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**THE DEVIL YOU KNOW**  
**SANDY MITCHELL**

**A CIAPHAS CAIN AUDIO DRAMA**

# THE DEVIL YOU KNOW (2014)

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## LIST OF CHARACTERS:

- \* Ciaphas Cain - Imperial Commissar;
- \* Ferik Jurgen - personal adjutant to Commissar Ciaphas Cain;
- \* Zale - sergeant of the Catachans accompanying Cain;
- \* Colonel - unnamed Catachans commander;
- \* Malicia Mortales - Dark Eldar succubus;
- \* Brennan, Carter, Klist, Felessen, Carter - the Catachans;

## CHAPTER 01

*"Though Cain encountered the so called Dark Eldar several times in the course of his career witnessing both their refined sadism and utter lack of scruple<sup>1</sup> from far closer at hand than he otherwise have liked, one such incident stands out among the rest. Not least because for a short while he found himself in uneasy alliance with one of them. An arrangement needless to say which both parties soon came to regret. As ever I've been content to let his account speak for itself apart from the occasional explanatory footnote and the interpolation<sup>2</sup> of material from other sources when required to place things in a wider context than his habitually self-centered narrative provides".*

Amberley Vail, Ordo Xenos

As our shuttle approached the glowing emerald sphere of Diadem Sextus I found myself thinking how tranquil it looked. Although I knew perfectly well it was nothing of the kind. Practically every square centimeter of the world's surface apart from the shallow stagnant<sup>3</sup> seas was choked<sup>4</sup> with vegetation. Trees the height of hab-spires clawed they way out of the lower canopy like reefs jutting from a green choppy<sup>5</sup> ocean. The titanic balls of which our pilot made sure to give a wide berth<sup>6</sup> to, wary<sup>7</sup> of what might be roosting within them. Almost a vertical kilometer of savagely contended plant life separated the smooth seeming surface beneath us from the forest floor below, swarming with wildlife of such staggering ferocity that only the Catachans garrisoning the place could possibly feel at home. And now the Tyranids had arrived drawn to that rich agglomeration of biomass as surely as Kroot to carrion<sup>8</sup> whereupon desperate battle had been joined on a deathworld suddenly a thousand times more lethal than it had been. The only bright spot I could see was that the bulk of the system's population was safely tucked<sup>9</sup> away in the heavily defended hives of the industrial moons. Although that advantage wouldn't remain with us for long. If the Nids succeeded in stripping Sextus bare, converting its billions of tons of flora and fauna into living weapons under control of the hive mind

the resulting tsunami of genetically engineered faunas would sweep all resistance aside as casually as a hand swatting<sup>10</sup> a net.

"Which given the amount of materials being produced in the forges of the Diadem system would effectively cripple the Imperial war effort to cross half of the subsector".

A situation so desperate that it clearly required the presence of a hero to turn the tide. Unfortunately what it got instead was me.

\* \* \*

Jurgen (vomiting): "It looks awfully green down there, sir".

Cain: "It's not classified as a deathworld for nothing, Jurgen. If the Nids or the wildlife don't get you, the plants probably will".

Jurgen: "Just so long as the ground is solid..."

First Pilot: "Beacon acquired, sir. We are on the final approach".

Second Pilot: "Evade! Evade!"

Cain: "What the hell?"

First Pilot: "Landing site is under attack. We have a flock of gargoyles on our tail".

Cain: "Can you pick them off with the point defenses?"

First Pilot: "If I can't we are in trouble..."

Jurgen: "That's a relief. I thought we already were..."

(multiple gun rounds)

Cain: "Hang on!"

Jurgen: "I am, sir! Just about... (ready to vomit again)"

First Pilot: "They are breaking off".

Second Pilot: "Resuming final approach!"

\* \* \*

(sounds of a distant battle, gun rounds and flying aircrafts)

(shuttle's ramp opening)

Jurgen: "Throne be praised!"

Cain: "Ground's solid enough for you?"

Jurgen: "Give permafrost<sup>11</sup> and a day, that will do".

The outpost was pretty much what I expected - a couple of sky shield landing pads, their blocky supporting pillars raising them above the scored<sup>12</sup> surface of the jungle floor where a couple of thermobaric warheads had been employed to create clearing large enough to erect a couple of bastions and a cluster of prefabricated block houses, no doubt used for storage, mess rooms and barrack blocks. Our heavy dropship was too large to take advantage of the fortified platforms however, setting down in a clearer zone a few meters to the south of them where judging by the carpet of fresher ash and the absence of green shoots already forcing their way through it into the light it or others like it were frequent visitors.

Jurgen and I strode away from its boarding ramp as steadily as we could while squads of heavily muscled Catachan troopers hurried forward accompanied by a couple of Sentinel power-loaders eager to loot the cargo hold of it desperately needed stores of ammunition. Behind them at a more leisurely pace as befitted his rank came the colonel in charge of this impressive display of military might.

Surrounded by the usual coterie<sup>13</sup> of subalterns<sup>14</sup>, aides and specialists one of who was an Ogryn bodyguard. For a moment I thought he looked a remarkably stunted<sup>15</sup> member of his subspecies before my forebrain caught up with my eyes

and I realized he was perfectly normal as far as that adjective can ever be applied to an abhuman. He merely looked smaller than usual because I initially registered that the Catachans surrounding him as of average build instead of the greater stature common to natives of that hellish world. They towered over Jurgen and myself as they approached like slabs<sup>16</sup> of corded muscle and the colonel held out a hand which long strong enough to arm-wrestle an ork with.

Colonel: "Commissar!"

Cain: "Colonel!"

I took it without hesitation having played this game innumerable times at the course of my career. We closed our grips simultaneously, my hand suddenly feeling as though it had been enclosed in a waste compactor<sup>17</sup>. But I kept my expression neutral and was gratified to see a flicker of surprise in the colonel's eyes as my augmetic fingers took the strain and returned as good as they got. After a moment he let go and we nodded at one another with all the courtesy we could counterfeit<sup>18</sup>.

Colonel: "Sorry, you didn't get a smoother landing".

Jurgen: "We've had worse..."

Colonel: "And this is..."

Cain: "My aide, gunner Jurgen".

Colonel: "The attacks are getting more frequent and more determined. It was just a few creatures at first, easy to drive off but every time they come back there are more of them".

Cain: "They are testing your defenses, looking for weaknesses".

Colonel: "Then they'll be disappointed. Every man here grew up surrounded by worst things than these. It's just a matter of time before we hunt them down and eradicate the lot".

Cain: "I admire your determination, colonel, but I've fought Tyranids before. Whatever they look like they are not just mindless beasts. They are directed by an intelligence greater and more malign<sup>19</sup> than anything else in the galaxy and it learns at frightening speed".

Colonel: "Not fast enough to get the better of you though it seems".

Cain: "Far too many good men haven't".

Colonel: "I think you'll find we've a lot more going for us than luck".

Cain: "Let's hope so".

Colonel's Aide: "Just got the latest technical data lined in the hololith, sir".

Colonel: "Good, perhaps this will set your mind at rest, commissar. As you can see we are fortified in depth with outer defensive lines here (beeping sound) and here (beeping sound). Emplaced heavy weapons with overlapping fields of fire and mine fields on our flanks. None of the attack so far has got through to the inner compound".

Cain: "Not even the gargoyles? In my experience anything with wings isn't that bothered by mine fields".

Colonel: "Which is why we've got the Hydras stationed here and here (beeping sounds). Overlapping fire lanes again, they'll take anything out in the air before it gets close enough to cause trouble".

Jurgen: "Till something takes them out".

Colonel (infuriated): "What does that..."

Cain (not letting Colonel finish): "What about burrowers<sup>20</sup>?"

Colonel: "I haven't seen any yet, but we'll deal with them if we do. We've got a mobile reserve of Chimeras and Sentinels ready to get stuck in to anything tunneling under our perimeter".

Cain: "I see... And what are these (beeping sound)... scattered through the jungle about ten kilometers beyond your perimeter?"

Colonel: "Listening posts dug in with seismographs. If any burrowers are on their way in we'll have plenty of warning. Believe it or not we do know what we are doing".

Cain: "I am sure you do".

Colonel: "But?"

Cain: "The real question is do the Tyranids know what you are doing?"

## CHAPTER 02

(footsteps)

Jurgen: "Managed to find you some recaf, sirá and a soaked Grox barb. Sure you wouldn't rather eat in the mess hall".

Cain: "I am positive. You know how awkward ever one gets. Half of them look at me like of just shaken hands with the Emperor, then the rest like they are worried I'll shoot them one of them on the spot (taking a cup). Thanks".

Jurgen: "You don't think the colonel would be disappointed, sir?"

Cain (finishing the cup): "Relieved, more likely. Even more so when we leave tomorrow".

Jurgen: "Leave, sir?"

Cain: "I think we should inspect one of those listening posts. You know the Nids as well as I do. They are getting ready for a major assault here and it's going to be a bloody business when they do".

Jurgen: "Good idea, sir. Make sure they can win us in good time".

I nodded but in truth that wasn't the real reason. If the hideous creatures really were massing for the attack, all my experience and instincts told me it was imminent, I wanted to be a long way away when it came.

\* \* \*

(footsteps)

Colonel: "Are you sure about this? You won't see much action at Echo 37. Surely one of the listening stations between us and the main mass of Tyranids would be a better choice".

Cain: "The last thing the front line units need now is a distraction. When the attack comes even a second or two of extra warning could be critical and I want their attention of the geophones not tiding up for a snap inspection".

Colonel: "Good point".

So it was. I'd given enough thought concocting a reason to visit a post well away from the Tyranids' predicted line of advance.

Jurgen: "Besides the Nids like to go in for flank attacks".

Colonel: "Yes, they do".

Jurgen: "Snaky your Nids, especially those Lictors. They can pop up and suck your brains up for even you don't know they are there".

Cain: "Indeed they can".

Jurgen: "And genestealers are almost as bat. Some rip a squad of terminator Marines apart ones. Never even knew they were coming to their pounds".

Cain: "Jurgen, you'll spook us all".

Colonel: "Not much fear of that. Catachans don't spook especially these ones".

Cain: "I can believe that. I've seen orks that looked less intimidating".

Jurgen: "And with fewer scars".

Zale (approaching the speakers): "Haven't kept you waiting, I hope so?"

Colonel: "Sergeant Zale in one of best recon specialists. You couldn't be in safer hands".

Zale: "Me and the boys will get you to Echo 37 in one piece".

Cain: "I don't doubt that for a second".

I'd have felt a lot better if they'd mentioned getting back too though.

\* \* \*

(machetes cutting the trees and bushes)

The journey to the listening post was every bit as arduous<sup>22</sup> as I'd expected. Pretty much everything we encountered making assiduous<sup>23</sup> efforts to kill us, but Zale and his men lived up to the confidence the colonel evidently had in him and they kept most of the predators off our backs.

(several gunshots, best roaring)

And a few they missed were no match for Jurgen and I who had more than enough experience of staying alive in the most unpromising of circumstances.

Jurgen: "Good shooting, sir".

Brennan: "Never seen anyone draw sword arm that fast..."

Cain: "I get a lot of practice".

Not for the first time I found myself wondering if this expedition was folly<sup>24</sup> of the purest kind but we were still unscathed<sup>25</sup> and nothing that had attacked us so far had been anything like as fearsome as a charging Tyranid swarm. If they really were massing for an assault on the fire base our chances of survival out here would be far greater however low they looked in absolute terms.

Jurgen: "What was that?"

Cain: "What?"

Jurgen: "Thought I saw movement over there".

Zale: "Just a strangle vine<sup>26</sup> is flexing. They can sense our body heat".

Jurgen: "There it is again, sir, four o'clock".

Cain: "I saw it too, something is definitely trailing us".

Jurgen: "Lictor, you reckon?"

Cain: "Throne, hope not! The Nids aren't supposed to be anywhere near here.

Sergeant Zale?"

Zale: "Sir?"

Cain: "We are being stalked. Sound like any of the local wildlife?"

Zale (gasping): "Could be. Most of the big predators have learned to leave us alone though. Brennan, Klist, sweep right! Reinforce Felessen".

Brennan: "One it, serge".

(silence, birds singing)

Zale: "Whatever it is, they'll find it".

Cain: "Or it will find them".

(Someone crying, multiple gun rounds)

Zale: "Come on!"

Despite my obvious reluctance I ran with him making sure to stay a pace or two behind. I had a reputation for leading from the front to live up to however undeserved may it be though and my life depended on the vigilance<sup>27</sup> of the troopers surrounding me. This was hardly the time to be casting doubt on it. Besides being left alone in the middle of the jungle full of things determined to kill me seemed even less safe than charging headlong into harm's way. At least while I had a squad of guardsmen to hide behind.

Zale: "Throne on earth! Looks like you were right about the Tyranids, commissar. Nothing local did that to them".

Cain: "No it didn't".

Jurgen: "Don't look like Nids to me either, sir. None would cut them about that".

Cain (agreeing and speaking low): "No. Whatever did this took them apart with surgical precision and didn't stop to feed. Better not mention it to the sergeant though. As long as thinks he knows what he is dealing with he'll stay confident".

Jurgen: "Any ideas, sir? About what really did it?"

Cain: "None I like".

In truth the condition of the cadavers did strike me as familiar in some fashion, although the memory refused to come into focus which considering the amount of violent death I'd seen in the past half century or more was probably not all that surprising. Along with the nagging<sup>28</sup> sense of familiarity came a strong feeling of dread which I could scarce<sup>29</sup> account for but which settled about me with suffocating weight. It was as much to dispel it as anything that I began to take charge remembering the old military maxim that in a crisis it was better to do the wrong thing than do nothing at all.

Cain: "Any tracks?"

Zale: "Nothing, but if these Lictors are as stealthy as you say they are, there wouldn't be".

Cain: "Let's press on to the outpost then. We can send back a burial detail<sup>30</sup> to recover the bodies".

Zale: "What for? They'll be stripped to the bone in an hour. And even those will be gone by nightfall. What the jungle takes, the jungle keeps. First thing you learn on Catachan".

Which made me even more heartily glad that I'd never been there.

## CHAPTER 03

Cain: "Echo 37, respond!"

Jurgen: "Nothing on my bead either, sir".

Cain: "We should be in range by now".

Zale: "Maybe that vox is down".

Cain: "Moving carefully, keep watching each other's backs".

Zale: "At least we will be under cover before nightfall".

Jurgen: "What happens at night?"

Zale: "Things get a lot less pleasant round here".

Which given how uninviting they were in broad daylight sounded far from encouraging. Jurgen and I hurried after him as the remaining members of our escort closed in on the blocky precast<sup>31</sup> bunker which gradually became visible through the dense tangle of vegetation. Despite regular attempts to keep it and its environs

clear with flamers and defoliant sprays some of the more tenacious<sup>32</sup> plants were already twining themselves around it and I gave them as wider berth as I could far from eager to discover what toxic surprises they held. We'd all seen flickers of movement several times in the hours since the butchery of two troopers sent to investigate them but so far at least whatever was trailing us seemed content to keep their distance which was fine by me. I just wished I could believe they'd continue to do so.

Jurgen: "No signs of life, sir".

(something heavy falling, gun rounds, birds shrieking)

Jurgen: "Not the sort we want anyway".

Cain: "Not the sort anyone would want".

I skirted<sup>33</sup> the hideous thing cautiously still unsure if that was plant or animal and approached the block house. The main door was wide open and the palms of my hands began to itch with unease. If I'd had any doubts at all that something had got badly wrong here they were instantly dispelled by the sight of that yearning<sup>34</sup> portal. Leaving the entrance to that refuge open and unguarded in an environment so abundant in inimicable<sup>35</sup> life forms would run completely counter to every instinct a native death-worlder possessed.

Cain: "Hello?"

Zale: "Wait here, sir. Team one with me, team two, stay here and guard the commissar".

Then without any other word he was gone. No doubt wishing to get away before I could object and insist on accompanying him. Not that I had the slightest intention of doing either of course. After a few moments he reappeared a couple of fresh abrasions<sup>36</sup> on his face and arms.

Cain: "Nids?"

Zale: "Just local vermin".

Cain: "Any sign of the garrison?"

Zale (grimly): "Nothing. The place seems deserted".

And so it was. We searched the whole outpost and Zale lead a sweep through the surrounding jungle...

"Almost certainly unaccompanied by Cain"

... to lower vain. Not a single survivor could be found from among dozen or so men stationed there. Which was not to say they hadn't left traces of their presence and those of the most disquieting kind, chiefly spatters of blood and a few pocks<sup>37</sup> in the walls where lasgun rounds had missed their mark. As night fell and we sealed the building against the terrors of the night I conferred<sup>38</sup> urgently with Zale.

(hatch opening)

Zale: "That's it, we are sealed in. Nothing can get through that".

Cain: "I am sure the men stationed here thought the same thing. Is the vox repaired yet?"

Zale: "There was nothing wrong with him".

Cain: "But they never reported they were under attack. Whatever hit this place it struck fast before they had time to react".

Jurgen: "Genestealers, you reckon, sir? A whole swarm of them. Hellish fast they are and they can squeeze in pretty much anywhere".

Cain: "True. Sergeant, get every air vent, waste pipe and conduit sealed tight. If that's how they got in, they'll remember the trick. Weld the grills if you have to". Not that it would make much difference. The claws of a stealer would rip through Terminator armor like Jurgen through a ration pack so a couple of metal grills weren't likely to slow them at all. But I knew what the troopers must be thinking. That their comrades had been precisely where we were now just a few hours before and it was vital to keep them busy before that reflection had a chance to chew away their morale. Anything I could do to make them think we stood a chance would increase our odds of survival a thousand fold.

Zale: "Right, sir. You heard the commissar, get moving".

Cain: "The Nids didn't do this. There was something else".

Jurgen: "If you say so, sir".

Cain: "They are not exactly subtle, are they? They'd have left more traces, claw marks, holes in the walls where they'd forced their way in, that kind of thing".

Jurgen: "What then, sir?"

Cain: "Frag if I know, but I'd lay good odds it had something to do with whatever is trailing us. You saw what was left of those troopers".

Jurgen: "Messy... Any idea what it was?"

Cain: "No and I hope we'll never find out. Just keep your eyes and ears open and if anything strikes you as odd, tell me at once. However trivial".

Jurgen: "Right you are, sir. So what's the plan?"

Cain: "I can't go anywhere at night so we'd pull out as soon as it is light assuming we are still here".

\* \* \*

Cain (speaking over vox): "That's right, colonel, completely deserted".

Colonel: "Any sign of Tyranid activity?"

Cain: "Not now, but there is no telling how long the diaphones<sup>39</sup> were on mend. Better go on full alert".

Colonel: "It's night on a death world, commissar. We already are".

Cain: "How soon can you extract us?"

Colonel: "As soon as the relief crew gets there".

Another day in other words. While they slog their way through the green hell the same way we had followed by tomorrow night too as there would be no chance at all of returning to the fire base before darkness fell. Far too long for my peace of mind. Something wasn't right here and the sooner I was away from this accursed place the better I'd like it.

Zale: "Everything is sealed tight, commissar. Tight as we can make it anyway".

Cain: "Good. How long until dawn?"

Zale: "Five or six hours, at least until the light starts filtering down through the trees. No one could move much before then".

Cain: "So we will just have to wait".

Which we did for what seemed like a great deal longer than the sergeant's estimation. For some of that long dragging night I actually managed to sleep falling into a fit full nightmare-played stupor from which I awoke periodically drenched<sup>40</sup> in perspiration<sup>41</sup>.

Jurgen: "You all right, sir?"

Cain: "Oh, fine. What time is it?"

Jurgen: "Just gone five local clock. The sergeant reckons there'll be sun up soon".

Cain: "Can't be soon enough for me. What's that?"

Jurgen: "Flask of tanna, sir".

"A Valhallan beverage which Cain acquired in inexplicable taste for during his long association with regiments from that world. The Gothic language might contain an adjective sufficient to convey something of its flavor but if it does it so far eluded me"

Jurgen: "Though you might need to pick me up, so I brought some along".

Cain: "You thought right, good man (drinking). Ah, anything to report?"

Jurgen: "Nothing so far, the Nids set another go at the fire pace a couple of hours ago, but we fought them off as usual".

So it looked as though I dragged us into this nightmare for nothing. Not for the first time I got the feeling that the only reason I wasn't long dead like most commissars my age was the amount of amusement I afforded the Emperor.

(beeping sound)

Jurgen: "GFO reading, strength twelve".

Cain: "Vector?"

Jurgen: "Straight for the compound! Movement on the auspex too. Holy Throne, there must be thousands of them".

Cain: "Vox, now!"

Jurgen: "Here, sir!"

Cain (over vox): "This is commissar Cain at Echo 37, we've got incoming. Looks like half of the Nids on this planet are heading straight forward to you".

Jurgen: "Told you they are like going to the flank..."

Cain (over vox): "Stand too, you have only minutes before they arrive".

Colonel (over vox): "Thank you, commissar. Throne be with you".

Cain (over vox): "The Emperor protects".

Though so far as I could see he was going to have his work cut out in my case. A single glance at the auspex was enough to confirm my worst fears. Though the vast majority of that hideous scything mass of malevolent chitin was to pass us by, the outline members of the swarm would pass close enough to detect our presence and once they knew we were there was certain to attack.

Cain: "Get on to one of the other beachheads<sup>42</sup> and call for extraction. Our only way out of here now is by air".

Zale: "Then we are reamed<sup>43</sup>. Nothing can get through the canopy, it's too thick". Which I already knew of course, why else would I've spent most of yesterday slogging through lethal jungle on foot. But one thing I'd learned in the course of far too narrow brushes<sup>44</sup> with death was that the dogged<sup>45</sup> refusal to accept the inevitable made all the difference to my prospects of survival. At least they had so far and I had no intention of allowing this occasion to become the exception to the rule.

Cain: "One place we know for sure is free of vegetation. This sector here".

Zale: "Where the main mass of Tyranids are".

Cain: "Were! They've gone charging off to attack the fire base. There maybe a few foragers<sup>46</sup> left behind to feed the digester pools but most of the warriors will be gone leaving a big hole in the jungle a flyer can be put down in".

Zale: "If we can make it there far in one piece".

Cain: "It's still a better chance than staying here".

Zale (finally persuaded): "Agreed".

Jurgen: "I've contacted air command. They are sending in a wave of Valkyrie strikes to disrupt the digester pools while they are only lightly defended. The pilots will be listening up for our signal".

Cain: "God, then let's get out of here before the Nids arrive".

(weird low noise, walls shaking)

Jurgen: "Sounds they already have".

He unslung the melta he normally carried when we were expecting real trouble while the Catachans readied their lasguns.

One of the Catachans (in the distance): "Over there!"

For my part I drew my las pistol and a chainsword thumbing the speed selector to maximum reflecting that there was no reason not to look the part at least. Hardly had I done so that the sturdy rockrete walls shook again.

Another of the Catachans (closer to Cain): "They are breaking through".

Cain: "Wait for a target".

(explosions, beasts roaring)

One of the Catachans: "Carnifex!"

Another of the Catachans: "That's a..."

(Jurgen firing the multi melta)

Cain: "Look out for the gaunts behind it".

(gaunts shrieking and screaming)

Sure enough the huge massive misshapen muscle was surrounded by the smaller bounding forms of hormagaunts leaping into the attack, their scything claws scissoring the air in search of flesh to bare of it. Most fell to the disciplined fire of the Catachans, but one leaped the barrier of its fallen brood-mates to hurl itself headlong in my direction. I evaded the attack narrowly and parried the blade of chitin, the whirling teeth of my chainsword biting deep. As the hideous thing rallied and came at me again the Carnifex advanced thrusting his deformed shoulders further into the gap it had made in the wall in a desperate attempt to reach my aid. But Jurgen was ready for it and fired the melta again taking the monstrous creature full in the face.

Jurgen: "Frag off!"

The hormagaunt turned to follow me as I fainted<sup>47</sup> right then I drove him running it neatly through the forearms ripping the blade free in a welter of ichor and masticated meat. The stroke was a killing one and I turned at once towards the breach in the wall bracing myself for the further onslaught. But to my relief the charge was faltering, the tide of gaunts now scuttling<sup>48</sup> back around the cadaver of the Carnifex.

Cain (hardly speaking): "They are on the run... for now. They'll look for cover until the hive mind rallies them".

Zale: "How long will it take?"

Cain: "Not long enough. It knows we are here now and we can't defend this place with a hole that size in the wall. Any casualties?"

Zale: "They got Carter, everyone else is in one piece".

Cain: "Then we'd better get moving while we still are".

## CHAPTER 04

(machetes cutting the branches)

We lost no time in leaving the outpost behind making the best time we could towards the dubious<sup>49</sup> sanctuary of the area that Tyranids had already stripped of biomass to fuel their apparently unstoppable advance. How the fire base had fared and whether the warning we'd given made any difference to their survival we could only guess. The miniature transceiver in my ear being too low-powered to reach that far without a boost from the monitoring station's own vox unit.

Jurgen: "At least nothing's attacked us yet".

Cain: "No".

Which worried me. On our journey the previous day we'd been constantly fighting off the denizens<sup>50</sup> of this murderous realm and I couldn't help feeling their absence was ominous<sup>51</sup>.

Jurgen: "Tyranids must have eaten them all".

Cain: "More than likely".

Remembering there was something else loose in the jungle too I kept a vigilant watch for signs of movement but if we were being stalked again this time our tracker was keeping successfully out of sight. It was possible of course that he had been consumed by the Tyranid swarm but somehow I doubted that. Judging by the condition of its victims' bodies whatever it was, was more than capable of defending itself.

Zale: "Wait, there's something up ahead".

We slowed our advance, weapons at the ready alert for any sign of threat. The undergrowth around us rustled<sup>52</sup> constantly from the intermittent<sup>53</sup> breeze and from the constant flexing of the semi-sentient plants which sensed our passage and sought to snail us. Any stealthy footsteps stalking us were bound to be masked by the ambient sound although that didn't stop me from straining my ears in a desperate attempt to distinguish them.

One of the Catachans: "Emperor, preserve us!"

Jurgen: "At least we found the missing station crew".

We had indeed, although in a manner which hadn't occurred to me in even my most morbid<sup>54</sup> imaginings. Their contorted<sup>55</sup> cadavers were hanging from the trees around us. The hideous state of them - mute testament to the fact that their deaths had been neither quick, nor easy.

Zale: "What could have done this? Tortured them to death in the jungle at night. The creatures around here would rip them to pieces if they scented this much blood".

Jurgen: "There are worse things than orks".

Cain: "Eldar Reavers, has to be. This abomination has all their hallmarks<sup>56</sup>".

Dark Eldar (suddenly appearing out of nowhere): "Only the Eldar strongly appreciate the artistry of pain".

I don't find admitting that the sight of the tall slight figure which ghosted into view from between the trees and the hideous harvest my blood ran cold. I've encountered these creatures before and if there is a purer distillation of unmitigated<sup>57</sup> evil in the galaxy I have no desire to know about it. They claim to live on the agony of others and for all I know it's true. They certainly have an insatiable appetite for inflicting it.

One of the Catachans: "Murdering bitch!"

(numerous gun rounds, slicing sound, one of the Catachans dying)

Dark Eldar (almost laughing): "Manners?"

She moved with impossible speed cutting down the trooper who challenged her with casual disdain<sup>58</sup>, her blade flickering like summer lightning as she carved her way through flesh and bone with equal ease. As he fell her movements seemed to become even more alive and the smile of pure indulgence oozed across her face while she drank in the pain and terror of her latest victim's last moments.

(Dark Eldar laughing)

Cain: "Hold your positions! Just keep her covered while we hear what she wants".

Dark Eldar (again laughing): "If you think that will do any good".

I was under no illusion that it would. If she chose to attack she'd undoubtedly get most of us before the others cut her down but "most of us" didn't have to include me and wouldn't if I had anything to do with it.

Zale: "How come her lips aren't moving?"

Cain: "She's using her vox coder but she understands us well enough".

Jurgen: "Just can't be bothered speaking Gothic".

Dark Eldar: "Beloit<sup>59</sup> my vocal chords with your animal grunts? (laughing) Hardly".

Cain: "Eldar witches are all like that".

Dark Eldar (laughing hysterically): "Guda'mir witch of the Nor'viss, know me and tremble before your final agonies feed my acolytes. I am Malicia Mortales, dark succubus of the Tainted Kiss".

Cain: "Only the third and there I was thinking we might be in trouble".

Bating a psychotic killer is never without risk of course but when you've come up against as many as I have you soon learn that their greatest weakness is often their arrogance, especially when you are talking about Eldar. Besides I'd been in the hands of these creatures before if only for a mercifully brief time and I knew all too well that provoking her into killing me quickly might soon turn out to be the best of a very short list of unattractive options.

Dark Eldar: "Hah, laugh when you can, Mon-keigh!"

She gestured almost imperceptively and half a dozen sinuous<sup>60</sup> figures rippled into view around us. Like their dark mistress they were clad half in armor while the other side of their bodies bore no protection at all beyond skintight body gloves artfully slashed to reveal glimpses of corpse pallid flesh.

Jurgen: "Are we in trouble now, sir?"

Cain: "Probably".

Dark Eldar: "Take them, this time there will be no need for haste. Consume them at your leisure".

Cain: "Fire!"

(multiple rounds, numerous cries from both sides)

As the witch's troopers danced towards us their envenomed blades whirling an intricate patterns of lethality I braced myself to meet their charge. Dueling one, I knew, would be like trying to cut down smoke, but I'd bested their like before albeit more by luck than skill.

"In fact Cain was a gifted swordsman, probably one of the finest in the sector although as in so many other things he seems genuinely unaware of how exceptional he was".

And I just had to hope I could repeat the trick. One of the pirouetting nightmares fell almost at once vaporized on the spot by a pointblank gift from Jurgen's melta although her comrades evaded the blizzard of lasgun bolts unleashed by the

Catachans with almost contemptuous<sup>61</sup> ease. Though armed with pistols they disdained the use of them preferring to close and savor the infliction of pain and death in a whirling balletic way. To my surprise however none of them approached me. The reason of which became apparent almost at once as I saw Malicia moving in my direction with the lazy deliberation of a feline catching sight of a rodent with nowhere to run.

Dark Eldar: "You have quite the reputation, commissar Cain. Shall we see if the reality matches it?"

I raised my chainsword for the guard position masking my unease as best I could. It seemed she knew who I was and knowing how her kind bore grudges that was distinctly disturbing. I'd been instrumental in their defeat more than once or to be more accurate had been handed most of the credit once the dust had settled. Perhaps she saw this as a chance to even the score. Before our blades could clash however we were interrupted.

Jurgen: "Look out, sir! Nids!"

My aid was right. No sooner had he uttered his warning than a tidal wave of malevolent chitin burst from the curtain of vegetation surrounding us, engulfing the struggling guardsmen and witches alike.

Dark Eldar: "This way, if you wish to live a little longer".

She turned as she spoke disemboweling one of the hulky warrior gaunts in a dazzling display of elegant butchery just as the hideous creature leveled its venom cannon at me. Quite wise she would bother to save my life elusively at that moment although my innate paranoia assured me that whatever her reasons I wasn't going to be happy with them when I found out. Nevertheless as I'd learned all too well over the years in situations like these the only thing to do was to take advantage of everything you could to get out of them and let the future take care of itself.

Cain: "Ladies first!"

I followed the bloody trail that succubus hacked from the ranks of the Tyranid swarm, my boots slipping in spilled ichor and hit the viscera<sup>62</sup> at almost every step marveling<sup>63</sup> at her deadly expertise. I must admit I was solidly tempted to just shoot her in the back while I had a chance, only in reflection that to do so would be to leave me at the mercy of the Tyranid swarm stayed my hand. That and the fact that she must surely be expecting so obvious attack, so to make the attempt would be to invite instant retaliation and I was by no means sure she wouldn't be able to evade faster than I could pull the trigger. Besides which both my weapons were busily enough employed fending off the gaunts and Termagants which swarmed around the larger warriors hurling themselves at us in an incensed<sup>64</sup> frenzy.

Then all at once we were clear.

Cain: "We need to go back, help the others".

Not that I had the remotest intention of doing so of course since it would mean almost certain death but the Reaver appeared to believe my reputation and reinforcing that illusion might help me gain the element of surprise later on.

Dark Eldar: "They won't prevail. They were too weak to live. Either way they are of no further concern".

The sound of the melta firing was enough to reassure me that Jurgen at least was still in the fight and if anyone was likely to walk away from it - it would be my aide. For a moment I was tempted to vox him but distracting him in the middle of the

desperate fight for survival was unlikely to end well so I settled for leaving the channel open. That way at least we'd aware of one another's final moments.

Cain: "What then?"

Dark Eldar: "I know a safer refuge. Our chances of reaching it alive will be far greater if we cooperate".

Cain: "Safe for who?"

Dark Eldar: "No harm will come to you which I can prevent. You have my word". And we both knew what that was worth. Nevertheless I nodded my agreement. The direction we were going in was towards the zone of Tyranids' attack cleared and I undoubtedly stood a better chance of reaching it with this blood-chilling embodiment of lethality watching my back. At least for as long as it suited her. For my own part I just had to remain on guard for the slightest sign of treachery and be ready to get my retaliation in first.

Cain: "And you have mine".

Dark Eldar: "Truce then. Hurry, before the beasts rally".

## CHAPTER 05

"For the following reconstruction of events I'm indebted to the after-action reports admitted by sergeant Zale. With its help I've been able to infer much of what happened following Cain's departure from the battlefield in the company of the Dark Eldar succubus".

Jurgen (hardly breathing): "I think we've just run out of Nids".

Zale: "Not before time. What happened?"

Jurgen: "We got over big ones so the rest ran away".

"Without the synapse creatures to herd them the smaller organisms would've been cut off from the influence of the hive mind and reverted to their instinctive behavior patterns. In this instance - to run for cover".

One of the Catachans: "But what about the Eldar?"

Zale: "Not so lucky".

What was left of our squad and the commissar's aide fend out to make sure but our first impression turned out to be right. All the xenos women were dead although they were each surrounded by so many dismembered Tyranids that it took us a while to be certain we'd located them all.

One of the Catachans: "Most of the Tyranids seem to have gone after them instead of us. Why would they do that?"

Zale: "Don't know, don't care. Just thank the Throne".

"Almost certainly because Jurgen was a blank, one of the incredibly rare individuals with a natural talent for nullifying any psychic or warp spawn phenomena in his immediate vicinity<sup>65</sup>. He appears to have disrupted the hive mind's connection to its synapse creatures on several occasions and it's more than likely he did so in this instance as well".

One of the Catachans: "The Emperor protects".

Jurgen: "Any sign of the commissar?"

Zale: "None, all that xenos harlot<sup>66</sup>".

One of the Catachans: "Probably both dead by now".

Jurgen: "Not the commissar, his vox bead's still working".

Zale: "Tracks, over here".

Jurgen: "Show me".

I was certain he would have led the way if he could, but reading the jungle is a skill that takes time to learn. Instead he kept his melta ready for instant use and followed hard on my heels leaving the others to bring up the rear.

One of the Catachans: "Where did those Tyranids come from so suddenly?"

Zale: "You saw the direction. What do you think?"

Jurgen: "Fire base must have driven them off".

Zale: "Or been overrun. Either way we have got an entire swarm on our heels. Let us hope the commissar's plan works before they catch up".

\* \* \*

Within moments it seemed we were deep in the jungle completely out of sight of the charnel growth and the battle which had raged within it. Despite the misgivings I still felt about the alliance I'd struck I couldn't deny that I needed it. It was now clear that the Tyranids hadn't been solely responsible for the absence of the local predators which had occasioned me such unease. Though they attacked less frequently than on the previous days' march the jungles still contained enough unpleasant surprises to keep me constantly scanning our surroundings for the lurking threats.

(several gun rounds, beast screaming)

Dark Eldar: "So your attention isn't entirely on me?"

Cain: "Disappointed?"

Dark Eldar: "Surprised, I was expecting you to try to kill me before now".

Cain: "Funny, I was thinking the same thing... (crying) Behind you!"

(beast roaring and being slashed to death)

Dark Eldar: "I wondered how long it would take you to spot it. You have a remarkably strong survival instinct for a member of so weaker species".

Cain: "Quite".

I wasn't nearly as sure of myself as I tried to sound of course but I knew a head case when I saw one. Malicia was a predator, pure and simple, and however much he thought she needed me would turn on me in a heartbeat if she scented a scintilla<sup>67</sup> of weakness. It was just in her nature.

Dark Eldar (laughing hysterically): "Ha-ha, was that a challenge? I am so glad I chose well".

A turn of phrase which sent a shudder through me as strongly as if I just stepped into a Valhallan shower but I masked the reaction with the consummate ease of the lifelong dissembler<sup>68</sup>.

Cain: "Chose? For what?"

Dark Eldar: "A travelling companion..."

Cain: "You had bodyguards".

Dark Eldar: "So did you. Much good they did either of us".

(another beast attacking and dying)

Dark Eldar (taking a gasp): "I like this world, like home without the intrigue".

Cain: "Is that why you are here? Your idea of a holiday?"

Dark Eldar: "You could call it... Hunting trip".

Which sort of made sense for a race which relished the pain of others a death world will be like a day at beach let alone one overrun with Tyranids and Imperial guardsmen energetically dismembering one another.

Cain: "Did you bring many friends along on this little junket<sup>69</sup>?"

From what I remembered Eldar Reavers tended to attack in force making lightning raids before melting back into the warp through one of the portals they seemed able to open pretty much anywhere they liked. If Malicia was a scout for a full scale incursion I needed to know. So I could find a bolt hole before it arrived.

Dark Eldar: "Just the ones you've met. This is a private hunt after a very special quarry<sup>70</sup>".

Cain: "So long as you are enjoying yourself..."

\* \* \*

The trail was easy enough to follow and we made good time urged on by the commissar's aide who seemed convinced that he was still alive and well. Though I never said so I had another reason for hurrying. The Tyranid army was hard on our heels and if I'd read the signs about us correctly - getting closer all the time. I could hear faint sounds of movement in the distance and the motile<sup>71</sup> plants about us seemed agitated as if they were sensing an approaching threat. And if that wasn't enough I had yet another cause for concern.

Zale: "I can only see one set of tracks that still leaves the Eldar unaccounted for".

One of the Catachans: "We didn't see any tracks before either".

Jurgen: "You wouldn't, her kind don't leave any".

Zale: "That doesn't mean she's with the commissar".

Jurgen: "His vox channel's still open. I can hear her talking".

One of the Catachans: "So you won't have to worry about an ambush anyway..."

Ah.... (unable to finish, screaming)

(Tyranid attacking, gun rounds)

Jurgen: "Lictor! Frag, just wounded. Your man?"

Zale: "Dead, it appeared out of nowhere".

Jurgen: "They do that, said they were snaky. Let us get a move on before the rest arrive".

Zale: "The rest?"

Jurgen: "They scout ahead of the swarm, leave a trail the rest can sniff out and follow. Come on".

Zale: "It's gone the same way as the commissar".

Jurgen: "Then we'll find him quicker, won't we?"

## CHAPTER 06

Dark Eldar: "There".

Cain: "That's what you were making for?"

I stopped in my tracks, astonished at the sight ahead. It was a building or the remains of one at least, titanic in scale and so overgrown that until we had approached within a few score meters it had simply blended into the rich greenery surrounding us. Nevertheless as my eyes began to adjust to the reality of it I found myself able to pick out the stumps of individual buttresses<sup>72</sup> and the scattered remains of tumbled walls. Blocks of masonry the size of Baneblades lay everywhere and I could scarcely imagine the effort with which they'd been raised or the heights to which they'd once saw. The overriding impression I got however was one of astonishing antiquity. These ruins had lain here tumbled and unregarded for millennia before humanity had arrived on this world, possibly before we'd even first left our own.

Cain: "What is this place?"

Dark Eldar: "No one knows. The ones who built it were ancient beyond even our imagining but the legacy they left endures".

Cain: "Legacy?"

Dark Eldar: "The webway. Places like these contain portals which are easier to open".

Cain (speaking lowly, to himself): "Do they indeed?"

Though I kept my voice as even as possible I couldn't entirely suppress the thrill of horror which ran through me at her words. Hellish as they were it seemed that Tyranids were by far the lesser threat now. I could imagine all too easily an army of Reavers pouring through the rent<sup>73</sup> in reality these ruins concealed to fall like ravening wolves on the billions of innocent souls packed into the industrial hives scattered throughout the system.

Dark Eldar: "Something we were preparing to take advantage of until the Great Devourer interrupted our plans. We can hardly harvest your system while it's fortified against invasion, can we? But monitoring your crude communications alerted me to a greater prize here for the taking".

Cain: "And that would be..."

Dark Eldar: "You, of course".

She eyed me with cool amusement as she spoke waiting my for reaction, no doubt anticipating shock, desperation and panic. All of which I am bound to say chased themselves around my synapses but I've spent a lifetime hiding my true nature from all around me and probably with greatest effort of my life I let none of the inner turmoil show on my face.

Cain: "I am flattered of course, but I am afraid you are in for disappointment. I am nothing special".

Dark Eldar: "You are to me".

As she spoke a faint shimmer appeared in the air, like fireflies dancing the summer heat haze and the hairs on my arms bristled<sup>74</sup>, rubbing against the sleeves of my shirt. This must be the portal itself and I wondered for an instant how I could have been so stupid as to have been lured almost to within arm's length of it. I had no idea what lurked beyond by anywhere Malicia called home would without doubt be hellish beyond imagining.

Dark Eldar: "A hero of these people, a soul blazing with nobility and self-sacrifice. Have you any idea how much power you represent?"

Cain: "Sure, you are about to enlighten me".

I've lost count of the number of obsessives, megalomaniacs and common loons who'd held me at gun point over the years both literally and metaphorically. And if I'd learned one thing it's that they never get tired of the sound of their own voices or in Malicia's case the sound of their artificially produced one. The longer you can keep them talking the greater the chance they'll get distracted. All right, there wasn't that much chance of disrupting so pure and focused predator as Malicia but I consoled<sup>75</sup> myself with a thought that at least Jurgen was listening in if he'd managed to get within vox-bead range by now and might even be lining up a kill shot if the Emperor hadn't decided I'd run out of entertainment value at last.

Dark Eldar: "With the energy I drain from your agonies I'll be far stronger than the other succubus. Their heads will fall and the Tainted Kiss will be mine to do with as I will".

Cain: "Oh, how disappointing..."

Needless to say it took every iota of self-control I possessed to retain the appearance of calm and if you doubt that I suggest you try putting yourself in the hands of the sadistic psychopath gloating<sup>76</sup> over the prospect of torturing you slowly to death and see how easy you find it to project an air of composure<sup>77</sup>. By the Emperor's grace however or she had talent for deception I seemed to have pulled off the trick. Yet at any rate in so far as I could read her expression at all Malicia seemed disconcerted<sup>78</sup> by my unexpected response.

Dark Eldar: "Disappointing?"

Cain: "Well after all that build up I was expecting something a little bit less prosaic than office politics".

Dark Eldar: "Prosaic? (laughing) You can't even begin to comprehend a complexity of the plots I'll weave, the alliances I'll forge, the elegance of the betrayals I'll engineer. But if there is any part of you that remains sane after the first few times I'd drawn sustenance<sup>79</sup> from your screams I'll share their wonder with your husk".

This was the moment, now or never. And I took it.

Cain: "Share this!"

(numerous bolt rounds)

Even as I fired though I realized I'd underestimated her.

(succubus laughing)

She was moving, a sardonic smile on her face before my finger had even tightened on the trigger. And I realized the instant of distraction I thought I'd seen was merely a ploy<sup>80</sup>. The las bolts expended themselves harmlessly among the stones apart from a couple that seemed to vanish in the thin air after brushing the fringes of the portal and I made a mental note to avoid that area at all costs. If I was drawn into the vortex I'd be lost, my fate sealed with only a hideous protracted death. As she closed Malicia took a swipe at my chest with her blade which I parried purely by instinct.

Dark Eldar (returning her breath): "Huh, not bad, but I am so much better".

Which I am bound to admit she was, her speed and dexterity quite phenomenal.

Time and again her venomous blade came within millimeters of my skin and had I time to think about that the prospect would have terrified me. Even a drop of that baleful<sup>81</sup> toxin entering my bloodstream would have been fatal, not instantly either. I had no doubt that she only intended to incapacitate me before dragging me through the shimmering rent in the air whatever unimaginable horror she had prepared.

Which I gradually began to realize was the main advantage I possessed. Whether or not Malicia was aware of it she was holding back wary of dispatching me too early which would derail all her grandiose plans.

(Malicia suddenly crying)

Cain: "First blood to me".

It was just a nick<sup>82</sup> inflicted more by luck than anything, but suddenly the dynamic of the fight changed and Malicia drove in far harder than hither<sup>83</sup> to.

(Malicia screaming infuriated)

Evidently her pride had been wounded rather more than her arm and she was no longer willing to hold back. Anger flooded her face and she unleashed a flurry of blows I was hard pressed to parry. Indeed had I not been an experienced enough duelist to trust entirely to instincts and reflex instead of conscious technique I doubt that I would have done.

Dark Eldar (in fury): "You'll pay for that! I promise you".

Cain: "Got change for ten".

Her anger was the first sign of weakness I'd seen in her and I continued goading<sup>84</sup> in spite of the risk. It was only then that I realized her strategium as we'd exchanged blows we'd circled each searching for an opening in the other's guard and my back was now facing the portal. In spite of all I could do I was forced to give ground against her frenzied onslaught and a sudden prickling<sup>85</sup> in the hair all over my bode abruptly warned me of the danger I was in. She was attempting to force me through and in another step or two my fate would be sealed.

I had only one option left. It was risky but the alternative would be unthinkable. I still held the las pistol although attempting to use it while we'd been trading blows hadn't been an option. Breaking my concentration enough to try to aim would have allowed her to cut me down where I stood. I didn't have to aim for I had in mind though. I just raised the muzzle<sup>86</sup> to my own head and pulled the trigger. As I anticipated Malicia lunged forward to grab the weapon, everything else forgotten in a desperate desire not to see her extravagant plans derail<sup>87</sup> by my inconvenient suicide.

Dark Eldar (in horror): "NO!!!"

(One las pistol round expended)

(Dark Eldar succubus crying in horror and despair)

She was almost too late but all in all if she hadn't been I doubt I'd have regretted the alternative. Far better an easy death by my own hand than a prolonged and hideous one at hers. As it worked out though she was just in time to deflect the shot while I took advantage of her distraction to run her through with my trusty chainsword. As she slumped to the ground and I kicked her weapon away I got as far from her and the portal as I could.

## CHAPTER 07

Jurgen (over vox): "Commissar, do you read?"

Cain (over vox): "Jurgen, good to hear you".

Jurgen (over vox): "There's a Lictor moving your way, sir. We are right behind him but.... (unable to finish)"

(beast roaring in the close distance)

Cain (over vox): "I know".

The hideous creature charged me at once lashing out with its huge striking claws while the shorter arms strained in my direction, that talented fingers flexing as though already embedded in my entrails. I rolled desperately aside striking out with my chainblade but succeeded only in the scoring a deep gash in its chitinous armor through which some noisome ichor began to sip. Had it not been for the deep cauterized<sup>88</sup> wound on its flank, unquestionably the result of Jurgen's melta, which had injured its left hand claw, it would undoubtedly have had me.

Jurgen (over vox): "Hang on, sir. We are almost there".

Which was encouraging but not encouraging enough. I rolled to my feet and struck again, this time fending off a grab from its nearest hand. Which left the arm a cripple but I was certain to no illusions about being able to fend this monster off for much longer especially debilitated<sup>89</sup> as I still was from the furious fight with Malicia. By this time I could hear the crashing of vegetation which meant that reinforcements were near. But whether I'd be able to last out even that long was by no means certain. When deliverance<sup>90</sup> came it was from the most unexpected source.

Dark Eldar (breathing hard): "Leave him... He is mine".

(numerous shuriken shots)

How she still lived was beyond believe, but live she did, swaying on her feet while the blood continues to flow from the ragged wound ripped by my chainsword. She had a pistol in her hand, a strange misshapen thing which she got trained on a Lictor. Although the effort of keeping it on aim was etched into her face. The huge Tyrannid staggered and she fired again.

(two shuriken shots)

The toxins she was pumping into it ravaging its system. For a moment I thought it was going to fall, but instead it rallied regaining its feet. Looking dumbly about itself for a line of retreat, it took a faltering step back in the direction it had come, but too late. My aid and a few surviving Catachans were waiting for it.

Zale: "FIRE!"

(numerous las rounds, beast roaring from pain)

That was enough. True to its instinct to flee in the face of effective resistance the Lictor broke in the only direction left open to it.

(Succubus crying in agony)

Before Malicia could react the thing was on her ripping her apart like a discarded ragdoll. Pursued by our vengeful weapons' fire it plunged through the portal and vanished as though it had never been.

(Catachans reloading their guns)

Zale: "Where did it go?"

Cain (hardly breathing): "Pray, you never find out! Jurgen, your vox- bead!".

Jurgen: "Right here, sir!"

Cain: "Just drop it on the ground and come on".

Jurgen: "If you say so".

Zale: "Come on, the rest will be here any minute".

Cain: "Good, may be they'll follow it through".

Jurgen: "Through what?"

Cain: "I'll explain later. Come on!"

To my relief surprise we made it to the tree line without meeting anything else determined to kill us and contacted an incoming Valkyrie flight with gratifying speed.

(sound of the aircraft approaching, landing and opening its ramp)

Before long we were hurrying up to boarding ramp of the flight leader.

Pilot: "Welcome aboard, sir".

Cain: "Get back in the air, fast! A whole swarm is right behind us".

Jurgen (vomiting): "Had to be aircraft...."

Pilot: "Circling back for a recky, sir".

Cain: "Scan for this frequency, we left a vox-bead as a locator beacon".

Pilot: "It goes in... That can't be right".

Cain: "What can't?"

Pilot: "We've got multiple life forms on the auspex but they are just disappearing. Thousands of them into thin air. There must be an equipment malfunction".

Cain: "It's not, believe me. Wait until they are all gone and target your entire payload on the beacon. Everyone else's too".

Jurgen: "You are right, sir. The whole swarm's following the Lictor through the portal".

Cain: "And much joy may the Reavers have of them".

Pilot: "Firing now!"

(numerous missiles launched)

\* \* \*

In all honesty I had no idea whether bombing the portal would seal it or not but it was worth a try and at least I'd got rid of a fair proportion of the Nids assailing the system. It wasn't until Amberley arrived a few weeks later in response to my urgent messages that my mind was finally put at rest.

Amberley Vail: "My people tell me there's no sign of an active portal anywhere in the system (putting some tea in the cup). Which doesn't mean the Dark Eldar won't open it again of course, but I think that's unlikely".

Cain: "You do? Malicia had told me they'd been planning an attack for some time".

Amberley Vail: "And got a Tyranid swarm dumped in their laps as a result. Wouldn't that pull you off?"

Cain (drinking tea, putting cup down): "Fair point, but there are far fewer Nids down there than there were. Removing the biggest swarm tipped the balance decisively in our favor. Only a matter of time before they eradicate it entirely".

Amberley Vail: "Even so we'll be prepared for a raid now and the Dark Eldar never have the stomach for a standard fight. They'll look for another target".

Cain: "Bad news for someone".

But not for me. For now I was as safe as I ever got or so I thought.

Amberley Vail: "So, what are you doing now?"

Cain: "Waiting for orders. There's always some other war somewhere".

Amberley Vail: "So there is... but in the meantime..."

Cain: "What?"

Amberley Vail (laughing seductively): "There is a little something you could help me with".

Cain: "Of course".

Amberley Vail: "Good (kissing Commissar on the cheek). I knew I could rely on you".

As much as anyone could, but whatever life-threatening horrors she was about to drag me into could hardly have been worse than the one I'd so recently been through. And at least I knew her company would make it worthwhile.