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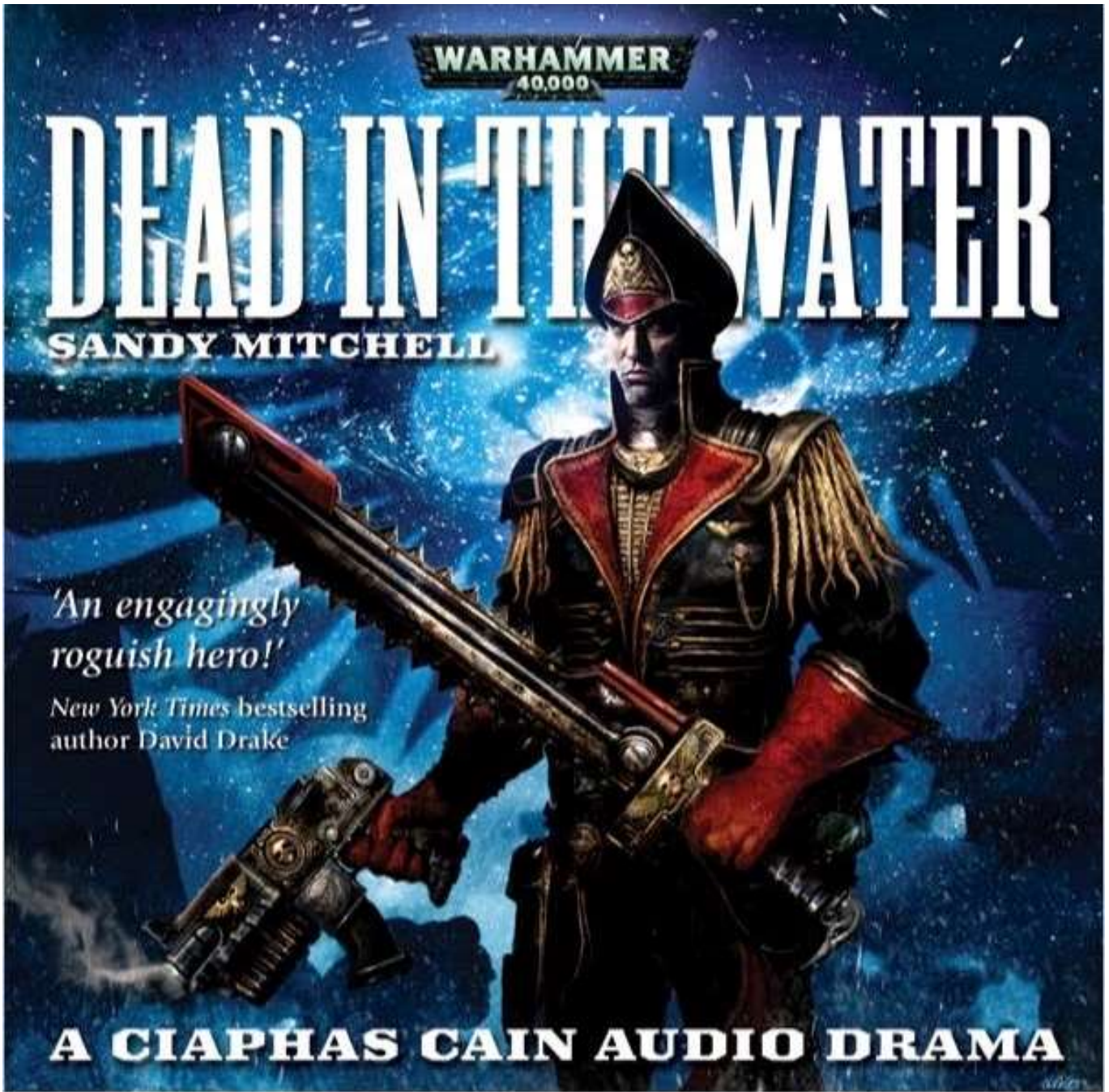
DEAD IN THE WATER

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*'An engagingly
roguish hero!'*

New York Times bestselling
author David Drake

A CIAPHAS CAIN AUDIO DRAMA



DEAD IN THE WATER (2011)

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Prologue

Cain's years as an independent commissar were among the most hectic of his checked career. His reluctant participation in the reclaimer's quest to cleanse the space hulk "Spawn of Damnation" and the close encounter with the guardians of a tomb-world, which preceded it, are well enough known by now. The following extract is another typical incident from this period.

Amberley Vail. Ordo Xenos.

Chapter 01

I've often thought, wars are what you make of them, and the Archipelaga campaign was shaping up very nicely. For one thing that peculiar nature of the local geography meant that I could avoid getting caught up in too much of a fighting. By the time I turned up to encourage the troops things had usually quietened down again and the war moved on to another island entirely. Mid also didn't heard that instead of the bellowing Orks, slaving Tyranids or up themselves Eldar I've grown used to facing in the last few years, the enemy here wore a human face.

Archipelaga was a feral world, rediscovered in the wake of the Damocles Gulf Crusade, an untouched by any trace of xenos taint. Even the Tau couldn't be bothered trying to annex such a minor spec of dirt. Despite the efforts being made to civilize the place, a few malcontents remained intent on making trouble, but since they still thought crossbows and gunpowder were cutting edge, and the guard garrison had lasguns and air support, the complete pacification of the planet could only be a matter of time. Not that the job looked like coming to an end any time soon, the enemy may have been few and poorly equipped, but they were persistent. And I was well aware of how a handful of motivated combatants could tie down a far larger force. I had no complaints about the length of time the conflict was dragging on for though.

The planetary capital was situated on the largest island of the temperate chain, which boasted an equitable climate, a larger of city to afford a pleasant evening's diversion. And a star port close enough to ensure all the little comforts of civilization remained readily to hand. Not to mention that decent number of orbit capable shuttles if things suddenly turned ploin-shaped after all.

So as far I was concerned the war could have gone on indefinitely. After all I knew it would have done, if it hadn't been for the baleful secret at the heart of this seemingly innocuous world. Not that I had the slightest inkling of what I was about to stumble into, on the contrary, I was pleasantly relaxed that evening, enjoying the hospitality of General Lokris - the seasoned old campaigner in charge of the pacification effort. In theory he'd been promoted to a staff job years before but found commanding at desk irksome. As such he had seized on the chance to get back into the field with

almost as much eagerness as I'd grab what I thought was going to be my ticket to a lifetime of file-shuffling and rear echelon obscurity.

Despite this rather irritating habit of palming off the most life-threatening assignments on me in the mistaken belief that my reputation for heroism was merited, I rather liked the old boy. He was straight-forward, transparently honest and as contemptuous as I was of the political gavotte danced by too many of the senior officers we both encountered. He also had a particularly fine personal chef, so an invitation to dine with him was always welcome. Especially on this occasion, when I could be reasonably confident that he wasn't trying to soften me up before dropping another suicide mission in my lap.

"You seem a little pensive tonight", I venged after the conversation had meandered inconsequently through four courses of gastronomic perfection, culminating in goblets of well-matured amasec.

"I suppose I am", he admitted, swirling the amber liquid before taking a sip and lapsing into silence again.

"Anything I can help with?" - I asked out of reflexed politeness. If I'd had the faintest idea what that question was going to lead to, I'd have held my tongue, but it seemed a harmless enough pleasantry at that time.

"Now you mention it, there might be", Lokris said as though the thought hadn't occurred to him before. He handed me a data-slate from the number of profiles littering a nearby side table¹. And I found myself confronted with a mass of material concerning our operations in the equatorial chain.

"What am I looking for?" I asked, skimming through a welter of after-action reports, intelligence summaries and for all I knew laundry lists.

"This one", Lokris leaned across and highlighted the report he wanted me to read. There was too much to take in with a cursory glance, so I asked for a quick verbal summary, which he was kind enough to provide.

"One of our squads went missing a couple of months back on a routine recon sweep. No vox contact, no trace of bodies or survivors"

"How thorough was the search?"

"Very. They were from a Vostroyan regiment, the Firstborn look after their own."

"So I've heard".

I'd never served with them, but I knew their reputation. They're still driven by guilt for their umpty² great grandfather, letting the Emperor down during the Heresy, and you couldn't hope to find more loyal and dedicated troopers.

I shrugged - "But guardsmen go missing in action all the time. They probably walked into an ambush and the bodies got washed out to sea".

"Which is what we assumed of course. Especially after their boat turned up with bullet-holes in it. But then the rumors started".

"Rumors", I repeated, trying to sound as though I was paying attention, and paged rapidly through the slate, trying to find whatever he was talking about. Lokris took that as a prompt to continue, which he did after another sip of amasec.

"Something's got the natives spooked".

Before I could point out there was nothing surprising in that most of them still thinking their sun was the Golden Throne, he added: "Even more, than usual".

"These so-called Ghost Warriors", I skimmed the text rapidly and finally found the right paragraph. "It looks like they are doing a pretty good job, if they really exist.

Five rebel camps destroyed, a couple of insurgent supporting villages shot up, bully for them I'd say". Then I read a little further. "Oh!"

"Quite", Lokris said, having correctly divined the point I'd reached. "They've hit loyalists' settlements too, food and supplies taken. Locals who tried to intervene shot. With lasguns".

"So you think, your missing troopers might have gone rogue?" - I concluded for him, and Lokris nodded.

"It happens".

We both knew that stress could do strange things to a trooper's mental state and the bonds between squad-mates are tight enough for a simple case of combat fatigue to rapidly develop into group psychosis, which is one of the reasons we have commissars, of course. We are supposed to spot that kind of thing and pass the problem back to the Medicare, wind the affected troopers up even tighter and point them at the enemy, or shoot them before they became a danger to their comrades, depending on the circumstances.

"The insurgence might still be to blame. If they did manage to take out the squad of guardsmen, their boulder have looted their weapons. Perhaps, they are hitting loyalists' villages to turn them against us, which leaves the small matter of the gutted insurgent camps, of course. But that could have been staged to keep us guessing, if it isn't simply the result of some interneers on feuding. Emperor knows heretics seem to hate one another almost as much as they do us".

"That's possible too", he sounded like he'd already considered the possibility and liked it no more than I did.

"I could look into it, I suppose".

"Good man. I'll have Vault take you down there. He could brief you on the way".

There was nothing particularly interesting or urgent to detain me in the capital, and the change of scene would be welcome, particularly as the things were hotting up on some of the more keenly contested islands. It was only a matter of time before someone decided I was the man to lead a do-or-die charge at the thick of the fighting, and wandering around the beach looking for a hand full of lost troopers seemed a far more comfortable option.

Of course, if I'd known what was waiting for me at the heart of one of those islands, I'd have grabbed my chainsword, shouted "For the Emperor" and run at the nearest rebel gun position without a thought. But, ignorance is a shield almost as strong as faith in the Throne. So I just accepted the general's thanks with a magnanimous nod and refilled my goblet, while I had the chance.

Chapter 02

The long drive to the main terrandy garrison was uneventful, confirming the impression I'd already formed of a safe haven comfortably under Imperial control. Though the windows of Colonel Vault's staff car were of armorcrys the finely mustached Vostroyan had lost no time in lowering them, so clearly had little fear of running into an ambush along the way or more likely felt that the risk of assassination was unacceptable one, if the alternative was remaining in an enclosed space with Jurgen. I got pretty used to my aids' aroma over the years, but even I was grateful for the current of warm air sluicing through the passenger compartment.

“This is the area in question”, Vault handed me a map-slate. We were on the coastal road by now heading away from the city spires towards a headland in the distance. If I narrowed my eyes enough against the glare of the shimmering waves, I could just make out a wharf, surrounded by fencing and a cluster of the pre-fabricated hab-units common to guard outposts throughout the galaxy.

Vault: “The red icons indicate confirmed sightings”.

Cain: “They are pretty scattered. And the rest?”

Vault: “Are inter-probable, blue – uncorroborated. Normally our analysts would be able to narrow down the most likely location of their base to a fairly small area, but the terrain here being what it is”.

Cain: “Quite”.

The icons were spread across a dozen islands and islets separated by narrow channels and wide expanses of blue water.

Cain: “They must be getting around by boat, which means they could have set off from anywhere”.

Jurgen: “Would we need one too, sir?”

Vault: “I’ve arranged one of our patrol boats to be put at your disposal”, Vault said to Jurgen’s visible relief.

My aid and aircraft were not a happy combination and best kept apart whenever possible.

Vault: “I trust that will be satisfactory”.

Cain: “Perfectly”.

By this time we were approaching a chain-link fence, uniformed troopers scurrying around beyond it, carrying ammo boxes, rations and medipacks towards the wharf I’d glimpsed from the highway. The huddle of buildings cut off my view of the vessel anchored there, but at least it seemed we’d be supplied once we’d boarded.

The Colonel’s car was evidently known well enough for the centuries on the gate to pass it through with a minimum of delay. And a few minutes later we rode to a stop alongside the boat which was to be both our transport and our protection for the duration of the trip.

Neither Jurgen, nor I were particularly familiar with watercraft. The closest thing to them in the under-hive I grew up in, were the crude rafts which the bolder tunnel-runners occasionally used to get across the wider sump-flows. While a boat would be no use to a Valhallan, water on my aid’s home world existing naturally only as a solid. The vessel seemed reassuringly boned, however, solid as a “Chimera”, though around as three times as large. Her gunnels were armored as was the blocky wheelhouse standing proud of the deck and heavy bolters were mounted for and aft, where they could be brought to bear on a threat from any direction.

“This isn’t the same kind of boat your missing troopers were in, is it?” - I asked mindful that it had apparently been found drifting in half-soak. If it was the same type the rebels would have had to have got their hands on something a lot more lethal than a handful of looted lasguns.

Vault shook his head as we climbed out of the car and the odor of brine promethium and rotten fish, displaced Jurgen’s earthier aroma.

Vail: “Of course not. This is one of our coastal patrol boats. Bram’s squad was in one of those”, he pointed to a much smaller boat, unarmed and barely large enough to seat a dozen men, bobbing at the end of its mooring line further down the wharf. I

found myself thinking of the down-hive rafts again, although this looked a great deal less like a lethal accident waiting for someone to happen to.

Vail: "Shallow draft so you can get through the narrower channels between the islands".

Dunn: "Flat bottom, too".

I glanced down at the deck of the armored patrol boat to meet the eyes of a younger Vostroyan officer, looking up at as in appraising manner.

Dunn: "Lets you hit the beach faster in an amphibious assault".

Cain: "I'll take your word for it".

His uniform was the usual strident red favored by Vostroyans regiments, which stood out oddly against the sober grey of the vessel he stood on. And his mustache had been waxed to stand at a jaunted tanned tattoo. He snapped a salute, which the Colonel and I returned, while Jurgen faded into the background as much as possible for a man, whose presence was always obvious even when he was out of sight.

Vail: "Commissar, this is Lieutenant Dunn, captain of the 109".

I belatedly noticed the identifying number stenciled on the stern of the blocky vessel.

Cain: "Do I call you captain or lieutenant?"

Dunn smiled, no doubt used to the question.

Dunn: "Whichever you prefer, but the crew sticks to skipper, saves confusing the rank with the job".

Cain: "Then skipper it is."

I jumped down from the wharf with a faint clatter of boot soles against the deck plates. The sensation of motion under foot as I regained my balance was a little disconcerting, but I'd experienced far worse in my time. I was able to ignore it after a while. Now we were on the same level. Dunn turned out to be a little shorter than me, although his stocky build probably gave him the edge in weight. The skin of his face had been reddened by years of exposure to the elements, but it still had some way to go before it became a match for his crimson top-coat.

Dunn: "Welcome aboard", he said and extended a hand, which I shook with the appropriate degree of formality, before taking an adroit to the side just in time to avoid getting brained by my kit-bag, which thudded to the deck a hair's breadth from where I'd been standing.

Jurgen: "Sorry, sir! I wanted to make sure it didn't go over the side".

A moment later he joined us, cushioning the shock of his landing by flexing his knees and planting a foot among my personal effects, trying not to wonder what it made the faint cracking noise and hoping it wasn't my flask of Lokris's best amasec, I introduced him to the skipper. Dunn returned his salute promptly enough, but to my distinct lack of surprise didn't offer to shake hands with him.

Jurgen: "If you'll point me to the Commissar's quarters, I'll get these stirred".

Dunn: "I'm afraid you'll have to bunk down with the rest of us, Commissar. We are not really set up for visitors".

Cain: "Of course".

The patrol boat was clearly intended as little more than a floating weapons platform with only minimal concessions to the comfort of its crew. It seems that they slept in hammocks below deck in the forward two thirds of the vessel, the rest being occupied by its engine and fuel tanks. These were capacious enough to sustain the

109 on an extended patrol, although a number of barrels of promethium were lashed to the deck in case of emergencies.

Cain: "We can always lay out the bedrolls up here if necessary".

Dunn: "That might be best".

Dunn said with barely concealed relief, no doubt imagining trying to sleep with Jurgen in close proximity. He beckoned to one of the deck hands.

Dunn: "Gowan, make room on the far deck for the Commissar and his aid".

"Right you are, skip!" - Gowan said with a rough approximation of the salute and ambled way, Jurgen following. No doubt aware of the Commissariat's position on matters of protocol and discipline Dunn looked at me with a flicker of apprehension.

Dunn: "You'll find us as little as formal, than a line regiment. I hope you don't consider that a problem".

Cain: "Not in the least".

Dunn: "We operate independently most of the time; the rulebook doesn't help much when you're facing a fast mobile enemy".

I looked at him appraisingly.

Cain: "I'm sure you wouldn't let the rains get slack enough for anyone to undermine your authority".

He might have been able to reply to that, but his expression suddenly hardened, his gaze shifting past my shoulder to something on the wharf. I turned to find Colonel Vault watching us, an oddly dressed trooper at his side. The first Vostroyan, I'd seen without extravagant facial hair, a second later the coin dropped.

Cain: "Who's he?"

"His name is Calen", the man said, dropping to the deck without a sound. He straightened up fixing me with the glare that would melt ceramite.

Calen: "And he's got ears and the tongue in his head".

"Ciaphas Cain", I said nodding a formal greeting. – "Who apologizes for his lack of courtesy".

I still didn't have a clue, what he was doing here, but I thought it wouldn't hurt to be polite. Vault clearly thought his presence was a good idea, even if Dunn equally clearly didn't. So I resolved to withhold judgment until I had a better idea of what was going on. Calen's expression softened a little.

"All right, then", he said grudgingly after sifting my words for signs of sarcasm. He barely came up to my shoulder, the red Vostroyan top-coat too big for his relatively slight frame. A long-bladed knife was scabbarded at his hip and he carried a lasgun slung across his back. Altogether I've seldom seen such an incongruous figure on the Imperial guard post, even taking my decades of service with Jurgen into account.

Vault: "Calen is one of our local scouts. He knows the channels and currents in the area better than anyone, and he can find his way across most of the islands too".

I glanced at the man again, but he seemed happy enough to have Vault speaking for him on this occasion, probably because he was being complimentary although as it turned out the praise was well merited.

"Then it seems we are fortunate to have you with us", I told him earning a reluctant and swiftly suppressed smile.

“I’m glad you think so”, Dunn said, while the Colonel potted back to his air-conditioned car, and the oddly attired barbarian wandered off without another word to sit cross-legged in the bow.

“I take it you don’t”, I said once I was sure, he was out of the air shot.

Dunn: “He is an indigene, one of the natives of this world”.

Cain: “The Colonel seems to trust him”.

Dunn: “Sadly dram”.

Cain: “He was a guide to the patrol that disappeared”.

Dunn: “Not in their last trip, obviously, but he’d been out with them a few times, showing them the channels and the sand banks. He knew their movements, is all I’m saying”.

Cain: “That doesn’t mean he sold them out to the insurgence”.

Dunn: “It doesn’t mean he didn’t, either. Lots of the indigenes are on our side, but they are Archipelagans first, however much they pray to the Emperor these days”. He looked at me sideways, as though expecting me to launch into a little homily about how we were all servants of the Emperor and equally deserving of his protection. But I am a Commissar, not a chaplain. Besides, I’d learned to trust my own paranoia a long time ago, so I could hardly be grudging his.

Cain: “It’s your boat. If you really don’t want him here, I can always overrule the Colonel”.

Not that I had the slightest intention of doing so, of course, but I was sure I’d read the man well enough to know that he’d refuse. Duty is everything to a Firstborn. Going against the orders of a superior officer, even with a Commissar to back him up, would be tantamount to spitting on the aquila, so far as he was concerned. I watched him struggle with the unexpected dilemma for a moment, before shaking his head, as I’d expected.

“We’ll make better time with his help”, he conceded with a final dubious glance in the direction of the man’s oblivious back. He turned away towards the wheelhouse.

Dunn: “You don’t get seasick I hope?”

Chapter 03

(Someone vomiting)

As it happens I don’t, but I couldn’t say the same of Jurgen, as we slipped unmooring and headed away from the shore. The powerful engines built to a full-throated roar as Dunn opened the throttles, carving our way through a gentle swell. A welcome cooling breeze rolled across the open deck, supplemented by refreshing flex of spray. It dispelled the thick humid air, which had enveloped me from the moment I disembarked at the airdrome. Reassured that I seemed to be feeling no ill effects, despite the sensation of skipping across the waves, like a stone on a pond, I approached Jurgen at trifled wearily.

“Far clear the sign this is?” – He greeted me with an appreciative and gluttonous sniff, his sea sickness having passed. Perhaps, being out in the open water helped.

“What do you make of them?” – I asked, keeping my voice low enough to remain unheard by the crew over the roar of the engine. - "They seem to know what they are doing".

Jurgen's gaze was fixed on the scattering of islands all around us, but nearest was only a couple of kilometers away - a surf-fringed beach paralleling our course, while

the great bulk of terrandy still loomed astern and tapered like a low thundercloud. Other patches of land could be seen further off, far closer at hand a chain of sand banks shouldered their way out of the water like surface incitations. There must have been hidden obstructions as well because Dunn was stirring a meandering course across the apparently open sea with the relaxed confidence of a man, who knew these waters well. Our whacker³ stern describing a series of arcs like an inebriated tempting to navigate at pavement.

"You can read waves", Calen confirmed, when I brought the subject up a few minutes later. Jurgen had produced a flask of recaf from one of the pouches his webbing was habitually festoon with and I'd use the excuse of offering him a drink to initiate a conversation, feeling oddly as though I was approaching a fellow guest at the social function where neither of us knew the host. Since my bafflement was evidently clear, he spent the next few minutes pointing out, where the swell flattened indicating an obstruction below the surface and where the color of the water changed to different shades of bluish grey, which to experienced eye was a reliable indication of depth.

Cain: "What do you think happened to all of these men?"

He spat over the side before making the sign of the aquila.

Calen: "Swam to the Emperor".

I took that to mean, that he believed them to be dead.

Cain: "But if they are not?"

He shrugged never taking his eyes of the horizon.

Calen: "Out there".

I could hardly argue with that, even though it was less than helpful.

We spent the next few hours slaloming between a bewildering number of islands, remaining well out from the shorelines in case any lurking rebels took a pot shot at us. Though we passed a number of settlements, the main signs of life we came across, were out on the water. An astonishing perfusion of boats shared the narrow seaways between the islands with us, sturdy little craft with lateen sails, larger caravels, laden with cargo and flat-bottom ferries belching smoke. Dunn avoided them all as best he could, while the gunnery crew slouched behind their shields prepared to bring their bolters to bear at a moment's notice. It gradually dawned on me that they regarded even the most mundane peace of civilian traffic as a potential threat.

"We are here", Dunn indicated the icon, which marked our position, and I raised an eyebrow, surprised by how far we travelled.

Cain: "Are we pulling in somewhere for the night?"

The young officer nodded

"There's a mission station on the West Skaris", he pointed to a small chain of islands on a relatively open portion of the display, which seemed vaguely familiar. After a moment I recognized them as having been nearly edge of the map Vault had shown me.

"Though you'd appreciate one more night in the proper bed before we got started in earliest".

"Mission station?" - I echoed masking my dismay at the prospect of being surrounded by Emperor botherers as best I could.

Dunn nodded: "The Ecclesiarchy set it up. Small shrine, basic sanatorium, usual thing".

Calen: "Bring the Emperor's light to a darkness..."

I suppressed the start as he spoke. Somehow Calen had managed to approach without making a sound or at least one audible over the rumble of our engine. Dunn was surprised too and made no attempt to hide it glancing at him with an air of bruited resentment.

"You sound like you know it", I said to cover the awkward moment, and he nodded.

Calen: "Been a few times".

Dunn: "Good, then you can guide us in".

"Starting to trust him?" I asked, as he padded off to the wheelhouse, where another of the crew had taken over the helm.

Dunn shrugged: "I want to see how good he really is before it matters".

As we drifted in towards the wooden pilings my own sense of unease began to increase. Thick purple twilight was beginning to gather in the shadows and not a single light was showing in any of the buildings.

Chapter 04

Cain: "Shouldn't someone have kindled the luminators by now".

Dunn nodded. His hand unconsciously dropping to the side-arm at his belt.

"Volley the miring lines".

PB 109 drifted into defendless garden the dock would have fainted shock of infarct, jarring the seals of my feet.

Dunn: "Jeopardy, form upon me", several of the crew trotted over to join him lasguns at the ready, while the ones manning the heavy bolters traversed their weapons to point towards the shore. - "Put out again the minute we disembark and cover us from the bay".

Cain: "Shouldn't you stay on the boat? You are responsible for it."

Dunn: "I'm responsible for my men too. Gowan can handle the boat. Coming?"

It was a question I'd been malign over since it became obvious that something was wrong. Given my unmerited reputation I could hardly appear to be shirky and appealing as the idea of remaining behind the slab or two of armor plate was in the abstract, once the boat put out from shore again it would be a sitting target. True, the insurgents weren't supposed to have much capable of denting it, but if the purpose of the exercise was to lure the patrol boat into a trap, they were bound to have remedied that deficiency in some way.

"Wouldn't miss it", I loosened my chainsword in its scabbard, and drew my laspistol. A familiar odor assaulted my nostrils, assuring me that Jurgen was in his habitual position behind me, and I turned to find him checking his lasgun as casually as he might respond to a request for another mug of tanna.

Jurgen: "All set, sir"

As usual my confidence rose a little in the knowledge that the one person in the galaxy I knew I could rely on would be watching my back.

"I'm coming too", Calen leapt up to the roughly-sawn planks of the jetty before Dunn could master an objection. His jaw tightened, but he let it go, merely motioning his men to follow before scrambling after him. No one got shot, so I hoisted myself up to the rough-wooden decking too and crouched in the semidarkness, looking round for

some sights of movement in the hab units littering the shoreline. After a moment my nose told me, that Jurgen had followed, and the soft snick of the safety-catch of his lasgun being eased off added that he liked the situation no more than I did.

"Vox check", Dunn's voice overlapped with its own echo in com-bid, and I nodded.

Cain: "Check".

Voices (in the background): "Check, Check, Check, Check".

My own voice added to the ripple of acknowledgments running through the party. Only Calen seemed not to be equipped with one, which was hardly surprising as they were supposed to be reserved for guardsmen on active service, although I suppose the same thing could be said for the lasgun he was leveling with every sign of being able to use it. Dunn led the way along the jetty, which was fine by me, I hung back, where I'd be a low priority target for any lurking ambushes.

After an anxious moment or two we made it to solid ground and looked around at the darkened buildings, which continued to show no signs of life. Dunn detailed his men to split up into pairs and they melted away into the dusk with gratifying efficiency. It seemed he hadn't been getting too slack with them after all. On the verge of moving off with the sole remaining Firstborn he glanced at Jurgen and I, and hesitated. Before he could ask the obvious question, I nodded.

Cain: "We'll be fine, we've done this sort of thing before".

It was a relief to be left to our own devices, thy years of campaigning together had left us with an instinctive repose in moments of stress, which we 'd both learned to trust and which never functioned so well with a larger group around to distract us. Not to mention that being left alone would make it a lot easier to keep out of any trouble, that might erupt here, instead of being expected to charge in the middle of it, lasguns blazing.

"Good", Calen said, as Dunn trotted away in the direction of the sanatorium, keeping to the shadows as he went.

Calen: "This way".

I could have ignored this suggestion, of course, as having taken the Emperor's coin put him as much under my jurisdiction as any more formally inducted trooper, but I decided to go with him in any case. He'd been here before, which meant he knew the ground, and if Dunn wasn't going to take advantage of that, I certainly would. He'd spot anything out of place at once, which could make all the difference between avoiding ambush and walking right into it.

Cain: "Where to?"

I fell into step behind him, as we made our way cautiously between two buildings, instinctively keeping to the side of the passageway, where the shadows were deepest. Jurgen followed, his presence obvious, even without turning my head to check.

Calen: "Chapel".

The hand supporting the barrel of his lasgun floated free for a moment to touch a cheap tin aquila pinned to his coat. My heart sank along with the good opinion I'd begun to form of him. Despite the clear evidence all around us that something was a miss, it seemed the only thing he was worried about, was being late for evening prayers.

"Red sector is clear", one of the boat's crew reported. - "Looks like no one's been here in days".

Cain: "Is it tidy?"

One of the crew: "Any mean, sir?"

Cain: "I mean, does it look like they were interrupted in the middle of a meal or did they get time to do the washing up?"

One of the crew: "Oh, then it's tidy. Place is laid in everything".

Cain: "Then they weren't intending to go anywhere. So what happened to them?"

Dunn: "They didn't get sick. The sanatorium is empty too".

The palms of my hands began to itch, as they tend to when my subconscious starts fretting before the fore brains had a chance to catch up with it. If I had any hope, that the missionaries and their staff were about to appear congratulating themselves on a quiet practice well-done, it pretty much evaporated at that point.

Cain: "What are the chances of that? It's the only sanatorium in a hundred kilometers. It ought to be packed".

I turned to Calen, who was probably wondering, whether I'd taken leave of my senses, having heard only my end of the conversations.

Cain: "How many people are normally in the sanatorium?"

Calen: "Two, three, more if something bad has happened".

Cain: "Check the patients records".

One of the crew: "Affirmative".

"Sir!" - Jurgen had stopped moving and called me back to an unremarkable section of walling I'd walked past, while my attention had been taken up with the vox-traffic. He pointed to a pock-mark in the surface about half a meter above his head.

Jurgen: "Lasbolt, fired recently".

Calen: "Too high to hit anyone".

Cain: "It wasn't meant to."

I looked back in the direction the shot had been fired from. A broad open area stood between us and the chapel, which would have been indistinguishable from any of the other standardized haps, if it hadn't been for the icon of Him on Earth over the doorway. With a faint premonitory shudder I realized it had been vandalized. Mud or some less wholesome substance caked to it with obvious blasphemous intent.

Calen: "It was a warning shot".

Cain: "Warning who?"

Calen: "Whoever was here".

Cain: "Then, where are they now?" - Which was a fair enough question.

"Chapel", Calen said again, marching determinedly towards it with the horrified glance at the desecrated icon above the door.

Calen: "The Emperor protects".

Cain: "You are right".

Where would frightened and disorganized ecclesiarches flee to in a crisis? The Sanctuary of Consecrated Ground trusting to Him on Earth to keep them from harm. A dubious proposition at best, if you asked me, but then I've always felt the Emperor has enough on his hands trying to keep the galaxy with sliding into damnation, so I've tended to look after my hide for myself. Which probably accounts for the fact that I'm still around dictating my memoirs while innumerable more poor souls are clogging up the cemeteries.

"The record shows three patients admitted", Dunn cut it on the vox. - "Two fever cases and a kelp farmer, who tried to take his own foot off with the scythe, so where are they?"

"Rendezvous the chapel", I broadcast generally. I didn't need the tingling in my palms to tell me that whatever we were about to find, I'd feel a whole lot happier facing it with as much backup as I could get.

Chapter 05

Calen was the first through the door, which was fine by me, especially as no one shot him as he entered. As it swung open the stench of decay rolled out, smacking me in the face like a wet fetid towel. My stomach heaved, but somehow I managed to keep my last meal down.

Cain: "Smells a bit".

Jurgen was oblivious to irony as always and followed the scout through the door.

Jurgen: "Holy throne!"

"Fracking4 warp!" - I agreed as Calen found the light switch and kindled the luminators.

"What's happening?" - Dunn voxed breaking into a run if his ragged breathing was anything to go by. I fought my lunch back into place again.

"We found them", I said taking my first reluctant steps across the threshold. There must have been a couple of dozen corpses in there riddled with lasgun wounds. Calen's face was grey but resolute, his track as I reading the scene as easily as a page of text.

Calen: "They herded everyone in here at gunpoint. Then opened up on full auto. None of them stood a chance".

Cain: Why though? What was the point?"

Calen: "That, I imagine".

I edged round the tumbled cadavers to get a good look at the altar. Like the icon outside it'd been smeared with blood and filth.

Cain: "The shrine's been desecrated".

I turned to Calen: "Which of the rebel groups goes in for this kind of thing?"

Calen: "None of them. They hit military targets".

"Since when our priests and medics have been combatants? - Dunn asked glaring at him through the door, as though he considered him personally responsible.

Cain: "They are not. Anymore than the locals who came here for their help were". I indicated what looked like the erstwhile residence of the sanatorium and frowned. Someone had torn the bandages from the kelp farmer's injured foot, exposing the raw wound, which seemed an odd thing to have done amongst so much casual butchery.

"Damn right", Dunn turned away regaining the sweeter air outside with as much evident relief as I felt when I followed a moment later. As I tried unsuccessfully to rid my nostrils of the lingering stench he began to report what we'd found. His com-bid patched into the more powerful vox-set aboard the boat.

"We're to sit tight", he told me when he'd finished either unaware that my commissarial access codes allowed me to listen in to the conversation or too polite to mention it.

Dunn: "The colonel's ordered an areal recon at first light".

Cain: "Makes sense, but whoever did this is long gone".

"Don't think so", Calen led the way to the edge of the tree line. - "See that?"

"See what?" - I grumbled squatting to take a closer look at the patch of the vegetation he was pointing at. After a moment Jurgen pulled a luminator out of one of his pouches and held it helpfully above my head, affording me a much clearer view of nothing in particular.

Calen: "Footprint".

He traced the outline of a barely visible indentation with forefinger. "And rub a musk's back to its old shape completely after a day or so".

Behind us Dunn snorted with the rision: "Those bodies have been there at least a week, longer probably".

I nodded, while a half-formed thought poked its head up, then scurried for cover before I could get a proper look at it.

"Things rot quicker in the tropical climate", I said knowing better than to try to force whatever connection my subconscious was making. - "And someone was definitely here yesterday". I turned to Calen: "Can you follow this trail?"

Calen: "Easily".

Dunn: "It's getting dark, we should get back to the boat and follow this up in the morning".

Calen: "By morning the trail would've gone".

I considered the risks. The idea of tracking down a bunch of mass-murderers in the dark was far from appealing, but losing their trail entirely was even less so. The next time they popped up I might be in their sights, better to take the initiative while we still had it. Jurgen and I had had more than enough practice at sneaking around in the dark and I'd already seen how silently Calen could move when he had a mind to. Dunn and his men on the other hand would undoubtedly flail around in the undergrowth like hull of the orks.

Cain: "Jurgen and I will go with Calen. The rest of you head back to the boat. We'll meet you at the jetty when we've completed our sweep".

That was the idea anyway. Unfortunately it didn't work out quite like that.

Chapter 06

At first it was almost a relief to be surrounded by cool shadows and the scent of growing things after the charnel stench of the desecrated chapel. But the further we got from the wharf and the protection afforded by the patrol boat and its heavy bolters, the greater my apprehension became. Jurgen and I were able to keep up with Calen well-enough as he wormed his way through the undergrowth, pausing every now and again to examine so minute trace of our enemies passing in the brief flash of a shadowed luminator.

But my senses were reaching out in every direction, desperate to make sense of the unfamiliar sounds which assailed me. Every susurration of the wind through the leaves or unfamiliar cry of some nocturnal creature sounded to me like stealthy enemies moving to flank us.

No one did of course, Calen knew the terrain too well to be taken by surprise, but no amount of logical analysis could quench the visceral apprehension annoying at my gut. Eventually after an indeterminate time I felt a cooler breeze on my face, accompanied by the odor of sea salt and the hollow booming of surf in my ears. A

moment later we broke free of the vegetation to find ourselves on a sandy beach. Tinted silver in the light of the newly risen moon.

Cain: "Have we crossed the whole island?"

Calen shook his head, his amusement at the question evident in the tilt of his shoulders.

Calen: "Just a peninsula. Thought we'd end here".

Cain: "Why?"

Our guide smiled, his teeth seeming to flare as in the soft light.

"Good beach. Easy to land", he shrugged and began leading the way along the shoreline.

Calen: "Local fishermen use it".

His pace faulted and he looked at the ground with the hint of annoyance.

Calen: "No good for tracks though".

There was no need to ask why. The breeze I'd been enjoying for the last few minutes was stirring the powdery grains around our feet, our own boot-prints eroding even as I watched.

Cain: "Just do your best. If you were breaching a boat here, where would you choose?"

Calen: "Over there, by that canoe".

Cain: "Could they have used it?"

He shook his head, clearly amused at the naivety of the question".

Calen: "Too small. That's for two man. Three at most, even without the fish".

We got closer to the odd little craft, as we talked. It seemed to be made of leather of some kind stretched over a wooden frame and looked far too flimsy to take to sea. A dark crescent on a sand nearby turned out to be a fishing net, half unfolded, and my sense of apprehension increased. It would be an immensely valuable possession in the primitive fishing community and wouldn't have just been abandoned without a second thought. The same thing had evidently occurred to Calen as he brought up the barrel of his lasgun at almost the same instant I raised the hand holding my pistol.

"Over there, sir", Jurgen rounded the boat a parcel too ahead of us and took aim at something. He began to advance cautiously, keeping his lasgun sighted. A second later I passed the obstruction too and felt the breath catching my throat.

"Dead", Calen trotted across to the nearest of the two corpses apparently more trusting than my aid and I, that it wasn't an ambush.

Calen: "Lasgun wound, this one too".

I was sufficiently confident by now the apparent cadaver wouldn't sit up and start shooting as I approached it. Like his friend he'd been shot in the back, apparently making a run for it, and the inference was clear.

Calen: "They must have been here, when the raiders returned to that boat".

Cain: "But why kill them? How could they be a threat?"

Calen: "They saw something. Something that Ghost Warrior couldn't risk getting back to the Imperial authorities".

Cain: "Who they were?", I shook my head.

Calen: "They have left witnesses alive before".

Not that any of their accounts had been particularly helpful, agreeing only that they were skilled at striking from ambush armed with lasguns and formidable hand-to-

hand fighters, the rest have been the usual exaggerated tales of superhuman strength and resilience, which spoke more of panic than reasoned recon.

Cain: "There must have been something else".

I glanced around the beach, searching for a clue, and found nothing.

Cain: "Where they were going?"

Then he scowled.

Calen: "Stupid idea".

Cain: "Why?"

Calen: "They could have gone anywhere".

He waved an expansive arm of the glittering sea. It stretched to the horizon, which was speckled with the faint hummocks of greater darkness marking the locations of distant islands. The only exception was the looming shadow of a nearby islet about half a kilometer away, close enough for the moonlight to catch the ring of breakers surrounding it, and create a band of shimmering silver.

"What about that?" - I pointed to the outcrop.

"If they were headed there, it would have been obvious" - Calen shrugged. - "You can't land,. Riff all around".

Cain: "So no one ever goes there?"

Calen: "That's right. Death to try".

That was good enough for me. I tapped the com-bid in my ear.

Cain: "Dunn, we are on the other side of the peninsula. Can you pick us up?"

Only a faint wash of static answered me. It seemed we'd come further than the short-range transceivers could reach. I was about to vent my feelings vocally when Jurgen suddenly pointed at the dark mass of the offshore islet.

Jurgen: "What's that?"

I narrowed my eyes. A brief flash of light had flickered somewhere on the supposedly unreachable island.

Cain: "Someone's over there".

Chapter 07

It goes without saying that the last thing I wanted to do, was paddle over there in the abandoned canoe for a closer look, but the more I thought about it, the more reluctantly convinced I became that I didn't have a choice.

Dunn would be wondering where we were by now and when the sun rose, he'd almost certainly begin cruising up and down the coast looking for us. Which meant he'd be sailing straight into an ambush. It was all too easy to picture the enemy lasguns racking the decks, the Vostroyan crew falling before they even had time to retaliate. Then I remembered the reserved barrels of promethium, if they were punctured; a single lasbolt would be enough to set the 109 ablaze, if the resulting explosion didn't simply blow her apart instead. The plain fact was: unless I was planning to swim back to terrandy, we had to neutralize the threat.

Getting our commandeered craft into the water turned out to be a lot easier than I expected, its light-weight construction enabling the three of us to carry it with little effort. I took my siege chingely weary a putting a foot through a flimsy looking high, which seemed to be the only thing keeping the water out. Calen however seemed unconcerned as he took up his paddle and Jurgen scrambled him with his usual lack

of thinness without sinking us. So my apprehension soon started to diminish at least in that regard. We still had an allegedly impenetrable reef to get through.

As we approached it I began to see sharp spires of rocks sticking out of the water, each one capable of ripping the flimsy hull wide open, but Calen kept us moving with every sign of confidence. So I quelled my fears as best I could and plied my own paddle, following his lead as we forged through the waves.

“Any luck?” – I asked before wondering belatedly if distracting him at this juncture was a very good idea.

Calen: “No sign of a channel”.

He dug his paddle hard into the water: “Go left, left” – at a blight feeling the canoe lurch beneath me like a recalcitrant steed missing a looming blade of rock by a hand’s breadth.

Calen: “Pull, right”.

I dug the paddle deep following each instruction automatically, terrified at the slightest misunderstanding would lead to catastrophe. Waves broke over the side, soaking me to the skin and for one heart-stopping moment a japing spear of rocks great along our port flank before Jurgen fended it off. Gradually the buffeting eased however, the obstacles coming at us out of the darkness less frequently and all at once it seemed to me we found ourselves skimming across a calm lagoon towards the sandy beach not unlike the one we’d left a subjective lifetime before.

Calen: “We are through, found the channel after all”.

Cain: “Good work. Can you find it again?”

Calen: “Easily”.

Chapter 08

A few moments later sand hissed against the hull of our boat and we scrambled out pulling it above the tide-line. There was no time to hide it so we did the next best thing and left it with a small group of similar craft that one in the distan, hoping none of our enemies had made an accurate count.

“Any tracks?” - Jurgen looked around hopefully for something to shoot at.

Calen shook his head after a cursory glance at the sand under foot: “Too trampled”.

Which at least meant, our own footprints were liable to go unnoticed. A well-worn path led away from the beach through a tangle of dense foliage like the one we’d slog through on the larger island. So for the want of any better ideas we followed it cautiously. Tension winding itself tighter in my gut with every step, I drew my laspistol again and curled my other hand around the hilt of my chainsword. My thumb poised over the activation rune. Jurgen then Calen kept their lasguns ready for use too, their fingers poised on the triggers.

I sniffed the air, finding a faint thread of wood-smoke insinuating itself through the mingled odors of Jurgen and my drying clothes and held up a hand for caution.

Moving even more stealthily if that were possible, we approached a flicker of firelight. As my eyes adjusted to the shadows around us, I became aware that they were angular and hard-edged, too much so to have been cast by anything natural. Reaching out cautiously my hand brushed likening crusted stone, with the reflexive shudder I couldn’t consciously account for, I wiped my hand on my shirt and went on.

“What was this place?” – I shrugged at a loss. None of the briefing materials I’d schemed had mentioned native structures on this scale anywhere on Archipelaga. Cain: “It must be old. Probably from before the world went feral”.

(Multiple gunshots)

Before I could add anything more, I was rudely interrupted by a lasbolt, which flashed between us, striking sparks from the nearest block of stone. Jurgen and Calen responded at once with short focused bursts, while I scurried into the lee of the masonry to get a cover there and withdraw with a couple of hopeful shots from my laspistol. As a blizzard of retaliatory lasbolts faded, something large thrashed about in the undergrowth for a moment, and then went silent. Too experienced at this kind of thing to take it for granted that we’d actually neutralized the sniper, I voxed Jurgen sure from the familiar odor that he’d found refuge on the other side of the same chunk of masonry.

“Take left”, I said.

A moment later the thrashing in the undergrowth began again and we bracked at its estimated position with lasbolts. This time we heard a scream, so one of us had found a target. Then I ducked as another volume of lasgun-fire began from two weapons at least widely spaced and both focused on our position. I dropped and began moving on my knees and elbows as stealthily as I could, hoping to get a look at our attackers. This brought the fire into the end, by its light a glimpse of the scarlet toppled somewhat the worse aware.

Voice: “Seize fire. In the name of the Emperor”.

Everything went quiet, and then another voice echoed the command.

Another voice: “Seize firing”.

I stood, adjusted my cap and stepped out of cover, finding to my surprise that I could see more clearly than before. A pink tinge echoing the flickering firelight was beginning to stain the eastern sky, and the canopy of branches overhead seemed translucent, each leaf standing out in stark silhouette.

The ruin I stood in was roofless, tumbled blocks of stone scattered at random around what once had been a high-ceiling hall, but its recesses remained in shudder. The more I saw of my surroundings, the less I liked them. There was nothing I could put my finger on, but the very stone seemed to exhale a cloacal miasma which made my skin crawl.

The man I caught a glimpse of was standing in one of the darker corners, a laspistol aimed at my torso.

Cain: “Sergeant Rohm, I presume? I’ve been sent to look for you”.

Rohm: “Commissar”.

This time the tone of surprise in his voice was unmistakable, and despite the certain knowledge that Jurgen would drop him in a heartbeat if he looked like using it, I found myself breathing a little more easily as he lowered the weapon.

Rohm: “We thought we’d been forgotten”.

Cain: “The Emperor protects”. – I took a couple of steps towards him – “What happened?”

Rohm: “We were ambushed. A group of fishermen we thought. They had a net slung between two boats to foul our prop when we passed between them. As soon as we slowed down, they opened fire”.

“Bad business”, I commented, which was a lot more tactful than my real opinion. Only a reckless idiot would have tried to go through the middle of the group like that, if you asked me.

Rohm: “We lost half the squad in the first volley. Then they tried to board us. The boat cap seized”.

“And after that?” – I prompted, although he seemed to need little urging to continue.

Rohm: “I don’t really remember. We were wounded and barely conscious. The current took us towards the reef. The heretics must have thought we were dead, because they didn’t follow”.

Cain: “They wouldn’t. The locals believe the reef’s impassable”.

Rohm: “We were pretty banged up passing through it, but we all recovered at a day or two”.

Cain: “How’s that possible?”

My palms were tingling again, the thought I’d had before was coming back to the surface stronger and more focused. I took a tighter grip on the hilt of my chainsword.

Rohm: “It was a miracle”.

The rising sun elbowed its way into the recess he was standing in at last and despite the deduction I’d just made, I felt the breath still in my throat. Raw flesh and festering wounds covered his face, and what I could see of his body through the ragged rents in his uniform – he shouldn’t even have been alive in that condition, let alone walking and talking.

Rohm: “The Emperor spared us to take vengeance on his enemies”.

Cain: “The people in the mission station were his servants”.

I needed to know how deep the corruption had gone, Rohm shook his head.

“They served the false Emperor”, he told me, as though it should have been obvious. – “The true one spoke to me”.

Cain: “Of course, he did”

I edged back towards cover, trying to look as I was merely shifting my weight. Rohm was no fool, whatever else he’d become and he leapt forward raising the laspistol again.

Rohm: “Heretic!”

Before he could fire a lasbolt took him square in the chest, proving Jurgen was as reliable as ever. The shot should have dropped him in a spray of pass and viscera, but it only seemed to enrage him. Howling he charged towards me, the stench of decay billowing out ahead of him, making me gibe. I lounged to the side reflexively drawing my chainsword and cutting at his chest, as he passed me. The warring blade bit deep, releasing another flood of corruption, as I turned bringing the blade up to guard my flank, Rohm kicked out of my leg, shrugging of another wound which should have proved fatal. I barely wavered, managing to parry with sheered through his chinbone, severing his foot - an effect chunk of leg below the knee. Before he could regain his balance, I brought the blade up diagonally through the center of his body. And he fell to the fetid flagstones at last, twitching and gurgling.

Chapter 09

As he finally expired, I registered the distinctive sound of lasguns before and behind me. I dived for cover again; Jurgen and Calen were engaging the other tainted guardsmen, who seemed to have dug in behind blocks of stone elsewhere in the

ruins. For the moment no one seemed keen to stick their heads up. But that wouldn't last. They knew the terrain and we didn't, so they'd start to flank us as soon as they'd fix our position. We had only one chance that I could see. I turned to Calen who was crouched behind the plinth of a tumbled statue and beckoned to attract his attention.

Cain: "Can you get us directly back to the beach?"

Calen: "Of course".

Then his habitual confidence took on a faint air of puzzlement.

Calen: "But they will only follow".

To be honest I'd thought no further than buying us a little time, but at that point hope suddenly flared as a faint voice began to make itself heard through the wash of static in my com-bid.

Dunn: "PB-109 to Commissar Cain. Do you copy?"

Cain: "Copy. We're on the island just off the peninsula, engaging hostiles. Get as close to the reef as you can and stand by to give us some fire support".

Dunn: "Acknowledged. The Vendettas are inbound too, ETA5 three minutes. Can they assist?"

Cain: "Patch me through to the flight commander".

I tried to ignore the lasbolts striking the other side of my refuge.

Flight Commander: "Old leader responding". – A new voice said in my ear a moment later.

Cain: "This is Commissar Cain, home in on this signal and fire everything you've got at the source as soon as you're in range. Clear?"

Flight Commander: "Are you sure?" – The flyboy was evidently wondering if I'd taken leave of my senses.

Cain: "Just do it".

I snapped, ripping the tiny vox-set from my ear dropping it in the bushes. I turned to Calen.

Cain: "Now would be good".

Calen: "Come on then".

As usual he didn't waste time on conversation just turning and melting into the undergrowth. Jurgen and I followed, trying to keep up with him and mostly failing dismally, but after a moment he slowed his pace to one we could cope with.

Calen: "They'll realize we've gone any minute".

Cain: "A minute should be all we need".

The roar of powerful engines began to make itself heard over the thumping of my heart. A moment later we burst through the line of scrub-fringing inches⁶, the sudden blast of fresh sea air almost intoxicating.

Calen: "The boat".

Calen waved at the welcome bulk of the PB-109, which loomed offshore just beyond the rampart of foam which marked the encircling reef. Then he dropped to the sand, as a lasround erupted from the bushes behind us, taking him in back of the leg.

"Dunn!" – I yelled unnecessarily, acquiring a sudden mouth for the beach, and reached reflexively to the com-bid in my ear before remembering I discarded it.

Dunn and his crew must have been keeping an eye out for us though, as the four and half mounted bolters opened up suddenly like the wrath of the Emperor himself. (Multiple bolter shots)

A blizzard of bolts poured over our heads with a sound like a Chimera-sized top bolending ripped, treading the undergrowth of the pursuing heretics of the noise some had feted. I just started to raise my head cautiously when the Vendetta wing howled over head, and the whole center of the island vanished in the maelstrom of fire and smoke.

(Multiple bomb-blasts)

I spat out another small dune, battered from the noise which struck with the impact of a Leman Russ and would surely have knocked me from my feet, if I hadn't been prone already. The pressure wave from the roaring explosion boiled out from the island, foaming the water and making Dunn's boat bob like a bath-toy. Jurgen looked up from applying addressing to the crater in Calen's left calf, his mouth moving.

After a moment the words: "Thought, takes care of that then, sir" – forced their way pass the bell-foundry which seemed to have set up business in both my ears.

"I suppose it does", I agreed, before wandering off to find a canoe that wouldn't leak.

Chapter 10

Lokris: "This puts a whole new complexion on things".

Lokris looked up in my report, his face grave.

Cain: "It does".

I took advantage of his distraction to refill my goblet with amasec. After what I'd been through in the last few days, I felt he owed me that much at least.

Cain: "We knew the Imperium lost track of the place during the Heresy. We just didn't know Archipelaga had been on the wrong side".

Lokris: "At least that's one temple of Nurgle cleansed"

He let the data-slate fall and reached for the decanter, his face troubled.

Lokris: "No telling how many more pockets of corruption there are though, just waiting for another Rohm to stumble into them".

Cain: "Well how many active Chaos cults there are perpetuating the taint?"

My comfortable little war had stopped being fun, no doubt about that. Time to move on again, to a more congenial conflict, as soon as I could find an excuse.

(Deep gulp)

Cain: "In the mean time".

The decanter was still half-full so far as I could see. And I've always been averse to leaving a job partly done.

Epilogue

Lokris: "Who's been drinking all my bloody amasec? Argh! It is hardly half thimble full left. Argh! Boy! Boy, another flacon of amasec. Cain's been here".