



ONE

*'I don't know what effect they have on the enemy,
but by the Emperor, they frighten me.'*

– General Karis, of the Valhallans under his command

One of the first things you learn as a commissar is that people are never pleased to see you; something that's no longer the case where I'm concerned, of course, now that my glorious and undeserved reputation precedes me wherever I go. A good rule of thumb in my younger days, but I'd never found myself staring down death in the eyes of the troopers I was supposed to be inspiring with loyalty to the Emperor before. In my early years as an occasionally loyal minion of his Glorious Majesty, I'd faced, or to be more accurate, ran away screaming from, orks, necrons, tyranids, and a severely hacked off daemonhost, just to pick out some of the highlights of my ignominious career. But standing in that mess room, a heartbeat away from being

ripped apart by mutinous Guardsmen, was a unique experience, and one that I have no wish to repeat.

I should have realised how bad the situation was when the commanding officer of my new regiment actually smiled at me as I stepped off the shuttle. I already had every reason to fear the worst, of course, but by that time I was out of options. Paradoxical as it might seem, taking this miserable assignment had looked uncomfortably like the best chance I had of keeping my precious skin in one piece.

The problem, of course, was my undeserved reputation for heroism, which by that time had grown to such ludicrous proportions that the Commissariat had finally noticed me and decided that my talents were being wasted in the artillery unit I'd picked as the safest place to sit out my lifetime of service to the Emperor, a long way away from the sharp end of combat. Accordingly, I'd found myself plucked from a position of relative obscurity and attached directly to Brigade headquarters.

That hadn't seemed too bad at first, as I'd had little to do except shuffle datafiles and organise the occasional firing squad, which had suited me fine, but the trouble with everybody thinking you're a hero is that they tend to assume you like being in mortal danger and go out of their way to provide some. In the half-dozen years since my arrival, I'd been temporarily seconded to units assigned, among other things, to assault fixed positions, clear out a space hulk, and run recon deep behind enemy lines. And every time I'd made it back alive, due in no small part to my natural talent for diving for cover and waiting for the noise to stop, the general staff had patted me on the head, given me another commendation, and tried to find an even more inventive way of getting me killed.

Something obviously had to be done, and done fast, before my luck ran out altogether. So, as I often had before, I let my reputation do the work for me and put in a request for a

transfer back to a regiment. Any regiment. By that time I just didn't care. Long experience had taught me that the opportunities for taking care of my own neck were much higher when I could pull rank on every officer around me.

'I just don't think I'm cut out for data shuffling,' I said apologetically to the weasel-faced little runt from the lord general's office. He nodded judiciously, and made a show of paging through my file.

'I can't say I'm surprised,' he said, in a slightly nasal whine. Although he tried to look cool and composed, his body language betrayed his excitement at being in the presence of a living legend; at least that's what some damn fool pictcast commentator had called me after the Siege of Perlia, and the appellation stuck. The next thing I know my own face is grinning at me from recruiting posters all over the sector, and I couldn't even grab a mug of recaf without having a piece of paper shoved under my nose with a request to autograph it. 'It doesn't suit everybody.'

'It's a shame we can't all have your dedication to the smooth running of the Imperium,' I said. He looked sharply at me for a moment, wondering if I was taking the frak, which of course I was, then decided I was simply being civil. I decided to ladle it on a bit. 'But I'm afraid I've been a soldier too long to start changing my habits now.'

That was the sort of thing Cain the Hero was supposed to say, of course, and weasel-face lapped it up. He took my transfer request from me as though it was a relic from one of the blessed saints.

'I'll handle it personally,' he said, practically bowing as he showed me out.

And so it was, a month or so later, I found myself in a shuttle approaching the hangar bay of the *Righteous Wrath*, a battered

old troopship identical to thousands in Imperial service, almost all of which I sometimes think I've travelled on over the years. The familiar smell of shipboard air, stale, recycled, inextricably intertwined with rancid sweat, machine oil and boiled cabbage, hissed into the passenger compartment as the hatch seals opened. I inhaled it gratefully, as it displaced the no less familiar odour of Gunner Jurgen, my aide almost since the outset of my commissarial career nearly twenty years before.

Short for a Valhallan, Jurgen somehow managed to look awkward and out of place wherever he was, and in all our time together, I couldn't recall a single occasion on which he'd ever worn anything that appeared to fit properly. Though amiable enough in temperament, he seemed ill at ease with people, and, in turn, most preferred to avoid his company; a tendency no doubt exacerbated by the perpetual psoriasis that afflicted him, as well as his body odour, which, in all honesty, took quite a bit of getting used to.

Nevertheless he'd proven an able and valued aide, due in no small part to his peculiar mentality. Not overly bright, but eager to please and doggedly literal in his approach to following orders, he'd become a useful buffer between me and some of the more onerous aspects of my job. He never questioned anything I said or did, apparently convinced that it must be for the good of the Imperium in some way, which, given the occasionally discreditable activities I'd been known to indulge in, was a great deal more than I could have hoped for from any other trooper. Even after all this time I still find myself missing him on occasion.

So he was right there at my side, half-hidden by our combined luggage, which he'd somehow contrived to gather up and hold despite the weight, as my boot heels first rang on the deck plating beneath the shuttle. I didn't object; experience had taught me that it was a good idea for people meeting him for the first time to get the full picture in increments.

I paused fractionally for dramatic effect before striding forward to meet the small knot of Guard officers drawn up to greet me by the main cargo doors, the clang of my footsteps on the metal sounding as crisp and authoritative as I could contrive; an effect undercut slightly by the pops and clangs from the scorched area under the shuttle engines as it cooled, and Jurgen's tottering gait behind me.

'Welcome, commissar. This is a great honour.' A surprisingly young woman with red hair and blue eyes stepped forward and snapped a crisp salute with parade ground efficiency. I thought for a moment that I was being subtly snubbed with only the junior officers present, before I reconciled her face with the file picture in the briefing slate. I returned the salute.

'Colonel Kasteen.' I nodded an acknowledgement. Despite having no objection to being fawned over by young women in the normal course of events, I found such a transparent attempt at ingratiation a little nauseating. Then I got a good look at her hopeful expression and felt as though I'd stepped on a non-existent final stair. She was absolutely sincere. Emperor help me, they really were pleased to see me. Things must be even worse here than I'd imagined.

Just how bad they actually were I had yet to discover, but I already had some presentiment. For one thing, the palms of my hands were tingling, which always means there's trouble hanging in the air like the static before a storm, and for another, I'd broken with the habit of a lifetime and actually read the briefing slate carefully on the tedious voyage out here to meet the ship.

To cut a long story short, morale in the Valhallan 296th/301st was at rock bottom, and the root cause of it all was obvious from the regiment's title. Combining below-strength regiments was standard practice among the Imperial Guard, a sensible way of consolidating after combat losses to keep units up to strength

and of further use in the field. What hadn't been sensible was combining what was left of the 301st, a crack planetary assault unit with fifteen hundred years of traditional belief in their innate superiority over every other unit in the Guard, particularly the other Valhallan ones, with the 296th; a rear echelon garrison command, which, just to throw promethium on the flames, was one of the few all-women regiments raised and maintained by that desolate iceball. And just to put the cherry on it, Kasteen had been given overall command by virtue of three days' seniority over her new immediate subordinate, a man with far more combat experience.

Not that any of them truly lacked that now, after the battle for Corania. The tyranids had attacked without warning, and every Guard regiment on the planet had been forced to resist ferociously for nearly a year before the navy and a couple of Astartes Chapters¹ had arrived to turn the tide. By that time, every surviving unit had sustained at least fifty per cent casualties, many of them a great deal more, and the bureaucrats of the Munitorium had begun the process of consolidating the battered survivors into useful units once again.

On paper, at least. No one with any practical military experience would have been so half-witted as to ignore the morale effects of their decisions. But that's bureaucrats for you. Maybe if a few more Administratum drones were given lasguns and told to soldier alongside the troopers for a month or two it would shake their ideas up a bit. Assuming by some miracle they weren't shot in the back on the first day, of course.

But I'm digressing. I returned Kasteen's salute, noting as I

¹ A common mistake. It is, of course, virtually unheard of for an entire Astartes Chapter to take the field at once, let alone two; what Cain obviously means here is that elements from two different Chapters were involved. (A couple of companies apiece from the Reclaimers and the Swords of the Emperor.)

did so the faint discolouration of the fabric beneath her rank insignia where her captain's studs had been before her recent unanticipated elevation to colonel. There had been few officers left in either regiment by the time the 'nids had got through with them, and they'd been lucky at that. At least one of the newly consolidated units was being led by a former corporal, or so I'd heard.² Unfortunately, neither of their commissars had survived so, thanks to my fortuitously timed transfer request, I'd been handed the job of sorting out the mess. Lucky me.

'Major Broklaw, my second-in-command.' Kasteen introduced the man next to her, his own insignia equally new. His face flushed almost imperceptibly, but he stepped forward to shake my hand with a firm grip. His eyes were flint grey beneath his dark fringe of hair, and he closed his hand a little too tightly, trying to gauge my strength. Two could play at that game, of course, and I had the advantage of a couple of augmented fingers, so I returned the favour, smiling blandly as the colour drained from his face.

'Major.' I let him go before anything was damaged except his pride, and turned to the next officer in line. Kasteen had rounded up pretty much her entire senior command staff, as protocol demanded, but it was clear most of them weren't too sure about having me around. Only a few met my eyes, but the legend of Cain the Hero had arrived here before me, and the ones that did were obviously hoping I'd be able to turn round a situation they all patently felt had gone way beyond their own ability to deal with.

2 He'd heard wrong, or is possibly exaggerating for effect. The newly appointed colonel of the 112th Rough Riders was a former sergeant, true, but had already received a battlefield promotion to lieutenant during the defence of Corania. None of the senior command staff in any of the recently consolidated units had made the promotional jump directly from non-commissioned officer.

I don't know what the rest were thinking; they were probably just relieved I wasn't talking about shooting the lot of them and bringing in somebody competent. Of course, if that had been a realistic option I might have considered it, but I had an unwanted reputation for honesty and fairness to live up to, so that was that.

The introductions over I turned back to Kasteen, and indicated the tottering pile of kitbags behind me. Her eyes widened fractionally as she caught a glimpse of Jurgen's face behind the barricade, but I suppose anyone who'd gone hand to hand with tyranids would have found the experience relatively unperturbing, and she masked it quickly. Most of the assembled officers, I noted with well-concealed amusement, were now breathing shallowly through their mouths.

'My aide, Gunner First Class Ferik Jurgen,' I said. In truth there was only one grade of gunner, but I didn't expect they'd know that, and the small unofficial promotion would add to whatever kudos he got from being the aide of a commissar. Which in turn would reflect well on me. 'Perhaps you could assign him some quarters?'

'Of course.' She turned to one of the youngest lieutenants, a blonde girl of vaguely equine appearance who looked as if she'd be more at home on a farm somewhere than in uniform, and nodded. 'Sulla. Get the quartermaster to sort it out.'

'I'll do it myself,' she replied, slightly overdoing the eager young officer routine. 'Magil's doing his best, but he's not quite on top of the system yet.' Kasteen nodded blandly, unaware of any problem, but I could see Broklaw's jaw tighten, and noticed that most of the men present failed to mask their displeasure.

'Sulla was our quartermaster sergeant until the last round of promotions,' Kasteen explained. 'She knows the ship's resources better than anyone.'

'I'm sure she does,' I said diplomatically. 'And I'm sure she

has far more pressing duties to perform than finding a bunk for Jurgen. We'll liaise with your Sergeant Magil ourselves, if you have no objection.'

'None at all.' Kasteen looked slightly puzzled for a moment, then dismissed it. Broklaw, I noticed from the corner of my eye, was looking at me with something approaching respect now. Well, that was something at least. But it was pretty clear I was going to have my work cut out to turn this divided and demoralised rabble into anything resembling a fighting unit.

Well, up to a point anyway. If they were a long way from being ready to fight the enemies of the Emperor, they were certainly in good enough shape to fight among themselves, as I was shortly to discover.

I haven't reached my second century by ignoring the little presentiments of trouble which sometimes appear out of nowhere, like those itching palms of mine, or the little voice in the back of my head which tells me something seems too good to be true. But in my first few days aboard the *Righteous Wrath* I had no need of such subtle promptings from my subconscious. Tension hung in the air of the corridors assigned to us like ozone around a daemonhost, all but striking sparks from the bulkheads. And I wasn't the only one to feel it. None of the other regiments on board would venture into our part of the ship, either for social interaction or the time-honoured tradition of perpetrating practical jokes against the members of another unit. The naval provosts patrolled in tense, wary groups. Desperate for some kind of respite, I even made courtesy calls on the other commissars aboard, but these were far from convivial; humourless Emperor-botherers to a man, the younger ones were too overwhelmed by respect for my reputation to be good company, and most of the older ones were quietly resentful of what they saw as a glory-hogging young upstart. Tedious as these interludes were, though, I was to be grateful for them sooner than I thought.

The one bright spot was Captain Parjita, who'd commanded the vessel for the past thirty years, and with whom I hit it off from our first dinner together. I'm sure he only invited me the first time because protocol demanded it, and perhaps out of curiosity to see what a Hero of the Imperium actually looked like in the flesh, but by the time we were halfway through the first course we were chatting away like old friends. I told a few outrageous lies about my past adventures, and he reciprocated with some anecdotes of his own, and by the time we'd got onto the amasec I felt more relaxed than I had in months. For one thing, he really appreciated the problems I was facing with Kasteen and her rabble.

'You need to reassert some discipline,' he told me unnecessarily. 'Before the rot spreads any further. Shoot a few, that'll buck their ideas up.'

Easy to say, of course, but not so easy in practice. That's what most commissars would have done, admittedly, but getting a regiment united because they're terrified of you and hate your guts has its own drawbacks, particularly as you're going to find yourself in the middle of a battlefield with these people before very long, and they'll all have guns. And, as I've already said, I had a reputation to maintain, and a good part of that was keeping up the pretence that I actually gave a damn about the troopers under my command. So, not an option, unfortunately.

It was while I was on my way back to my quarters from one such pleasant evening that my hand was forced, and in a way I could well have done without.

It was the noise that alerted me at first, a gradually swelling babble of voices from the corridors leading to our section of the ship. My pleasantly reflective mood, enhanced by Parjita's amasec and a comfortable win over the regicide board, evaporated in an instant. I knew that sound all too well, and the

clatter of boots on the deck behind me as a squad of provosts double-timed towards the disturbance with shock batons drawn was enough to confirm it. I picked up my pace to join them, falling in beside the section leader.

'Sounds like a riot,' I said. The blank-visored head nodded.

'Quite right, sir.'

'Any idea what sparked it?' Not that it mattered. The simmering resentment among the Valhallans was almost cause enough on its own. Any excuse would have done. If he did have a clue, I never got to hear it; as we arrived at the door of the mess hall a ceramic cup bearing the regimental crest of the 296th shattered against his helmet.

'Emperor's blood!' I ducked reflexively, taking cover behind the nearest piece of furniture to assess the situation while the provosts waded in ahead of me, striking out with their shock batons at any target that presented itself. The room was a heaving mass of angry men and women punching, kicking and flailing at one another, all semblance of discipline shot to hell. Several were down already, bleeding, screaming, being trampled on by the still active combatants, and the casualties were rising all the time.

The fiercest fighting was going on in the centre of the room, a small knot of brawlers clearly intent on actual murder unless someone intervened. Fine by me, that's what the provosts were for. I hunkered down behind an overturned table, scanning the room as I voxed a situation report to Kasteen, and watched them battle their way forward. The two fighters at the centre of the *mêlée* seemed evenly matched to me; a shaven-headed man, muscled like a Catachan, who towered over a wiry young woman with short-cropped raven black hair. Whatever advantage he had in strength she could match in agility, striking hard and leaping back out of range, reducing most of his strikes to glancing blows, which is just as well, as a clean hit from

those ham-like fists would likely have stove her ribcage in. As I watched he spun, launching a lethal roundhouse kick to her temple; she ducked just a fraction slow, and went sprawling as his foot grazed the top of her head, but twisted upright again with a knife from one of the tables in her hand. The blow came up towards his sternum, but he blocked it, opening up a livid red gash along his right arm.

It was about then that things really started to go wrong. The provosts had made it almost halfway to the brawl I was watching when the two sides finally realised they had an enemy in common. A young woman, blood pouring from a broken nose, was unceremoniously yanked away from the man whose groin she'd been aiming a kick at, and rounded on the provost attempting to restrain her. Her elbow strike bounced harmlessly off his torso armour, but her erstwhile opponent leapt to her defence, swinging a broken plate in a short, clinical arc which impacted precisely on the neck joint where helmet met flak; a bright crimson spurt of arterial blood sprayed the surrounding bystanders as the stricken provost dropped to his knees, trying to stem the bleeding.

'Emperor's bowels!' I began to edge my way back towards the door, to wait for the reinforcements Kasteen had promised; if they hadn't been before, the mob was in a killing mood now, and anyone who looked like a symbol of authority would become an obvious target. Even as I watched, both factions turned on the provosts in their midst, who disappeared under a swarm of bodies. The troopers barely seemed human any more. I'd seen tyranids move like that in response to a perceived threat, but this was even worse. Your average 'nid swarm has purpose and intelligence behind everything it does, even though it's hard to remember that when a tidal wave of chitin is bearing down on you with every intention of reducing you to mince-meat, but it was clear that there was no intelligence working

here, just sheer brute bloodlust. Emperor damn it, I've seen Khornate cults with more self-restraint than those supposedly disciplined Guard troopers displayed in that mess hall.

At least while they were ripping the provosts apart they weren't likely to notice me, so I made what progress I could towards the door, ready to take command of the reinforcements as soon as they arrived. And I would have made it too, if the squad leader hadn't surfaced long enough to scream, 'Commissar! Help!'

Oh great. Every pair of eyes in the room suddenly swung in my direction. I thought I could see my reflection in every pupil, tracking me like an auspex.

If you take one more step towards that door, I told myself, you're a dead man. They'd be on me in seconds. The only way to survive was to take them by surprise. So I stepped forward instead, as though I'd just entered the room.

'You.' I pointed at a random trooper. 'Get a broom.'

Whatever they'd been expecting me to say or do, this definitely wasn't it. The room hung suspended in confused anticipation, the silence stretching for an infinite second. No one moved.

'That was not a request,' I said, raising my voice a little, and taking another step forward. 'This mess hall is an absolute disgrace. And no one is leaving until it's been tidied up.' My boot skidded in a slowly congealing pool of blood. 'You, you, and you, go with him. Buckets and mops. Make sure you get enough to go round.'

Confusion and uncertainty began to spread, troopers flicking nervous glances at one other, as it gradually began to dawn on them that the situation had got well out of hand and that consequences had to be faced. The Guardsmen I'd pointed out, two of them women, began to edge nervously towards the door.

'At the double!' I barked suddenly, with my best parade-ground snap; the designated troopers scurried out, ingrained patterns of discipline reasserting themselves.

And that was enough. The thunderstorm crackle of violence dissipated from the room as though suddenly earthed.

After that it was easy; now that I'd asserted my authority the rest fell into line as meek as you please, and by the time Kasteen arrived with another squad of provosts in tow I'd already detailed a few more to escort the wounded and worse to the infirmary. A surprising number were able to walk, but there were still far too many stretcher cases for my liking.

'You did well, I hear.' Kasteen was at my elbow, her face pale as she surveyed the damage. I shrugged, knowing from long experience that credit snowballs all the faster the less you seem to want it.

'Not well enough for some of these poor souls,' I said.

'Bravest thing I ever saw,' I heard from behind me, as one of the injured provosts was helped away by a couple of his ship-mates. 'He just stood there and faced them down, the whole damn lot..' His voice faded, adding another small increment to my heroic reputation, which I knew would be all round the ship by this time tomorrow.

'There'll have to be an investigation.' Kasteen looked stunned, still not quite capable of taking in the full enormity of what had happened. 'We need to know who started it, what happened..'

'Who's to blame?' Broklaw cut in from the door. It was obvious from the direction of his gaze where he thought the responsibility should lie. Kasteen flushed.

'I've no doubt we'll discover the men responsible,' she said, a faint but perceptible stress on the pronoun. Broklaw refused to rise to the bait.

'We can all thank the Emperor we have an impartial adjudicator in the commissar here,' he said smoothly. 'I'm sure we can rely on him to sort it out.'

Thanks a lot, I thought. But he was right. And how I handled it was to determine the rest of my future with the regiment.

Not to mention leaving me running for my life yet again, beginning a long and unwelcome association with the Emperor's pet psychopaths,³ and an encounter with the most fascinating woman I've ever met.

3 Not the most flattering or accurate description of His Divine Majesty's most holy Inquisition, it must be admitted.