



WARHAMMER
40,000

THE LITTLE THINGS

SANDY MITCHELL



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The concourse leading to the most expensive caravanserai the orbital boasted was crowded with travellers hurrying between starship and shuttle, browsing the stalls choking the thoroughfare, or simply stopping to gawk at the blue and white world beyond the armourcrys wall curving gently away towards the docking ports.

The prospect of seeing Amberley again was always enough to put a spring in my step, even though the pleasure of her company often came at the expense of some life-threatening favour she wanted; but on this occasion she'd assured me the invitation was purely a social one.

Spotting a street vendor hawking hegantha blossoms, I purchased a bouquet and strolled into the caravanserai's wide, marble-floored atrium, where a flunky dressed like an over-elaborate lampshade assured me I was expected and directed me to 'her excellency's' suite. The name I'd been told to ask for was one of Amberley's favourite faux identities, a minor noble from a backwater world, near enough for people to have vaguely heard of, but too distant for them to know or care anything about. Though she insisted such subterfuge was essential to her Inquisitorial duties, I strongly suspected that she simply enjoyed the play-acting.

'You're early,' the young woman who opened the door greeted me. She was dressed for the street, a scarlet cape concealing the laspistol I felt holstered in the small of her back as she brushed past me. 'Boss is still in the shower.'

'I'd gathered that,' I said, enjoying the sound of the warm contralto filtering through the wall from the balnearia. The first time I'd met Amberley she'd been masquerading as a professional chanteuse, and her voice was as enchanting as ever. 'Where are you off to?'

'Meeting the boys downside,' Zemelda said, meaning the rest of Amberley's entourage were on the planet below, if I interpreted her fractured version of Gothic correctly. 'Food's on the way up, so you won't starve.'

'Hegantha,' Amberley said, emerging from the balnearia swathed in a towel. 'You shouldn't have.'

Which meant I should, of course. One principle of battlefield survival which applies equally well to relations between the sexes is that it's the little things that matter most. A flash of reflected light betraying the position of an ambush or a narrowing of the eyes across the dinner table are both points at which it's wise to duck.

'I remembered how fond you are of them,' I said, earning a smile which boded well for the rest of the evening.

Before I could savour it to the full, a loud knock echoed from the door and Amberley's eyebrows rose.

'Impatient waiter,' she said, at a second peremptory rap. 'I'd better get something on. You know how servants like to gossip.'

The waiter seemed unusually insistent for so refined a hostelry, where polite, barely audible tapping would be more the order of the day, so I already had a strong mental image of the man I'd open the door to. As I'd expected, his livery was a little short in the sleeve, the fastenings straining to keep it closed across his chest, while the hems of his trousers sagged across his boots.

'Is there a problem?' I asked, after he'd gawked at me for an impolite number of seconds.

'Your pardon, sieur,' he said, recovering his wits at last, 'but your face seems familiar.' Well, it should do; it was on half the recruiting posters in the sector. Then he made the classic mistake of trying to play it a shade too cool. 'Have I had the pleasure of serving you before?'

'If you have, I'm sure I'd remember,' I said, 'given that you've only been a waiter for the last five minutes.'

He reacted exactly as I'd known he would, shoving the trolley hard in an attempt to ram it into my shins, but I dodged it easily, drawing my laspistol as I did so. It crossed my mind to draw the chainsword too, but that would have made a frightful mess of Amberley's suite, which I wanted to avoid. Decorating a lady's boudoir with bits of low-life viscera is another of the little things pretty much guaranteed to annoy them.

'Get in here!' he shouted, giving up all pretence, and a couple of well-muscled thugs shouldered their way through the slowly-closing door. The first fell to an easy headshot, dropping the stubber he was brandishing, but the second managed to get off a round before I could adjust my aim. The slug whined past my head, expending itself harmlessly in a plaster cherub of quite staggering tastelessness. The ersatz waiter was fumbling inside his jacket too, so I discouraged him with a kick to the sternum that drove him, windless, to his knees, then put him to sleep

with the butt of my sidearm.

Which just left the second gunman, who had me dead in his sights. I brought the laspistol around, too slowly, seeing his finger tightening on the trigger. I flinched, anticipating the impact. Then a towel snapped around his wrist, yanking it off aim in the nick of time, a dripping, fuming Amberley on the other end. I shot the fellow at once, before he could recover, reflecting that at least his last sight had been a memorable one.

‘Were they after you, or me?’ Amberley asked, rearranging the towel, to my vague disappointment.

‘Your alias, by the look of it,’ I said, after a cursory search of the not-waiter’s pockets. ‘They were planning to leave this ransom note for her family.’

‘Could have been real,’ she said, with a shrug which did interesting things to the towel’s stability. ‘Or it might have been a blind, and my cover’s blown. We’ll find out once we get this one to an interrogation suite.’

She wandered off to make the arrangements, while I started to lay out the dinner our luckless assassins had provided. She’d be hungry when she finished; and like I said, it’s the little things that count.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

SANDY MITCHELL is one of Black Library's best loved authors, and has written fiction set in both the Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000 universes. He is best known for the nine books of the Ciaphas Cain series, along with a plethora of associated short stories and audio dramas. Also known as Alex Stewart, he writes screenplays for film and television.



When the world of Quadravidia comes under attack by the insidious tau, only one man can defeat the aliens and save the planet in the Emperor's name: the legendary Hero of the Imperium, Commissar Ciaphas Cain.

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