

**WARHAMMER**  
**40,000**



— THE —  
**PRICE OF DUTY**

AN ASTRA MILITARUM STORY BY  
MATT SMITH



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An Extract from ‘Ciaphas Cain: Choose Your Enemies’

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# THE PRICE OF DUTY

By Matt Smith

The forest was warm but a cool breeze brushed at his face. The sun was bright, but shaded by the thick canopy, which allowed only thin beams of light to reach through, like the Emperor's fingers reaching from the heavens to bless the ground. Jasper Nevin couldn't help thinking it would be a nice place to go on a relaxing stroll or bring one's paramour for a romantic picnic.

At least, it would be if he weren't being shot at. Las-fire struck the wide colossoak tree he was sheltering behind and Nevin flinched with every impact. He had been hiding here for several minutes. He had been separated from his unit when they had been ambushed. Stun grenades had left him disoriented, and by the time he had come to his senses there were no allies in sight. Now he was pinned down and unable to find a way out. He grew frustrated. He was a graduate of the schola progenium of Grundus V, for Emperor's sake, but for all their talk of duty and discipline the schola progenium could never truly drive the fear from a man, never truly prepare him for war.

Jasper Nevin was a commissar, and he was afraid.

He dared a glance out from behind the trunk. He couldn't see anything. A shot hit the colossoak, stripping bark, and Nevin snapped back into cover. He fired back blindly with his laspistol. His shots were weak next to the incoming fire. They were quiet and dull and where they struck trees they left only faint burn marks. The weapon was old and poorly maintained, the powercell recycled more times than even the most generous Munitorum guidelines allowed. It whined low, drained, as more loud sharp cracks

snapped back. He tried to reload the pistol but his hands were shaking. His fingers felt numb and unwieldy.

He heard footsteps. They were swift and light. He couldn't tell how many there were, or which direction they were coming from – only that they were getting closer. He fumbled the powercell into place and dared another look out of cover. He spotted something, a figure in green hooded overalls covered in off-cuts of foliage. It moved assuredly between the trees. Nevin fired and the figure dived away. Nevin ducked back, then looked around the other side of the trunk. He caught a glance of a second figure clad like the first. It fired on full-auto from the hip as it moved, the shots spraying wildly. Nevin dropped to one knee and returned fire. A shot struck the attacker in the abdomen and it stumbled clumsily before falling on its face.

Before Nevin could relish his success, a third attacker stepped out ahead of where the second had fallen, and fired. Nevin only just managed to get out of the way before the shots buzzed past. He noticed he was panting and tried to control his breathing. This was how he was going to die: alone, at the hands of rebel logging workers on what was supposed to be a simple garrison duty before he'd ever even seen a xenos or a heretic.

No, that wasn't how the story of Jasper Nevin would finish. He'd trained too long for such an ignominious end. He was a commissar and he had one weapon left at his disposal: righteous authority. He cleared his throat, took a deep breath, and pronounced: 'Workers of Verdine Two logging station Primus Delta Twelve, I am Commissar Jasper Nevin! You stand in defiance of the ordained edicts of the Departmento Munitorum and the Adeptus Mechanicus! By the authority of the Commissariat, the Officio Prefectus and the Emperor Himself, stand down and—'

More las-fire cut him off. Nevin glanced out to see how long he had left. The approaching figures had once more blended into the forest but when he looked away he saw another. It was halfway up a tree directly ahead of him, suspended from a utility harness, the kind the workers used to strip high branches. He had a clear sight line. Nevin threw himself forwards onto his face as a spray of las-fire chewed up the tree where he had been sat a moment before. More fire from behind kicked up tufts of dirt around him. With the rebel sniper in play he could no longer hide. Survival instincts that had previously rooted him to the spot now lent strength to his

legs. He got to his feet and ran. Las-fire chased him every step of the way, and he fired back desperately over his shoulders. He tripped and fell. More shots whined overhead and Nevin rolled onto his back, firing at random as he tried to regain his footing. He saw something move between the trees and snapped off three more shots before his pistol whined low again. The pursuer stepped out of cover. His lasgun was held at his hip, finger on the trigger as he walked calmly towards Nevin.

There was a flash of movement from the shrubbery surrounding the base of the nearest colossoak. Before the rebel labourer could react, a hand was clamped over his nose and mouth and a knife had been driven up under his ribcage. He let out a muffled splutter and blood seeped between the fingers across his face. He slumped as the blade slid free, dripping crimson. The wielder crouched, wiping the knife clean on their victim's overalls with one hand while snapping off a series of gestures with the other. Nevin heard the distinctive snap of a single long-las shot, followed by a cry – and a moment later, a dull heavy thud. He hadn't seen the shooter; he was still looking at the warrior who'd saved him.

Captain Rosario Vargass, 'Viper' among the soldiery, was powerfully built. She stood half a head taller than Nevin and her hair was a dark buzz cut. She wore a red bandana, a dirty white vest and jungle camouflage fatigues that showed off the tattoos that ran down both her arms. She was the commanding officer of B Company in the Catachan 64th. Nevin had been assigned to her upon his allocation to the regiment. In his time with B Company, he had found her to be a brutal, sometimes terrifying combatant. Beyond that, she had proven to have a keen strategic mind and an easy, natural leadership style that Nevin admired and envied. She stayed crouched unmoving in the undergrowth. In the sudden stillness Nevin heard a muted cry only a short distance to his right, followed by a sharp crack to the left. He didn't know if it was snapping wood or breaking bone.

Captain Vargass finally moved in a swift, hunched walk towards him. 'Get up,' she snarled, not deigning to look down at him as she yanked up on the shoulder of his storm coat. He could smell the blood of the dead labourer on her fingers. There was movement all around them as one by one, four more Catachan troopers made themselves known. Captain Vargass stood up straight and Nevin quickly pushed himself to his feet, brushing dry dirt and leaves off his coat.

‘Your assistance was most timely, captain,’ Nevin said in a clipped tone, trying to establish an air of authority.

Vargass turned and stepped so she could whisper to him. ‘You should be careful, commissar. It almost looked like you were running away.’

Nevin stepped away and made a show of checking and reloading his pistol. ‘Merely withdrawing to a more defensible position, captain.’

‘I was referring more to how you ended up out here in the first place,’ Vargass replied, loud enough that the squad could hear this time.

‘Oh.’ Nevin cleared his throat and looked away sheepishly for a second before catching himself and snapping his gaze back to the captain. ‘I got disoriented during the ambush. These damn trees all look the same,’ he said.

‘At least none of them look like sucker trees,’ one of the troopers said. The others laughed.

‘You’re lucky that Vandien saw which way you went,’ Vargass said and nodded her head past him.

Nevin looked back over his shoulder at Trooper Vandien. He was Vargass’ adjutant and one of the youngest in the regiment, roughly Nevin’s age but noticeably taller, with a thick, dark beard. He returned Vargass’ gesture respectfully.

‘My thanks for your vigilance, Trooper Vandien,’ Nevin said.

The trooper fixed him with a cold stare for a long second, then looked away.

‘We all enjoyed your little speech about the authority of the Officio Prefectus,’ said Vargass drawing another low rumble of laughter from the Catachans. ‘How did that work out for you?’

Nevin turned back to her and forced an easy smile. ‘Unsurprisingly the rebels failed to recognise Imperial authority,’ he said.

‘Well, it helped us find you, at least.’

‘The Emperor protects,’ said Nevin.

‘Captain,’ another of Vargass’ command squad said. ‘Did you see this?’ It was the scout, Romaro. She was hunched down over the fallen labourer Viper had killed.

‘What is it?’ Vargass asked as she made her way towards her. Nevin followed unbidden. When he reached her, Romaro was prising the dead man’s fingers from his lasgun.

‘Well, captain, when the rebellion began the labourers were practically unarmed. They were fighting the overseers with forestry equipment and their bare hands. Any firearms they had were old personal items, a few autopistols and stubbers.’

‘We knew they had managed to arm themselves,’ Nevin said.

Romaro shot him a sideways glance and kept speaking to Vargass. ‘We thought they had managed to get hold of some cheap lasguns, but nothing like this. Look.’ She unslung her own lascarbine and laid it down next to the dead man’s weapon.

The guns were near identical. The clearest difference Nevin could see was in their condition. Romaro’s lascarbine, like his own pistol, looked aged. Where metal was exposed it was beginning to rust. Thick clumps of ash and dirt filled its crevices and the casing was badly cracked to the point that it was hazardous to use. By comparison, the labourer’s weapon was brand new. Captain Vargass took the labourer’s rifle and unslung her own, which was in no better condition than Romaro’s.

‘How did these upstart woodsmen get access to brand new military-issue lascarbines while we’re out here fighting with whatever is barely working after Scarda?’ Captain Vargass asked.

Nevin stood silently, looking down at the dead body.

‘Well?’

Nevin flinched at the captain’s sharp tone and looked up to see her staring at him. He had assumed the question was rhetorical. ‘I-I don’t know,’ he said, his mind failing as it scrambled for a better answer. ‘I’ll speak to the lord commissar when we get back to the outpost.’

‘Good idea,’ Vargass said, ‘we should do that.’

Outpost Beta One Alpha had been home to the majority of the Catachan 64th for the past month. It was made up of large tents surrounding a few small prefab structures. The perimeter wall was built from the wood of the colossoak trees that had been cleared to make room for the base’s construction. Currently, the regimental commander, Colonel Mason, was in orbit dealing with high command, which put Captain Vargass in charge.

On their return to the outpost Vargass had taken casualty reports from Fourth Platoon. They had fifteen confirmed dead, a dozen more injured and two missing. Nevin had stood beside the captain as the reports came in

and watched with increasing concern at the growing tension in the tendons of her neck. He remained after she had dismissed the platoon sergeants.

‘What do you want, Nevin?’ she said.

‘I thought it was as good a time as any to go and see the lord commissar.’

Vargass looked at him, nodded and led the way towards the command bunker.

Commissar Nevin’s superior had laid claim to a large storage room on the edge of the command building and converted it into his office. The door was manned by a pair of Tempestus Scions from the 91st Rhoin Cobras. They wore the same camouflage fatigues as the Catachans, though theirs were layered over with plates of matt-black carapace armour and they wore black berets.

‘Commissar Nevin, sir,’ one of them greeted him as the pair snapped to attention. ‘Captain Vargass,’ he added a long moment later.

‘We’re here to see the lord commissar,’ said Nevin.

‘He’s been expecting you, go ahead.’

Nevin stepped between the Scions and placed his hand on the door. Captain Vargass made to follow him, but the Scion to Nevin’s left held up a hand to stop her.

‘Not you,’ he said bluntly.

‘What?’ Vargass replied, indignant.

‘The captain is with me,’ Nevin said.

‘Regardless, sir,’ the Scion to Nevin’s right said, ‘the lord commissar is not currently meeting with any member of the Catachan Sixty-Fourth.’

‘I demand to speak to him,’ Vargass said. She slapped the first Scion’s raised hand out of the air, and he bristled at the contact.

‘We answer only to the lord commissar, and his orders were clear. Now, please remove yourself from the vicinity, or you will be removed forcefully.’

‘I am in operational command of this outpost, I could have a hundred soldiers here to—’

‘Captain,’ said Nevin. Vargass glared at him. Her eyes were fierce and intimidating but Nevin held her gaze stoically. The silence lingered awkwardly until Vargass turned and began to walk away. ‘I’ll find you when I’m done,’ he called after her.

Vargass glanced back for a moment, but kept walking. Nevin was sure he

heard her mutter something offensive. When she had passed out of earshot, Nevin turned with a nod to the men on the door and entered.

The office was a strange blend of military bareness and baroque opulence. The walls and floor were plain grey rockcrete, and a chill hung in the air. By contrast, the centre of the room was dominated by a large, rich mahogany desk piled with neat stacks of paperwork. On the wall behind it was a grand painting Nevin knew depicted the final Imperial victory on Salshiek two hundred years ago. In the centre was the heroic Commissar Bandine, depicted shining with the Emperor's light, his blade held forth, leading the final charge into the breached fortress walls. It was magnificent and imposing, but to Nevin, not nearly as much as the figure seated in front of it.

Lord Commissar Albrec Stone was Jasper Nevin's hero. He was bald, his uniform was immaculately pressed and he sat with a nobleman's poise. While Nevin was just a boy, Stone had been injured in the battle for Numitus Beta. He still bore the evidence – a long scar that ran down the side of his face, and a gold-plated bionic left eye. During his convalescence, the lord commissar had given lectures to Nevin's schola progenium class on matters of politics, philosophy, strategy and more. His oratory had always been inspiring, wise and insightful. When Nevin had been given his first posting he had been dumbfounded to see that he would be serving beneath Stone himself.

'Commissar Nevin, do you have something to report or did you mistake my office for an art gallery?' Stone asked. His voice was low and rasping, but still strong and authoritative.

Nevin tucked his cap under his arm, snapped to attention and saluted.

'Lord Commissar, sir, Captain Vargass' patrol was ambushed this afternoon. Casualties were significant. Reports are coming in of attacks on the satellite outposts also.'

'You have the formal report?' Stone asked, extending his hand expectantly.

'N-no, not yet, sir. There was another matter we– I needed to consult you about. It is urgent.'

'Who is "we"?' Stone asked.

Nevin looked down at his feet for a second, but luckily caught himself before Stone was moved to chastise him. 'Captain Vargass and I, sir.'

Stone sneered. ‘Go on.’

‘Sir, upon inspection of the bodies of slain labour rebels it was observed that they have acquired newly forged military-issue weaponry – lascarbines of similar design to the regiment’s own, to be specific, sir.’

The lord commissar rested his thumb and index finger against his chin. ‘How do you believe they could have come upon such armaments, Commissar Nevin?’

‘Unknown, sir. There are no manufactoria producing such weapons on this world and we do not believe the rebels have means of off-world contact. Even if they did, the Naval patrols in orbit would prevent anything being transported to the surface.’

‘A perturbatory development,’ Stone said, leaning back a little in his seat. ‘Leave this matter to me, commissar. I will investigate it personally. In the meantime see to it that any of these weapons that the Catachans may have plundered from the dead are confiscated and turned in to Tempestor Sonnen.’

Nevin wanted to respond, but didn’t dare speak out against the lord commissar. He opened his mouth to speak, but hesitated and shut it. The movement was not lost on Stone.

‘Something to say, commissar?’

‘No, well, yes, sir – it’s just that—’

‘Spit it out, commissar,’ Stone snapped.

Nevin’s fear of speaking up was replaced with a greater fear of staying quiet. He took a deep breath, filling his chest. ‘Sir, the regiment could really use these new weapons. Their own equipment is no longer fit for purpose. Soldiers are dying because their lasguns are failing them.’

Stone leant forwards, resting his forearms on the desk. He stared at Nevin intently. ‘The souls of our enemies are corrupt, as are the weapons they wield. I will not see them used by soldiers under my command.’

‘Understood, sir,’ said Nevin, ‘in which case should the weapons not go to the quartermaster?’

Stone shook his head. ‘I will trust this task to my own men and no others. Now do as commanded. Dismissed.’

Nevin snapped his heels together and saluted, then turned on the spot and left the room. His orders didn’t sit well with him; he had no desire to see Catachan lives lost when there was any way to save them. But, the lord

commissar knew best. Nevin reassured himself of that. He put his cap back on, straightened his jacket and went to carry out his orders.

The inspection took hours to complete, with hundreds of bunks needing to be searched. It swiftly became clear that the Catachan soldiers were as ingenious in their methods of hiding contraband as they were unwilling to cooperate with him. Even so, with the assistance of the Rhoin Cobras, Nevin was able to find and confiscate dozens of illegal lascarbines and pistols and even several flamers. Once it was all over Nevin felt quite proud of himself. It had been a difficult job and he felt he had executed it well. It left him in a good mood as he moved on to his daily inspection of the outer walls. He climbed the ladder nearest the southern entrance and started to make his way around. He greeted each sentry as he came upon them, doing his best to recall their names, though rarely succeeding. Regardless, he was only ever met with a cold acknowledgement of 'commissar' and an awkward silence until he moved on. As he approached the northern gate he was surprised to find Captain Vargass among the sentries.

'Captain,' he said politely as he passed, hoping that he would receive the usual frosty greeting in return.

'Commissar Nevin, you've saved me the trouble of having to find you,' she said.

Nevin's chest grew tight and his good mood drained through the soles of his feet. 'How can I help you, captain?' he asked, moving to stand beside her, looking out into the forest.

'You chose not to inform me that you would be inspecting my regiment.'

'Under the circumstances I judged it best that the inspection be a surprise, as is my prerogative,' Nevin replied.

'Yours? Or the lord commissar's?'

Nevin stiffened. 'We all have orders to follow.'

Vargass looked away. 'That's what I thought. My own orders are to put down this rebellion. Recently yours seem intent on undermining me.'

'My orders, and moreover my duty, are to maintain the discipline and moral fibre of this regiment.'

'Is that so?' Vargass asked. There was a sudden hint of levity to her voice that caught Nevin off guard.

‘It is,’ he replied with a frown.

‘At what cost?’ she asked, turning to look at him now.

‘At any cost,’ Nevin said earnestly.

‘Remember that,’ she said, her face stern once again. ‘Follow me.’ She turned away, checking over her shoulder to ensure Nevin was following, and slid down the nearest ladder.

‘Where are we going?’ Nevin asked, calling down from the barricade.

‘The armoury. I have something important to show you,’ Vargass called back.

The armoury was a long, narrow room lined with rows of solid wooden shelving. It was mostly empty. Captain Vargass led Nevin inside and took him towards a man hunched over a workbench. Nevin knew a little of the quartermaster. He was the oldest member of the regiment that Nevin could recall, older still than the colonel. He had lost his left leg somewhere along the line, and it had been replaced with a crude bionic. That had been the end of his soldiering career. Since then he had rather let himself go; a once muscular physique had slowly turned to fat, his belly forever poking out under the bottom of his vest.

‘Bron,’ Vargass said, greeting him warmly.

‘Viper,’ the man replied, straightening up with a thin groan and an amiable smile.

‘You know Commissar Nevin,’ Vargass said, gesturing to him.

Bron Hader looked at him. His smile faded. ‘I know of him,’ he said. His voice was gravelly and Nevin thought he might break into a coughing fit at any moment. Nevin responded with a polite nod.

Hader turned back to Vargass. ‘To what do I owe the pleasure?’

Vargass reached into the waistband of her fatigues and withdrew a laspistol. Nevin could tell it was one of the enemy contraband. She turned it in her grip and offered it to Hader. ‘The commissar needs to know what you told me about these weapons.’

Hader took the weapon and glanced at Nevin, then back at Vargass. ‘You sure?’ he asked.

Vargass just looked at him.

‘Very well,’ he conceded, then turned to Nevin. ‘Over here, kid,’ he said, gesturing to the space beside him at the workbench.

‘That’s Commissar Nevin, if you will, Quartermaster Hader,’ Nevin replied sternly.

‘Sure, commissar,’ said Hader as he laid the laspistol on the bench. ‘Now look. See here?’ he said, pointing to the discolouration of the metal at the top of the grip. ‘That’s where Militarum-issue weapons are typically embossed with a serial number and maker’s mark. These markings have been acid-burned off.’

‘That’s unfortunate.’

‘Obviously, but it confirms that these are definitely Militarum-issue weapons. We got lucky here though,’ he said, and knocked on the casing with his knuckles. ‘It’s a plastek composite I’ve only seen on weapons forged on Kaedis Prime.’

‘I’m afraid I’m unfamiliar with that world,’ said Nevin.

‘It was the forge world providing resupply to the campaign on Scarda. What’s more, the weapons match the configuration of a resupply shipment I requested on Scarda but never received. Strange thing is, I was notified several weeks ago that the shipment was here on Verdine, and would be delivered to the outpost. *Better late than never* might as well be the Munitorum’s motto, but again, they never arrived.’

‘Perhaps the rebels intercepted it,’ Nevin speculated.

Hader shook his head. ‘An ambush would have been officially recorded. When I contacted Alpha Base for confirmation they told me the shipment had been assigned for redistribution.’

Nevin nodded. ‘This was meant to be a quiet garrison duty. There are other warzones in greater need of resupply.’

‘Perhaps, in the eyes of some Munitorum scribe who doesn’t know the situation we’re in, but non-delivery of requisitioned munitions obliges the Munitorum to seek confirmation from a senior officer. Alpha Base confirmed they got it, but they wouldn’t tell me who from.’

‘Who would have the authority?’

‘That’s quite the question,’ said Vargass, and the two men turned towards her. ‘Whoever it is could possibly be involved in a conspiracy to supply weapons to the labourers. There’s Colonel Mason of course, but he’s with crusade command. I haven’t been able to get in touch with him in over a month and even if the Munitorum were able to, he knows the situation we’re in. He’d have fought it, or at least let us know. There’s me and the

other captains. It wasn't any of them. That leaves two people.'

Nevin realised he was having palpitations. He knew what Vargass was going to say. His hand blindly reached back for the pistol on the bench but couldn't find it. He dared a glance back to see it out of reach, firmly pinned under Hader's meaty paw.

'Lord Commissar Stone,' she said, taking a step towards him, looking down at him right in the eye, 'and you.'

Nevin tried to step back but he had nowhere to go. 'It wasn't me,' he said, holding his hands up as if to surrender.

'No? Who didn't fight beside us on Scarda?' She took another step towards him. Nevin was all too aware of the knife at her hip. 'Who has the most to gain from keeping favour with the Munitorum? Who is the weakest, most blindly obedient man in this regiment? How can I trust you?'

Each insult stung Nevin to his core as a bright light was shone upon his failings. He wanted so much to be respected by the Catachans and he had believed he was slowly starting to earn that respect. Viper's words stripped that belief away, and in that moment he wished she would draw that knife, run him through and save the Imperium from his weakness.

'You can't,' he managed to say, 'but I swear in the Emperor's name it was not me.'

She narrowed her eyes at him. 'Do you understand what you are saying?'

He did, though he didn't want to believe it. There must have been another option Vargass hadn't considered. He nodded.

'And in your duty to uphold the discipline of this regiment it would fall to you to investigate the possibility of such a crime and bring justice to its perpetrator.'

Nevin pushed himself off the bench and straightened up.

'It would,' he said, 'but understand that I do not believe Lord Commissar Stone would do such a thing. The most likely explanation is that this is all down to a simple clerical error. I will look into the matter further, but if the lord commissar proves to be innocent, as I expect, I shall be investigating you next. Do not think I haven't noticed that you have no more proof of your innocence than I do.'

Vargass was quiet for a long second and Nevin worried his defiance had angered her further. He almost sighed with relief as she spoke.

‘Very well. I have nothing to hide. As for Stone, you’ll need evidence. There is likely to be a paper trail, perhaps a confirmation from the Munitorum. If we can find that we may be able to follow it.’

‘Lord Commissar Stone is an intelligent man. If it *were* him he would likely have destroyed any incriminating evidence,’ said Nevin.

‘He is also an arrogant man,’ said Vargass, ‘one who would not comprehend that he may be challenged.’

‘If that is the case any documents would be kept in his office.’

Vargass sneered. ‘Those toy soldiers won’t let me in there, but you they might.’

Nevin hated the thought of investigating Lord Commissar Stone, of betraying his trust, but what Vargass was saying was undeniably plausible. It was his duty to examine the possibility. ‘I’ll find a way,’ he said.

‘Good. I want to know as soon as you find something.’

‘Of course,’ Nevin said. He stepped past her, turning back to spare a departing nod to Hader, and left the armoury. He wouldn’t finish his rounds. He suddenly felt quite sick.

Each day Lord Commissar Stone took breakfast in the officers’ mess at sunrise. He ate a bowl of oats, drank black recaff and looked over the latest reports from high command. It took him fifteen minutes. This was Nevin’s window. He was nervous as he approached the office. As usual, there were two Scions guarding the door. One of them raised a hand to stop him as he got close.

‘The lord commissar is not in at the moment, sir,’ he said.

‘I know, trooper, I just saw him in the officers’ mess. He forgot to pick up the latest reports from Battle Group Orion so I offered to fetch them for him,’ Nevin said, and made to step past.

The second guard moved in front of the door to block him. ‘No one enters the lord commissar’s office while he is out.’

Nevin took a step back. He had thought that would be enough to get him inside, and momentarily regretted not asking Trooper Vandien to cause a distraction for him. It was too late now, though – he would have to improvise. He smiled, hoping it looked relaxed and not desperate.

‘You know full well that if I said I’d get the lord commissar’s reports I can’t go back to him now without them,’ he said, looking back and forth

between them. The two Scions looked at each other. Nevin could tell they were unsure, but he was still a superior officer and unlike the Catachans, the Rhoin respected that.

‘Be quick,’ the first guard said. The second guard cleared his path.

‘Thank you. The Emperor protects,’ Nevin said and slipped past them. He closed the door behind himself and immediately got to work. As usual the desk was piled with papers, and Nevin set about rifling through them. There were all manner of reports from across Verdine II, high command and systems beyond. Nevin found several he had written himself, and wondered if they had even been read. He was several long minutes into the search when the door opened behind him.

‘What’s taking so long?’ one of the guards asked.

Nevin made a sweeping gesture to the paper-covered desk. ‘Can you not tell there is a lot here for me to look through?’

‘Shall I help you?’ the guard asked.

‘That won’t be necessary, trooper. Please return to your post.’

The guard closed the door. Nevin let out a long breath he hadn’t realised he was holding. His hands were shaking and he rested them on the desk to steady them before finishing flicking through the papers. He found nothing of use. With a great surge of courage he moved around the desk and started opening drawers. He found more reports filed away, stationery items, notepads, small devotional trinkets, but still nothing of use. He was starting to feel relief that Vargass may have been wrong as he went into the bottom drawer.

More papers. He flicked through them. Most were several years old, and Nevin wondered why the lord commissar even kept them. He pulled the drawer out as far as it would go in case something was lurking at the back, but the drawer came too far. He swore as it came off its runners, pulling itself out of the loose grip Nevin had on the handle and falling to the ground with a clatter. Papers spilled out over the floor. Nevin was panicking. He’d broken it. He was going to be found out now, for sure. He picked the drawer up, turned it over and was about to try to put it back on its runners when he noticed the bottom was crooked. Nevin realised there was something beneath it. Cautiously he prised the false bottom out of the drawer and found a small black folder. His heart sank. Some instinct told him this was exactly what he was looking for and had hoped not to find.

Nevin spared a glance at the door, then pulled the folder out and opened it up. At first he wasn't sure what he was reading. Losing himself for a moment, Nevin stood up and laid out the contents on the desk. There was a personal correspondence from Lord General von Barthus thanking the lord commissar for a favour, a sheaf of papers that looked to Nevin like transfer orders and behind those, just as Captain Vargass had expected, confirmation of non-delivery of the resupply shipment, signed by Lord Commissar Stone.

He read over them several times, trying to take everything in and make sense of it in his head. He got so engrossed that he forgot about the time.

'Commissar Nevin, what are you doing in my office?'

Nevin froze. How had he been so careless? He slowly looked up into the lord commissar's fiery golden eye. He was lost for words. A primal part of him screamed for him to run, but the lord commissar was blocking the door.

Then something occurred to him. Running was the response of the guilty or cowardly. In this case he was not the former, and he refused to be the latter any more. He stood straight and jammed a finger down on the papers.

'What are these?'

'Not any of your business,' Stone said, moving around the desk. Nevin snatched up the papers, scrunching them in his hand, then retreated until the two of them had almost swapped places.

'You knew that the weapons the regiment needed were not going to arrive. Why did you not let anyone know?'

'Give me those,' Stone said angrily, holding out his hand.

A reflex deeply ingrained in Nevin's mind almost acquiesced. This was insubordination, and he had to consciously fight to maintain his resolve.

'Please answer my question, sir.'

Stone slowly retracted his hand with a frown. 'It was a Departmento Munitorum matter,' he said, 'it was out of my command.'

'Was it? Or were you doing a favour for a lord general so you could get yourself transferred away from the regiment?'

'I don't see how my career aspirations are relevant,' said Stone as he sat down.

Nevin slammed his hands down on the edge of the desk. 'Because people

are dying. Your regiment is dying because you sold them out. You knew, didn't you? You knew weapons were being supplied to the labourers – that's why you wanted to handle the investigation yourself. That's why you kept it quiet.'

Stone reached behind his chair and in a flash Nevin found himself staring down the barrel of a snub-nosed autopistol. 'Sit. Down,' Stone said. The indignant anger that had taken hold of Nevin drained away and he fumbled for a chair, unable to look away from the weapon pointed at him.

Nevin wasn't sure what he was expecting Stone to do next, but it wasn't what he did. The lord commissar cocked his head to the left, and Nevin thought he saw the barest hint of a wry smile tug at the corner of his mouth. There was a long, awkward pause. Nevin couldn't bear it and opened his mouth, but Stone held up a finger to silence him. He then reached into his pocket and removed a small black box. He placed it purposefully on the table then tapped it with his finger, and Nevin saw a little green light start to blink. The walls went blurry, as if Nevin were looking at them through a heat haze. His skin prickled.

'Now we can speak more privately,' said Stone. There was a tinge of something in his voice that Nevin struggled to place. Was it warmth?

Stone got up and stepped around the desk. He perched on its edge within arm's reach of Nevin. He held the pistol loosely across his stomach, still pointed at the young commissar.

'I could kill you now. It wouldn't be too hard. No one would ask too many questions. But you've impressed me, Jasper. I think there is a better way to handle this situation,' he said. 'In your time with this regiment I have had my concerns. You haven't displayed the poise or strength of character I usually expect from even a newly appointed commissar. Now, though, you are willing to challenge a superior officer you suspect of corruption. You've proven yourself very perceptive. Sneaking in here and lying to my guards was a little underhanded, but it shows initiative, boldness. All traits I require in a protégé.'

'You honour me, sir.'

'No need for such modesty, Jasper. You're a fine young man.'

'Th-thank you, sir.' Nevin couldn't help feeling such words would have meant more to him days earlier, but surprised himself as he realised he was still seeking Stone's validation. 'That means a great deal to me

coming from you.'

Stone nodded thoughtfully. 'I remember you, you know,' he said.

'How do you mean, sir?' Nevin asked, puzzled.

'From Grundus Five, at the schola.'

'You do?' Jasper's heart soared. He couldn't hide the genuine smile on his face.

'Oh yes. You were always in the front row. Always bright-eyed and attentive.'

'You were an inspiration.'

Stone smiled and slowly shook his head, then placed his free hand on Jasper's shoulder. 'No, it was you who were an inspiration to me. Those long months of recovery were hard for me. Being able to speak with you boys, knowing I was helping to mould the next generation of fine young commissars, that I was still serving His will – that kept me going. I was very happy to see that it was a graduate of Grundus Five that been assigned to my regiment.'

Jasper was speechless. He was elated.

Stone continued, 'I believe you and I can be a very effective team. Together we could have very comfortable careers. How does that sound to you, Jasper?'

'I'm not sure I understand what you mean, sir,' said Jasper.

'It is important to have friends, and the best type of friends are powerful ones. We should be friends, and what better time to begin than now? In your perceptiveness you are already aware that there is a little more going on than meets the eye. You are right. I did sign away the weapons shipment as a favour to Lord General von Barthus. You see, the lord general is close to retirement and he is looking to set himself up a comfortable little nest egg, off the books. To do so he's arranged to have some surplus supplies sold off to a lucrative third party. In a few cases he needed a little hand to ensure swift and simple administration. In return, the lord general has granted me a favour. A transfer to a more civilised regiment.'

'Why do you wish to leave the Catachans? They are one of the most renowned regiments in the Imperium. Their history in battle is exemplary and stretches back millennia. It is an honour to serve beside them,' Jasper said.

Stone scoffed. ‘They are not real soldiers. They have no discipline. No respect for authority. They are savages, barely better than the orks that took my eye, and – dare I say – no better than our enemies here. Given a chance they would see us both dead.’

‘Have there been attempts on your life?’ Jasper asked in disbelief.

‘Several. That is why I maintain my own retinue. Catachans cannot be trusted.’

Jasper looked to the door as if it represented the hundreds of Catachan soldiers outside in the outpost. He thought of Captain Vargass. He imagined her driving that giant knife through his chest. It felt plausible. He shook the thought away and looked back to Stone.

‘Interference in Departmento Munitorum affairs is an act of gross misconduct, punishable by court martial, even for a lord general. We were taught that at the schola.’

Stone sighed wistfully. ‘The schola progenium teaches a very rose-tinted view on war. It’s how we would like things to be, but in the face of the enemy we do as needs must. We need to be flexible in order to serve the Emperor to the best of our abilities. Have I ever told you about the war on Maesa VI?’

‘No,’ said Jasper. Stone had never shared anything with him beyond orders, before today.

‘Maesa VI is a hive world. When the regiment was posted there it was close to being overrun by the Archenemy. What had begun as a cult uprising had been reinforced by Heretic Astartes. We were one of the regiments sent to drive them out. I questioned the decision to assign a regiment of specialised jungle fighters to an urban warzone, but they didn’t want us on the front line. We were to cover the flanks of the armoured regiments, fight skirmishes in the ruins. It was a fitting assignment but in the face of heavily armoured foes the regiment was still deployed with little more than lasguns and flammers. Weapons that the enemy had proven themselves all but immune to. We were destined for slaughter. I made the decision to change that. I was able to come by several crates of plasma weapons from a most reputable trader who had been trapped in orbit. It was entirely against Departmento Munitorum regulations, but with those weapons we accounted for many of the vile heretics. The regiment was noted for its effectiveness and the war was

won. Without them, who knows what could have been? So you see, it is necessary for us to bend the rules sometimes. Is it not better to do so and serve the Emperor than not to and to fail Him?’

‘I’m not sure I understand how this serves the Emperor,’ said Nevin hesitantly.

‘It serves the lord general. He is my superior, and as such speaks to me with the Emperor’s authority. Likewise, as I speak to you I speak with His authority, and when you speak to the men under your own command, you speak with His authority also. Do you understand?’

‘I do,’ said Jasper, although he wasn’t sure he entirely believed in the sentiment.

‘Good. Yet despite this the Catachans still show us no respect. With Lord General von Barthus’ help, however, I will see us transferred to one of the regiments stationed at sector command. They have true soldiers there – Mordians, Ventrillians and many more of the Rhoin. They have always treated you well, have they not?’

‘They have, sir. They are fine warriors.’

‘They are indeed. I would not trust them with my life otherwise. You could lead them also. Would you like that?’

Jasper’s chest swelled at the thought. ‘I would like that very much.’

‘I am happy to hear that,’ Stone said and got to his feet. He walked back around to the far side of his desk and opened another drawer. The autopistol was still aimed at Nevin.

‘I have a gift for you,’ he said and reached inside. What he withdrew startled and amazed Jasper. It was a plasma pistol, simple in its design but finely made in a matt-grey casing. A small bronze aquila hung from the grip. Stone offered it to Jasper across the desk.

‘This is the weapon I used on Maesa. Most of them I saw turned in to the Munitorum for redistribution, but this one I kept. It served me well, and now I pass it on to you. It is a much more fitting sidearm for a commissar than the rotting laspistol that fat old quartermaster assigned you, don’t you think?’

Jasper reached for the weapon tentatively and picked it up as if it were a fragile relic. He wrapped his hand around the grip. It felt comfortable in his palm, its weight reassuring.

‘Thank you,’ he said.

‘It is my pleasure,’ Stone said and sat down in his usual seat. ‘Then we have an agreement.’

It wasn’t phrased as a question, and Nevin was deeply aware that he was still being held at gunpoint.

‘We keep the lord general’s arrangements quiet a little longer, and soon we see ourselves away from this place, and begin a much more favourable phase of both of our careers.’

The conversation had left a knot in Nevin’s stomach. It felt dishonest. Who was he to argue, though? Nevin realised he knew very little of life outside the schola. Lord Commissar Stone had decades of experience of warfare. He felt betrayed still, but he put it down to his own naivety and chastised himself for it. The way forward seemed clear.

‘Yes, sir. We have an agreement,’ he said.

‘Good. Then perhaps you should hand me back those papers now.’

Jasper had almost forgotten he was still holding them. He stood up, laying down the plasma pistol so he could use both hands to try to flatten out the crumpled parchment again before handing them back. ‘Sir, would it not be wise to destroy these?’

‘No,’ said Stone, taking the papers and returning them to the folder and finally lowering his autopistol, ‘these are of the greatest importance still.’

‘How so?’

‘Simple. If von Barthus tries to renege on our deal I will use them to expose his entire scheme and ruin the old fool.’

Jasper didn’t know what to say. Despite all of Stone’s justification something about the situation still didn’t sit right in his gut. He tried not to think about it. Stone knew better than he did. This was what the real galaxy was like. Who was he to argue? Besides, he was going to be Lord Commissar Stone’s protégé. In the past five minutes he had been promised everything he had ever wanted from life. He would get past his doubts in time, he was sure.

‘Will that be all, sir?’

‘Yes, Commissar Nevin. Return to your duties,’ Stone said dismissively.

The attack came as night fell the following day. Nevin had been about to go to sleep when the klaxons started. Though he’d not heard them before, he knew what they meant, and adrenaline immediately flooded into his

system. He got up and dressed himself, picked up his laspistol from a small side table then knelt down and drew a small wooden box from under his cot. He had decided to keep the plasma pistol hidden for now. It would only raise difficult questions if he was seen with it, but he didn't want to go into a fight without it. Aside from the weapon's own strength, it made him feel stronger just to carry it. He hoped that would be enough. He tucked it into a holster strapped across the small of his back, hidden by his coat. With that he stood up, whispered a short litany of protection and headed outside.

By the time he reached the courtyard the battle was raging. The air was filled with sounds of las-fire and shouting. Bright beams flashed through the air above him, casting dizzying shadows in all directions. He had to find Captain Vargass. The fighting was fiercest around the northern gate. He headed there.

On the barricades Captain Vargass was leading by example. She knelt within the line of Catachan soldiers, lascarbine braced to her shoulder and firing. The rebel labourers were firing from the treeline. Though their weapons were strong their aim was poor, most shots flying high overhead. It was hard to tell what effect the Catachan response was having.

Nevin knelt down beside Vargass. 'This doesn't seem like a very determined assault,' he said, looking over the barricade and firing his laspistol.

'It's not. They know they can't attack us directly so they're trying to make us chase them into the forest.'

'Perhaps we should. Is it not your speciality?' Nevin asked.

'If we were properly armed, yes, but I'm not going to risk running into an ambush with only knives and boots to fight back with,' Vargass said. She dropped down under the rim of the barricade to reload her carbine.

Nevin felt responsible for the regiment's situation now, in a way he hadn't before. He felt guilty and part of him wanted to confess everything to Vargass right now. He couldn't, though. He had made an agreement with Stone and he was going to stick to it.

'Captain, do you hear that?' asked Vandien, the other side of Vargass.

Nevin tried to listen for something, but all he could hear was the whip-crack of las-fire.

'It sounds like an engine,' said Vargass.

‘I agree,’ said Vandien, ‘West?’

‘West,’ Vargass nodded. ‘Keep firing! Hold them back!’ she ordered. ‘My squad, with me.’

The command group gathered together and followed Captain Vargass as she skirted around the barricade towards the western gate. Though most of the Catachan force had been deployed to the north there were three squads still at the west gate. They looked anxious, sitting idle while their comrades were fighting.

‘Do you see anything?’ Vargass asked a sergeant. Nevin had recently learned the man’s name was Foley. The sergeant had shared a cup of hot recaff with him as Nevin had walked the walls late two nights ago. Nevin liked him.

‘No, sir. All quiet, except for that engine sound,’ said Foley.

Then he was gone. A shot reached out from the darkness and struck him, throwing him back off the wall.

‘Sniper!’ Vargass shouted a warning and everyone ducked low. Some were too slow, and Nevin saw more troopers along the line get hit. The Catachans returned fire, shooting blindly into the treeline. More long-las shots snapped back. From their vantage points harnessed high in the trees, the rebel shooters were able to negate much of the protection offered by the barricade, and the Catachans hunkered lower with each shot.

‘Vandien, get sniper support over here,’ Vargass ordered and her adjutant started working with his vox-set. Despite the shooting Nevin realised he could finally hear the engine noise the Catachans had been talking about. He peered over the edge and spotted the source. It was a logging truck, near fifty feet long with twelve wheels. It came careening out of the forest as fast as Nevin imagined such a vehicle could move. It was heading straight for the gate, laden with demo charges.

‘Captain, look,’ said Nevin, but Vargass had already seen it.

‘Stop the hauler!’ she ordered. Immediately the Catachan fire turned on the truck. Those shots that struck its body did no more than leave blackened marks. A volley went through the windscreen and killed the driver, but the truck kept going.

‘They weren’t trying to draw us out, captain. It was a diversion,’ said Nevin.

‘Throne, do you think so?’ Vargass snapped back. She took a shot that put

a hole in one of the truck's tyres. It burst and sent the hauler flailing. It jackknifed. At the speed it was going, the sudden change of direction was too much. The truck toppled over onto its side but its momentum pushed it forwards, ploughing a deep furrow as it skidded towards the gate. Nevin could tell it wouldn't stop in time.

'Fall back! Off the wall! Fall back!' Vargass was shouting, ahead of him as usual. The Catachans made for the ladders. More were struck by sniper fire as they broke cover and were thrown off the barricade to the ground below. Nevin reached a ladder and hurried down. He slipped on the bottom rung and fell. He scrambled to his feet, only narrowly getting out of the way before the soldier behind would have landed on top of him.

'Make for the secondary line,' Nevin ordered, gesturing to a ramshackle line of sandbags, munitions crates and parked troop transports some thirty feet back from the outer walls. Sniper fire still lanced down into the courtyard. More soldiers were shot in the back as they ran for cover.

Nevin sprinted until his lungs burned and his legs went soft, expecting each step to be his last.

He dived over the secondary barricade and pushed himself back tight against it. He looked back and saw the last of the troopers reach the ground and start running. Captain Vargass was among them.

There was a loud reverberating bang as the hauler truck hit the gate. Heat and light, noise and pure concussive force struck the Catachan line. Cargo trucks and supply haulers rocked on their suspension. A truck to Nevin's left rolled over, crushing a trio of soldiers who had been sheltered behind it. A fireball soared into the sky like a miniature star, and for a second, night turned to day. Nevin was blinded and all he could hear was a single, constant, high-pitched whine. He rubbed his eyes, and slowly the world began to reappear.

He looked back. A wide, fire-rimmed hole was now all that remained of the gate. In the wake of the explosion, burning Catachan bodies were strewn across the ground. An unlucky few were still moving. Nevin panicked. He couldn't see Captain Vargass. He heard motors, loud, revving maniacally. Through the smoke and flames, monsters advanced towards him.

Ogryns. The labour force had always utilised the hulking abhumans for their strength, for everything from moving vast fallen trees to wielding the

man-sized motorised felling-saws required to bring down the colossoaks. Tools these ogryns now bore as weapons into battle.

The Catachans that had reached the second line started shooting. It sounded distant to Nevin, though he took it as a good sign that his hearing was slowly recovering. Then, as he heard the screams of the dying, he wished it hadn't. A Catachan trooper, thrown to the ground by the blast, rolled onto his back and raised his weapon. He fired defiantly into the hulking beast that loomed over him, though if the ogryn registered pain it did not show it. It drove its felling-saw down through the man's chest. His agonised cries mixed with the sounds of shredding flesh and shattering bone. Nevin raised his laspistol. The ogryns were big, and lumbered with brutal confidence. Even in the dark, obscured by smoke, they were difficult to miss.

Nevin emptied his powercell into the nearest beast. Shots struck it in the chest, shoulder and neck. The ogryn swatted at the impacts as if it were being pestered by insects. The rest of the Catachan fire was equally ineffectual. A gout of flame lanced out from the line and enveloped an ogryn. It let out a deep roar of pain as the fire engulfed it, but the flames soon sputtered and died. The ogryn stood, blackened but unbroken, and drove its felling-saw into another prone soldier.

'Commissar, look!'

Nevin became aware of Trooper Vandien to his right, pointing through the smoke. Nevin had to squint to see what he was looking for, then he saw it: the unmistakable form of Captain Vargass. She lay face down in the dirt, deathly still.

'That's Viper. We have to get to her!' Vandien yelled. He fixed his bayonet and leapt over the sandbags they were hidden behind.

'Get back in cover, trooper! That's an order!'

'Frag you, hangman, she's still alive!' Vandien shouted back.

Vargass was dead, or if she wasn't she soon would be. The ogryns seemed to be taking pleasure in hacking apart the bodies of those thrown down by the blast. Vargass' death made Nevin's life easier, but her blood was on his hands. He wouldn't let her be mutilated by these monsters now as well. He reloaded his laspistol and ineffectually emptied it again. He noticed the weight of fire beside his own was lessening, and looked along the line. One by one he saw Catachan soldiers throw their corroded lasguns to the

ground and draw their knives.

‘For the captain! Charge!’ someone ordered, and with a raucous cry the Catachans attacked.

Jasper Nevin was a commissar. Right now he felt like a poor one, but a day earlier he had resolved not to be a coward any longer. Vargass’ death already hung over him. He wouldn’t leave these men to die with her. Not in a mess he was now complicit in. He owed them that much.

‘Emperor preserve me,’ he said to himself, and joined the charge.

An ogryn was closing on Vargass, felling-saw growling. It was clear to Nevin that his laspistol was useless now. He reached back beneath his storm coat, drew the plasma pistol and raised it. Consequences be damned.

The tutors at the schola progenium had given him a theoretical knowledge of plasma weaponry – that it should be used sparingly, as overuse could lead to fatal malfunction. There was no time for that now. Nevin fired. Superheated plasma, burning blue, struck the nearest ogryn in the chest, searing a deep gouge from its flesh. It looked up, seemingly in disbelief, as a second and third shot hit it, each sloughing off chunks of burning muscle. Nevin felt the weapon growing warm in his hand. Each shot was accompanied by a vented blast of hot air as the pistol fought to cool itself. They washed over his face, making his brow prickle with sweat.

He kept firing. The fourth shot put the ogryn down, but more came on. His fifth shot hit the felling-saw of the next attacker and blew it apart. The still-spinning blade took off its owner’s hand. Nevin put three more shots into it to be sure. The pistol was almost too hot to hold. Nevin felt the skin of his palm and fingers blistering. He gritted his teeth and mumbled litanies of resilience to himself. He had drawn the ogryns’ attention now. The next one lowered its shoulder and charged him, roaring. It was the largest he had seen yet. It wore a bright yellow worksuit with the sleeves torn off, and a rebreather mask covered its face. Nevin planted his feet and aimed the pistol but his hands were shaking. He tried to take a deep breath but all that came were ragged gasps. He was out of time.

He fired. It was a poor shot, glancing off the ogryn’s arm, but with such a weapon it was enough to destroy the thing’s bicep. It howled and dropped its felling-saw but came on regardless. Nevin dived aside as the ogryn was about to crash into him. It swung out with the back of its good hand. It

caught him with a glancing blow that swatted Nevin out of the air and sent him flying. He landed heavily, the wind knocked out of him, and rolled over in the mud until coming to a halt. Nevin noticed he had released his grip but the plasma pistol remained attached to him, the flesh of his palm now burned to the grip. It was agony. He tried to breathe through it and compose himself, but every inhalation sent stabbing pains through his chest. He became aware of the ogryn standing over him. It lowered itself down to one knee beside him. It raised its fist.

‘Emperor, forgive me my weakness and welcome me into your eternal kingdom,’ he prayed as he awaited the blow that would crush his skull.

It never came. Before the fist could fall, a blade appeared, lashing out over the ogryn’s shoulder. It buried itself in the beast’s throat and pulled. Hot blood sprayed from the wide wound and covered Nevin’s head and face. Mud splattered him as the ogryn fell on its face. Nevin wiped his eyes with the sleeves of his storm coat.

Knelt on the fallen ogryn’s back was Viper Vargass. Her eyes spoke of a place between determination and madness. Her long knife was dripping with blood. She stood up, clearly favouring one leg, and Nevin could see her thigh was bleeding, yet still she stood tall. She reached down and Nevin expected her to grab him by the scruff of his coat, but she stopped short and waited.

‘On your feet, commissar,’ she said.

Nevin took the offered hand and Vargass helped him stand. ‘Thank you,’ he said.

‘The Emperor protects,’ Vargass said.

As Nevin straightened he took in the situation. They had killed several of the ogryns but there were yet more, and human rebels had moved in behind them with lasguns and flammers. The skilled Catachan soldiers were cutting down every labourer that came within a knife’s reach, but Nevin knew it would not be enough. More were pouring through the breached wall and soon the base would be overwhelmed.

‘It’s been a blessing to have fought beside you, captain,’ he said to Vargass.

Vargass opened her mouth to respond, but those words would never come. A new sound added to the cacophony of battle. Reinforcements, no doubt redirected from the northern barricade, charged into the fray.

Sharpshooters among them fired into the treeline, bringing down the effective rebel snipers. The Rhoin Cobras came with them, moving with speed and purpose. Controlled bursts of pinpoint hotshot las-fire drove back the rebel infantry. Grenade launchers lobbed their explosive payloads into the breach, blasting ogryns apart. Lord Commissar Stone led them, his pistol barking, a powered rapier sparking in his hand. His face was stern and unyielding and he looked every inch the hero Nevin had always believed him to be.

The counter-attack broke the rebel momentum, and they fled. Undisciplined, it soon devolved into a rout and the labourers were washed away, leaving the bodies of fallen Catachans in their wake. Nevin looked around them. They had fought valiantly through a situation they never should have been in and suffered a fate they didn't deserve. He was complicit in that now. The thought shamed him.

'Pursue them! I want prisoners,' Stone ordered, sending Scions after the fleeing rebels. He was clean and unhurt. He barely looked like he had broken a sweat. By comparison, Nevin and Vargass were both bleeding, struggling to stand or even draw breath. All because Lord Commissar Stone had conspired against them, giving their enemy the weapons they needed to kill the Emperor's loyal soldiers. He had made Nevin his co-conspirator, and Jasper worried his soul would forever be tarnished by it.

His choice was made.

'It seems I arrived just in time,' said Stone.

'It was him,' said Nevin, turning towards Vargass and keeping his voice low. Then Nevin turned on Stone and raised his arm. The pistol, burned to his hand, aimed at Stone's chest.

The weapons of the Scions around Stone snapped up.

'Drop the weapon!' the Tempestor barked.

'I cannot,' Nevin said plainly. 'Lord Commissar Stone, by the authority of the Officio Prefectus I charge you with the crimes of smuggling, of conspiracy to arm the enemies of the Imperium, and through those actions I charge you with the deaths of scores of Imperial soldiers. How do you plead?'

Stone was silent for a moment, then he began to laugh and gestured for his bodyguards to lower their weapons. It caught Nevin off guard and his resolve threatened to waver.

‘Oh my, Commissar Nevin. Are there no depths to which you will not sink?’

Nevin frowned, but kept his weapon raised.

‘I know everything, Commissar Nevin. It is safe to say I was already disappointed to learn of your betrayal of this regiment, but to turn on me when I have been nothing but a mentor to you. You truly are a callous boy.’

Nevin couldn’t believe the words he was hearing. He looked at Vargass beside him. ‘He’s lying,’ he said, desperation in his voice. ‘He admitted it to me, everything.’

Vargass just looked at him, her face impassive.

‘Do you have any evidence to back your accusations?’ Stone asked.

Nevin looked back to him. ‘You know I don’t. You saw to that.’

‘More empty words. Here you stand, a fine relic of a weapon in your hand, while the soldiers you betrayed fight on with what little they can salvage. The sign of one making illicit deals with the Departamento Munitorum if ever I’ve seen one.’

‘You gave this to me!’ said Nevin, then turned to Vargass. ‘He gave it to me.’

‘I would never trust such a weapon to your incapable hands,’ Stone sneered. ‘Not that I need prove myself any further, but I was holding on to this,’ Stone said, sheathing his sword and reaching inside his coat. He produced a folded sheet of parchment and handed it to a Scion to his left. The Scion crossed the ground between them and handed the paper to Captain Vargass. She shook it open and Nevin watched her eyes scan back and forth as she read it. When she finished she looked up at him.

‘Confirmation from the Munitorum. It says you authorised the weapons redistribution,’ she said.

The full weight of Stone’s betrayal hit Nevin like a tank. Stone had had the papers forged. He had brought them onto the battlefield. This was not a response to Nevin’s accusation. This was a plan. It had been all along.

‘That’s just the start. The trail was easy to follow. With the help of a conspirator in the Departamento Munitorum, Commissar Nevin sold those weapons to a rogue trader in exchange for passage off-world. You were going to desert us, weren’t you, Nevin?’

Nevin kept looking at Vargass, his eyes pleading. ‘He’s lying, I swear by the Golden Throne. That’s a forgery,’ he said, nodding at the paper in

Vargass' hands.

'You really are not much of a commissar, are you, Nevin?' Stone said mockingly.

Vargass looked at Stone, then back at Nevin. 'He's right, you're not. You can't trust commissars.'

She dropped the paper in her hand and snapped off a signal. One of few Nevin had learned. It was the order to eliminate a target.

He closed his eyes and waited to die. Lascarbines and hotshot lasguns fired. Nevin felt nothing. He opened his eyes surprised to find he was still alive. He saw the Catachans swarm the Scions, and watched as dulled steel blades slid between carapace armour plates.

'Traitors!' Stone barked and fired his pistol at Vargass, but her own knife was already flying, spinning in the air towards him. It struck his hand as he pulled the trigger. The shot flew wide as the weapon fell to the ground. Stone tried to draw his rapier.

Nevin took aim at Stone, turned his back on everything he had thought he wanted from his life, and shot the lord commissar. Superheated plasma blew a gaping bloody hole in Stone's chest. He wheezed and fell back. Nevin and Vargass shared a silent look of understanding, then walked to the body of the fallen lord commissar.

'Emperor... damn you... Catachan savages,' Stone said, spluttering as he coughed up blood. 'Damn you to the warp and burn for eternity.'

Nevin raised his hand, the plasma pistol still welded to his palm. It was a part of him now. It had cooled once again, and purred softly in his hand. He aimed it at Stone's head. In Nevin's mind, the man's rank of lord commissar faded away. In the place of his lifelong hero was now just a small man called Albrec.

'You are a commissar! This is mutiny! Do your duty!' he barked, but Albrec's words no longer had power over Commissar Nevin.

Nevin looked at Captain Vargass, then back down at Albrec.

'This is my duty,' he said, and fired.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Matt Smith** is one of Black Library's newest authors, and the Warhammer 40,000 short story 'In Service Eternal' is his first. He is based in Norwich and spends his spare time working on his Raven Guard army and training in martial arts.

An extract from *Ciaphas Cain: Choose Your Enemies*.



The thing I've always found most annoying about the eldar, apart from their psychotic sadism and their almost visible aura of patronising smugness, is their habit of popping up where you least expect them. Like the ones who came charging out of the depths of the mine workings on Drechia, for instance, laying down a lethal spread of razor-edged discs from their small-arms as they came. Within seconds, half the troopers with me were down, either diced so thoroughly the burial party was going to need buckets to collect them in, or incapacitated beyond the point of any form of retaliation apart from harsh language.

Not wishing their sacrifice to have been in vain, I lost no time in diving for cover behind a comfortingly solid-seeming outcrop of rock. Once there, I snapped off a couple of shots from my laspistol in the general direction of the enemy, trying to ignore the little sparks left by ricocheting shuriken which seemed far too close to my nose for comfort while I did so.

'Where in the warp did they come from?' Lieutenant Grifen snarled, more rhetorically than because she really expected an answer.

'Who cares? They're dying right here,' Magot, her platoon sergeant and closest friend, returned, lobbing a frag grenade at the first group of Guardians to have broken cover as she spoke. It burst in the middle of them, and the two closest promptly went down, crimson trickles leaking through the newly punched rents in their green-and-purple armour.

The surviving members of Grifen's command squad were already returning fire with their lasguns, picking off the rest of the xenos who'd been incautious enough to attempt to try following up their initial advantage by closing to chainsword distance. A big mistake if you wanted my opinion, which I doubted the pointy-ears did; they'd obviously counted

on the element of surprise to overwhelm us completely, before charging home against dazed and disorientated soldiers in no fit state to defend themselves. Which might well have worked against the local militia rabble who'd been trying to contain their raids up until now, but unfortunately for them, what they got instead was battle-hardened Imperial Guard veterans who dived for cover the moment the shooting started, and immediately began giving as good as they got. But that was the 597th for you; I'd been fighting alongside them for the last couple of decades, and seen them take on pretty much anything the galaxy had to throw at us. A handful of overconfident eldar would hardly make them break sweat.

Grifen tapped her comm-bead. 'Second and fifth squads, circle back. We're under fire,' she voxed, before turning to me for approval. 'With any luck they'll catch them from behind, and we can take out the lot between us.'

'Good thinking, lieutenant,' I said, keeping my voice conversational with the ease of a lifetime's practice at concealing visible signs of panic. She hadn't been an officer for long, and I suspected she was still harbouring doubts about her ability to manage a whole platoon instead of a single squad. But the strategy seemed perfectly sound to me, if I remembered the layout of the tunnels around here correctly. 'But right now I'm wondering how they got here in the first place.'

And, more importantly, whether there were any more where these ones had come from. Needless to say I'd never have been anywhere near the place if I'd thought there was a chance of running into serious opposition, which was why I'd decided to accompany Grifen's platoon that day: if anyone asked, I was there to see how she was getting on with her new command and provide any help she might need in adjusting to her greater responsibilities. In actual fact it was because I'd got heartily tired of the eldar's fondness for sudden aerial attacks, which had seen me dodging strafing runs by the one-man speeders our troopers referred to as jetbikes, despite the obvious lack of either jets or wheels, almost from the moment of our arrival. Not to mention the aircraft, which – though mercifully few – we lacked sufficient Hydras to defend against effectively, and which accordingly were left free to maraud almost at will. Since aerial assets were strikingly ineffective down holes in the ground I'd jumped at the chance to tag along with the group sent to check the tunnels for any sign of

enemy infiltration, only to find that, not for the first time, I'd become the butt of one of the Emperor's little jokes.

'There's nothing on the auspex,' Magot said, with a glance at the unit she'd pulled from one of her webbing pouches, but that hardly came as a surprise. With all the ore, and the rock it was embedded in, surrounding us, its range would be limited at best. 'We'll have to do this the hard way.' Which tended to be her preferred option in any case. She gestured towards the tunnel mouth in front of us. 'Get in there and flush them out.'

'If there are any left down there to flush,' I said, already certain that there would be. In my experience, enemies only came in two quantities: too many and far too many.

And far too many was what we'd been facing here for more than a month.

The eldar had first appeared on Drechia a couple of years ago, in relatively small numbers to begin with, grabbing a consignment of freshly dug merconium before vanishing as suddenly as they'd arrived. The planetary defence force was predictably slow and ineffectual in their response to the initial incursion, with the inevitable result that the raiders returned in ever increasing numbers. The planetary governor had believed the assurances of whichever members of her extended family were in charge of the local defence forces that they were able to cope, despite their complete lack of understanding of military matters, with the inevitable result that, by the time the Imperial Guard were called in to clean up the mess, the xenos were rampaging about the place pretty much as they pleased.

Which meant that the 597th and I had been diverted from our planned return to Coronus, and landed with the unenviable task of attempting to put a bit of backbone into the defence of the place. A proper task force would have been a far better option, but with the tyranids encroaching ever deeper into the gulf, the resources required to assemble one in a hurry simply weren't available, and until they were we'd just have to do the best we could on our own.

I'd complained about it, of course, not expecting anyone to take a blind bit of notice, and – to my complete lack of surprise – no one had; one of the definite downsides of my absurdly inflated reputation was the average Munitorum flunkey's apparently unshakable belief that the mere fact of my presence would guarantee victory whatever the circumstances. So,

with the orders confirmed, there was nothing else for it but to get on with the job and try to keep my head down as usual.

‘It’s not going to be easy,’ I said as the door closed behind the Administratum drone, who’d departed with almost unseemly haste after delivering the briefing documents, which, as usual, I hadn’t the slightest intention of bothering to read. I glanced through the armourcrys viewport along the length of the void station’s docking arm, to where our troop ship, the encouragingly named *Indestructible IV*, was partially visible behind the bulk of an Armageddon-class battle cruiser which – judging by the rents in its hull plating – had recently been on the wrong end of a necron lightning arc. ‘We’ve got an entire planet to protect, and just one regiment to do it with.’

‘Technically, it’s not really a planet,’ Major Broklaw said, glancing up from one of the data-slates the scribe had left, already getting on with the job of ploughing through the verbiage so Colonel Kasteen and I could benefit from his much more succinct and useful summary – one of the habits which made him such an effective executive officer. ‘It’s a large moon. One of a dozen inhabited ones, orbiting an isolated gas giant.’

‘So we’ll be tunnel fighting,’ I said, feeling a cautious surge of optimism. For an old underhiver like me, that was pretty much as good as it got, if you ignored the ‘murderous xenos trying to kill you’ part. An environment I felt completely at home in, knew better than the enemy, and dark enough to find somewhere to hide without anyone noticing if things went seriously ploid-shaped.

Broklaw shook his head. ‘It’s a really big gas giant. More of a protostar, really.’

‘The moons are warm, then?’ Kasteen picked up another of the data-slates, and called up a pict of the surface of Drechia. My heart contracted, along with my stomach.

‘Warm enough for us,’ Broklaw said happily, gazing at the snowfields and glaciers as though they were a gift from the Emperor. Which, for a Valhallan, they probably were. ‘Drechia’s an iceworld.’

‘That’ll make a change,’ Kasteen said happily. These days her red hair had a dusting of white in it, despite a juvenat treatment or two (which, I’m bound to say, was equally true of Broklaw and myself, except that his was still predominantly black, and mine the same nondescript hue it had

always been beneath the speckling), but the cheery prospect of mucking about in bone-freezing temperatures which could kill an unprotected man in a matter of moments made her look a decade or two younger at once. ‘And the troopers will be happy.’

‘That they will,’ I agreed, taking a closer look at the data-slate despite myself. As I’d expected, the Adeptus Mechanicus had been busy in the first few centuries of colonisation, thickening the atmosphere and warming it up from unliveable to merely lethal, not just on Drechia, but on many of the other local bodies too. ‘What about the rest of the system?’

‘Nothing we need to worry about,’ Broklaw assured us. ‘The protostar and its satellites are independent of the rest of it. They have their own governor, Administratum and infrastructure.’

I skimmed through the relevant pages, my eyes and synapses ricocheting from the dense columns of population and tithing statistics like a bullet from an ogryn’s skull, and nodded as if I’d grasped the fundamentals as quickly as he had. ‘Makes sense,’ I said. ‘It’s just like a miniature solar system on its own, stuck out near the halo. Running things from Ironfound would be a logistical nightmare.’

‘That it would,’ Broklaw agreed, calling up a diagram of the system as a whole. The hive world around which everything else orbited (administratively speaking) was less than a quarter of the way out from the star at the centre of things, the vast majority of inhabited worlds, moons and asteroids petering out no more than an equal distance beyond that; only a few isolated void stations or chunks of worthless rock punctuated the vast gulf between their outliers and the protostar, which, for all practical purposes, might just as well have been in another system entirely. ‘Even a vox transmission would take a couple of hours to get there, let alone ships.’

I nodded. ‘Month or more, probably,’ I said, mindful of my own long coast into Perlia aboard a saviour pod from a similar distance out, some thirty years before. Which was why we were being sent straight there; the rest of the Ironfound System was probably blissfully unaware of the eldar raiders harassing their distant neighbours, and unwilling to help against them even if they weren’t for fear of attracting the xenos’ attention. We could be at least that long in the warp, of course, if the currents of that ocean of unreality happened to be flowing in the wrong direction, but at

least we'd get the job done when we arrived – which is more than could be said for whatever dregs of the Ironfound planetary defence force the authorities there would be willing to get rid of. 'Do we have a departure time yet?'

'Twelve hours and counting,' Broklaw said. 'Should be long enough to get everything moved over to the freighter they've found for us, if we hustle.' But his brow was furrowing even as he spoke, for which I couldn't exactly blame him. Twelve hours might sound like a long time, but when you've got around four thousand troopers to herd, along with their vehicles, weapons, rations, ammunition, personal effects and the instruments of the regimental band, it can be eaten up hellishly fast, believe me. Especially when a double-figure percentage of them have already been granted permission to disperse among whatever diversions they can find on a pressurised ration can floating in several billion cubic kilometres of frak all.

'I'll get Sulla on it,' Kasteen said, happy to pass the buck down the chain of command to her second most senior subordinate.

'Good choice,' I agreed. Sulla had begun her career as a quartermaster, and retained a talent for logistics which made her positively relish a challenge like this. I rose, with the best show of reluctance I could feign. 'And I suppose I'd better start rounding our people up. There can't be too many bars and gambling dens on a void station this size.' I still intended to make use of as many as possible before we left, though, especially as I now had a perfect excuse to make the rounds.

'Good luck with that,' Kasteen said. 'I'll send out a general recall message, but there are bound to be plenty who've switched off their vox-beads.'

'Sounds like we've a busy night ahead of us,' I said, which, although it turned out to be true, was as nothing compared to the job awaiting us on Drechia – which, in turn, was to pale into insignificance once the true nature and scale of the threat we were facing eventually became clear.

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