

# THE BEGUILING

NIGHT AND THE rain had both been falling for some time and I'd been getting steadily colder, wetter and more hacked off since the middle of the afternoon before we saw the light, glimmering faintly through the trees which bordered the road. The two gunners in the back of the Salamander with me hadn't helped my darkening mood either; they were fresh out from Valhalla, had never seen rain before, and found the 'liquid snow' a fascinating novelty which they discussed at inordinate length and with increasingly inanity.

To add insult to injury they had an ice-worlder's indifference to low temperatures, chattering about how warm it was, while I huddled into my greatcoat and shivered. The only upside to their presence was their transparent awe at being in the company of the famous Commissar Cain, whose heroism and concern for his men was fast becoming legendary. Legendary, that is, in the literal sense of being both widely believed and completely without foundation. Since my attempt to save my own miserable skin by deserting in the face of a tyranid horde on Desolatia had backfired spectacularly, leaving me the inadvertant hero of the hour, my undeserved reputation had continued to grow like tanglevine. A couple of narrow scrapes during the subsequent campaign to cleanse Keffia of genestealers, which aren't strictly relevant to this anecdote but were unpleasant enough at the time, had added to it; mostly I'd run for cover, kept my head down, and emerged to take the credit when the noise stopped.

So I should have had the sense to sit back and enjoy the relative peace the post I'd gone to some trouble to arrange for myself ought to have guaranteed; a rear-echelon artillery battery, a long way from the front line, with no disciplinary problems to speak of. But, true to form, I just couldn't leave well enough alone.

We'd been campaigning on Slawkenberg for about eight months standard, or about half the local year, putting down in the southern hemisphere of the main eastern continent just as the snows of winter began to give way to a clement, sweet-scented spring. Tough luck on the Valhallans, who bore the disappointment with the stoicism I'd come to expect, but just gravy so far as I was concerned. True to form we spent the spring, and the sort of balmy summer that vacation worlds build their entire economies on, flinging shells into the distance, secure in the knowledge that we were doing the Emperor's work without any of the unpleasantness you get when the enemy can shoot back at you.

I wasn't even sure who the enemy was, to be honest. As usual I'd given the briefing slates only the most perfunctory of glances before turning my attention to matters of more immediate concern, like grabbing the best billets for myself and a few favoured cronies. Since my instincts in this regard remained as finely honed as ever, I managed to install myself in a high class hotel in a nearby village along with the senior command staff, most of whom still cordially detested me but who weren't about to turn down a soft bed and a cellar full of cask-matured amasec. I had equally little time for them, but liked to be able to keep an eye on them without too much effort.

I made sure Colonel Mostrue got the best suite, of course, selecting a more modest one for myself which better fitted my undeserved reputation, and which had the added advantage of a pair of bay windows which afforded easy and unobserved access to the street through a small garden which was only overlooked by the apartment belonging to the hotel's owner. He wasn't about to challenge anything an Imperial commissar might do, and with the indispensable Jurgen, my faithful and malodorous aide, camped out in the anteroom, there was no chance of anyone wandering in to discover that I was entertaining company or had wandered off to amuse myself in the many houses of discreet entertainment the locality had to offer.

In short, I had it made. So, as the summer wore on, it was only a matter of time before I found myself getting bored. 'That's the trouble with you, Cai.' Toren Divas, the young lieutenant who was the closest thing I had to a friend among the battery, and was certainly the only member of it who would even dream of using the familiar form of my given name, tilted his glass and let the amber liquid slide down his throat, sighing with satisfaction. 'You're not suited to this rear-echelon soldiering. A man like you needs more of a challenge.' He fumbled for the bottle, found it was empty, and looked around hopefully for another.

'Right now I've got enough of a challenge with that winning streak of yours,' I said, hoping to bluff him into doubling his bet again. The best he could be holding was a pair of inquisitors, and I only needed one more Emperor to scoop the pot. But he wasn't biting.

'You're going stir crazy here,' he went on. 'You need a bit of excitement.'

Well, that was true, but not in the way he meant. He'd been there on Desolatia and seen me take on a swarm of tyranids with just a chainsword, hacking my way through to save Jurgen's miserable hide completely by accident, and bought the Cain the Hero legend wholesale. His idea of excitement was being in a place where people or aliens or warp-spawned monstrosities wanted to kill you as horribly as possible and doing it to them first. Mine was finding a gambling den without a house limit, or a well-endowed young lady with a thing for men in uniforms and access to her father's credit slip. And in the last few months I'd pretty much run out of both locally, not to mention other recreational facilities of a less salubrious nature. So I nodded, mindful of the need to play up to my public persona.

'Well, the enemy's leagues away,' I said, trying to sound rueful. 'What can you do?'

'Go out and look for them,' he said. Maybe it was the amasec, maybe it was the stage of the evening when you start to

talk frak just for the hell of it, but for whatever reason I found myself pursuing the topic.

'I wish it was that easy,' I said insincerely. 'But then I'd have to shoot myself for desertion.' Divas laughed at the feeble joke.

'Not if you made it official,' he said. There was something about his voice which sounded quite serious, despite the amasec-induced preternatural care with which he formed the words. If I'd just laughed it off at that point, it would all have turned out differently: a couple of eager young troopers wouldn't have died, Slawkenberg might have fallen to the forces of Chaos, and I definitely wouldn't have ended up fleeing in terror from yet another bunch of psychopaths determined to kill me. But, as usual, my curiosity got the better of me.

'How do you mean?' I asked.

'LET ME GET this straight.' Colonel Mostrue looked at me narrowly, distrust clearly evident in his ice-blue eyes. He'd never fully bought my story on Desolatia, and although he generally gave me the benefit of the doubt he was never quite able to ignore the instinctive antipathy most Cuard officers harboured towards members of the Commissariat. 'You want to lead a recon mission out towards the enemy lines.'

'Not lead, exactly,' I said. 'More like tag along. See how the forward observers are doing.'

'They seem to be doing fine,' Mostrue riposted, his breath puffing to vapour as he spoke. As usual he had the air conditioning in his office turned up high enough to preserve grox.

'As I'd expect,' I said smoothly. 'But I'm sure you've seen the latest intelligence reports.' Which was more than I had, until my conversation with Divas had drawn my attention to them. 'Something peculiar seems to be happening among the enemy forces.'

'Of course it does.' His voice held a faint tinge of asperity. 'They're Chaos worshippers.' I almost expected him to spit. 'Nothing they do makes sense.'

'Of course not,' I said. 'But I feel I'd be shirking my duties if I didn't take a look for myself. Although I didn't have the slightest intention of going anywhere near the battlefield, I really was mildly intrigued by the reports I'd skimmed. The traitors seemed to be fighting each other in several places, even ignoring nearby Imperial forces altogether unless they intervened. I didn't know or care why, any more than Mostrue did; the more damage they inflicted on each other the better I liked it. But it did give me the perfect excuse to comander some transport and check out the recreational possibilities of some of the nearby towns. Mostrue shrugged.

'Well, please yourself,' he said. 'It's your funeral.'

SO I FOUND myself later that morning in the vehicle park, watching a couple of young gunners called Grear and Mulenz stowing their kit in the back of a Salamander. Jurgen, who I'd co-opted as my driver, glanced up at the almost cloudless sky, his shirt sleeves rolled up as usual, a faint sheen of sweat trickling across his interesting collection of skin diseases. Even though we were in the open air, and he wasn't perspiring nearly as much as he had when we first met in the baking deserts of Desolatia, I kept upwind of him through long habit.

Jurgen's body odour was quite spectacular, and even though our time together had more or less immured me to it there was no point in taking any chances. Physically he was much less prepossessing than he smelled, looking as though someone had started to mould a human figure out of clay but became bored before they finished.

Though I strongly suspected Mostrue had assigned him as my aide more as a practical joke than anything else, Jurgen had turned out to be ideally suited to the role. He wasn't the biggest bang in the armoury by any means, but made up for his lack of intellect with a literally minded approach to following orders and an unquestioning acceptance of even the mutually contradictory parts of Imperial doctrine which would have done credit to the most devout ecclesiarch. Now he looked at a faint wisp of cloud on the horizon, and shook his head.

'Weather'll be changing soon.'

'It seems fine to me,' I said. I suppose I should have listened, but I grew up in a hive and had never quite got the hang of living in an environment you couldn't adjust. And besides, it had been warm and dry for weeks now. Jurgen shrugged.

'As the Emperor wills,' he said, and started the engine.

WHAT THE EMPEROR willed on this particular morning was a steady increase in the cloud, which gradually began to attenuate the sunshine, and a slowly freshening breeze which stole the remaining warmth from it. The sky darkened by almost imperceptable degrees as we rattled along, making good time towards the nearest town, and I wasn't too surprised to feel the first drops of moisture on my skin while we were still some way short of our destination.

'How much further?' I asked Jurgen, wishing I'd comandered a Chimera instead. The noise in the enclosed crew bay would have been deafening, but at least it would have kept the rain off.

'Ten or twelve leagues,' he said, apparently unperturbed by the change in the weather, 'fifteen to the OR'

I had no intention of accompanying Grear and Mulenz all the way to the forward observation post, but we were close enough to civilisation to make the quarter hour or so of mild discomfort I still had to look forward to seem bearable.

'Good,' I said, then turned to the gunners with an encouraging smile. 'You'll be there in no time.'

'What about you, sir?' Mulenz asked, looking up from his ranging scope. It was the first time I'd let them know I

wasn't planning on checking in on the observation post; every artillery battery needs its forward observers, but it's a hard, thankless job, and a fire magnet for every enemy trooper in the area once they realise you're there. I smiled again, the warm, confident smile of the hero they expected me to be.

'I'll just be poking around to see what the enemy's up to,' I said. 'I'm sure you don't need me getting in the way.' That was always my style, making the troops feel as though they had my full confidence. A pat on the back generally works better than a gun to the head, in my experience; and if it doesn't you can just as easily shoot them later. Grear nodded, his chest swelling visibly.

'You can count on us, sir,' he said, positively radiating enthusiasm.

'I'm sure I can,' I said, then lifted myself up to look over the rim of the driver's compartment again. 'Jurgen. Why are we stopping?'

'Roadblock,' he said. The palms of my hands began to tingle, as they often do when something I can't quite put my finger on doesn't seem right. 'Catachans, by the look of it.'

'They can't be,' I said. I glanced ahead of us: a squad of troopers was fanning out across the road, lasguns at the ready. Jurgen was right, from this distance they did seem to have the heavily-muscled build which distinguishes the inhabitants of that greenhouse hell. But there was something about the way they moved which rang alarm bells in my mind. 'And besides... They're all assigned to the equatorial region.'

'Then who are they?' Jurgen asked.

'Good question. Let's not wait to find out.' No other instructions were necessary: he killed the drive to the left-hand tracks, and the Salamander slewed round to face the way we'd come. Grear and Mulenz sprawled across the floor of the crew compartment, taken by surprise by the violent manoeuvre; more used to Jurgen's robust driving style I'd grabbed the pintel mount to steady myself.

A few las-bolts shot past our heads as the ambushers realised we were getting away, followed by barely coherent curses.

'Emperor's blood!' I swung the heavy bolter around and loosed off a fusillade of badly-aimed shots at our pursuers. Grear and Mulenz gaped at me, obviously stunned at seeing the heroic legend come to life, until I grabbed Grear and got him to replace me at the weapon.

'Keep firing,' I snapped, pleased to see that I'd got a couple at least, and dropped back behind the safety of the armour plate. That required an excuse, so I seized the voxcaster. 'Cain to Command. We have hostiles on the forest road, coordinates...' I scrambled for the map slate, which Mulenz helpfully thrust at me, and rattled them off. 'Estimate at no more than platoon strength...'

'There's more of them up ahead,' Jurgen cut in helpfully.

'Command. Wait one.' I peered cautiously over the rim of the crew compartment. Another squad had emerged from the trees lining the road, then another, and another... I could estimate at least fifty men, maybe more, straggling across the highway towards concealment on the other side. 'Make that company strength. Possibly a full advance.'

'Confirming that, commissar.' Mostrue's voice, calm and collected as usual. 'Targeting now. firing in two.'

'What?' But the link had gone dead. We only had one chance. 'Jurgen! Get us off the road!'

'Yes, sir.' The Salamander swung violently again, lasbolts spanging from the armour on all sides now, throwing us around like peas in a bucket. The ride became a succession of sickening lurches, as the smooth rockcrete of the highway gave way to a rutted forest track. The flurry of bolts began to dwindle as we opened the distance from our pursuers. All except a few, which continued to pepper the front armour to little effect.

I risked another peek over the armour to see a small knot of men scattering in front of us: a couple of them weren't quite fast enough, and the Salamander lurched again with a sickening crack and a smell of putrescence which made Jurgen's odour seem like a flower garden.

'Who are these guys?' Mulenz asked, grabbing a lasgun and sending a few rounds after them for good measure.

'Care to guess?' I suggested, drawing my chainsword as one of the enemy troopers began clawing his way aboard. Despite everything I'd seen in my career up to that point, it was still a shock. The face was distended with infection, pus seeping from open sores, and his limbs were swollen and arthritic. But inhumanly strong, for all that. Even an ork would probably have thought twice about trying to board a vehicle moving at our pace...

With an incoherent scream, which the two gunners fortunately took for a heroic battle cry, I swung the humming weapon in a short arc that separated the head from his body. A fountain of filth jetted from it as it fell, fortunately away from the Salamander, making us gag and retch at the smell. By the time I was able to blink my eyes clear I could hear the first shrieks of the incoming shells.

The roar of the barrage detonating behind us was almost deafening, splinters of wood from shattered trees spattering the armour plate, and stinging my cheek as I ducked for cover. Jurgen kept us moving at a brisk pace, deeper into the cover of the woods, and the noise gradually receded. Grear and Mulenz were looking back at the flashes and smoke like juvies at a firework display, but I guess being forward observers they were used to being at the sharp end of one of our barrages. For me it was a novel experience, and one I wasn't keen to repeat.

'What do we do now, commissar?' Jurgen asked, slowing to a less life-threatening speed as the noise grew fainter behind us. I shrugged, considering our options.

'Well, we can't go back,' I said. 'The road will be impassable after that.' A quick conversation on the vox was enough

to vindicate my guess; things had been chewed up so badly regimental headquarters was having to send patrols in on foot to confirm that the enemy had been neutralised.

I looked at the map slate again. The forest seemed awfully big now that we were inside it, and the rain was starting to fall in earnest, gathering on the over-hanging branches to drip in large, cold drops onto my exposed skin. I shivered. 'What I don't understand is what they were doing out here,' Grear said. 'There's nothing of any strategic importance in this area.'

'There's nothing in this area at all,' I said, mesmerised by the map. 'Except trees.' A faint line was probably the forest track we were on. I leaned forwards to show it to Jurgen. 'I reckon we're about here,' I concluded. He nodded.

'Looks about right, sir.' He switched on the headlights; the twisting track became a lot clearer, but the trees surrounding us suddenly loomed more dark and threatening. I traced the thin line with my thumbnail.

'If it is,' I said, 'it comes out on the north road. Eventually' It was going to be a long, arduous trip, though. For a moment I even considered going back the way we'd come, and taking our chances on the shattered highway, but that was never really going to be an option; the Salamander's suspension would be wrecked in moments, and there were bound to be enemy survivors lurking in the woods. Pushing on was the only sensible choice.

FOUR HOURS LATER, cold, tired, hungry, and seriously hacked off, I was beginning to think fighting our way out through a bunch of walking pusbags wouldn't have been so bad after all. We'd probably have linked up with the first of our recon patrols by now, and be on our way back to the battery in a nice cosy Chimera...

'What's that?' Grear pointed off to the left, through the trees.

'What's what?' I brushed the fringe of raindrops from the peak of my cap, and followed the direction of his finger with my eyes.

'I thought I saw something.' Shadows and trees continued to crawl past the Salamander.

'What, exactly?' I asked, trying not to snap at him.

'I don't know.' A fine observer he was turning out to be. 'There!' He pointed again, and this time I saw it for myself. A glimmer of light flickering through the trees.

'Civilisation!' I said. 'Emperor be praised!' There could be no doubt that the light was artificial, a strong, warm glow.

'There's nothing on the map,' Jurgen said. He killed the headlights, and brought us to a stop. I glanced at the softly-glowing slate screen.

'We're almost at the highway,' I concluded. 'Maybe it's a farmhouse or something.'

'Not exactly agricultural land around here though, is it, sir?' Mulenz asked. I shrugged.

'Forestry workers, then.' I didn't really care. The light promised warmth, food, and a chance to get out of the rain. That was good enough for me. Except for the little voice of caution which scratched at the back of my mind...

'We'll go in on foot,' I decided. 'If they're hostile they can't have heard our engine yet. We'll reconnoitre before we proceed. Any questions?'

No one had, so we disembarked; the three gunners carrying lasguns, while I loosened my trusty chainsword in its scabbard.

The ground was ankle-deep in mud and mulch as we squelched our way forward. I ordered us into the trees to make for the light directly, cutting the corner off the curve of the track. The going was easier here, a carpet of rich loam and fallen leaves cushioning our footfalls, and the thick tracery of branches overhead keeping most of the rain off as we slipped between the shadowy trunks.

A line of thicker darkness began to resolve itself through the trees, backlit by the increasing glow behind it.

'It's a wall,' Mulenz said. No wonder they made him an observer, I thought, nothing gets past this one. I raised a cautious hand to it: old stonework, slick with moss, about twice my own height. I was about to mutter something sarcastic about his ability to state the obvious when we heard the scream. It was a woman's voice, harsh and shrill, cutting through the shrouding gloom around us.

'This way!' Mulenz took off like a startled sump rat, and the rest of us followed. I drew my laspistol, and tried to look as though I was heroically leading the charge while keeping the rest of the group between me and potential danger. Something was crashing towards us through the undergrowth, and I drew a bead on it, finger tightening reflexively on the trigger.

'Frak!' I held my fire as the looming shape resolved itself into a young woman, her clothing torn and muddy, who I suddenly found clamped around my neck.

'Help me!' she cried, like the heroine of a cheesy holodrama. Easier said than done with a good fifty kilos of feminine pulchritude trying to throttle me. Despite the mud and grime and darkness I found her extraordinarily attractive, the scent of her hair dizzying; at the time, I put it down to oxygen starvation.

'With pleasure,' I croaked, finally managing to unwind her from around my throat. 'If you could just...'

'They're coming!' she shrieked, wriggling in my grip like a down-hive dancing girl. Under other circumstances I'd have enjoyed the experience, but there's a time and a place for everything, and this was neither.

'Who are you, miss?' At least Jurgen was paying attention; Grear and Mulenz were just staring at her, as though they'd never seen a pretty girl falling out of her dress before. Maybe they didn't get out much.

'Them!' She pointed back the way she'd come, where something else was thrashing its way through the undergrowth.

The stench preceding it was enough to confirm the presence of at least one of the Chaos troopers we'd encountered before. Shaking her off like an overeager puppy I raised my arm and fired.

The crack of the lasbolt broke the spell; Greer and Mulenz raised their lasguns and followed suit. Jurgen took slower, deliberate aim.

Something shrieked in the darkness, and burst through the surrounding undergrowth. A smoking crater had been gouged out of the left side of its body, a mortal wound to any normal man, but it just kept coming, Jurgen fired once, exploding its head, and it fell in a shower of putrescence.

'Sir! There's another!' Grear fired again, setting fire to a nearby shrub. In the sudden flare of light the enemy trooper stood out clearly, running towards us, a filthy combat blade in its hand. Jurgen and I fired simultaneously, blowing it to pieces before it could close.

'Is that the last of them?' I asked the girl. She nodded, shaking with reaction, and slumped against me. Once again I found the sensation curiously distracting; with a surge of willpower I detached her again. 'Mulenz. Help her.' He came forward grinning like an idiot, and I handed the girl across to him. As I did so a curious expression flickered across her face, almost like surprise, before she swooned decorously into his arms.

'Any movement out there?' I asked, crossing to Jurgen. He turned slowly, tracking the barrel of his lasgun, sweeping the perimeter of firelight. Welcome as it had been at the climax of the fight, now it was a hindrance, destroying our night vision and rendering everything outside it impenetrable.

'I think I can still hear movement,' he said. I strained my ears, picking up the faint scuff of feet moving through the forest detritus.

'Several of them,' I agreed. 'Back towards the road.' Almost the opposite direction to the one our guest and her pursuers had come from.

'Commissar, look.' Grear managed to tear his envious attention away from Mulenz long enough to point. Flickering lights were moving through the trees, heading towards us. He levelled his gun.

'Hold your fire,' I said. Whoever it was out there was moving far too openly to be trying to sneak up on us. I kept my pistol in my hand nevertheless. 'It might be...'

'Hello?' A warm, contralto voice floated out of the darkness, unmistakably feminine. A tension I hadn't even been aware of suddenly left me; even without seeing the speaker I felt as though here was someone to be trusted.

'Over here,' I found myself calling unnecessarily. The lights were now bobbing in our direction, attracted by the glow of the gradually diminishing fire, and quickly resolved themselves into hand-held luminators. Half a dozen girls, dressed like the one clamped firmly to Mulenz but without the mud and rents appeared; like her they all seemed to be in their late teens. All except one...

She stepped forward out of the group, almost a head taller, the hood falling back from her cape to reveal long, raven hair. Her eyes were a startling emerald colour, her lips full and rounded, pulling back to reveal perfect white teeth as she smiled. She extended a hand towards me. Even before she spoke I knew hers would be the voice I'd heard before.

'I'm Emeli Duboir. And you are?'

'Ciaphas Cain. Imperial Commissar, 12th Valhallan Field Artillery. At your service.' I bowed formally. She smiled again, and I felt warm and comfortable for the first time that night.

'Delighted to make your acquaintance, commissar.' Her voice tingled down my spine. Listening to it was like bathing in chocolate. 'It seems we owe you a great deal.' Her eyes moved on, taking in the corpses of the traitors, and the girl who still seemed welded to Mulenz. 'Is Krystabel all right?'

'Shocked a little, possibly,' I said. 'Maybe a few minor scrapes. Nothing a warm bath couldn't put right.' The words were accompanied by a sudden, extraordinarily vivid mental image of Krystabel luxuriating in a steaming bathtub; I fought it down, bringing my thoughts back to the necessities of the present. Emeli was looking at me with faint amusement, an eyebrow quirked, as though she could read my thoughts.

'We need to get her inside as soon as possible,' she said. 'I wonder if your man would mind helping to carry her.'

'Of course not,' I said. Judging by Mulenz's expression we'd need a crowbar to separate them.

SO WE ACCOMPANIED the women home, which turned out to be a large, rambling manor house set securely in its own grounds. A plaque on the gates announced that this was the Saint Trynia Academy for the Daughters of Gentlefolk, which explained a lot. To my relief I saw that the forest track was paved from that point on, which would speed up our journey considerably when we set out again. But of course Emeli wouldn't hear of it.

'You must stay, at least until the morning,' she said. By this time we were in the main hall, which was warmed by a roaring fire; I'd expected the Valhallans to be severely uncomfortable, but they didn't seem to mind, crowding into the benches along the polished wooden dining table with the students.

We were certainly the centre of attention during dinner. Grear was surrounded by a small knot of giggling admirers, oohing and ahing appreciatively as he enlarged on our day's adventures. Although he was making me out to be the main hero of the piece, he was painting himself a fairly creditable second. Mulenz had seemed remarkably subdued since Krystabel was detached from him and packed off to the infirmary, but he perked up as soon as she reappeared, chatty and animated now.

She perched on his knee as he ate, the two of them gazing into one another's eyes, and I found myself thinking I was

going to have trouble getting him back aboard the Salamander in the morning. Even Jurgen was being flirted with outrageously, which struck me as truly bizarre. The only female I'd ever known to take a romantic interest in him before was an ogryn on R&R, and she'd been drunk at the time. He picked at his food nervously, responding as best he could, but it was clear he was out of his depth.

'Is the grox all right?' Emeli asked at my elbow. Protocol demanded I sat next to her at the top table.

'It's fine,' I responded. In truth it was excellent, the most tender I'd ever tasted, lightly poached in a samec sauce that was positively to die for. Which I nearly did, of course, but I'm getting a little ahead of myself. She smiled dazzlingly at my approval, and again I found my senses overwhelmed by her closeness. The sound of her voice was like the caress of silk, smooth and fine, like the fabric of her gown; it was the same shade of green as her bewitching eyes, clinging to the curves of her body in ways which inflamed my imagination. She knew it too, the minx. As she leaned over to pick up the condiments she brushed my arm lightly with her own, and a lightning strike of desire swept the breath from my lungs.

'I'm glad you like it,' she said, her voice bubbling with mischief. 'I think you'll find a lot here to enjoy'

'I'm sure I will,' I said.

AFTER DINNER THE company separated. Emeli invited me up to her private apartments, and promised to arrange accomodation for the gunners, although by the look of things Greer and Mulenz had pretty much taken care of that for themselves. While Emeli went off to do whatever finishing school principals did in the evening I caught up with Jurgen in the hallway, and prised him away from his giggling escort.

'Jurgen,' I said. 'Get back to the Salamander. Vox the battery, and give them our co-ordinates. This is all very pleasant, but...'

'I know what you mean, sir.' He nodded, relief clearly visible in his eyes. 'The way the lads are acting...'

'They're acting pretty much like troopers always do when there are women around,' I said. He nodded.

'Only more so.' He hesitated. 'I was beginning to think they'd got to you too, sir.'

Well they had, nearly. But my innate paranoia hadn't let me down. If it's too good to be true then it probably is, as my old tutor used to say, and even though I wasn't sure exactly what was going on here I knew something wasn't right. I just hoped I could keep reminding myself of that when I was with Emeli.

Of course I should have been wondering why Jurgen wasn't affected like the rest of us, but that particular coin wouldn't drop for another decade or more; in those days although I'd read the manual, I'd never met a psyker, let alone a blank.

'Don't worry girls,' I reassured his hovering fan club. 'He'll be right back.' Jurgen shot me a grateful look, and disappeared.

'Ciaphas. There you are.' Emeli appeared at the top of the stairs. 'I was wondering what had happened to you.'

'Likewise.' I turned on the charm with practiced ease, and moved to join her; although I told myself I was climbing the stairs of my own volition, something drew me towards her, something which seemed to grow stronger and muffle my senses the closer I got. She moulded herself to the inside of my arm, and we drifted across a wide hallway towards her apartments.

I had no memory of entering, but found myself inside an elegant boudoir, smelling faintly of some heady perfume. Everywhere I looked were soft pastel colours, flimsy fabrics, and artworks of the most flagrant eroticism. I'd seen quite a bit in my time, I have to confess, but the atmosphere of sensual indulgence inside that room was something I couldn't have begun to imagine.

Emeli sank into the wide, yielding bed, drawing me down after her. Her breath was sweet as our lips touched, tasting faintly of that strange, sensual perfume.

'I knew you were one of us the moment I felt your presence in the woods,' she whispered. I tried to make sense of her words, but the sheer physical need for her was pounding in my blood.

'Felt?' I mumbled, drawing her closer. She nodded, kissing my throat.

'I could taste your soul,' she breathed. 'Like to like...'

The little voice in my head was screaming now, screaming that something was wrong. Screaming out questions that something kept trying to suppress, something which I now realised was outside myself, trying to worm its way in.

'Why were you out there?' I asked, and the answer suddenly flared in my mind. Hunting. Krystabel had been...

'Bait,' Emeli's voice rang silently inside my brain. 'Enticing those Nurglite scum. But then you came instead. Much better.'

'Better for what?' I mumbled. It felt like one of those dreams where you know you're asleep and try desperately to wake. Her voice danced through my mind like laughing windchimes.

'That which wakes. It comes tonight. But not for you.' Somewhere in the physical world our bodies moved together, caressing, enticing, casting a spell of physical pleasure I knew with a sudden burst of panic was ensnaring my very soul. Her disembodied voice laughed again. 'Give in, Ciaphas. Slaanesh has surely touched your soul before now. You live only for yourself. You're his, whether you know it or not.'

Holy Emperor! That was the first time I'd heard the names of any of the Chaos powers, long before my subsequent activities as the Inquisition's occasional and extremely reluctant errand boy made them all too familiar, but even then I

could tell that what I faced was monstrous beyond measure. Selfish and self-indulgent I may well have been, and still am if I'm honest about it, but if I have any qualities that outmatch that one it's my will to survive. The realisation of what I faced, and the consequences if I failed, doused me like a shock of cold water. I snapped back to myself like a drowning man gasping for air, to find Fmeli staring at me in consternation.

'You broke free!' she said, like a petulant child denied a sweet. Now I knew she was a psyker I could feel the tendrils starting to wrap themselves around my mind again. I scrabbled for the laspistol at my belt, desperation making my fingers shake.

'Sorry,' I said. 'I prefer blondes.' Then I shot her. She glared at me for a moment in outraged astonishment, before the light faded from her eyes and she went to join whatever she worshipped in hell.

As my mind began to clear I became aware of a new sound, a rhythmical chanting which echoed through the building. I wasn't sure what it meant, but my tingling palms told me things were about to get a whole lot worse.

SURE ENOUGH, AS I staggered down the stairway to the entrance hall, the sound grew in intensity. I hefted the pistol in my sweat-sticky hand and cautiously pushed the door to the great hall ajar. I wished I hadn't. Every girl in the school was there, along with what was left of Grear and Mulenz. They were still alive, for whatever that was worth, rictus grins of insane ecstasy on their faces, as the priestesses of depravity conducted their obscene rituals. As I watched, Grear expired, and an ululating howl of joy rose from the assembled cultist's throats.

Then Krystabel stepped forward, her voice raised, chanting something new in counterpoint to the other acolytes. A faint wind blew through the room, thick with that damnable perfume, and the hairs on the back of my neck rose. Mulenz began to levitate, his body shifting and distorting in strange inhuman ways. Power began to crackle through the air.

'Merciful Emperor!' I made the warding sign of the eagle, more out of habit than because I expected it to do any good, and turned to leave. Whatever was beginning to possess my erstwhile trooper, I wanted to be long gone before it manifested itself properly. Not that that seemed likely without a miracle...

Lasbolts exploded over my head, raking the room, taking down some of the cultists. I turned, the sudden stench behind me warning me what I was about to see. Sure enough the entrance hall was full of the pus-bag troopers, and for the first time I realised that Slawkenberg was under attack from two different Chaos powers. No wonder they were more interested in killing each other than us. Not that I was likely to reap the benefit, by the look of things.

The Slaaneshi cult was rallying by now, howling forward to meet their disease-ridden rivals in what looked like a suicidal charge; but it was only to buy Krystabel enough time to complete her ritual. The daemonhost which had formerly been Mulenz levitated forwards, spitting bolts of energy from its hands, and laughing insanely as it blasted pusbags and schoolgirls alike. I fled, ignored by the Nurglites, who grouped together to concentrate their lasgun fire on the hovering abomination. Much good it seemed to be doing them. I could hear screams and explosions behind me as I sprinted across the lawn, shoulderblades itching in expectation of feeling a lasbolt or something worse at any moment.

'Commissar! Over here!' Jurgen's familiar voice rose above the roar of an engine, and the Salamander crashed through an ornamental shrubbery. I clambered aboard.

'Jurgen!' I shouted, dazed and delighted to see him. 'I thought they'd got you too!'

'No.' He looked puzzled for a moment. 'I ran into some of those enemy troopers in the woods. But they walked right past me. I can't understand it.' I caught a full-strength whiff of his body odour as he shrugged.

'The Emperor protects the righteous,' I suggested straight-faced, Jurgen nodded. He crossed himself and gunned the engine.

'At least we know what they were doing in this sector now,' I said, as we raced down the paved track towards the road.

'They were trying to stop the summoning... Oh frak!' I grabbed the voxcaster. 'Did you vox in our co-ordinates?'

'Of course,' Jurgen nodded.

'Cain to command. Full barrage, danger close, immediate effect. Don't argue, just do it!' I hung up before Mostrue could start pestering me with questions, and waited for the first shells to arrive.

If being close to the first strike had been worrying, getting caught in a full barrage was serious change of undergarments time. For what seemed like eternity the world disappeared in fire and smoke, but I guess the Emperor was looking out for us after all or we'd never have made it to the road in one piece.

When we went back at first light the entire building had been obliterated, along with several hectares of woodland. I left out the bit about the daemonhost in my report; I'd been the only one to see it, after all, and I didn't want the Inquisition poking around in my affairs. Instead I made up some extravagant lies about the heroism of the dead troopers, which, as usual, were taken as a modest attempt to deflect attention from my own valour. And, so far as I knew at the time, that was the end of it.

Except that sometimes at night, even after more than a century, I find myself dreaming of green eyes and a voice like velvet, and I wonder if my soul is as safe as I'd like to think...