough assassination attempts for one lifetime, and had no wish to fend off any more.

'Ah, Sister,' Rorkins said, nodding courteously to Julien as she walked past the table we were occupying together in the faculty lounge, Brasker at her heels, droning on about the dismal decline in the standard of third level aspirants in his usual pedantic monotone. 'We were just wondering if you'd care to join us for another card game tomorrow evening.'

'Why not?' She nudged the bundle of data-slates under her arm to a more comfortable position, pausing to talk to us, while Brasker shifted from foot to foot like a servitor caught between conflicting instructions. After a moment he inclined his head politely and greeted us by name, before subsiding into uncharacteristic silence. 'Your quarters again?'

'I believe it's my turn to be the host,' I said. We generally took it in turns, and Jurgen's almost preternatural talent for scrounging meant that we'd be tolerably well fed during our deliberations, however futile they might turn out to be.

'Sounds fine to me,' Julien agreed. 'I'd offer to have you round myself, but tongues might wag.' She grinned at Brasker, who seemed completely unaware of the joke at his expense. 'Same time as last week?'

'If it suits you,' I said. After a few more pleasantries the two of them moved away, and left Rorkins and I to our mid-morning recaff. We continued to converse for a while in a desultory fashion, our thoughts on far more weighty matters than the ones we discussed for appearances' sake, until a small and odoriferous altercation by the door informed me that Jurgen was in no mood to abide by the general convention that only tutors and the housekeeping staff were admitted to these chambers.

'It's all right,' I soothed the small comet tail of agitated timewasters jabbering and gesticulating in his wake, 'he's with me.' Something they were all no doubt aware of in any case, since he was never exactly inconspicuous, however hard you tried, and had been infesting the schola for as long as I had. Satisfied that if they

couldn't ignore his presence, even with the window open, at least he was someone else's responsibility now, they scuttled back to their own concerns, while Jurgen handed me a data-slate, his expression sour.

'Message for you, sir. Marked personal.' He glared around the room, as though anyone else who stood between him and his duty was little better than an ork, and just about as expendable. 'And urgent.'

'I see. Thank you.' I took the slate and scanned the contents. After a moment I looked up, catching Rorkins's eye, and nodded almost imperceptibly. 'I think this might go some way towards clearing up that little difficulty you mentioned after the last tarot game.' Which was about as explicit as I wanted to get, surrounded as we were by listening ears.

Astute enough to have come to the same conclusion, Rorkins simply nodded in response. 'I'm glad to hear it,' he said. 'Not bad news, I hope.'

'Far from it,' I told him, feeling the first faint stirrings of optimism in several days. 'It's a dinner invitation.'

UNDER THE CIRCUMSTANCES I felt able to prevail upon Visiter to provide me with the use of the Aquila, and a pilot to go with it. To my pleasant surprise the pilot he'd assigned turned out to be Sprie, who confirmed the favourable impression I'd formed of him on our eventful foray to the mining hab with a swift and thorough cockpit check, which left him sufficiently occupied for the commodore and I to hold a quick conversation on the landing pad without the risk of being overheard.

'He's a good lad,' Visiter confirmed. 'Best pilot in the whole bunch. More to the point, though, he's bright enough to keep his mouth shut about anythin' you ask him to.' Which might prove necessary at that. I hadn't been entirely honest with my fellow conspirators, you see, telling them only that I was dining with a rogue trader of my acquaintance. As you can imagine, that little titbit of news swept the campus from end to end (thanks in no small part to Brasker, who I'd made sure was close enough to overhear the

end of my conversation with Rorkins); only Jurgen, Visiter, and now Sprie, knew that I was meeting him aboard his ship.

What no one else apart from Jurgen knew, and I was quite determined to keep it that way, was that Orelus was far more than a simple merchant; he was another of Amberley's agents, gathering information from across half the segmentum on her behalf. If anyone in the sector knew what was really going on, it would undoubtedly be him. Of course his arrival here was hardly likely to be a coincidence, which was also an encouraging sign; slapping down heretics wasn't exactly Amberley's speciality, but I was sure she had a few contacts among the Ordo Hereticus in whose laps she could drop the problem once I'd made her aware of it. I

His checks complete, Sprie boosted us smoothly from the ground, lifting us into orbit with an ease even Jurgen would have had little to complain about had I decided to bring him along. I have to admit to a sense of pleasurable anticipation as the familiar gilded pinnacles of the Lucre Foedus rolled past the viewport, and the welcoming maw of the mighty vessel's main hangar bay loomed ahead. Amberley, I knew, was unlikely to be aboard, generally preferring to make use of her own yacht, the Externus Exterminatus, to flit around the galaxy, but even the remote possibility that she might be was enough to trigger some pleasant reveries, which occupied my mind to the exclusion of practically everything else. I was only recalled to business as we passed through the main hangar doors, vast slabs of orichalcum chased with gold filigree, and Sprie cut in the retros, settling us as gently as a piece of windblown thistledown in the middle of the landing area marked out by a score or so of deckhands waving hand-held luminators.

'My dear Cain. A pleasure to see you again,' Orelus greeted me as I stepped off the boarding ramp, his cadaverous appearance and aquiline nose as prominent as they had been the first time we'd met, although, like myself, he was sporting a touch of grey in the hair these days, and he'd acquired an impressive scar on his right cheek since I'd last set eyes on him. He was still just as enamoured of gaudy clothing as he'd ever been, however, a pair of crimson hose

visible beneath a bright yellow tunic, over which an open mesh cape of spun gold had been casually thrown.

‘Orelus. I could say the same,’ I replied, trying not to feel too let down by Amberley’s obvious absence. That aside, I was perfectly sincere in the compliment, as his company was always pleasurable, and his hospitality generous. Although it had been some considerable time since we’d seen each other, we fell easily and naturally into a companionable gait, strolling side by side across the echoing plain of metal, chatting amiably about our respective adventures in the interim, both being careful from long habit not to say too much before we reached the seclusion of his quarters.

As we passed a line of heavy cargo shuttles, which dwarfed the Aquila now parked at the end of the row, I raised an eyebrow in polite enquiry. All were armed, and several showed the scars of recent combat. ‘Someone ask for their money back?’ I asked.

‘Not this time,’ Orelus replied, any further remarks he might have been about to make drowned out by the rapping of boot-heels against the deck plates as an honour guard of his household troops came smartly to attention. Having been in action alongside them more than once, I knew better than to let the gaudy livery they wore fool me into underestimating them. Most were Imperial Guard veterans, and many possessed special skills of quite staggering lethality. I nodded to a couple of faces I recognised, who were too well disciplined to return the greeting, but who no doubt appreciated the courtesy, and spoke their names as I passed. As I tell the young pups I’ve been trying to lick into shape, it always helps to let the troopers think you care about them as individuals, not just a faceless mass: believe me, when the las-bolts start flying, that sense of connection is going to save your neck.

We passed from the hangar bay into a carpeted corridor, where little knots of people scurried to and fro on the mysterious errands ship crew always seem to be engaged in, and marble busts of people I didn’t recognise lined the tapestried walls on waist-high plinths.

‘Your man not with you?’ Orelus enquired, no doubt surprised at Jurgen’s absence.

‘Not this time,’ I said. ‘Under the circumstances, I thought it best to leave him in place.’

With the situation on Perlia still so unstable, I wanted him where he could keep his ear to the ground, and notify me at once if anything happened. Rorkins and the others were good enough allies, of course, but I couldn’t bring myself to trust any of them to the extent I would Jurgen, or rely on them to cover my back in quite the same way. After almost a century of soldiering together, the rapport we shared was second to none. Besides which, I knew that Orelius occasionally made use of sanctioned psykers, and if any of them were likely to be around, the secret of my aide’s abilities would prove almost impossible to keep.

‘Probably just as well,’ Orelius agreed, standing aside to usher me into his personal apartments. They were just as richly decorated as I recalled from previous visits, scarlet hangings ornamented with his family crest obscuring most of the metal bulkheads, which had been gilded and polished to a rich lustre, making the room feel curiously as though it had been flooded with honey. I’d always found the display of ostentation rather vulgar, to be honest, and was quietly relieved when the trader carried on through the formal reception rooms to the cosier environs of the parlour beyond, where he liked to relax when he wasn’t trying to impress some chinless piece of backwater nobility. ‘You might want to talk to the Navigator a bit later on.’

That, I rather doubted, as I’ve yet to meet a member of the Navis Nobilite I didn’t have an almost irresistible urge to shoot on sight. I know they’re a necessary evil, and the Imperium could barely function without them, but anyone who is more at home in the warp than the real world is a bit too close to the Great Enemy for my liking. Besides, they’re arrogant, condescending snobs, and those are the ones who are making an effort to get along with you. Nevertheless I let the matter go, and merely nodded in reply.

Orelius’s inner sanctum was surprisingly cosy, with wood panelling on the walls, and a dark blue carpet, almost the same colour as the oceans of Perlia, which could be glimpsed through the wide viewport at one end of the room. Without that somewhat

vertiginous reminder, it would have been easy to forget we were aboard a starship at all.

‘You’ve heard the rumours, I take it?’ I asked him as we sat, and my host lifted the lids from a battery of chafing dishes cluttering the table. That alone told me how sensitive he expected our conversation to become: even his most trusted servants were being excluded from the room while we talked.

‘Which ones?’ Orelius asked, helping himself to some cottleston pie, while I poured a large goblet of whichever wine he’d chosen to accompany our meal, and found it as excellent as I’d expected.

‘The whole planet’s buzzing with them,’ I told him. ‘About a new Black Crusade. Absurdly exaggerated, of course, but the local authorities are just sitting on their hands instead of issuing a denial, which just makes things worse. If somebody doesn’t do something soon, there’s going to be so much civil unrest the Governor will need to call in the sector fleet to restore order.’

‘The sector fleet’s got its hands full already,’ Orelius told me, to my complete lack of surprise. ‘The main thrust of the tyranid advance has diverted towards ork-held space for some reason,¹ but there are enough of them left on the fringes to keep most of our assets pinned down for the foreseeable future.’ He shrugged, accepting a goblet of wine, which I handed to him as he spoke. ‘But right now that looks like the least of your worries.’

‘The rumours are true, then,’ I said, a statement rather than a question, and Orelius nodded.

‘I’m afraid so,’ he confirmed, a trifle indistinctly around a mouthful of pie. ‘The Traitor Legions attacked in force some months ago, trying to force passage through the Cadian Gate. Enough of them are getting through to make things very difficult in the Segmentum Obscurus.’

‘But that’s half the galaxy away,’ I said, tucking in to the tempting array of viands on offer in front of me, although my appetite was considerably less keen than it had been a moment ago. ‘I don’t see how that can affect us here.’ Actually I could, because it was precisely the topic I’d been discussing with Rorkins and the others, but I was still hoping desperately that Orelius was about to

reassure me that the situation was being contained. ‘Other than the resources being diverted to deal with it weakening our defences against the tyrannids, of course.’

‘Most of the fighting’s been confined to the Obscurus so far,’ Orelius confirmed, idly dismissing about a quarter of the galaxy as though it were a single cohesive lump, ‘but the enemy raiding fleets are getting bolder. Several have been ranging farther afield.’ He paused, picking at a palovine pastry, waiting for me to draw the obvious conclusion.

‘Ranging in this direction,’ I said, taking his meaning at once.

Orelius nodded. ‘There’s a whole flotilla heading this way, as fast as the warp can carry them. And that’s pretty fast at the moment; according to our Navigator, there are currents flowing out of the Eye stronger than any he’s ever seen.’

‘Even so,’ I said, feeling the old familiar chill of foreboding, ‘there must be plenty of other easy targets between them and us.’

‘You’d think so,’ Orelius agreed. ‘But they don’t seem to be slowing down much.’ He touched a large emerald on the thick bracelet around his wrist, and a hidden hololith hummed into life, projecting a flickering image of the galaxy into the empty space above the table. A line appeared, originating in the Eye of Terror, and heading unmistakably in our direction. Orelius waved a hand through the insubstantial projection, indicating several stellar systems close to the crimson smear. ‘They’ve bypassed these systems entirely, even though they were obviously sitting ducks, with little or no effective defences.’

‘That doesn’t sound like any Chaos raiders I’ve ever seen,’ I said. Normally the weaker the targets the better from their point of view, just like the cowardly scum they are. I pointed to a couple of contact icons along the line of the enemy’s progress. ‘But they fought here and here.’

‘They did.’ Orelius nodded, looking grave. ‘Fought and won. Which simply shouldn’t have happened.’ He expanded the image, overlaying the contested systems with battlefield data I found myself reluctant to believe. ‘They were outnumbered and outgunned on

each occasion. At Madasa they were even faced with an entire convent of Adepta Sororitas, which fell within the hour.'

'That's impossible,' I said. Emperor knows, I had little enough time for the psalm-singing harpies in the normal course of events, but I'd seen them hold their ground tenaciously against almost impossible odds on several occasions. 'They'd have fought to the last woman.'

'They seem to have fought, all right.' Orelus's voice was grim. 'They fought for the enemy.' Then, as if realising how absurd the accusation sounded, a faintly defensive tone entered his voice. 'So far as I've been able to determine, anyway. There were sporadic reports of what sounded like a formation of battle sisters engaging one of the last PDF units to fall.'

'Misdirection and propaganda,' I said decisively.

Orelus nodded slowly. 'I hope you're right,' he said, sounding far from convinced. 'At any event, the Madasa system is now firmly under enemy control, and resisting all the attempts of the Astartes to reclaim it.' He returned the hololith to its original view, and extended the red line from its final position. As I'd expected, it intersected the Perlia system, before disappearing somewhere into the blank space chewed into the heart of the Imperium by the advance of the hive fleets.

'Maybe they want something from the tyranids,' I suggested, failing to convince even myself.

'Maybe they do,' Orelus said, throwing me that small crumb of comfort, before adding, 'but I doubt it.'

'So do I,' I agreed. 'In which case, it's pretty obvious what they're coming after.' Being an agent of the Ordo Xenos, I was sure Orelus was well aware of the clandestine Inquisition research facility in the Valley of Daemons, somewhere under the wisps of cloud trailing over the eastern continent of the gently rotating globe beyond the viewport.

'The Shadowlight,' he confirmed. 'Inquisitor Vail is of the opinion that Abaddon, or, more likely, one of his lackeys wanting to curry favour with him, has somehow learned of its existence. If that's the case, then its removal from Perlia before the enemy arrives

becomes of paramount importance.’ Which was a major understatement. I hadn’t set eyes on the cursed thing for more than sixty-five years, but the memory of it was still enough to send a shiver down my spine.

I nodded. ‘I take it that’s why you’re here,’ I said.

‘Quite.’ Orelius echoed the gesture. ‘We still don’t know where it came from, or what it’s really supposed to do, but we do know from Killian’s researches that it can turn latent psykers into powerful active ones.’

‘Not something I’m likely to forget,’ I said, suppressing a shudder at the memory. The rogue inquisitor had intended using the thing in an insane attempt to mass produce psykers, hoping to beat the forces of Chaos at their own game, which still seemed like burning down the house to get rid of the termites to me. Luckily he’d ended up messily dead in the nick of time, allowing Amberley to snaffle the thing, and send it back to where it came from, which was now roughly a hundred kilometres below my feet and a bit to the left. If the forces of Chaos succeeded in getting hold of it, though, I had no doubt that they’d carry on where the late and unlamented Killian had left off, leaving us up to our ears in wyrds. That simply couldn’t be allowed to happen.

‘I take it you’ve got the blasted thing safely stowed away in your most secure hold by now?’ I asked, and Orelius shook his head.

‘I wish we did. But there’s a problem.’

‘There always is,’ I said, trying not to sound bitter about it. I nibbled at one of the delicacies on my plate, but for all the pleasure I was able to take in it, it might as well have been a standard ration bar. ‘What kind of a problem?’

‘The magi staffing the facility have recovered several more artefacts in the last few decades,’ Orelius told me soberly. ‘They’re now working on the assumption that the Shadowlight is part of a more complex mechanism, which they’ve spent a number of years attempting to assemble. Apparently, dismantling it now would be an affront to the Ommissiah, or some such foolery. I’ve been trying to impress upon them that letting Abaddon stroll off with it would be a damn sight worse, but you know what tech-priests are like. It’s

going to take a while to persuade them to let me pack the thing up and go.'

I nodded again, and sipped at the wine, letting its heady fragrance calm the alarm bells shrilling in my head. This was a complication I suppose I should have foreseen; the research facility in the Valley of Daemons was a joint operation between the Ordo Xenos and the Adeptus Mechanicus, and I'd gathered from Amberley that the partnership was sometimes a strained one. The tech-priests manning the place eighty years ago had told Killian to go for himself when he tried to pull rank on them, despite his Inquisitorial status;1 unfortunately for them he wasn't the kind to take no for an answer, came back with an army, and grabbed the thing over their gently steaming corpses. 'Are you making any headway at all?' I asked.

'A little,' Orelus said. 'I've been able to persuade them to let me have copies of all their data, at least. But that's not going to be a whole lot of use if Abaddon's got the device itself.'

'I suppose not.' I shook my head sympathetically. 'Which reminds me.' I took a data-slate from my pocket, and laid it on the table. 'This is all the intelligence I've been able to collate since the last time I saw Amberley.'

'I'll see that she gets it,' Orelus promised, not quite managing to mask his unease at my casual use of Amberley's given name. It was hardly news to him, or anyone else among her associates, that we shared a personal relationship beyond the merely professional, but for some reason none of them liked to be reminded of it.

'Thank you,' I said. After some deliberation I'd decided to mention my feelings of disquiet about the mining station in the report, despite the near certainty that Amberley would simply dismiss them as the paranoid imaginings I'd almost succeeded in convincing myself they actually were. Necrons weren't exactly subtle, in my experience, and if they really were taking an interest in Perlia, I was morbidly certain that we'd have known about it by now. With an effort, I returned my attention to the main topic of conversation. 'How long do you think it will take to convince them?'

‘Not too long, I hope,’ Orelus said, smiling mirthlessly. It never occurred to either of us that he wouldn’t get his own way in the end; rogue traders are notoriously tough negotiators. Neither of us was crass enough to verbalise the obvious thought that, if push came to shove, he probably had enough firepower aboard to repeat Killian’s solution to the problem. That might get the Shadowlight to safety, but wouldn’t do a lot to keep the Mechanicus on side once the immediate crisis was past. ‘I imagine they’ll see sense once the enemy gets close enough.’

‘Any idea how long that’ll take?’ I asked, a small knot of tension winding itself around my gut as I spoke.

Orelus shrugged. ‘About a week, I think, at least so far as the main fleet goes.’ He pulled a data-slate from the pocket of his tunic, and handed it to me. ‘This contains the best estimate I can give you of their strength and numbers, but I should warn you, it’s highly conjectural.’

‘It’s better than nothing,’ I replied grimly, stowing it in the pocket of my greatcoat. I’d show it to Rorkins and the others, and with any luck we’d be able to devise a strategy or two we could take to the PDF. Potentially compromised or not, they were the only thing standing between Perlia and annihilation now, and the sooner this information got to them, the better our chances of holding the planet.

There was also the distinctly tempting possibility that, since Orelus was here to retrieve the Shadowlight, I could come up with a plausible-sounding reason in the next day or two for leaving along with it. As far as I knew, Jurgen was still the only man capable of handling the thing without extensive precautions, and our previous experience was bound to prove valuable in keeping it safe.

‘I hope it helps.’ Orelus might have said more, but before he got the chance, the picture in the hololith flickered and changed. The slash across the galaxy, like a bloody claw mark, vanished, to be replaced by a view of the Perlia system. I quickly identified the runes marking our own position in orbit, and, with a vertiginous lurch to my stomach, a scatter of icons marking an enemy contact.

‘I’m sorry to interrupt your supper, my lord,’ the voice of the vessel’s captain said, issuing from some artfully concealed vox unit, ‘but we have warp portals forming throughout the system. The enemy seem to have been less tardy than we hoped.’

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