

WARHAMMER 40,000



DEATHWATCH 8

THE SILENCE

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The xenos died without ever seeing its killer.

It was lying on its stomach in the long grass at the lip of an escarpment, overlooking a natural forest path: an eldar scout with pale skin, dark eyes and sculpted cheekbones. It wore a hooded cloak of animal hide, and had decorated its arms and face with tattoos and bone jewellery. It carried only a simple recurve bow.

Up close, it turned out that the bow was sculpted from wraithbone, while the arrows were tipped with explosives.

The scout hadn't moved, hadn't made a sound, for as long as Setorax had been watching. It had cloaked itself in silence – but it didn't know the silence like he did.

He approached it on his elbows, inch by painstaking inch. With each movement, he settled into position carefully, so as not to snap any twigs or crunch any leaves beneath him. Not once had his prey so much as glanced in his direction. It probably thought it impossible for anyone to sneak up on it – least of all a fully armoured Space Marine – through foliage so dense.

Its mistake.

Setorax waited for the breeze to waft by him again, carrying with it the sounds of the distant battle. He used those sounds to cover him as he had pounced.

The first the eldar knew of his presence was when he seized it in a chokehold with his left arm, driving a knife through its back and into its heart with his right. It expired without a sound, just as he had intended.

He left the lifeless body where it lay, overlooking the path, its bow wedged against its shoulder, eyes open and staring. From a distance, anyone would think that it was still on sentry duty. No one would know that Edryc Setorax had ever been here.

There were two more sentries in the nearby trees.

Setorax had scouted their positions earlier, before dealing with their fellow on the ground. He had to be sure they wouldn't see him, or hear him, as he did what had to be done. He was deep in enemy territory. He was alone. He knew that the moment his presence here was detected, it would be the end for him.

And the eldar were famed for their keen hearing.

He slipped into the shelter of a sprawling, thorny bush, and dropped into a crouch behind it. He raised his bolt pistol and sighted along its barrel. He had a clear head shot at one of the scouts, lying across a low branch. The other was more difficult to target, higher up and nestled in the crook of a broad, gnarled trunk.

He preferred not to use the gun anyway – not until he had to. Even suppressed, it would make too loud a noise out here.

He circled his prey, using the trees for cover. He worked his way closer, ever closer, towards their positions. It was a meticulous process, almost painfully slow, but Edryc Setorax had learned how to be patient.

At last, he made the tree in which the first scout – the one closer to the ground – lurked. He eased himself into a hollow between the tree's roots. The scout was immediately above him now. He couldn't see the xenos – it was perfectly hidden from him at this angle, as he was from it – but he knew it was there.

In a flash, he uncoiled himself to his full eight-foot height. He reached up and snatched the eldar scout from its perch. Taken by surprise, it fell backwards into his arms, and he twisted its neck until the bone snapped.

He heard a rustle in the larger tree beside him. He cast the first scout's body aside to round on the second, above him. It was just beginning to react to his sudden appearance: too slow, as he had hoped. It had nocked an explosive-tipped arrow.

Setorax fired his jump pack. He winced at its engine roar, but that could not be helped. A rapid burst was enough to propel him twenty feet up in an

instant. He cannoned into the second eldar scout, splintering its arrow. He overbalanced it, and they plummeted into the soft bed of the undergrowth together.

He landed on top of his enemy, his fingers locked around its throat. It was stronger than it looked, but still utterly helpless beneath the crushing weight of Setorax's genetically enhanced bulk and heavy power armour. He crumpled the xenos' windpipe, and held it down firmly while it choked.

Like the other eldar before it, it died in silence.

Setorax listened for approaching footsteps. He heard nothing. He concealed the bodies of the scouts in a nearby bush, piling leaves on top of them for additional camouflage. As long as nobody stumbled across them, it would likely be some time before they were missed. Just like the others.

He could make up a little lost time now.

He weaved his way quickly through the forest, sure that the immediate area was clear of eyes and ears. He trusted to his armour – matt black, its silver trim deliberately dulled – to cloak him if he was wrong. He trusted his auto-senses to detect more sentries, or find their tracks, before they heard him.

Setorax was a silent shadow, flitting through the foliage.

The next marks he encountered, however, were making no attempt to hide. He heard them mustering in the centre of a clearing ahead of him. He could probably have found a way around them, but he was curious to see what they were doing.

There were thirty or more of them: eldar warriors, better equipped than the scouts, with several power blades and shuriken catapults among them. A pair of dragon riders stood out from the crowd in their sturdy but elegant wraithbone armour. They had brought their hulking, reptilian mounts with them. Setorax was careful to remain upwind of the creatures, lest they pick up his scent.

He wondered why these eldar weren't out fighting with their main force.

He could only imagine one reason. They were setting up an ambush.

He lay on his stomach, in cover at the edge of the clearing, and watched for a while. He kept an eye out for farseers among the eldar, but saw none. He knew they had to be close by, though. He had learned a great deal about

the eldar's psykers on the craftworld of Yme-Loc. It was they who must have divined his kill team's approach.

Setorax had lost vox-contact with them hours ago. He couldn't warn them about what lay in store for them. He could stay where he was, though. He could wait until the ambush was almost sprung, then erupt from hiding behind his enemies and turn the tables on them.

Not this time, he thought. He had come this far behind enemy lines for a reason. He wasn't ready to reveal his presence here yet. His battle-brothers, he decided, would have to look after themselves. They were more than capable. Inquisitor Gravelyn might not like it, he thought; but then, the inquisitor need never know.

The eldar were digging a linked series of pits, setting monofilament tripwires. As ever, their traps were so subtle, so elaborate, that even a Space Marine might find himself ensnared – or at least distracted a second too long. When Setorax had seen enough, he backed away from his vantage point and circled around them.

He hadn't gone much further when he discovered the first formation.

It stood between the trees, in a spot where narrow shafts of afternoon sunlight pierced the canopy, and it sparkled in their radiance. It was four and a half feet tall, a solid slab of crystal, abstract in shape – one side was bulbous, the other almost razor-edged – but, like the eldar themselves, it was beautiful in a dark, twisted way.

Setorax found his eyes drawn to it, despite himself. He regarded his reflection, distorted by the crystal's facets. There was a suggestion of circuitry embedded within the crystal, and he thought he saw xenos machine-spirits working busily, but that might have been merely a trick of the light.

He had seen formations like this one before, on Yme-Loc and other worlds since. He knew what it was, and he knew that it was entirely organic.

It was because of this structure, and others like it, that this world was at war.

An Imperial colony fleet had arrived here, months ago. Surveys had suggested that the planet was uninhabited, an ideal site for new agricultural facilities.

The settlers had begun the process of clearing the forest, which blanketed

the planet's only continent from coast to coast.

They had happened upon some of the crystal formations and, believing them to be ancient xenos ruins, had naturally razed them to make way for new construction.

That act of destruction had summoned the eldar here – or rather, back here. Theirs was an Exodite tribe, split off from their decaying civilisation millennia ago. Like many of their kind, they were nomadic. They travelled between worlds, following the seasons or merely their own whims. They hadn't returned to this world, to this forest, in many years; but nor had they abandoned it for good.

They had left their souls here.

The human settlers didn't understand that. They didn't know the eldar like Edryc Setorax knew them. All they knew was that pale, willowy, deadly figures had emerged from the trees and set upon them. They didn't know where their attackers had come from – there had been no reports of any ships approaching the planet.

They had been massacred.

And, of course, the survivors had sent a distress signal. And, of course, the Astra Militarum had despatched an Imperial Guard regiment to find out what had happened here and deal with the apparent xenos threat.

The battle had been raging for several weeks now.

The Exodites were relatively few in number, but they knew this environment well and they knew how to hide in it. The guardsmen had suffered significant losses. They had turned to the Ordo Xenos for help in understanding their foes and their tactics; and the alien hunters in turn had called in the Deathwatch.

They had brought a kill team to this world, ten members strong. One of their own inquisitors had chosen to lead it – that was how important this mission was to the order – and Edryc Setorax had been assigned to join him. He was a Raven Guard, a specialist in guerrilla warfare – and, of course, he knew the eldar.

They had been dropped into the thick of the forest. While the Astra Militarum kept the bulk of the Exodite force occupied, Setorax's kill team were to strike unexpectedly at their heart; specifically, at the psykers whose precognitive powers were guiding the xenos forces, keeping them always a step ahead. There were two Librarians among the kill team's

number, keen to utilise their own warp-gifted abilities.

To Setorax's frustration, they had been too slow, too noisy. They had talked too much instead of acting. And, inevitably, they had been detected.

Once this became apparent, as the first wave of warriors sprang from the trees around them, he had slipped away from the others. He hadn't bothered to ask Inquisitor Gravelyn for leave. He hadn't told his battle-brothers, any of them, where he was going. Those who knew him, however – those who had fought alongside him before – would not have been surprised to find him gone.

He knew what they thought of him. Setorax had heard them talking, when they didn't know he was within earshot. They didn't trust him to support them – one of the worst things that could be said about a soldier, any soldier. They speculated that the Raven Guard Chapter had been glad of a chance to be rid of him.

He knew that wasn't true. The Master of Shadows had not volunteered him for service; in fact, the Deathwatch had requested him by name, after reading his record. He also knew that he had more than proved his worth to them.

He had saved the lives of too many brothers to count, sometimes with their knowledge, often without. He expected no gratitude either way. Setorax expected nothing at all, nothing from anyone. He only spoke to his fellows when he had to, during missions. In between these, he shunned their company entirely.

He was happiest – he had always been happiest – in solitude.

He preferred to hunt alone.

Someone was coming towards him.

The stranger was trying his best to be stealthy. To be fair, he was making a passable job of it. He was no eldar, however, and his presence lit up the display inside Setorax's helmet. The Raven Guard flattened himself against a tree trunk and waited.

The stranger crept past him without seeing him.

He was an Imperial Guardsman in fatigues, flak jacket and battered tin helmet. He clutched his standard-issue lasgun one-handed, his right arm in a grubby sling. Setorax felt a flash of anger towards him. After all the effort he had made to get this far, this idiot could have brought an army

down on top of him. He had to silence him.

He knew that, if he showed himself, he would likely startle the guardsman, perhaps make him cry out. He crept up behind him instead. Clamping one hand firmly over his mouth, Setorax snatched the gun away from him with the other.

‘Be quiet and still,’ he hissed in the guardsman’s ear as the man panicked and struggled, ‘else I will crush your throat.’ He considered doing it anyway.

When his captive finally calmed down enough to comply, Setorax let him go. The guardsman reeled out of his grip and whirled to face him. He was sallow-eyed, filthy and unshaven. He must have been wandering the forest for days.

Setorax made the sign of the aquila, the quickest – and quietest – way of demonstrating his loyalties. The guardsman was still frightened out of his wits. He had probably never seen a Space Marine before, let alone had one spring out at him from nowhere, like some macabre forest spirit.

‘How long have you been here?’ Setorax snapped. ‘Have you seen the eldar encampment?’

The guardsman gaped at him, unable to speak.

‘I... They ambushed us,’ he finally managed to say. ‘Three days ago. They were riding these... these huge creatures and–’

‘Did you see any farseers?’ Setorax interrupted him. Impatiently, he clarified, ‘Shamans. Have you seen the eldar shamans?’

The guardsman shook his head.

‘My sergeant gave the order to withdraw,’ he insisted. ‘I didn’t desert, I swear I didn’t, but I was injured, separated from my squad, there were eldar everywhere and I couldn’t get back to–’

Setorax had no interest in his story. He raised a hand to stem the guardsman’s babbling. He didn’t need an answer from him, anyway. He would likely only have confirmed what the Space Marine already knew.

‘Follow me at a distance of twenty paces,’ he instructed. ‘Stay quiet – as quiet as you can. And don’t speak. Never speak to me, unless I ask you a question.’

The guardsman nodded. He seemed relieved to have orders to follow again.

Setorax had been following a set of dragon tracks, and he continued to do

so. He winced as, behind him, his companion's boots crunched into the undergrowth. He was taking a risk, but he judged it a risk worth the taking. If there were eldar in the immediate vicinity, he considered, the guardsman would be dead already.

And it was always useful to have a distraction to hand.

Setorax could hear a voice. An alien voice.

It was raised in a lilting incantation. The words were unintelligible, flowing into each other like the rushing of a river. He told his companion – he hadn't asked his name – to stay back. The guardsman was only too happy to obey him.

As he neared the voice's source, he saw another pair of misshapen crystal structures. Sitting cross-legged between them was a bony eldar figure, its pale face painted with natural forest dyes and wrinkled by age. It was wrapped in homespun robes that were fraying at the wrists and elbows and threaded through with faded sigils. The robe was cinched with a belt of twisted vines and hung with fetishes.

It could hardly have been anything but a farseer.

Setorax eased himself down onto his elbows and kneepads, then his stomach. He watched and planned. His prey, alas, was not alone – it was protected by three rings of eldar sentries.

Three lesser warlocks surrounded their master, each facing away from it. They were tall and wiry, their faces hidden behind carved wooden masks that lent them a ghoulish aspect. They wore breastplates of sculpted wraithbone over their robes, and carried blades of the same arcane material. Each of them wore a spirit stone as a pendant, hanging from a fine silver chain around their neck.

Eldar warlocks were powerful warriors as well as witches. Setorax didn't relish the thought of fighting three of them at once. He knew he had to act soon, though – the farseer's mind would detect his presence eventually, if its other senses could not.

He raised his bolt pistol, seeking out the clearest sightline through the trees. He waited until no eyes were turned his way to see the telltale flash of a muzzle.

He squeezed his trigger.

A silenced shell struck the farseer's unprotected head, detonating inside

its skull and blowing brain matter in all directions. Setorax took no pleasure in the grisly sight. He was doing his duty – no more than that, no less.

He held his breath as the warlocks separated, seeking cover, hissing urgently to each other. They didn't know where the assassin was yet – not exactly, thanks to his silenced weapon – but their psychic senses would pinpoint him soon enough. Setorax eased his hand behind his back, to his jump pack.

The warlocks, all three of them, turned his way at once. They began to stride boldly towards him. The closest of them was *too* close. It raised its hands, dark energy dancing and fizzing between its fingers. Had it unleashed that energy upon the prone Space Marine, it would surely have crippled or killed him. Having seen the farseer's fate, however, it chose to defend itself until its fellows could reach it.

The air around the warlock rippled as it weaved the substance of the warp itself into a shield. At the same time, Setorax triggered the launcher on his jump pack, firing a blind grenade. The shell rocketed between the warlock's feet and buried itself in the undergrowth, pumping out thick grey smoke in its wake. He launched himself at his enemy as the choking cloud swelled around them.

The warlock didn't see him coming, couldn't even try to dodge him. Setorax's hurtling, armoured form bore it to the ground. Its psychic shield was little use up close, against brute physical force. Setorax hammered his fists into the warlock's head, until his gauntlets were dripping with blood.

He listened for the others, couldn't hear them, knew they would be close by all the same. He fired several rapid shots from his bolt pistol; he heard the rounds bursting against tree branches and roots, but the fog cloud swallowed up their flashes. He also heard two pairs of light footsteps, scampering for cover.

He turned and raced away from his invisible enemies. The fog confused his auto-senses as well as his natural ones, but this was a necessary price to pay. The eldar might have had scanning devices too, in addition to their witch-sight. Many Exodite tribes possessed equipment that belied their apparently rustic lifestyles.

He maintained as steady a heading as he could, tearing carelessly through vines and branches. He ran until the strands of grey smoke ahead of him

parted, giving way to dappled sunlight. His armour's sensors could tell him where he was now: not far from where he had left the Imperial Guardsman, as he had intended.

He looked back towards the fog cloud to see the fiery trail of a flare streaking out of it. The flare exploded as it struck the forest canopy, sending tendrils far and wide. The surviving warlocks had sounded the alarm. Soon, too, the cloud would dissipate, and they would be able to use their senses – all of their senses – to find him.

He had made it easy enough for them. He had let them hear him running, and left a trail that even a neophyte could follow. Setorax didn't have much time.

He made his way back to the guardsman. He was in a highly agitated state, almost firing on the Space Marine when he saw him. Setorax waved aside his garbled apologies.

‘You want to get out of here?’ he asked him, brusquely.

The guardsman nodded.

‘What happened back there?’ he whispered, breathlessly. ‘I thought I heard—’

Setorax talked over him. ‘When I give you the word, run as far as you can in that direction.’ He pointed eastwards. ‘Do not engage the eldar, but do not stop or deviate from your course for any reason. When you can run no further—’

‘But I thought you were taking me back to—’

The Space Marine pressed a small, metallic disc into the guardsman's good hand, which was trembling.

‘When you can run no further,’ he repeated, ‘activate this. Then hide it as best you can. After that, you may defend yourself if you wish.’

‘What is that? Is that a—’

‘You will be doing the Emperor a valuable service,’ said Setorax, gravely. Then, before the guardsman could speak again, he barked at him, ‘Now, go!’

The guardsman hesitated for a second, as if trying to decide which frightened him more, his enemies or his nominal ally. He decided to take his chances, such as they were, with the former.

As the man scurried off eastwards, Setorax slipped away in the opposite direction, a silent shadow once more.

It wasn't long before he detected the first signs of pursuit.

The eldar weren't close enough for Setorax to hear them, but he felt the ground trembling with the footsteps of their dragon mounts. At least two beasts had joined the hunt, he judged. That was good. The more the better, as long as they were hunting the wrong quarry – which they were. The tremors were lessening in severity as the hunters headed further eastwards, away from him.

'When you can run no further,' he had said. He had meant, *'When the Exodites catch up to you, intent upon bloody revenge.'* He wondered if they would torture the guardsman before they killed him – could they resist the temptation? They might suspect that he hadn't been working alone. They would find no evidence to confirm this suspicion, however, and with luck they'd have more pressing concerns by then.

Setorax had gone far enough west. He veered northwards again, then north-east, coming around behind his foes. He found another crystal formation, this one with the look of a stunted tree about it, but it was unattended. His auspex informed him that he was nearing his target coordinates.

An icon flared red inside his helmet. He allowed himself a grunt of satisfaction. The Imperial Guardsman – likely the *late* Imperial Guardsman – had served his purpose. He had activated the locator beacon that Setorax had given him. He must have hidden it well, too, or simply flung it far away as the dragon riders pounced on him, because a full minute passed before its signal cut out.

Long enough.

Setorax's auto-senses had a fix on the beacon's position. That meant his kill team knew where it was, too. And that changed everything.

Another pair of dragon riders thundered across Setorax's path.

They were clearly in a hurry to be somewhere. He waited for their footsteps to die down. In their rush, they had left a clear trail for him to follow, back to their point of origin. The Exodite encampment. He knew he was close to it now.

He almost ran into several more eldar hastening up the same trail in the dragons' wake. He hid from a group of eight of them. Most of them were warriors, but there were two among them that he judged to be warlocks,

from their dress.

The encampment was where he had expected it to be, based on Astra Militarum reports and a strike cruiser's orbital scans of the forest. It was small, so the scans had been unable to pinpoint it precisely. It comprised a mere half-dozen tents – though each of these was an elaborate, multi-layered pavilion, woven from the dyed fur of some beast or other, supported by an intricate web of external ropes and timber poles. The tents stood in a rough circle around the ashes of a recent fire.

This was only a temporary base, erected by the Exodites upon their return to this world. The portal that had brought them here was probably close by. It hadn't shown on the orbital scans either, so was likely no more than a sliver, only wide enough to step through. Setorax knew he could search for it for months and never find it.

He could hear no sounds, just the flapping of the tents themselves in the breeze. The camp appeared to be deserted. He knew better than to believe that, of course.

It did seem, however, that his strategy had proven successful. The Exodites, their farseers, had seen his kill team coming. They had been prepared to greet them. Then, a beacon had been activated behind the Exodite lines, and the kill team – after wasting much time with discussion, he didn't doubt – had altered their heading.

Whatever they thought of Setorax, they respected his abilities. They would have identified his beacon's unique signature and known he had employed it for a reason. They were no longer marching into an eldar ambush. And the eldar themselves knew this – their farseers would certainly have divined it – and were scrambling to adjust their tactics accordingly.

It was always useful to have a distraction.

Setorax had already killed one eldar farseer. Experience suggested that there would be at least two more; including one more experienced, more powerful than the others, acting as their leader. This one, at least, was unlikely to leave the encampment, unlikely to expose itself to danger. It had sent its warriors away, however – even some of its warlocks, as Setorax had seen – to meet the approaching threat.

It would never be more vulnerable to a stealth attack than it was right now.

There were tripwires set around the clearing. They were strung through the undergrowth, invisible to anyone who didn't know to look for them. The crystalline filaments stretched up to the branches of nearby trees, in which comparatively low-tech warning chimes were concealed.

Setorax stepped over each wire in turn, mindful not to brush against them. Then he slid across a narrow patch of open ground and took cover behind the closest tent.

He had timed his arrival well. The sun was setting. The forest was being gradually leeched of colour and its shadows were lengthening. Nocturnal creatures were beginning to stir in the brush, squeaking and rustling.

Setorax drew his knife and slowly, carefully, scored a vertical slit in the tent. He teased the flaps aside with his fingers and peered through. His auto-senses took a moment to adjust to the dimness within, to confirm that the tent was empty.

He sliced further, eventually creating a gap that he could slip his armoured form through. Setorax crept through the tent and hunkered down behind its entrance. Each time the breeze stirred it, he was able to look out across the campsite. From this vantage point, he could see into three more tents. They appeared to be empty too.

Then the flap of another tent bulged, and a figure emerged from it and stood still, straight-backed. It was another warlock; and it must have sensed something amiss. It cocked its head, alert for the slightest disturbance in the air. In its right hand it clutched a tall spear, silver and studded with gems. The spear hummed quietly, suffused with arcane power.

The warlock's dark eyes roved around the encampment, gleaming through the round holes in its mask. Even cloaked in shadows as Setorax was, he knew its witch-sight would detect his aura. He was going to have to fight it.

An eruption of sound, from somewhere to his left, saved him.

One of the squeaking creatures he had heard burst out of the undergrowth – a small one, it sounded like, perhaps fleeing from a predator – and blundered into the tripwires. It hissed and screeched as it tied itself up, alarm bells clanging in the trees.

The warlock took three strides, turning its back to Setorax, and hurled its spear. He heard a thunk, a whimper, and both beast and bells were abruptly

silenced.

By then, Setorax had darted back through the tent and was climbing out through the slit he had cut. He heard a harsh voice, raised in question. He judged its source to be the tent from which the warlock had appeared.

For all his dealings with the eldar, he had never deciphered their tortuous language, nor did he care to. The Exodites had likely evolved their own impenetrable dialect, anyway. He could judge the tone of the warlock's answer, however, which was calm and reassuring. It was claiming to have everything under control.

Belying that sentiment, it was approaching Setorax's tent – the one from which he had just escaped – suspiciously. Its humming spear had returned to its hand, by some sorcery that disgusted Setorax but didn't surprise him. The sound gave away its position as surely as any locator beacon would. Setorax crept around the side of the tent, between its guy ropes, in time to see the warlock disappearing inside.

He slipped through behind it, his knife at the ready.

In the moment that the warlock saw the tear in the back of the tent, as it opened its mouth to cry out and began to turn, Setorax pulled the creature's head back and cut its windpipe with his blade. He kept a firm grip on the body until the last of its life had bled out of it. Then he lowered it carefully to the ground.

For several minutes, he waited inside the tent, letting the silence settle. Only now did he let himself think about the peril he had been in, the risk he had taken.

The warlock he had killed had carried a rare and precious weapon. It must have been a potent psyker, perhaps on the path to becoming a farseer. In a fair fight, face-to-face, he knew it would likely have slaughtered him.

Three or more such warlocks could have given his kill team a fight, had he brought them with him. At least, they'd have held them at a standstill long enough for eldar warriors to make it back here and lend their arms to the effort. The ensuing battle would have been long and hard, with casualties on both sides.

Setorax had been caught up in many such melees himself. Too many.

He had felt the crush of armoured bodies around him, breathed in the stink of burning chainsword oil, felt the hairs on the back of his neck

pricking up as psychic energy charged the air. Most of all, he loathed the noise that filled his ears – the resounding clashes of metal on metal, the percussion cracks of gunfire and bursting grenades, the roars of the victors and the howls of the defeated.

He knew that his battle-brothers, many of them, lived for those moments. Setorax had learned better. On Yme-Loc, he had spent three weeks behind enemy lines, moving always in the shadows of the craftworld. He had studied the eldar and had learned their strengths and weaknesses, and frustrated their repeated attempts to scry him out.

The eldar were fast and they were agile. He knew well the frustration of trying to land a blow on one of them, at least when they were aware of him. They weren't especially tough, however; they favoured light armour, trading protection for mobility. The way to beat them was with a blow that they couldn't see coming.

That was what made their psykers – with their warp-enhanced perceptions – especially dangerous. Setorax had learned their weaknesses too, however.

He emerged into the encampment again. He crouched in the leeward shadow of another tent there. His auspex picked up three heat signatures inside the occupied tent. Most likely, he thought, two more warlocks – along with their leader.

Ideally, he'd have waited for the latter to show itself. It couldn't hide forever. He would have despatched it with a shot to the head, as he had the farseer in the forest. What the creature would never see or hear, it couldn't *foresee*; and what it couldn't foresee was likely to make it nervous, afraid, prone to making mistakes.

But the psykers would miss their dead fellow soon, if they hadn't already.

Setorax fired a blind grenade through the flap of the tent.

It was a perfect shot. Smoke billowed out through the narrow opening, between the tent's overlapping layers, through the vents in its roof. A moment later, a masked figure stumbled out. It had thrown up a shield around itself, as Setorax had expected it would. He held his fire. If he could draw this creature away...

It swung towards him, firing a shuriken pistol. Setorax was already running. Tiny star-shaped projectiles shredded the corner of the tent behind him, slicing through its web of ropes. He made the relative safety

of the forest, flattened himself behind a mighty spreading tree with needle-shaped leaves and turned to look for his enemy, but it had disappeared. It had taken to the shadows itself.

The warlock knew where Setorax was, but it was hidden from him. He had to reverse that state of affairs if he wanted to live.

He doubled back to the treeline, creeping up behind the farseer's tent.

A thin grey haze still clung to it, but there was no sign of movement either from within or without. Setorax scanned the tent again and found it empty.

He was alone, outmatched. Perhaps he ought to have abandoned the mission, he thought, to melt back into the shadows and find his way back to his kill team. But then, everything he had done so far would count for nothing.

So he waited instead. For several minutes, he didn't so much as twitch a muscle. He was like a dark, metallic statue. He had crouched like this for hours at a time before. When his enemies were sure he had indeed escaped into the forest, when they lowered their guards, he would still be here, a mere breath away from them.

If they didn't find him first. Was that the breeze rustling the leaves above him, he wondered, or an eldar crawling along a branch towards him? Was that the snout of a forest animal poking out of the undergrowth, or was it a gun barrel?

A shadow flitted between the eldar tents, accompanied by a low, familiar hum. Two figures met over the ashes of the fire, and exchanged urgent whispers. Setorax eased himself forwards to get a better look at them. One was the warlock that had fired at him before, now clutching its dead fellow's silver spear. The other carried a glowing blade.

There was something behind him.

He didn't know what had sparked that realisation. He had seen nothing, heard nothing, he just knew. He whirled around, saw nothing still. He raised his bolt pistol all the same; and suddenly, it was as if a gauze had fallen from his eyes, as the warlock – the one that had been there all along – came at him through the trees.

It had clouded Setorax's senses, his very thoughts. It had happened to him before; he should have sensed it. On some instinctual level, he had.

The creature sliced at him with a witchblade, which crackled as it

channelled its wielder's own psychic power. Setorax was barely able to twist out of the way of its thrust. The air around the blade rippled, as if it were cleaving reality itself. He didn't doubt that, had the warlock been able to surprise him, it would have stabbed just as easily through his armour, into his back.

The warlock, certainly, had expected him to die – it wasn't prepared for him to fight back. Setorax emptied his bolt pistol into its face. It reeled away from him with a howl. He didn't stop to confirm that it was dead. He could hear its fellows running up behind him, and a familiar hum rapidly growing in volume.

He whirled around as the humming spear streaked towards him, energised as the witchblade had been. It grazed his armour between the ribs, causing startled flashes in his helmet displays. Setorax lowered his head and fired his jump pack.

The remaining two warlocks leapt for cover, but his auto-senses had anticipated their trajectories. He rocketed into one of them, the one that had thrown the spear at him and thus disarmed itself. His momentum carried it clear across the encampment.

A heavy tent arrested their flights, and folded around them. Tangled up in its fabric, they wrestled furiously, the advantage clearly with the stronger of them. The warlock couldn't scramble away from its attacker, couldn't make use of its superior dexterity, couldn't catch its breath long enough to bring its psychic abilities to bear.

Setorax pummelled the warlock relentlessly, shattering its bones.

He heard the spear coming up behind him again and dived out of its way.

This time, however, it hadn't been targeting him. The weapon returned to its wielder's hand, which closed around it reflexively. It was the last move the warlock made. The spear fell silent, clutched between its stiffening fingers.

Setorax rolled to his feet to confront what he hoped was the final warlock. It was marching towards him, eyes blazing, witchblade drawn. He had no choice but to fight it head-on. He drew his knife. He let the warlock come to him.

And it was just as it had always been.

The clamour of battle numbed his ears. There was only himself and his opponent in the world, only this one tiny patch of ground. Setorax swung,

thrust, sliced at the warlock, but it danced around his attacks, in the process delivering a few expert strikes of its own. Its own blade scored criss-cross lines across his chestplate, defacing the Imperial aquila and fracturing the armour over his right hip.

Seeing the weak point it had created, the warlock smashed its blade into Setorax's hip again, forcing his leg to buckle underneath him, driving him to one knee. He thought he heard the eldar laughing, taking pleasure in his pain, savouring the taste of vengeance.

Setorax knew it would be a mistake to succumb to rage. He had to tune out all distractions, had to focus. He had to see past his enemy, aiming not for where it was but for where it was about to be. He had to be like the farseers and divine the future.

His knife sliced open the warlock's stomach. It staggered away from him in abject surprise. It dropped its blade, and reality distorted around its raised hands. It must have known it was finished. It was gathering the sum total of its being together for one final, devastating assault upon its executioner.

He lunged after it, ignoring the shooting pain in his hip, his bolt pistol firing. The warlock jerked and howled and toppled backwards. It lost control of its psychic energies, writhing in their excoriating grip. Blood leaked from its eyes and nose.

Setorax left the xenos to die in agony. He was painfully exposed here, and the Exodites' leader must be close by.

He heard footsteps marching towards him. The warlock he had beaten at the edge of the clearing was bearing down on him. He cursed himself for not finishing it off, until he saw that the spirit stone it wore against its chest was glowing white.

He heard a rustle of fabric behind him. Another dead warlock – the first one he had killed – struggled out of the tent he had left it in. Its throat gaped open, it was caked in congealed blood, but it came lurching at him all the same.

This was something he hadn't seen before, and he wondered if – he prayed that – it might be an illusion. Either way, there was no point in fighting already-dead foes. He could be fighting them forever. He fired his final blind grenade at his own feet. As its cloud of darkness enveloped him, Setorax ran, but not too far. He relied on the scans his auto-senses had

already taken to guide him across the encampment. He asked himself, if he were the eldar farseer, where would he be hiding?

It would want the best possible view of its surroundings. It must also have had sightlines to the warlocks whose life forces it had rekindled.

He circled another tent. He had to tread especially carefully, because he couldn't see its ropes until they were stretched across his calves, on the verge of being wrenched from their moorings. He could hear the two reanimated warlocks feeling their way around blindly, searching for him. He heard nothing of their master.

It might have slipped away, of course; it would have been stealthy enough. Or it was holding its position, still and silent, waiting for the unnatural fog to lift as it had lifted before. It could be listening for Setorax, just as he was listening for it. He'd have done the same thing in its place.

He crouched and levelled his bolt pistol, although he could see no target.

The fog cloud began to disperse, slowly, on the breeze.

He could make out a few shapes now: some real, some illusions caused by the shifting smoke. He could see the large, elaborate silhouette of the Exodite tent at his shoulder. He could see the knotted tendrils of a scrubby bush at his foot, but the twisted faces that leered out of it were purely imaginary.

He could see a figure ahead of him.

He waited for it to become clearer. It was crouched at the far corner of the tent. It was looking across the encampment, with its back to him. It wore a farseer's robes, finer than its fellows', and a headdress fashioned from some beast's antlers. It was female, he realised, snow-white hair flowing down its back.

It was almost perfectly framed in Setorax's sights.

But he waited an instant too long.

The farseer moved as he fired. His bolt-round grazed its shoulder rather than, as intended, detonating inside its skull. Grunting in pain, it fled behind the tent. Setorax cursed to himself as he sprang after it. It had been a long hunt, too long to let his prey escape him now. As he rounded the tent, however, he saw that he had made a mistake. The farseer wasn't running.

It was standing, waiting for him, flanked by its reanimated warlocks. It

was bleeding, clearly in severe pain, but its eyes blazed with hate-fuelled resolve. It was summoning the power of the warp to deal with its tormentor.

Setorax didn't have time to aim his bolt pistol. He simply emptied its magazine in the eldar's direction while he could. Then, a small sun exploded inside his head and his muscles turned to rubber. He was dimly aware of his gun slipping through his numbed fingers as the world turned a fiery shade of red, and then black.

Blessed silence returned to the forest, like a blanket settling over it.

Setorax returned to his senses, lying face down in the dirt. He felt as if someone had sliced open his scalp and pounded his brain with a hammer. He lay perfectly still for some time, letting the silence soothe him. He listened for sounds of movement around him, but could hear nothing.

He had been out, according to his armour chronos, for just a few minutes. He wasn't sure how he had survived at all. Mere strength of will? Perhaps he had gunned down the eldar farseer before it could train its full power upon him?

When at last he lifted his head, he was greeted by a welcome sight.

The farseer lay dead alongside him. The revenant warlocks had fallen too, presumably when their master had perished but, crucially, before either one of them could finish off their helpless enemy.

The Emperor had been with him today. The sounds of the battle, however, must have carried far and wide. Setorax should have slipped away from the encampment while he could, but something stopped him: an instinct, again.

He heard a droning voice, and suddenly he realised that it had been there all along. It came from somewhere among the trees, somewhere to the north.

He approached the voice with caution. Drugs from his armour's reservoir had numbed the pain from his injured hip, but it was still weak and his right leg dragged behind him a little. He would have to do something about that: patch up his fractured armour, so it gave better support. Later, he told himself.

He came upon a cluster of crystal formations. He had mistaken them for tree stumps from a distance in the twilight greyness. He could now see

several more of them, stretching ahead of him like trail markers. He picked out fresh tracks between them.

Were there more Exodites ahead of him, Setorax wondered? If there were, they must have heard the battle too, and known he was nearby.

He almost mistook the farseer for another formation, before realising that it was the source of the voice. It was sitting cross-legged in the dirt, unmoving. It had its back to him. A dozen wraithbone runes danced in the air in front of it, glowing white. As Setorax watched them, their lights faded and they clattered to the ground.

The farseer's chant had tailed off. In a scratchy voice, without turning its head, it said quietly, 'You may as well show yourself. I cannot harm you.'

It spoke in High Gothic, with no hint of any accent. Setorax, for reasons that he couldn't define, believed the xenos. He remained in the shadows all the same. He aimed his bolt pistol at the back of the farseer's head.

'I saw you,' said the farseer, 'in my visions. Time and again, I cast the runes, and always they showed me the same: a fleeting shadow at the edge of my perception. I tried to bring you into focus, but time and again you slipped away from me. With each casting, I divined victory over the human invaders, and yet—'

'You,' Setorax breathed. 'You are their leader. The farseer I fought at the encampment—'

'She would have been their leader tomorrow,' the eldar sighed. 'I am old, far older than one of your race could possibly imagine.'

Setorax eyed the hunched figure.

'You are old,' he agreed, 'and unprotected.'

'Yes, I am. And you have your duty to your god on his golden throne. I have already accepted my fate. I see you clearly now. I know you for what you are. Yours is the silence that fell upon Yme-Loc. Yours is the shadow of death, for all of my kin.'

'Yes.' Setorax's finger began to tighten around his trigger.

'I only pray our deaths will satisfy you.'

He hesitated. 'What do you mean?'

'No longer do our warriors fight to repel the invaders,' said the farseer. 'They give their lives only to delay your advance. They hope to buy time for our warlocks to save the World Spirit.'

Setorax had heard the term before. 'The crystals?'

‘The spirits of every eldar that has lived and died in this forest. They are the reason we returned here, when your settlers began to wreak their destruction. Break the crystals, and our ancestors lose their tethers to this realm. You condemn them to the hell of the warp, to be devoured by She Who Thirsts.’

‘But you can save them?’ asked Setorax, uncertainly. He remembered the first farseer he had killed, the ritual it had been performing.

‘Take our lives if you must, they are of little consequence to us. But I beg of you, Edryc Setorax, if your emperor has left you any compassion at all in your hearts, spare our immortal souls.’

The old xenos fell silent, then. For a moment that stretched into many minutes, nothing stirred in the darkening forest.

Setorax crept up cautiously behind the eldar. He kept his gun trained on it, as indeed he had done all along. It didn’t move, didn’t even appear to breathe. As he drew closer, Setorax saw that his first instinct about it had been right. There was no eldar there at all. There was only a twisted, shapeless slab of crystal, to which his eyes had ascribed a curved spine and a bowed head, in the gathering gloom.

A dozen wraithbone runes were scattered in the dirt in front of it.

Setorax crouched beside the crystal. He pressed the barrel of his bolt pistol up against it. He peered into the crystal’s depths, as if he might have found the farseer lurking in there somehow, staring out at him with a mute appeal in his eyes.

Then he holstered his weapon, pushed himself to his feet and turned away. He had completed his mission, done his duty. The crystal was no threat to him, no impediment to the Imperium’s goals. He had no reason to squeeze the trigger.

And it would have made too much noise.

Setorax made good time back through the forest.

Night had fallen, so it was easier for him to pass unseen. He also knew the lie of the land now. He avoided the crystal formations in case more warlocks were conducting their rituals among them. Let them do what they have to do, he thought.

Nor was there much chance of encountering Exodite warriors. They were still busy keeping the Imperial Guardsmen at bay. By morning, he thought,

most of them would be dead, while the rest would have faded away into the shadows.

In the meantime, the sounds of a smaller, closer battle – even more hard-fought, if that was possible – drifted to his ears from the south-east. His kill team had walked into the eldar ambush, the second one; although, thanks to him, their attackers were unlikely to have been completely prepared for them.

The sounds made it easier for him to pass through the forest unheard.

The flashes of gun muzzles, gouts of flame, the sparks of swords against armour, lit up the night ahead of him. Setorax came up behind an eldar scout, firing arrows from behind a tree at the edge of the melee, and snapped its neck.

He took over its vantage point. He watched and waited.

His battle-brothers were outnumbered six to one, pinned down but fighting furiously. He saw Inquisitor Gravelyn surrounded by eldar warriors, bellowing litanies of battle as he swung his hammer tirelessly.

Brother-Epistolary Malkus had thrown up a psychic shield to deflect incoming arrows and shuriken. Brother Delassio, his own jump pack burning hot, was blazing a swathe through his enemies with a hand flamer. Eldar bodies were mounting up as the jungle burned.

Two brothers had already fallen, however, and as Setorax watched, Brother Torgo almost became the third. He was about to be crushed between a pair of charging dragons. Setorax raised his bolt pistol. He targeted one of the dragon's riders, hoping at least to shake its control of its mount. Torgo, however, saw what was coming and leapt out of the impact zone with a quarter-second to spare. Setorax stayed his hand. He didn't have to reveal himself yet.

It wasn't long before his moment came, however.

The remaining Space Marines rallied behind the two Librarians, who hurled bolts of psychic energy from their hands, and the tides of battle slowly shifted. A knot of eldar withdrew to the edge of the battlefield, and they had their backs to Setorax. He fired his jump pack and was among them in an instant.

The force of his arrival scattered them. His knife cut down three warriors before they knew he was there. He had punched a hole in the eldar's skirmish line, and his brothers on the kill team poured into it. He had

probably saved their lives. Again.

He would make that point when, inevitably, Gravelyn challenged him to justify his actions today. He would explain how he had changed the course of the war on this world. He wouldn't mention using his kill team as bait in the process.

Then, no doubt, the inquisitor would write a scathing report for his watch captain, which, no doubt, would be utterly disregarded. The Deathwatch knew what a valuable asset they had in Edryc Setorax. So, as far as his faults – his withdrawn nature, his disregard for authority– were concerned, nothing would be said.

There would be only silence.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steve Lyons' work in the Warhammer 40,000 universe includes the novellas *Engines of War* and *Angron's Monolith*, the Imperial Guard novels *Ice World* and *Dead Men Walking* – now collected in the omnibus *Honour Imperialis* – and the audio dramas *Waiting Death* and *The Madness Within*. He has also written numerous short stories and is currently working on more tales from the grim darkness of the far future.

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