



*Editorial Note:*

*This is one of the longer fragments scattered throughout the Cain Archive and, as it's reasonably self-contained, I've resisted the temptation to incorporate it into the more comprehensive account of his activities during this period that I'm currently compiling.*

*Amberley Vail, Ordo Xenos.*



As I've mentioned before in the course of these memoirs, my life has held more than its fair share of surprises. One of the rare pleasant ones had been my appointment to the position of Commissarial Liaison Officer to the staff of the Lord General, apparently at the instigation of Zyvan himself: we'd always got on tolerably well, and I suppose he liked the idea of furthering our acquaintance under more congenial circumstances. Of course I still found myself dragged off to one warzone after another, but at least being attached to the upper echelons kept me away from the noise a bit more than hitherto. (Not as much as I'd have liked, of course, as my duties still took me a lot closer to the battlefield than Zyvan usually ventured, and the nature of the posting meant that Amberley was able to find me more easily whenever she had a particularly life-threatening errand to drop in my lap, but I can't deny her more frequent appearances had a definite upside too. *[I'm pleased to hear it]*)

So, by the early weeks of 990, life was looking pretty good to me. We'd just arrived in the Deepwater system, along with a naval task force and a couple of dozen troop transports, ostensibly to show the flag and reassure our loyal citizens that the forces of the Emperor stood ever ready to protect them from the rapacious ambitions of the tau: although, as usual, the aliens had managed to persuade a sizable chunk of the population that they'd be better off embracing the greater good and defecting en masse. At least the situation hadn't deteriorated as badly as it had done on Gravalax, but things were getting uncomfortable enough for the local governor to seem heartily pleased at our arrival.

To my surprise, I was quite favourably impressed by the man the first time we met. I've come across a number of planetary governors in the course of my erratic progress around the galaxy and, on the whole, the ones who weren't incompetent were either corrupt, insane, or both; on at least one occasion sufficiently so to have mortgaged their soul and the world they administered to the forces of the Ruinous Powers.

There have been exceptions, however, and Landen Hoy was definitely one of those; a vigorous man of about my own age, *[Almost a century by this point, although given the degree of vagueness about Cain's origins, and the amount of time he spent travelling the warp, that's more of a best guess than an accurate estimate. One thing we can be certain of from this description is that, like Cain, Hoy had benefited from a juvenat treatment or two]* whose greying temples imparted an air of wisdom and gravitas to his bearing, and who ruled his fiefdom in the Emperor's name with what seemed to me to be a reasonable degree of competence and integrity.

Unusually for a civilian, he'd been able to grasp the tactical implications of the situation when Zyvan and I pointed them out to him on our first (and, as things turned out, only) visit to the Gubernatorial Palace. As the name implied, Deepwater was an aquatic world, with no land at all to speak of apart

from the occasional island chain, so most of the population lived in hive cities anchored to the seabed; from these roots the spires soared into the air above, often for a kilometre or more, to form glass and steel reefs capable of withstanding anything the elements were capable of throwing at them. A warren of tunnels and mineshafts sprawled out from the underhives, to pillage the rich store of minerals lying beneath the waves, and periodically threaten the occasional sump community with drowning when they breached. A hiver myself, I found the place a strange mixture of the comfortably nostalgic and the outlandish, savouring the salt tang in the air as an honour guard of Hoy's household troops escorted us through tapestry-shrouded corridors towards our destination. A larger contingent of Zyvan's personal guard trotted in our wake, keeping them covered. The Lord General hadn't risen to his current eminence by being overly reckless, and was all too aware of how big a gift his sudden removal would be to the enemies of Him on Earth.

Hoy received us in a well-appointed room below the waterline, where couches upholstered in powder-blue silk were arranged to give the best possible view of the fish swimming around the reef beyond the thick sheet of armourcrys forming the far wall. The spectacle was stunning, but I was too seasoned a campaigner to have my attention diverted that easily, and shook the hand of our host with an easy assurance I thought would best match the mental picture he undoubtedly had of a Hero of the Imperium. He returned it firmly, then bowed formally to Zyvan.

'I can't deny I'm pleased to see you,' he said, reseating himself on a sofa and gesturing a servitor forward to offer drinks. I selected an amasec from the array of decanters on the tray, finding it surprisingly indifferent, but masked my disappointment easily. 'The xenoists have been gaining ground among the populace, in spite of everything we do to discourage them. If nothing else, your arrival means they can't keep spreading the lie that we've been abandoned by the Imperium.'

'And you won't be,' Zyvan assured him, clearly finding the amasec no more palatable than I had. The Tau Empire had managed to annex several Imperial systems in the region over the last few years simply because, with the growing menace of the tyranid hive fleets, we hadn't had the resources to defend them properly. In fact, if the 'nids hadn't been as much of a problem for them as they were for us, they'd probably have wrapped up half the sector by now. *[Something of an exaggeration, but they'd certainly have made significant gains]* Enough was enough, and Deepwater was where we'd decided to draw the line; the resources extracted here were vital both militarily and economically. If it fell, we'd all be feeling the pinch.

'I'm glad to hear it,' Hoy said, with a nod towards a pile of papers on a small table close to his elbow. They were too far away for me to read from where I was sitting, but I didn't need to anyway, as I'd authorised their release to him personally. It had simply been meant as a gesture of trust, and the idea that he'd actually bothered to read the material was as much a surprise to me as it clearly was to Zyvan. 'Especially as it seems you're needed in other systems too.'

That still remains to be seen,' I said, cautiously. The star cluster of which Deepwater was a part was far too vulnerable to a sudden tau attack for my peace of mind, or Zyvan's too, come to that; so the strategy we'd determined on was the old one of a mobile defence, moving from system to system as unpredictably as possible. The tau couldn't know which system the fleet would be in next, and would have to mount an invasion force sufficiently powerful to overcome it wherever they tried. Even if we weren't there when they arrived, the existing defences should be enough to bog them down long enough for our flotilla to respond, and tip the balance in the Imperium's favour. We hoped. Of course, if our intelligence turned out to be wrong about the resources they had available, we'd be royally frakked, but I'd worry about that when the time came, if it ever did. 'At the moment, the protection of Deepwater is our highest priority.'

'I'd be interested in any suggestions you might have,' Hoy said, ignoring the amasec, and reaching for an unfamiliar drink at the back of the tray. He smiled. 'Have a nagila? I'm afraid our local amasec isn't up to much. Hardly anywhere to grow the grain, for one thing.'

I took the local beverage, and sipped cautiously finding it a great deal more appetising than the contents of my abandoned glass. I thought briefly about asking what it was made from, then decided I probably didn't want to know.

'Our first priority is to assess the state of readiness of the assets you already have in-system,' Zyvan said, as agreeably surprised as I was. He nodded at me. 'That will be Commissar Cain's job. Once he's done that, we can institute any additional training measures that seem necessary, purge the outstandingly incompetent officers, raise any additional manpower the PDF requires, and garrison a

Guard regiment or two here to make up any deficiencies which may remain.' He regarded the governor seriously over the rim of his glass. 'I trust you have no objection to that?'

'None whatsoever,' Hoy assured him. He returned his gaze to me. 'In fact I'm due to begin a tour of the offworld habs and void stations the day after tomorrow. If you'd care to tag along, I'm sure you'll find my yacht a good deal more comfortable than a military shuttle.'

Well, it would have been churlish to refuse, and the thought of spending the best part of a month cooped up in an *Aquila* with Jorgen wasn't exactly the most congenial prospect I could imagine, so I made a brief show of consideration, and nodded. 'Thank you,' I said, little realising how wide of the mark my next four words were going to be, 'that sounds very pleasant.'



My first impression of the *Wavecrest* did nothing to dispel the fond illusion that, for once, I'd fallen on my feet, and could expect more of a luxury cruise than a tour of inspection. My stateroom was as lavishly appointed as anything I'd come to expect since joining Zyvan's staff; almost too much so, the mattress on the bed being so yielding that climbing into it was more like being swallowed by a patch of tangle-moss than an attempt to rest. After one sleepless night, troubled by dreams of being digested, I instructed Jorgen to remove it, and found the more utilitarian padding of the frame far more to my liking.

He nodded and, to my relief, moved away from the grille of the circulator, where he'd been basking in the frigid draft, [*Cain's aide was a Valhallan and, like most iceworlders, found the temperatures most other Imperial citizens tend to favour sultry at best*] allowing his remarkable body odour to roam the room freely. Jorgen wasn't exactly the most prepossessing soldier in the Imperial Guard: in fact I'd seen troopers who'd been dead for several days and still looked more presentable than he did. That said, he possessed a number of qualities which made him the perfect aide, not the least of which was a literal-minded obduracy in following orders, coupled with an unshakable faith in my judgement second only to his reverence for the Emperor Himself. He'd saved my life on more occasions than either of us could remember, although I tried not to bother him with anything which involved counting above ten, as I suspected that might involve the removal of his socks, a prospect to leave even an ork shuddering.

'Mine was the same,' he said, glaring at the offending mattress. 'Wouldn't have had a wink of sleep if I hadn't turfed it on the floor.' He had a small cabin adjacent to mine, an arrangement common to the guest quarters, where it seemed to be assumed that the occupants would require their valets, maids, coiffurists, or whatever, kept readily to hand. I hadn't had occasion to venture inside, but the glimpses I'd had through the doorway had left me in no doubt that Jorgen had made himself as much at home as he ever did, in a huddle's nest of abandoned meals, discarded underwear and porno slates. I had no idea who was going to tidy up in there after we disembarked, but strongly suspected that whoever got the job would have severely hacked off their superior shortly before.

Overstuffed mattresses notwithstanding, I found the bulk of the voyage as enjoyable as I'd anticipated. We spent almost a month ricocheting from one outpost to another, where Hoy would disembark to confer with the local Administratum adepts, while I put the fear of the Emperor into whatever System Defence force personnel I could find lounging about the place. In general, I have to admit, I was quite favourably impressed; they weren't up to the standard of Guard or Navy regulars, of course, or they'd have been swept up in the manpower tithes, but they were competent enough to give the tati a bloody nose if push came to shove. Not for long, of course; they'd be overwhelmed in a matter of days, but the blues would know they'd been in a fight, and, Emperor willing, be weakened enough for our fleet to have the edge when we turned up to liberate the system again.

Between outposts, we generally had two or three days coasting through open space, which were the next best thing to a holiday. I still had plenty of work to do, of course, remaining in vox contact with Zyvan, and keeping up-to-date with the latest intelligence reports, but, as ever, Jurgen was an invaluable bulwark against the more onerous aspects of my job, deflecting most of the paperwork with his usual efficiency.

That left me free to play the diplomatic game, mingling with the usual collection of aristocratic parasites and senior bureaucrats who accrete round a governor's household, and who were all gratifyingly aware of my unmerited reputation. By playing an adroit combination of the bluff old soldier and the modest hero I was able to milk them for a fair amount of useful intelligence, which I duly passed on to Zyvan, and a couple of morsels of information about the most probable tau sympathisers in positions of influence, which I sent straight to Amberley.

Without doubt, though, the most agreeable aspect of the voyage was the chance to socialise with Hoy; he invited me to his quarters for dinner on several occasions, where Styne, his personal chef, demonstrated an ability with fish dishes bordering on genius. [*Seafood being a staple of the Deepwater diet, of course*] The meal over, we'd retire to the somewhat gaudy lounge, where we'd play a game or two of regicide in front of the armourcrys wall giving on to a spectacular view of the Emperor's demesne, and I'd exaggerate outrageously about my experiences in the front line of its defence.

'It sounds a near miracle that you're here at all,' Hoy said, knocking back his goblet of nagila, and glancing around for a refill. 'Like another?'

I glanced up from the regicide board, where I was on the verge of losing my third game in a row, grateful for the distraction. I'd have preferred to get my tarot deck out, to tell the truth, but I had a feeling that the governor would consider that a rather vulgar pastime, and if he started getting competitive I'd never be able to afford to match his bets anyway. 'No thanks,' I said, considering the offer. Nagila was all very well in its way, but it had a slightly cloying aftertaste, and I was beginning to miss the cleaner flavour of my favourite tippie. 'I'll take an amasec this time.'

'If you're sure,' Hoy said, looking faintly surprised, and signalling for a servant. Unusually, there were none around, as he'd dismissed them all from his quarters after dinner. Unlike most aristos I've come across, he was sensible enough to realise that servants are people too, and liable to gossip about anything they've overheard. 'But I'd have thought you'd prefer something a little better than what we've got to offer.'

'I do,' I said, knowing him well enough by now to be certain that he wouldn't mistake candour for a slight against his home world. 'And I've got a particularly fine bottle in my quarters' If Zyvan was aware that it was missing from his personal stock, he'd been too polite to mention it. 'As this is our last night before making orbit again,' I went on, 'I can't think of a better time to share it.'

Hoy nodded, slowly. Once we got back to Deepwater, our respective duties would make it all but impossible to spend a convivial evening together again, so we might as well make the most of it while we could. 'By all means,' he agreed, and pressed the switch on the arm of his chair again. The servants seemed to be taking an inordinate amount of time to respond. 'Have your man bring it round.'

I stood, a little more carefully than I'd anticipated; nagila may not have been entirely to my taste, but there was no denying it was powerful stuff. 'I'll fetch it myself' I said. So far I'd managed to keep Jurgen out of the governor's way, and felt it would be prudent if I continued to do so.

'Probably best,' Hoy agreed, pressing the call button again with a hint of impatience. 'If he's anything like my staff, we could die of thirst before he got here.'

'Quite,' I agreed diplomatically, and slipped out of the governor's quarters. As the solid gold doors slid closed behind me, the palms of my hands began to itch; a presentiment I'd learned long ago not to ignore, even when, as now, there seemed no obvious reason for disquiet. Loosening my laspistol in its holster I began to walk down the corridor, used by this time to the slightly springy sensation underfoot imparted by the luxuriant carpet. My footfalls were all but silent, and I strained my ears for any sound out of the ordinary.

I could hear nothing unusual, although that brought little comfort. In my experience, it's what you don't notice that kills you. The circulators were humming quietly, and the constant thrumming of the engines, felt through the bones rather than heard, was as steady as ever.

That was when it hit me: not a sound out of place, but the absence of one. Ever since we'd boarded, I'd been aware of the faint murmur of a human presence, mingling with the other noises; now that

nebulous amalgam of distant voices, clattering tools and the footfalls of the lowly toiling in the uncarpeted regions of the ship had vanished completely. Certain by now that something had gone badly awry, I drew my sidearm, and loosened my trusty chainsword in its scabbard.

Rounding the next junction in the corridor, I tensed, seeing a flash of movement in the distance, then began to relax. Hoy's servants were responding to his summons at last, three of them, the gold highlights of their livery flashing as they caught the radiance of the overhead luminators.

I was just on the brink of hailing them, when something about the way they were moving started my palms tingling afresh. They were spread out, like an infantry team advancing into hostile territory, the two on the flanks glancing down each side corridor as they approached it, while the third kept his gaze on the main passageway ahead. I just had time to register the comm-bead in his ear, and the laspistol gripped in his hand, when our eyes locked.

The odds hardly seemed fair; three to one it may have been, but I've spent a lifetime fending off attempts to kill me, generally by things a great deal more formidable than a gaggle of civilian insurrectionists who barely knew one end of a gun barrel from another. I hesitated for a fraction of a second, just to make sure I wasn't misreading the situation, but the moment the pointman stopped gawking at me he began to bring his pistol up, which just goes to show what a frakbrain he was. I'd already got him in my sights, and dropped him with a single shot before he could even come close to threatening me.

The other two were a bit quicker on the mark, although neither seemed to have registered my presence until the snap of ionising air from my lasbolt and the muffled thud of their friend hitting the carpet brought their heads round with identical expressions of stupefied astonishment. I couldn't take them both before they retaliated, though; they were too widely separated, so I cracked off a snapshot at the woman on the left, which despite missing made a nasty mess of some gaudy frescoes millimetres from her head, and dived for cover behind a pedestal supporting a marble bust of some dyspeptic-looking predecessor of Hoy's.

The man on the right recovered first, returning fire with far more enthusiasm than accuracy, and going to ground behind a large ceramic urn, which my next lasbolt shattered most satisfactorily. I followed up with a second as soon as I could squeeze the trigger again, blessing the extra speed and steadiness my augmetic fingers gave me, and he collapsed among the shards, a bloody crater punched neatly into his torso. Seeing him fall, the woman turned and fled towards the dubious refuge of the corridor she'd been investigating, crossing half the distance in a couple of panic-lengthened strides before my next bolt took the back of her head off.

I stood slowly, making sure they didn't have friends within earshot, and walked towards the trio of corpses, wondering what the hell was going on. It would have been flattering to think that I was their intended target, but the encounter had clearly been no more than random chance: if I hadn't had a sudden impulse to fetch the amasec from my quarters, I'd still have been sitting across the regicide board from Hoy, blithely unaware of whatever was happening.

I raised a hand to my ear, before belatedly recalling that I'd left my comm-bead in my quarters, along with instructions to Jurgen that I wasn't to be disturbed for anything less urgent than the sudden appearance of a tau battlefleet. The scapegraces who'd attacked me were all well past the point of being able to give answers, something a cursory examination made all too clear, and I was on the point of turning away when a faint hissing sound drew my attention to the leader's earpiece, which, by some miracle, was still functioning. I picked it up, and listened with interest.

'Yannis, where are you?' a female voice asked, not for the first time judging by the petulant tone beginning to creep into it. 'Team three respond! You should have met Kraven in the governor's quarters by now!'

'None of your people can answer at the moment,' I said, the residual adrenaline buzz from the skirmish combining with the nagila still sloshing around my system to override my more cautious instincts. 'They're a bit too busy being dead.'

'Who is this?' The voice was sounding more curious than irritable now, and I had the sudden unnerving sensation of having attracted the attention of a predator, which I'd last experienced in the underhives of Hope Springs just before the genestealers started coming out of the walls. No matter, I told myself, beginning to regret my moment of uncharacteristic bravado; whoever was on the other end of the vox-link could hardly talk me to death.

'Commissar Cain,' I said, injecting a dash of the insouciant self-assurance I liked to project in my

younger days, whenever there were impressionable young ladies in the room. *[And the rest of his life, too, although by this point it was more habit than a serious attempt at seduction. I'd certainly have known if it wasn't]* 'And you would be...?'

'Entirely unconcerned,' the voice replied, with what the owner no doubt hoped was withering scorn. Having survived the displeasure of a number of women over the years, including an inquisitor, the heiress to a planet, and a sorceress who came back from the dead as a daemon, *[Hardly the most flattering company to have been lumped in with]* I was singularly unimpressed. 'You'll be dead soon enough.'

'Forgive me if this sounds a little ungallant,' I riposted, 'but I've heard that before.' I was already moving as I spoke, jogging back to Hoy's quarters, alert for any sound betraying the approach of another squad of turncoat retainers. I didn't think the woman would be stupid enough to issue orders to the rest of her brigands on the frequency we were using to converse, but I kept the channel open anyway on general principles.

'Hanar, this is Roxwell,' a new voice broke in after a moment, and I blessed the lack of imagination of the average civilian. The earpieces they'd been issued with were on a preset frequency, so it hadn't occurred to anyone to change them. 'The enginarium's secured.'

'Bully for you,' I cut in, scenting the chance for a bit of misdirection. 'Let's see how long it takes me to loosen it up again.' I hadn't the slightest intention of going anywhere near the place, of course. But with any luck my shadowy enemies would be so taken with my hollow reputation that they'd dig in there, expecting me to burst through the door, diverting enough reinforcements to pretty much give me the run of the rest of the ship. Which, now I came to think about it, wasn't all that big, at least compared to the warp-going transports I'd spent so much of my life aboard.

Besides, it was clear from the first thing I'd overheard that Hoy was either a target, or involved in the conspiracy, and on the whole the former was far more likely. If I could get to him before Kraven, whoever the hell that was, with any luck he'd be able to give me some answers about whatever was going on.

As I approached the governor's quarters I slowed my pace, checking the charge in my laspistol's powerpack, and drawing my chainsword. The golden doors were open, and a cape of chill presentiment settled itself around my shoulders.

On entering, a single glance was all it took to confirm my worst fears. The governor was dead, most of his torso seared away by an energy bolt of quite staggering power; I'd seen the damage done by plasma weapons often enough to recognise it, and felt an even stronger sense of foreboding than before. Whoever Hanar's people were, they were well resourced; plasma weapons were rare to say the least, and the vast majority of them firmly in the hands of the Emperor's faithful servants.

Palms tingling anew, I edged further inside, keeping my back to the wall and an eye on the door. My erstwhile drinking companion had clearly been taken by surprise, but hadn't gone down without a fight; there was another body sprawled across the carpet, dressed in the plain utilitarian uniform of a member of the ship's crew, the small, neat hole punched through his forehead confirming the suspicion I'd long harboured that the ornate ring on Hoy's index finger was a digital weapon of some kind.

I swept the room rapidly, but the mere fact that my head was still attached to my shoulders was enough to confirm that the assassin had been alone. Besides which, if he'd had any companions with him, they would undoubtedly have recovered the weapon he'd dropped when Hoy took his final revenge. (It was actually hard to tell who'd died first, as the final involuntary muscle spasm could have triggered either weapon, but given the manifest accuracy of Hoy's shot, my money would have been on the governor beating his assailant to the punch. Just his hard luck that Kraven had been armed in the way he was; a las or autopistol might well have missed Hoy altogether, but the plasma bolt had expanded as it travelled.)

I bent to pick up the assassin's handgun from the floor, rescabbing my chainsword to do so, although I'd have kissed an ork before I let go of my laspistol at that point. The handgun's smooth surface, devoid of devotional icons and the seals of sanctification bestowed by the tech-priests, bespoke its unhallowed origins, and I was unable to suppress a shudder of revulsion as I closed my hand around it. It was of tau origin, I'd seen enough of their xenos tech over the years to be certain of that, and a grim conclusion began to force its way into my thoughts. Hoy's assassination was almost certainly a decapitation strike, intended to sow confusion and discord in advance of a xenos invasion,



which meant that an all-out attack on the Deepwater system must be imminent.

I took a deep breath, forcing down my spiralling fears. I knew where the vox room was, from my periodic reports to Zyvan; all I had to do was reach it, and warn the fleet. Of course I'd have to make my way through an indeterminate number of xenos sympathisers to get there, but I'd faced far worse odds than that before, and I was still around to tell the tale.

Despite my misgivings, I tucked the plasma pistol into the sash at my waist before leaving the room, as gingerly as if it was a greech egg. *[A life form unlive to the Bannen system, most notable for its acidic blood, which is capable of eating through ceramite armour in a matter of seconds. Its eggs are full of the stuff which makes handling them something of a risky business]* It was clear evidence of the xenos's involvement which would convince even the most sceptical of Zyvan's underlings, and I was sure Amberley would appreciate the chance to do whatever it is inquisitors do with unhallowed artefacts. *[That depends on the individual of course: I lend towards stiff disposal, but there are radicals out there unbalanced enough to actually use the things. Had enough in my own ordo, but a truly terrifying prospect where the Malleus is concerned]*

I was on the point of leaving, when I noticed that the prostrate assassin had a comm-bead in his ear as well, and, struck by an idea, relined the one I'd confiscated from the late and unlamented Yannis.

'Kraven. Are you receiving?' Hanar's voice came through almost at once, and I smiled grimly to myself as I slipped out of the room. No harm in dividing the opposition up even further, I thought; by the time they responded, I'd be long gone.

'Hello again, Hanar,' I said. 'Kraven's dead. Can I take a message?' I trotted along the corridor, keeping an eye out for any more insurrectionists, but the whole ship seemed eerily quiet and still. I soon found the reason for that; as I rounded a corner, I almost stumbled over the corpses of a couple of ladies' maids, evidently gunned down as they tried to flee, and any thoughts I might have had about offering terms of surrender to the pirates evaporated abruptly. Civilian casualties are a sad inevitability of warfare, but any true servant of the Emperor tries to avoid harming His subjects as much as possible. Casual butchery like this was the mark of creatures like the orks, or debased followers of the Ruinous Powers, and for the first time I began to appreciate just how ruthless my foes were in pursuit of their agenda.

The unfortunate women were just the first of many, I discovered, as I made my way through the passageways; servant and plenipotentiary alike had been slaughtered where they stood, or, more frequently, as they ran or tried to make a fight of it. The guest quarters, where most of the local aristocracy and adepts had been sleeping when the insurrectionists began their coup, was a charnel house. I approached my own stateroom with a rising sense of foreboding, fearing to find my aide among the casualties at any moment but to my relief, both my own room and Jurgen's were empty, only the faint residue of his body odour remaining to confirm that he'd been there at all. Where he'd gone I had no idea, but his lasgun was missing as well, which was a good sign. Like any Guardsman, he'd as soon be parted from his right arm as his weapon, and I was certain he'd be prepared to use it. As reassured as it was possible to be under the circumstances, I picked up the bottle of amasec from my quarters, and slipped it into my greatcoat pocket after a quick restorative gulp. So fine an example of the distiller's art undoubtedly deserved better, but I didn't have time to savour it properly, and I was damned if I was going to leave it for a bunch of murdering brigands. Then, as ready as I was ever going to be, I set off for the vox room.

Having been aboard the *Wavecrest* for the best part of a month, I had a reasonable idea of the layout, which my innate sense of spatial awareness in enclosed environments had helped to sharpen. Ever since Kari had conducted me through the service passages of the *Hand of Vengeance* during the ork attack off Perlia, I had cultivated the habit of making a quiet mental note of the hatchways giving access to these areas on every vessel I'd travelled aboard, so I had a rough idea of how they interconnected as well. On a troopship or military vessel these would be guarded by security codes, which I generally found some way to get my hands on, but in the case of the *Wavecrest* the opportunity hadn't arisen, so I supposed I'd be stuck in the main corridors. That was irksome, as I was sure Hanar's people would be searching them diligently by now, but for an old hiver like me playing hunt the sumprat in a maze of passageways was second nature, so I was certain I'd still have the edge. It all seemed to go fine at first. I knew the vox room was three decks up from the guest quarters, near the bridge, so I headed for the nearest stairwell. There were lifts too, of course, but I'd got far too much sense to box myself in, waiting to be gunned down like a trakki. *[A Valhallan fowl, proverbially*



*too stupid and slow-moving to offer any challenge to a hunter]* I'd be keeping them covered if I was Hanar, and, from what I'd seen, whoever she was, she was far from stupid.

As I approached the stairwell I heard voices. It seemed I'd read my unseen enemy right, and she had enough manpower spare to cover the stairwells too. Drawing my chainsword again, I flattened myself against the side of the corridor, and peered cautiously around the angle of the walls.

Sure enough, there was a reception committee waiting for me, two more fellows in the livery of servants, another crewman, and a fourth individual whose presence came as a real surprise. I'd last seen him at a cotillion in the ballroom a couple of nights before, where he'd droned on about the economics of fish ranching and the extent of his family estates at tedious length, before asking what I now realised had been a few artfully ingenuous questions about the Imperial Guard regiments embedded in our task force. (Which I'd declined to answer, of course, in favour of embroidering a few of my own past exploits, much to my retrospective relief.) It seemed that the conspiracy included members of the Deepwater aristocracy, as well as the lower orders, and from the easy manner in which the fellow was conversing with his social inferiors, the pernicious notion of egalitarianism held out by the tau had evidently found converts even among those with the most to lose from its adoption. I observed the group of traitors for a few more moments, before concluding that any attempt to get past them to the stairs would be doomed to failure. They had room to scatter in the wide landing, and if I mistimed my attack, they could separate and pick me off. At least one of the group had a comm-bead, too, and I couldn't see the others clearly enough to be sure that he was the only one; if any of the heretics was able to vox a warning before I killed them all, the net would be closing around me faster than you could say 'The Emperor protects'.

I was on the verge of slinking away when it suddenly dawned on me that the fellow with the visible earpiece appeared to be engaged in an urgent conversation, although none of his companions seemed to be responding. Intrigued, I tried retuning the set in my ear again, and was almost instantly rewarded with the sound of Hanar's voice. It seemed she learned fast, and was switching frequencies in an attempt to keep me from listening in.

'Hold your position,' she said, sounding a little miffed that no one had reported killing me by now. 'He can't get off that deck without using one of the stairways or elevators, and when he tries, we'll have him.'

'Can you get another team down here to help sweep the corridors?' the aristo asked, confirming my suspicion that more than one of the group was in the comm-net. 'Roxwell says he's already set the fusion reactors to overload, so his group aren't needed in the enginarium any more.'

A sliver of ice seemed to enter my spinal cord as he spoke. It seemed that the traitors were preparing to cover their tracks by destroying the *Wavecrest* entirely, making the loss of the governor look like a tragic accident. I'd seen spacecraft reactors breach before, although in most cases the catastrophe had been triggered by a lance or torpedo volley. I knew that once they'd carried out their dastardly plan, there would be nothing left of the yacht beyond a cloud of superheated plasma, burning like a brief, miniature sun, consuming everything within a couple of kilometres of the explosion point.

To hell with the vox room, I thought, it was time to start looking for an escape pod. I withdrew carefully round the corner, and considered my options. The launch racks were all on the deck below, on the reasonable assumption that anyone on the upper levels would head for the shuttle hangars in an emergency, which meant I had to get past the pickets after all.

Suppressing the impulse to join in the conversation this time, I listened to Hanar's reply with considerable interest.

'No,' she said, to my immense relief. 'Roxwell stays put. They're already welding the doors shut down there. Cain said he's on his way to retake the place, so he can waste his time trying to get in if he ever makes it that far. Even if he does, they'll be waiting.'

I digested this with some puzzlement, wondering how they intended getting out before the reactor blew if they were sealing the room, before the full extent of their fanaticism finally dawned on me. They weren't going to. This was a suicide mission, at least for some of them; and for all I knew, the entire cabal was intending to go down with the ship. Which simply didn't make sense. They'd achieved their objective, so far as I could see. Why not stick around to enjoy it, and get a pat on the back from their alien masters?

Well, as I've remarked on more than one occasion, heretics are all deranged by definition, although this was more the kind of thing I'd expect from Chaos worshippers than the followers of the so-called

Greater Good. I gave up trying to understand it in favour of staying alive, which has always been one of my favourite occupations. I lowever you looked at it, things were grim. I was just on the verge of chancing the stairs anyway, and trusting to the Emperor to watch my back in the regrettable absence of Jurgen, when the initiative was abruptly wrested out of my hands.

'There he is!' someone shouted, an instant before a las-bolt detonated against the wall, far enough from where I was standing to induce apoplexy in the average Imperial Guard small arms instructor. I spun round, already bringing up my laspistol, to see a trio of crewmen charging towards me with all the finesse of a rabble of gretchin, brandishing handguns of their own as they came. I put a las-bolt through the one who'd shot at me, as he was marginally in front, and to my immense satisfaction he tripped the others as he fell. I was about to pick them off before they could rise again, when a stubber round ricocheted from the wall behind me. I turned, to find the party from the stairwell rounding the corner, the light of murder in their eyes, and brought my pistol up, while looking desperately around for some cover.

There was none. By sheer bad luck I was between cross passageways, nothing to my right or left but the burnished metal walls. There was nothing else for it but to trust in the Emperor, and try to keep them rattled enough not to shoot straight, so I bellowed 'Waaaaaaaarggggghhhh!' with all the gusto of an ork, and charged at them, chainsword swinging, and depleting the power pack of my laspistol as rapidly as I could pull the trigger. Of course I didn't have a hope of accuracy under the circumstances, even a skilled marksman [*Which Cain most certainly was, despite his frequent protestations to the contrary*] finding it all but impossible to hit a moving target while running. But Him on Earth must have been looking over my shoulder after all, because one of my wild lasbolts caught the renegade aristo on the upper arm just as he pulled the trigger of another tau-made plasma pistol, making the shot go wide and punching a molten hole in the wall of the corridor.

I was still a few strides short of being able to bring the chainsword into play, though, and to my chagrin the sight of it wasn't causing them to falter as I'd hoped. It's a formidable looking weapon, and generally an untrained opponent doesn't have the nerve to face one without flinching, being able to picture it shearing through their own tender flesh all too vividly. Untrained they may have been, but they were fanatics, prepared to die for their cause, and they held their ground, bringing their weapons on aim, each one certain that if he fell, one of his friends would kill me an instant later. Not only that, the two survivors behind me would be climbing to their feet by now, preparing to shoot me in the back.

As I've remarked before, even the slimmest chance is better than no chance at all, so I did the one thing I hoped they wouldn't expect, diving forwards into a roll, hoping to close the distance and take the legs out from under them with the humming blade before they could readjust their aim. No sooner had I hit the carpet than a blizzard of lasbolts scorched the air above me, the distinctive overlapping crackle of a lasgun on full auto echoing from the enclosing walls. As I rose to my feet to find my putative targets making a mess of the expensive floor coverings with their bodily fluids, I breathed a heartfelt sigh of relief, despite the assault on my nostrils which the act of inhaling now entailed.

'Well done, Jurgen,' I said. 'Timely as ever.' Warned by the sudden shifting of his aim, I turned and dispatched one of the crewmen behind me, a steward I vaguely remembered handing me a drink at a couple of social gatherings, and who I now found it hard not to resent having tipped, while Jurgen took out the other with a single shot to the head.

'You're welcome, sir,' he said, as phlegmatically as ever, and glanced at me. 'What do we do now?'

'Escape pod,' I said. I'd been in enough of them to know that they all carried vox-sets as a matter of course, and with the *Wavecrest* about to blow up under our feet, I'd feel far happier warning Zyvan about the imminent tau attack from the relative safety of open space than fighting our way through to the vox room. 'How did you manage to avoid getting killed with everyone else?'

'I hid in the service passages,' Jurgen said, leading the way to an open access hatch in the wall which I'd barely noticed before. 'I reckoned they wouldn't expect us to think of that.' He looked at me a trifle quizzically. 'I thought you'd be doing the same.'

'How did you get the access codes?' I asked, not bothering to waste any more time on being surprised. Jurgen's ability to scrounge the most unlikely things bordered on the preternatural, and if anyone had been able to get their hands on secure information like that it would have been him.

His expression grew even more puzzled. 'Access codes?' he repeated blankly, and it belatedly dawned on me that the locking plate such hatches generally had was missing. Apparently it simply wouldn't

occur to the kind of passenger the *Wavecrest* usually carried that the utility areas even existed, let alone that they might be entered.

'Never mind,' I said, drawing the hatchway closed behind us, and trying not to breathe too deeply in the confined space. 'How did you find me?'

Jurgen shrugged. 'They've killed everyone else, so I just listened out for more shooting.' It had evidently never crossed his mind that I wouldn't have survived, and I found the notion curiously touching.

'We need to get to the saviour pods,' I said. 'They're overloading the reactor to cover their tracks, and I don't know how long we've got before it blows'

Most people would have found that little piece of information somewhat disturbing, to say the least, but Jurgen simply nodded, as though I'd been commenting on the weather. 'Better get a move on then, sir,' he agreed.

We double-timed it in what I hoped was the most likely direction to find a vertical shaft, and found one with gratifying speed; I was beginning to think that the Emperor was looking out for me after all, although I have to admit I was doing my best to make things easy for Him. As I reluctantly stowed my weapons, and Jurgen slung his lasgun across his back, I looked around apprehensively. I knew some of the crew had joined the heretics, which meant that they'd be unlikely to overlook the warren of service tunnels we now found ourselves in. 'Have you seen anyone else in here?' I asked.

'Not really,' Jurgen said, to my immense relief. 'There were a couple of traitors passing through a while back, but they didn't notice me. They seemed a bit busy.'

'Doing what?' I asked, and my aide shrugged.

'Messing about with stuff he said, unhelpfully. 'Like the cogboys do, but without the incense and the chanting.' More tau influence, I thought. They don't have any respect for the machine-spirits, just bullying them into compliance instead of invoking their aid with the proper rituals, and their human dupes tend to behave in the same way. Why their mechanisms don't just stop working out of sheer pique is beyond me, but perhaps they have other methods of propitiating them. *[A question the Adeptus Mechanicus would very much like to have answered. A few magi have gone so far as to suggest that the machine-spirits of the Tau Empire might even be subverted and turned against their masters if they could somehow be persuaded that the servants of the Imperium would accord them the veneration they deserve, but so far no practical method of attempting the experiment has been proposed]*

'We'd better move quietly, then,' I said, at least partially reassured that the notion of anyone crossing from the passenger areas to the service passages seemed to be unthinkable to the renegade crew members. I climbed down the ladder we'd found as quickly as I could, stepping from it into a low-ceilinged corridor lined with cabling. There was a body down here too, a junior engineeer judging by her robes, so it seemed that not all the crew had been in on the mutiny.

Jurgen joined me a few seconds later, and glanced around, unslinging his lasgun. 'Which way, sir?' he asked, certain as always that I'd have the answer.

'Down there,' I said, indicating a passageway I was certain would take us to the saviour pods, and leading the way at a run. Despite my innate paranoia, and almost a century of discovering that when things appear to be going well it's just because you haven't noticed the real threat, I began to feel cautiously optimistic. Even if the saviour pods were guarded, the two of us would certainly be able to overcome any resistance, and I reached out to open the hatch leading to the corridor with a rising sense of confidence. Not enough to overcome my cautious streak, which was beginning to kick in again now the nagila was wearing off, so I kept an ear out for any stray traitors who might still be wandering around.

I was still listening to the comm-bead I'd confiscated too, switching frequencies at random, hoping to pick up more chatter, but it seemed Hanar had finally given up playing that game in favour of complete vox silence; something I hoped meant that they were too busy to worry about me any more, although I was too much of a realist to believe it.

We emerged into a wide gallery, with one of the armourcrys walls Hoy seemed to have been so fond of, and I was relieved to find no sign of anyone's presence. No one living, at any rate; the bodies of a young couple were sprawled across one of the padded seats lining the hullward side of the concourse, evidently interrupted in the middle of a romantic tryst. The luminators were dim here, to allow the full splendour of the stars to be appreciated, and their bluish radiance cast a chill pallor across the faces of

the slaughtered lovers.

Despite the urgency of our errand, I found myself hesitating for a moment, scanning the starscape anxiously for any specks of light which might be moving, betraying the presence of marauding tau battleships already inbound, even though I knew the effort would be futile. If things had got that bad, Zyvan would have mobilised the fleet in any case, warned by the auspex traces of the invaders emerging from the warp.

Well, let them come and be damned, I thought. Once Jurgen and I had raised the alarm, they'd find themselves coasting blithely into a trap, and serve them right for the cowardly curs they were.

So thinking, I led the way towards the launching racks at a rapid rate, my stride broken only by the occasional need to hurdle another cadaver, alert for any sign of a guard but, to my surprise and relief, there didn't seem to be one. There was a small group of corpses near the furthest of the pods, which was hardly a surprise; it wasn't hard to picture them being gunned down as they attempted to reach safety by launching themselves into space.

A couple of paces behind me, Jurgen sniffed loudly. 'Something smells funny,' he said, oblivious as usual to the irony.

'Plasma discharge,' I said, recognising the mingled odours of charred meat and ozone I'd scented in Hoy's quarters, and a tingle of unease brushed through me. How many more of the heretics had those damned weapons?

There was no more time to worry about that, though, because I'd reached the nearest saviour pod, with a hearty prayer of thanks to the Emperor. As I glanced inside, however, disappointment kicked me in the gut. The interior was a mess, wrecked beyond all hope of use, the vox and the launching mechanism melted into slag by a volley of plasma blasts.

'This one's the same,' Jurgen reported, with a cursory glance at the next in line. And so's this.'

'Check them all,' I said, convinced that it would be futile, but clinging to the faintest shred of hope, as I always did. There might still be something we could do, or salvage, and if the worst came to the worst we'd just have to break into the enginarium, take out the heretics guarding it, and hope we could find some way of undoing whatever it was they'd done to turn the *Wavecrest* into a massive bomb. As we reached the last pod in the line, though, Jurgen turned to me with the slight nod he generally employed when he was pleased about something, but thought it beneath his dignity to display overmuch enthusiasm. 'This one's all right,' he said.

'Good,' I replied, hardly able to seem less cool than my aide, and stepped round the huddle of corpses impeding my progress. As I did so, I glanced down, and my palms prickled anew. This was definitely not right. They'd all been carrying weapons, the same mix of stubbers and laspistols I'd seen the heretics favour, so they couldn't have been innocent victims as I'd first assumed, but the manner of their deaths was unmistakably the work of one of their own.

Well, whatever internecine feud had erupted between the traitors was no concern of mine, so I followed Jurgen into the pod. As I did so, my foot clanked against a couple of holdalls someone had left lying on the floor, and, fearing a booby trap, I stooped to investigate. To my surprise, it was stuffed full of the kind of expensive trinkets the *Wavecrest* was littered with: small gold statues, gem encrusted data-slates, a devotional cogwheel from the engineers' chapel of the Omnisiah cast in platinum, that kind of thing. Between them, the two bags must have held a small fortune.

'Strap in,' I said, taking no further interest in the find now that I was sure it was harmless, but I might as well have saved my breath. No doubt remembering the uncomfortable manner in which we'd parted company from the *Hand of Vengeance*, Jurgen was already fastening his crash webbing, his lasgun neatly stowed at his feet. Unlike the saviour pod we'd inadvertently commandeered on that occasion, which had been commodious enough to take dozens of survivors, this one was cramped, intended for a mere handful, and the narrow seats certainly hadn't been designed with armed Guardsmen in mind, let alone a commissar with a chainsword and pistol holster. I couldn't strap myself in without taking off my weapon belt, which I did reluctantly, but kept everything as close to hand as possible; unfortunately the padding on the chair was as extravagantly yielding as the mattress I'd discarded, and I sank into it so deeply my fingertips could barely reach my weapons.

No matter, I thought, and raised my hand to punch the launching button, which the artificer had been thoughtful enough to incorporate into the armrest of every seat. Before I could activate it, however, a middle-aged woman in the robes of an Administratum scribe appeared in the hatchway, lugging another bagful of loot. Her eyes widened as she took in our presence, and she dropped her burden to

draw one of the tau pistols from the recesses of her robe in a single fluid movement.

I couldn't press the button with her standing there; if she was caught by the closing hatch the pod wouldn't launch, and if she wasn't and it did, she'd gun us both down before we could fight free of the crash webbing and reach our weapons. So I smiled instead, projecting an air of calm assurance in the hope of seizing the initiative. 'You must be Hanar,' I said, as though we'd simply run into each other at a social gathering.

'I am,' she agreed, trapped by convention into responding rather than shooting me straight away. 'And you're Cain.' Her expression flickered a little, as she got her first full-strength whiff of Jurgan, and a trace of surprise appeared on her face. 'Who's he?'

'Gunner Jurgan, my aide,' I said. 'Quite a resourceful fellow.'

'Evidently.' Her eyes took in each of us, emotionless and calculating. 'Any more of you evade the sweep?'

I shrugged. 'Who knows?' I doubted it, but it wouldn't hurt to give her something else to worry about. 'No matter.' Hanar echoed the gesture. 'Anyone else on the loose will go up with the ship, and your precious Lord General.'

'Zyvan?' I began in surprise. 'What does he...' Then the coin dropped. 'Oh, I see. That's why you're staying on board. You still need to steer this tub.'

'Quite.' The ghost of a smile tugged at the corner of her mouth, and subsided again. 'The *Wavecrest's* a gigantic torpedo, aimed right at your flagship. When it's been vaporised, and your task force is leaderless, the tau will be able to liberate the whole cluster from Imperial oppression.'

'I'm sorry to disappoint you,' I said, masking my horror at the idea with the ease of a lifetime's dissembling, 'but Zyvan's death won't make a blind bit of difference. In the military we have this thing called the chain of command. The senior surviving officer will simply take over where he left off. But he wouldn't have Zyvan's flair for leadership, and the unflinching confidence of the men under his command that the Lord General enjoyed. There was no doubt about it, if this heinous plan succeeded, we'd all be in deep trouble.'

'We'll see,' Hanar said, gesturing with the barrel of the alien weapon she held. 'Now, if you'll both get out of those seats, and out of the pod, I'll be on my way.'

'Stay where you are, Jurgan,' I said, suddenly realising why we were both still alive. 'She daren't fire that thing in here, in case she fraks up the equipment.'

'I'll risk it if I have to,' Hanar said, a trace of uncertainty cracking her imperturbable mask.

'I doubt that,' I said, allowing a measure of scorn to enter my voice. 'I wonder how your comrades would feel if they knew then-leader's nothing more than a coward and a common thief.'

'I'm nothing of the kind,' Hanar said, her voice so tightly controlled that I could hear the anger behind it scrabbling to get out. 'I'm quite an exceptional thief. And if those idiots are so keen to lay down their lives for the Greater Good, fine, they're welcome to. I intend to be around afterwards to reap the benefits.' She forced a mirthless laugh, which didn't suit her at all. 'Why shouldn't I be well paid for my efforts? How much have you ever got from putting your life on the line, all those times you've been boring the parasites about ever since you came aboard?'

'I get the standard pay specified by the Munitorum for a commissar of my seniority and length of service,' I replied, uncomfortably aware of how much we seemed to have in common after all. 'Plus accommodation and rations, when required.' I smiled slowly, an idea beginning to form. It was risky, but if I didn't do something soon, she'd kill both of us anyway. I gestured with my hand, up towards my head. And the hat and the sash, of course. No commissar worth the name would be seen dead without those.' I let my hand come to rest against the crimson cloth around my waist.

Hanar smiled vindictively, her mind made up at last. 'Then this must be your lucky day,' she said, her finger tightening on the trigger.

I fired first, the plasma bolt from the weapon I'd picked up earlier vaporising the front of my sash and scorching the legs of my trousers, before taking the traitorous adept high on the right side of her chest, searing away her shoulder and upper arm. She staggered back, shrieking, as her forearm and hand, still clutching the butt of the tau pistol, thudded to the deck plates.

'Jurgan! Go!' I shouted, relieved to see that she'd cleared the hatch, but my faithful aide had already punched the button on the arm of his chair. I just had time for one last glimpse of Hanar, lunging desperately for the pod again despite her appalling injuries, before the hatch clanged shut and the engine ignited, throwing us clear of the *Wavecrest* with a surge of acceleration which almost made me

feel grateful for the excessive padding of the seat.

'What do we do now, sir?' Jurgen asked, once we'd got the vox to work and reported the situation to Zyvan, who'd assured me that the matter would be dealt with.

'Sit tight and enjoy the fireworks, I suppose,' I said, as a small nova flared briefly among the starfield, the *Wavecrest* detonating far short of her intended target as the flagship's crew made the most of the chance for some unexpected target practice. It would take a few hours for the pod's machine-spirit to guide us home, and I fished the bottle of amasec out of my pocket speculatively. 'I don't suppose there are any glasses aboard this thing?'

