



WARHAMMER
40,000



ANDY CHAMBERS

THE ALIEN HUNTERS

A DEATHWATCH SPACE MARINES SHORT STORY



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To be Unclean

That is the Mark of the Xenos

To be Impure

That is the Mark of the Xenos

To be Abhorred

That is the Mark of the Xenos

To be Reviled

That is the Mark of the Xenos

To be Hunted

That is the Mark of the Xenos

To be Purged

That is the fate of the Xenos

To be Cleansed

For that is the fate of all Xenos

– Extract from the *Third Book of Indoctrinations*

In the empty vastness of the void, a tiny sliver of metal drifted with its crystalline gaze fixed on distant stars. If it were taken from its setting, this artificial satellite would seem large to a man. To a man it would appear as a gnarled tower of steel and brass at the centre of vast spreading sails of silver mesh, like the overgrown stamen at the centre of an unnatural flower. But here in the emptiness between stars it was less than nothing; a tiny and unnoticeable mote on the face of the universe.

Few men would ever see this lonely artefact as it kept its silent vigil down the years. Inside it dwelt only clicking cogitators and thrumming data-stacks. The tireless machine-spirits meticulously marked off the span of centuries as they watched for signs their masters would wish to know of. The tower was called Watch Station Elkin and served the organization known as the Deathwatch.

If the machine-cant of the unliving occupants of Watch Station Elkin could be eavesdropped upon at this juncture, it would have revealed a flurry of activity. Relays opened and closed with a rapid chatter analogous to excitement at the first brush of distant energies.

+Anomalous contact detected: Bearing/98.328. Azimuth/67.201.+

Moments passed as a faint ethereal breeze caressed the far-flung sensor nets of the Watch Station. Weeks or months away in realspace, events had occurred that only now had crossed the intervening distance to reach the artificial eyes and ears of the Station. The spreading ripples betrayed much to the watching machine-spirits. Their brass-bound cogs and gears ground the information into powder, reconstituted it, and sieved it back through data-stacks filled with information on every known contact signature, human or alien. A match was quickly found, one that was disappointingly mundane.

+Contact identified. Analysis confirmed: Warp egress signature of Imperial Pilgrim-class transport vessel verified. Location: Teramus system. 38AU from star, 68 degrees above plane of the ecliptic.+

Lenses locked onto the origin point of the warp signature picked out tell-tale twinkles of light, ones racing far ahead of all tertiary emissions. The clattering cogitators suddenly sped up to fever pitch.

+High energy discharges detected. Spectral output gradient indicates xenos-

specific origins.+

+Cogitators II through IV assigned to verify. Processing... Contact confirmed. Cogitators V through XXII activated for cross-correlation.+

+Institute automated blessing protocols.+

+“Blessed be the Ommissiah, blessed be his coming and going, blessed be his servants, blessed be their instruments. Grant us the wisdom of His clarity this day.”+

+Automated blessing confirmed. Cogitators V through XXII now active. Begin analysis.+

+Confirmed. Data-stack inquiry confirms weapon signatures most closely match eldar lance parameters. Logged as high probability xenos contact. Activate all remaining idle cogitators. Institute automated celebratory catechism.+

+“Praise be to the Machine-God, through Him our purpose is found.”+

The full attention of the Watch Station was now bent on the distant Teramus system. Weeks or months ago, alien-built weapons had been fired in a system that should have no xenos within a hundred light years. Perhaps once in half a century, Watch Station Elkin might detect such an event and such was precisely the purpose for which it was constructed. Slower ripples of energy were arriving now, laggardly waves of electro-magnetism and tardy infrared that betrayed the complexities of the unfolding drama. Each nugget of information was dissected with infinite care and precision; all was logged and recorded by the watching machine-spirits in an ecstasy of purpose.

+Tertiary contacts detected. Engine trace analysis indicates estimated twelve plus unidentified system vessels on intercept course with primary contact.+

+Broadband high power transmission detected. Imperial standard gamma level encryption. Origin point: Pilgrim-class vessel. Recording.+

‘...Repeat. This is the *Penitent Wanderer* Imperial transport out of Dhumres. Our warp drive is damaged. Unidentified vessels closing in. We’re running but we can’t stay ahead of them for long. For the love of Terra, any Imperial vessel in the area please assist. Repeat.’

+Voice print confirmed human origin. Conjecture: Captain of *Penitent Wanderer*. Speech patterns indicate heightened stress levels. Conjecture: Under attack.+

The doomed pleas of the long-dead captain were taken and preserved in crystal and silicon for later examination, assigned with a low priority. Charters and logs were cross-examined to confirm the existence of the *Penitent Wanderer*. Its five-

hundred year history of hauling pilgrims and convicts between Dhumres and Vertus Magna were appended to the growing report as a minor footnote.

+Confirmed. Additional low power transmissions detected. Unknown sub-Alpha level encryption. Cogitators II through IV assigned to breaking encryption.+

+Unfocused plasma dispersal detected. Conjecture: Drive loss on Pilgrim-class vessel designated *Penitent Wanderer*.+

+Confirmed. Alpha level encryption defeated. Signal content as follows:+

‘There she is, boys! Didn’t ‘ole Buke tell you there’d be a soft touch for the taking today? Aren’t I good to you? Now run her down careful, mind. I don’t want her all spread across the belt like last time. Get this right and there’s a year’s worth of red sacra in it for everyone, got it?’

+Voice print confirmed human origin. Conjecture: Leader of system ships. Speech patterns indicate non-dispersed non-militaristic command structure. Conjecture: Pirate.+

+Subsequent transmission source from *Penitent Wanderer* detected. Confirmed low power broad band signal.+

‘Engines are out! Hull integrity at thirty per cent! Their weapons cut straight through the plating like it was nothing! Anyone in range, please help! This is *Penitent Wanderer* under attack in the Teramus system... Emperor’s teeth they’re coming aboard... Even if you can’t get here in time just make sure these bastards pay, get them, I-’

+Subsequent transmissions terminated at source. Naval data cross-reference confirms pirate activity reported around Teramus system. *Penitent Wanderer* logged as overdue, believed total loss. Situation unresolved.+

The dispassionate crystal eyes of Watch Station Elkin observed the dying moments of the *Penitent Wanderer* as the pirates closed in on their prey. The lightning-flicker of xenos weaponry had died away and nothing now remained to excite the interest of their masters, but the machine-spirits faithfully continued recording every detail of the month-old attack. The *Penitent Wanderer* was boarded, gutted and left drifting in the void. The pirate ships vanished back into the slowly tumbling corona of rock around Teramus’s star and beyond the reach of the Watch Station’s most sensitive detectors.

A report was filed and flagged in the data-stacks alongside hundreds of other incidents. With their work complete, the cogitators subsided into endless slow matriculations once more. In a year, a decade, or a century, their masters would come for the knowledge accumulated by the Watch Station and decide whether

to act upon this particular report. Perhaps the nameless captain and his crew would be avenged, perhaps not. To the machine-spirits, and to their Deathwatch masters, simple vengeance was an emotion of no consequence.

Far from Watch Station Elkin and months later, a group of its masters did indeed meet in conclave at the great citadel of Zarabek. A towering edifice orbiting a dying star, Zarabek had once been the last holdfast of the race of Muhlari, a xenos people of tremendous antiquity that had claimed to have walked the stars when mankind was still in its infancy. The Deathwatch had ended the Muhlari centuries ago, slaying their den mothers and burning their sacellum of knowledge in the Purgation of Zarabek. The mighty fortress was purged by promethium fires from top to bottom as the Deathwatch consigned the Muhlari to the Book of Extinctions.

Afterwards, seeing Zarabek as a place both strong and well-hidden, the Deathwatch took it as one of their own. Zarabek became a Watch Fortress, like and unlike a hundred other hidden places scattered across the galaxy and used by the alien-hunting Deathwatch to keep vigil. Generations of serf-artisans began the work of chipping away the obscene carvings of the extinct Muhlari and rendering the fortress fit for service. Centuries later, the ghosts of the unfortunate Muhlari would scarcely recognise their own holdfast. The sinuous, curving Muhlari script covering Zarabek's lofty halls had been completely obliterated with ranks of statuesque Imperial heroes and crowding lines of angular High Gothic creed; elegantly curved pillars and arches had become sharp and angular; vast open spaces once filled with light and life were now dark and sepulchral.

Now the sternly chiselled faces of past heroes overlooked a company of living warriors close to blows. A dozen different Chapter icons were displayed by the assembled Space Marines: fists, claws, daggers, wings, flames, skulls set against green, red, white, yellow, silver and more. Save for this single link back to their parent Chapters, all present wore their power armour repainted in unrelieved black and bearing the silver skull icon of the Deathwatch. Despite this symbolic unity, barely submerged Chapter rivalries were coming to the fore and threatening to break the company apart.

'How can you speak such words? Are we not the Emperor's chosen warriors? Are we not vowed to seize the enemy by the throat at every opening and tear him asunder? Your cowardice sickens me!'

Gottrand's words rang through the grim silence of the Hall of Intentions like a clarion call, arousing snarls and imprecations from his fellow warriors. A score

of hulking figures armoured in ceramite and plasteel surrounded him. For Space Marines of the Holy Emperor of Mankind, accusations of cowardice are a matter to be expunged by blood.

Gottrand grinned back at them all without fear. His sharp teeth and long, plaited hair marked him as a member of the Space Wolves Chapter as much as his grey shoulder pad marked with the icon of the wolf rampant. Such wild talk was expected among the brothers of Fenris, where the youngest Space Marine warriors, Blood Claws as they are called, are measured in worth by their gusto and carelessness of danger. His present companions evinced little appreciation for his savage brand of courage.

‘Curb your tongue, wolf-cub. Your childish jibes have no place here,’ grumbled Battle-Brother Thucyid. His own shoulder bore the black mailed fist against yellow that was the icon of the Imperial Fists Chapter. Stoic and meticulous by nature, the Imperial Fists contrasted the headstrong Space Wolves as night contrasts day.

‘While lacking in tact, Brother Gottrand’s point is well-made,’ offered Brother-Sergeant Courlanth, his shoulder marked by the quartered crimson and gold of the Howling Griffons Chapter. ‘What purpose do we serve if not to fight the alien? Why come so far from our respective Chapters, only to sit idle in defiance of the sacred vows we’ve taken?’

Courlanth addressed these words not to the assembled Space Marines, but to one who sat apart from them on a throne forged of shattered alien bones and broken xenos weaponry. Watch Captain Ska Mordentodt glowered down at his squabbling charges with undisguised contempt. No Chapter badge or icon was borne upon his armour except for the silver skull of the Deathwatch. Which Space Marine Chapter Mordentodt originally hailed from was as unknown and as unknowable as the man himself.

Centuries of devotion to the Deathwatch vigil had rendered the watch captain a distant and forbidding figure. When Mordentodt finally spoke, the company present quieted instantly, not out of fear – for Space Marines know no fear – but out of respect to one that has long sacrificed the fellowship of Chapter brethren for the lonely vigil of the Deathwatch.

‘Your vows are ones of obedience and service – a sacred charge to stand vigil among the Deathwatch,’ Mordentodt grated. ‘The defiance you speak of is defiance only of my authority as captain of this fortress.’

‘Such was not my intent, watch captain, as well you must know,’ Courlanth said with contrition. ‘I wished only to add my voice to Gottrand’s that the reports

from the Elkinian Reach are disturbing and bear further investigation. Xenos weaponry appearing in the hands of pirates must surely fall within the remit of the Deathwatch.’

‘A great many things fall within the remit of the Deathwatch,’ Mordentodt replied grimly. ‘Hrud migrations, necrontyr tomb-sites, xenarch raids, malgreth sightings, genestealer infestations and more, much more, fall within the remit of this single fortress and the handful of battle-brothers your Chapter Masters permit to stand vigil here.’

‘In truth, a hundred battle companies would be insufficient for the task. The xenos swarm and multiply beyond the Emperor’s Light in such numbers. Where would you have me pluck the brothers needed to chase these pirates into their holes? What should remain unwatched while some of you indulge yourselves in the pursuit of glory?’

Courlanth bowed his head. ‘Such decisions are yours and yours alone to make, watch captain. Though this is not my first vigil in the Deathwatch, I am but newly arrived at Zarabek and know nothing of the other commitments you speak of. My apologies if I spoke out of turn.’

Mordentodt made no response to the Howling Griffons sergeant, only gazing stonily out across the faces of the assembled Space Marines for several long moments. At this, a young Techmarine bearing the icon of the Novamarines on his right shoulder quietly stood forward and calmly returned Mordentodt’s basilisk glare when it was snapped onto him.

‘What is it, Felbaine?’ Mordentodt growled. ‘Do the machine-spirits seek to usurp my command as well?’

‘No, watch captain, I wished only to draw to your attention certain details in the reports I brought back from Watch Station Elkin.’

‘I see – more advice. I have a veritable feast of it laid before me this day. Out with it then.’

‘I wish to be specific in one regard. The weapons used in the attacks closely match the signature of those used by the degenerate eldar. My xenos-lore is feeble compared to some present, yet even I know that the eldar wield blasphemous technologies of the most potent kind. To find such technology in the hands of pirates is exceptional to say the least.’

Mordentodt’s eyes glittered at the mention of the eldar. ‘So these pirates found a wreck and looted it,’ the watch captain murmured with less conviction. ‘It remains a matter of small and distant import compared to many of the others confronting this fortress.’

The Techmarine shook his head regretfully, his single bionic eye and the complex swirl of electroos that marked his cheeks flashing in the gloom. ‘With respect, watch captain, even the finest savants of the Adeptus Mechanicus have struggled to maintain eldar artefacts in operative condition. For mere pirates to use and continue to use these weapons, they must be getting help from somewhere or someone – and I believe that is what is truly significant about this matter.’

Mordentodt sat back in his throne, contemplating the Techmarine’s words. The implications were clear to all present. Some bargain had been struck between human and alien in the Teramus system. In the eyes of the Deathwatch there was no greater crime. Mordentodt eventually nodded grimly.

‘Good. Well done, Felbaine. You apply logic to the problem while others do battle to see only who can bark the loudest. Know also that the Elkinian covenant of Ordo Xenos has also demanded – *demande*d – action be taken in the Reach due to the virtual cessation of shipping between Dhumres and Vertus Magna because of these pirates. The damned inquisitors call upon us because the Imperial Navy is too weak to act and the Imperial Guard too slow... Courlanth, you spoke in favour of this mission – will you now fulfil your oath to accept it?’

‘It is my sworn duty to do so, watch captain,’ Courlanth replied, ‘and my honour to serve the Deathwatch in any way I can.’

‘Spoken like a true Howling Griffon,’ Mordentodt grunted. ‘I meant what I said about other commitments – I can spare no more than five battle-brothers for the Teramus kill-team, including you. Choose now those you would have accompany you from among those here present.’

Courlanth’s voice was strong and steady as he named his companions one by one without hesitation. Each came to stand beside him to be eyed jealously by those not chosen.

‘I name Brother Maxillus of the Ultramarines for his sharp aim and his honourable role in shared dangers past.’

‘I name Brother Thucyd of the Imperial Fists for his strength and stoicism in adversity.’

‘I name Brother Felbaine of the Novamarines for his knowledge and wisdom.’

‘I name Brother Gottrand for his fervour and to spare those who remain behind at Zarabek from his wailing if he were not permitted to come along.’

This last drew a chuckle from his companions, most of all from Gottrand himself. Mordentodt did not even crack a smile.

‘Set aside thoughts of your Chapters,’ the watch captain warned. ‘All are as

one in the Deathwatch. Your only concern should be whether your remains will be returned to your brothers garlanded with honour and success, or failure and ignominy. Get to the arming halls and ready yourselves, the strike cruiser *Xenos Purgatio* departs for the Teramus system within the hour. Do not fail me. Do not fail the Deathwatch.'

The arming halls of Zarabek had been rebuilt from the walled enclosures that had formed the Muhlari sacellum of knowledge. The inquisitors of the Ordo Xenos had pored over the contents of the sacellum for weeks before ordering its complete destruction, to the predictable dismay of some of the attending Adeptus Mechanicus representatives. The Deathwatch had attended to the matter with customary thoroughness, grinding the delicate crystal data repositories into powder, mixing it with the crushed bones of the Muhlari, and shooting into the heart of the dying star nearby.

Now brass cages filled with racks of armaments enclosed the sacellum where libraries of data crystals said to encompass the whole length and breadth of the known universe had been stored. The far end of the cavernous halls was the realm of the Forgemaster. These glowed with ruddy light and rang with a cacophonous hammering where a thousand servitors worked beneath the Forgemaster's direction, churning out munitions for the Deathwatch's endless war against the xenos in all its forms. Everything was made here, from the humblest bolt shell to hundred-metre long cyclonic torpedoes built for the ruin of worlds.

Maxillus emerged from the cages and greeted Sergeant Courlanth with a clenched fist salute. Dark-haired and square-jawed, Maxillus looked every inch the archetypical warrior of Ultramar – so much so that the black of Deathwatch looked incongruous covering his armour. The Ultramarine easily held the hefty weight of a slab-sided Crusade-pattern boltgun upright in his other hand, the weapon's pistol grip fitted so perfectly into his fist that it looked like an extension of him.

'Well met, Maxillus,' Courlanth said warmly, returning the salute before gripping Maxillus by the forearm and slapping him on the shoulder plate. 'Ready your bolter well, brother, we aren't out for a simple afternoon's gaunt-hunting this time.'

Maxillus grinned appreciatively. 'Don't worry, brother, I'll make sure to bring along enough shells for everyone this time.'

Maxillus and Courlanth had fought together before on the moons of Masali, an

arid agri-world that formed part of the Realm of Ultramar. They had met as part of a Deathwatch kill-team hunting down the resurgent tyranid broods which could never seem to be fully expunged after the defeat of Hive Fleet Behemoth in the First Tyrannic War.

Courlanth had been on his first vigil with the Deathwatch and feeling acutely aware of the absence of the stalwart Chapter-Brothers of the Howling Griffons that he had fought alongside for decades. Maxillus had inspired his confidence by telling him that a simple afternoon's gaunt-hunting was nothing to get anxious about. In the event, Maxillus's confidence was proven ill-founded and Courlanth's concerns had emerged as being warranted, but both had at least survived to share the tale.

Courlanth found Thucyid in another cage methodically slotting oversized bolt-rounds into the flexible belt feed of his cherished heavy bolter *Iolanth*. The heavy bolter stood over half as tall as a Space Marine, a huge slab of metal any ordinary man could scarcely lift, let alone fire, unaided.

As he took up each shell, the Imperial Fists veteran rubbed it with sanctified oils and whispered a prayer to Dorn and the Emperor to guide it straight and true. Thucyid looked up as Courlanth entered, his practiced hands still blessing and loading the bolt-rounds even as he gazed curiously at the Howling Griffons sergeant. Thucyid was scarred, with blond hair cropped to little more than stubble across his thick-boned skull. Five long-service studs gleamed on Thucyid's brow, plentiful evidence if any were needed of his extensive experience and battle-craft. The Imperial Fist was the first to speak.

'Why choose me, sergeant?' Thucyid said mildly, his hands never stopping as they loaded shell after shell into the link-belt. 'You were right to choose the wolf-pup, I think, his kind are bad at waiting for anything – most of all a fit chance for glory. I think that's why they wind up getting killed chasing the unfit kind so often. But why choose me?'

'Because when you chided Gottrand for his hasty words it was without real anger or challenge, and he subsided at once. The others were ready to fight him on the spot, but you just told him to know his place and he accepted it. I need that kind of stability – and quite possibly heavy firepower too.'

Thucyid still seemed puzzled. 'I suppose you're right – he did quiet down after that, can't understand why myself.'

'I've heard that among the Space Wolves, their veteran warriors wield heavy weapons much as you do, Thucyid, as they have the wisdom to know that winning battles requires fire support as well as the courage to rush into the midst

of things. They're called Long Fangs and hold high regard at the Wolves' feasting tables.'

'Ah, so you're saying that you think Gottrand will listen to me because I'm old?' Thucyid said with a twinkle in his eye. 'Old and too slow with *Iolanth* to go rushing off anywhere.'

Courlanth grinned. 'I'm sure *Iolanth* – or more accurately her many offspring – will close the distance for you quickly enough. What shells are you loading for her?'

'Three-to-one mix of mass-reactive to Inferno in this belt, mass-reactive and metal storm in another, all Inferno in a third, Kraken penetrator rounds in a fourth. It's hard to know what we'll need so I've found it's best to prepare for all eventualities.'

'I ask your forgiveness for that lack of knowledge,' the Tech-marine Felbaine said as he entered the cage bearing an ornate casket. 'I did not anticipate that the watch captain would react by sending a kill-team without arranging further reconnaissance of the system first. I fear the confrontation among the brethren drove him into hasty action to seek resolution.'

'Don't underestimate Mordentodt's foresight,' Courlanth said reassuringly. 'Further reconnaissance might have simply scared the pirates away – or more likely their mysterious benefactors – and left us with nothing. A single kill-team is enough to investigate and deal with the threat at the same time.'

'Perhaps, perhaps not,' insisted Felbaine. 'I fear that if we are not strong enough we will only know when it is too late and we have failed.'

'Then we will be avenged,' said Courlanth with finality.

Courlanth found Gottrand emerging from the forges. The Blood Claw had a sour look on his face as he ruefully contemplated his long-bladed chainsword.

'What's wrong now, Gottrand?' Courlanth asked.

'The Forgemaster here hasn't even heard of kraken teeth. On Fenris the Iron Priests must learn to carve them before they can even dream of smelting iron.'

'Significance continues to evade you. What exactly is the problem?'

'This blade is *Hjormir*,' Gottrand declared with pride and a little chagrin, brandishing the weapon with its sharp rows of contra-rotating teeth before Courlanth. 'It has been borne by my Great Company since the days of Russ. The Great Wolf entrusted it to me when I began my vigil so that it might add some new stanzas to its saga.'

'And so?'

'I chipped three of *Hjormir*'s teeth in training, and now I find they cannot be

replaced by the Forgemaster. *Hjormir* snarls and whines at me in complaint whenever he is woken, and I fear I will offend his spirit if I bear him into battle in such a state.’

‘Gottrand, if your chainsword has truly been fighting since the days of your primarch, its spirit has survived far worse calamities than a few chipped teeth. *Hjormir* will simply have to be remembered for fighting this battle wearing a gap-toothed smile.’

The command bridge of the *Xenos Purgatio* was a cold, cramped, angular space filled with low bulkheads, struts and stanchions that was designed for solidity more than comfort. The ship’s Lochos was a gaunt thrall wrapped in a cloak of trailing cables that connected his cranium directly to the ship’s primary systems. Ranged around the walls, dozens of niches held more thrall-servitors, each connected to their respective stations. The air was thick with machine-cant as the Lochos guided the kilometres-long vessel out of its docking berth in Zarabek’s lower reaches and set it on a course away from the citadel.

Sergeant Courlanth had assembled his kill-team to coordinate his plans with the Lochos of the *Xenos Purgatio* for the coming action. A strike cruiser was capable of carrying a whole company of a hundred Space Marines across the stars and delivering them into the heart of battle via Thunderhawk gunship, drop pod and teleportarium. It had enough firepower to defeat any vessel of its own size, and enough speed to outrun anything greater. The strike cruiser also carried Exterminatus-class weapons that could devastate a world from orbit and expunge all life from it if such were deemed necessary. This vast, world-destroying ship and its thousands of thrall crew members were now theoretically under Courlanth’s direct and absolute control, a somewhat dizzying prospect for a mere sergeant like him.

Fortunately, its Lochos – a servant of the Deathwatch permanently bonded to the machine-spirits of his vessel – had centuries of experience to draw upon. He would understand the capabilities and limitations of his ship far better than Courlanth could ever hope to. Unfortunately, the Lochos appeared fully engaged with getting the ship underway for the Teramus system. Courlanth feared to disturb the man-machine from his matriculations in case they ended up making a warp translation into a star, or something worse, thanks to his impatience.

‘Felbaine,’ the sergeant said at last. ‘What can you tell us about the Teramus system? How can we track down our quarry once we arrive?’

The Techmarine gestured to a holo-pit at the centre of the bridge. Skeins and

jewels of light sketched an orrery of a star system. ‘This is Teramus,’ Felbaine explained. ‘See here the old, red star at its centre? In some long age past it gradually expanded to its current size and most of the worlds in its orbit were torn apart. The rings of rocky debris you see were formed out of the bones of them.’

‘Does anyone live there at all?’ asked Thucyid. ‘Aside from heretics and pirates I mean – are there no outposts or astropath stations?’

‘There used to be mines in the asteroid belts,’ said Felbaine, ‘but they were abandoned centuries ago. There’s really no reason for ships to go to Teramus at all. I confess I was surprised when the watch captain spoke of the Ordo Xenos demanding immediate action over the affair.’

‘If I may interject, my lords?’ The Lochos’s voice was a parchment-thin whisper issuing from speaker-grilles all over the bridge. The lips of his cable-cloaked body standing at the command console did not move. ‘Our course is laid in, a task easily done because Teramus is within what you might call a calm channel through warp space. To either side of it lie areas of more tumultuous flux, so a course through Teramus is frequently used. On the passage between Dhumres and Vertus Magna, most Navigators need to translate into the real at Teramus in order to check their bearings or they risk straying into the aforementioned tumult and becoming lost.’

‘I understand your meaning, Lochos,’ said Courlanth. ‘While Teramus itself is of no consequence, it lies on a route of importance.’

‘Dhumres and Vertus Magna support a combined population of over ninety billion souls,’ Felbaine added. ‘Any disruption to their trade and shipping will cause immense privation and eventually disorder.’

‘That must be what these eldar are really after,’ said Maxillus. ‘In Ultramar they are known for being ever-full of trickery and misdirection.’

‘We’ll make sure we catch some live ones so we can ask them,’ joked Gottrand.

‘Not if they hear of our arrival. They’ll disappear into their rat holes at the first sign of trouble,’ said Thucyid.

‘It’s a fair point,’ granted Courlanth. ‘Lochos, will you be able to keep the ship undetected when we arrive?’

‘Impossible to determine given the unknown capabilities of the enemy,’ whispered the Lochos, ‘but our translation in-system will be far from the usual arrival points, and I will refrain from using active sensor sweeps to avoid advertising our presence. By using limited manoeuvring thrusts I will keep us

undetectable against the background radiation of the star, save by direct observation.'

'Good. And what about locating their base?'

'Again, impossible to determine at this time. Once in the Teramus system it is likely that there will be emissions too weak to register from a Watch Station that will become readily apparent from closer proximity.'

'Very well. We may need to act to draw them out if that doesn't work, but I'm loath to tip our hand if we don't have to. Surprise will be key to victory.'

'I have a question to ask of the Lochos with your permission, sergeant,' said Felbaine. Courlanth nodded curtly in response, wondering what was troubling the Techmarine now.

'Lochos, Watch Captain Mordentodt said that the Imperial Navy was too weak to act, and yet I see recent Navy reports appended to the holo-display of the Teramus system – what can you tell us about those?'

'Three Imperial Navy patrols have been routed through the Teramus system to search for pirates in the past five years,' the Lochos said tonelessly. 'Two found no sign of pirates, the third and most recent failed to report back and is listed as missing presumed lost. Further operations have been suspended until capital ships can be found to reinforce the effort.'

'Then we definitely need the element of surprise,' Courlanth said grimly. 'I will pray that you tread lightly enough to evade detection, Lochos.'

'Have no fear, my lords,' the Lochos replied, 'no effort will be spared to bring you to battle in the manner of your choosing. For now, however, it may be wisest to retire to your Reclusiam while warp translation is achieved. I ask you not to wander the ship; you will find most sections sealed off or hazardous while in flight.'

The *Xenos Purgatio* slid through the churning rock rings of Teramus on minimum power, no more than a sensor-shadow among the hurtling drift of asteroids. No burst of comm-chatter had met its arrival, despite the ship straining every receptor to listen for it. Either the arrival of the Deathwatch strike cruiser had gone unmarked or their enemies were preternaturally well-disciplined. The other possibility, Courlanth silently reflected, was that they had been expected and were blithely drifting into a trap.

The bridge of the strike cruiser was once again alive with quiet machine-cant and drifting clouds of sickly sweet incense from auto-thuribles. Ranks of monotask servitors had already been sifting the available data for hours as they

tried to locate a veritable needle in a haystack. Without recourse to active sensor sweeps, they must perforce look for tell-tale emissions that stood out from the natural cacophony of background radiation. Meanwhile, there was little for Courlanth and his kill-team to do but watch and wait while the man-machines ferreted out their target.

In deference to his passengers, the Lochos had configured the holo-pit to project a view of the outside world. Even with this aid the kill-team could see nothing but rolling rocks the size of mountains all around them, jagged-looking and ruddy in the backwash of Teramus's star. After several hours of this unchanging landscape, Gottrand was becoming increasingly restless. Courlanth was beginning to regret his decision to convene the kill-team so early. The hunt could take days rather than hours.

'I still say we issue a challenge,' the Blood Claw declared for the hundredth time, 'and board the first ship they send out. We take a prisoner and make them tell us where their lair can be found.'

'A direct challenge from a Space Marine strike cruiser will only send them running, xenos weaponry or not,' Thucyid said, 'but a faked distress call might produce the desired result.'

'It's simply too risky,' Courlanth declared. 'We have to find their nest before we act or we risk losing our chance to act at all. Our best and probably our only chance to discover the xenos connection will be to infiltrate the interior of their base and strike from within. If we are discovered before that, we have failed before we have even begun.'

'Courlanth is right,' Maxillus said loyally. 'The pirates are alien-tainted scum that need to die too, but the important thing is to find the xenos themselves. If there is a connection here then their corruption may have spread to other worlds too. It's our duty to root out every last vestige of it.'

Gottrand muttered something and turned away, pacing the deck-plates like a caged wolf. Thucyid looked to Courlanth and shrugged, appearing little troubled by the delay. The Imperial Fists were legendary besiegers who knew the value of patience.

'Contact detected,' the Lochos announced. 'A high albedo anomaly, probably the remains of a shipwreck.'

The holo-view swung around to show an apparently entirely identical selection of tumbling rocks. In the shadows of one asteroid, Courlanth could pick out a tell-tale glitter of metal.

'Lochos, take us closer,' the sergeant said. 'As quietly as you can.'

Courlanth felt the gravity fluctuate slightly as the strike cruiser changed course, its giga-tonnage of mass shivering as it manoeuvred on limited power. As his view steadied he saw more gleams coming into sight on the holo-view. There were more wrecks drifting in this sector of Teramus's asteroid belts, a lot more.

'The sheer brazenness of them,' Thucyid muttered in disbelief. 'There must be a hundred wrecks out there. How could the Navy have missed this?'

'The last patrol didn't, and it's probably out there adrift with the rest of them now,' Courlanth replied. 'Lochos, can you gain any notion of the age of these wrecks or how long ago they were taken?'

'Yes, my lord. Plasma core remnants detectable on most of the vessels give an approximation of age through their heat signature degradation. The vast majority of the visible ships were destroyed within the last year, while the oldest wreck is more than a century old.'

'The xenos weaponry has tipped the balance and now the pirates are running wild like a pack of rabid dogs,' Courlanth said grimly. 'With any other predator I would expect to find the freshest carcasses close to the lair. Is it so, Lochos?'

'Allowing for drift there is an apparent nexus of activity,' the Lochos whispered. 'I will indicate it on the holo-view.'

Cross-hairs sprang into place within the holo-view, indicating an island-sized asteroid that at first glance appeared little different from its fellows. Deep cracks were visible in its surface, wide enough and long enough to swallow the *Xenos Purgatio* whole.

'Trace emissions indicate power sources and atmosphere present in some areas of the asteroid. Dispersed ion trails indicate vessels travel to and from it with some frequency. I could find out more through active scans or a closer approach, but either action would substantially increase the chances of our detection.'

'Then ready a Thunderhawk for immediate launch and it can take us quietly in for a closer look.'

'Landing a Thunderhawk gunship on the asteroid will create unavoidable emissions that will almost certainly be detected,' the Lochos warned. Gottrand brightened visibly at the prospect.

'Then we simply won't land the Thunderhawk,' Courlanth countered. 'We'll land without it.'

Courlanth sat in the hold of the Thunderhawk with his kill-team, each of them fully occupied with making final checks of their armour and weaponry in

preparation for combat. Theoretically, up to thirty armoured Space Marines could have been carried within that long, narrow space but it seemed crowded holding just the five members of the kill-team. Prayers were murmured and catechisms recited over the thick carapace of ceramite and plasteel that protected their bodies. Their weapons were anointed with sacred oils and given abjurations to the ferocity of their spirits.

‘Pay particular attention to your atmospheric seals,’ Courlanth bade them, ‘and your backpack air scrubbers. We must respect the environment we enter.’

‘Ah, when you’ve fought through plasma storms and acid lakes a little hard vacuum is nothing,’ Gottrand joked. ‘Are we not Space Marines?’ Maxillus and Thucyid groaned at the old joke. Felbaine, looking a little uncomfortable, brought out the ornate casket Courlanth had first seen him carrying in the arming halls.

‘I received specific instructions before we left Zarabek,’ Felbaine said apologetically, ‘that every member of the kill-team was to be outfitted with one of these devices before potentially entering any combat.’

‘Eh? What are you talking about, what are they?’ Gottrand asked dubiously as Felbaine opened the casket. Inside were five palm-sized, finger-thick discs embossed with a design of skull against a cross.

‘Teleport homers,’ Felbaine said. ‘Devices that allow the *Xenos Purgatio* to lock its teleportarium onto their unique signatures over a considerable distance and through all kinds of interference. With these we can theoretically be recalled to the ship at any time.’

‘I don’t like that,’ Gottrand declared sullenly. ‘I don’t like that at all. It smacks of going into battle ready to be pulled out of it at the whim of another. I am no puppet to be dangled on a piece of string!’

‘Calm yourself, Gottrand,’ Courlanth snapped. ‘Who gave you these specific instructions, Felbaine?’

‘Watch Captain Ska Mordentodt. He said he wanted...’ Felbaine paused in momentary discomfort at the implied insult he was about to deliver. ‘He said if things went badly he wanted no one left behind under any circumstances – “no Deathwatch corpses for the xenos to despoil” were his exact words.’

‘I see,’ Courlanth said icily, trying not to show his anger at the implications for his command. ‘The watch captain has commanded and we must obey without regard to our foolish notions of pride and honour. Go ahead, Felbaine, fit your damned devices and I will have words with the watch captain after our return with them unused.’

As Felbaine set about spot-welding the disk-shaped devices to the kill-team, Courlanth consulted his inertial map via his armour's autosenses. The Thunderhawk was sliding along unpowered and undetectable, its engines dark since their initial push away from the docking cradles of the *Xenos Purgatio*. Their course described a precise arc which would take them to within a few kilometres of the pirates' asteroid base.

Mountains of rock and tumbling wreckage were all around them, sometimes so close that Courlanth could have opened a hatch and trailed his fingers across them. Micro-gravity effects from the passing asteroids made the Thunderhawk buck and judder, meteorites occasionally rattling off the craft's thick armour plates like hail. The course had been precisely calculated to avoid any direct collision with larger bodies – or at least so the Lochos had assured him.

They would be at their closest approach to the target within just a few minutes. Felbaine was just finishing the last piece of welding. 'Helmets on,' Courlanth ordered before clamping his own into place. There was a momentary sensation of claustrophobia before the autosenses connected and his vision cleared into tactical view with its display of status icons showing reassuringly steady and green. He checked around the rest of the kill-team, receiving the traditional thumbs-up signal from each in turn.

Courlanth stepped to the rear hatch controls and triggered them. Warning lights flashed before the entire rear wall of the hold hinged downward to form a ramp. Beyond the open hatch a rushing blackness was revealed, where the asteroids around them were just barely visible as a turning kaleidoscope of vast interlocking shadows. Courlanth walked onto the ramp, acutely aware of the tenuous grip of his magnetic-soled boots. Below him a vaster shadow was rearing up, its highest peaks painted crimson as they flashed in the light of the distant red giant. The Deathwatch sergeant braced himself at the edge for a moment before quite deliberately hurling himself off.

One after another the kill-team flung themselves after him: Gottrand, Felbaine, Maxillus and Thucyid dropped towards the asteroid, spread-eagled in a perfect echelon behind Courlanth. Above them the Thunderhawk plunged silently onward through the maelstrom of stone until it could reach a safe distance to make a course change and return to the strike cruiser undetected. Thousands of metres below them, the asteroid that was their goal swelled rapidly as it came up to greet them.

Arlon Buke, King Buke the third as he styled himself, chafed uncomfortably in

the rich robes he had forced himself to wear. He was hurrying through the twisting, lamp-lit rock tunnels of his kingdom of Bukehall with the robes unceremoniously hitched up around his knees for speed. Some fat Ecclesiarch or adept had died inside the starched folds of silk and satin he wore – dried blood still clotted the rich fur of the collar. But it was the freshest and most impressive looking of the pickings from the space lanes. It would have to do.

His bodyguards clumped along at his back, big men with bigger guns, who Arlon Buke had deemed stupid enough to be intimidating and trustworthy. The bodyguards were being careful not to snigger but he could feel their knowing smirks behind him. Buke didn't like wearing fancy robes. He would much rather be roistering with his men, drinking red sacra and indulging his most base lusts with the most recent acquisitions. There was no time for such happy diversions now. A black bird had flown, the winged messenger had come with fresh demands that he pay up or be replaced. They came so often now it seemed there was no end to them.

In his father's day, Buke could remember the black bird had been seen precisely five times before Arlon had grown big and strong enough to strangle Buke the Second and take his place. Now every month brought word of new gifts and new prices from the winged ones, and Arlon never had the guts to turn any of it down.

The bird had said the Crimsons were coming to collect the latest payment in person, something Buke had always dreaded. The Crimsons were such sticklers for protocol that they looked down on him and mocked what they called his oafish ways at every turn. It didn't stop them dealing with him any more than it had stopped them dealing with his father, or his father's father before him in the first days after the Discovery, but Arlon still hated it. He did feel oafish and stupid around the Crimsons and the hungry, avaricious glitter in their eyes reappeared in his nightmares all too often.

From past experience, Buke knew that dressing in finery shielded him from some tiny part of the Crimsons' disdain. He had a sneaking suspicion that it was because the different clothes made it easier for them to pick him out from among his men and address him directly. The Crimsons really saw them all as just meat, beasts in an enclosure they could cull at will. Buke and his men could only avoid a trip down the hell-mouth by staying useful. Otherwise they might end up being carried off like Buke's father's father had been.

Buke reflexively smoothed the robes down again at the thought, failing to notice the sweaty trails he left on the white satin as he hurried along. The

Crimsons weren't due for hours but he had to get things going in case they decided to play games by arriving early. Starting the meeting off with the Crimsons claiming to be insulted by his inattention would not end well for him. Ahead of him the great brass valve that was the main door of the audience chamber was coming into view. Buke slowed down and dropped the hem of his robes, ambling onward with an outward show of stately confidence that he really did not feel. He could hear strains of weird, alien-sounding music coming from within.

They had chosen an impact point a kilometre out from the widest crack in the asteroid, reasoning that would be the most likely location for the base. What had seemed a shadowed crevice through distant telescopes was now revealed as wide valley between twin peaks. As they dropped closer, metal could be seen glittering in the valley and Courlanth knew the pride of vindication. Closer still and details became apparent to his autosenses when boosted to maximum gain: the hunch-backed shapes of system vessels, a spider-web framework of gantries and platforms, sensor dishes and defence turrets pointing at the tumultuous skies. Light and heat plumes betrayed occupation below, but the distance was too great to spot any suited figures.

Courlanth rotated to bring his heels toward the asteroid and folded his arms to his chest. He released a blast of compressed gas from his backpack to give himself a single, hard push downwards and the rocky surface leapt towards him. Seconds later Courlanth crunched into the sloping surface with legs braced, the impact of his armoured boots gouging two craters into the brittle rock. Behind him, Gottrand, Maxillus and Thucyid struck with more or less the same skill. Felbaine unaccountably misjudged his descent and struck with a force his suit's gyro-stabilisers couldn't cope with, sending him tumbling out of control.

The Techmarine half-stumbled, half-skidded away in a cloud of dust and debris, his excess momentum sending him down-slope towards a yawning chasm. Under the asteroid's weak gravity Felbaine was less in danger of falling than flying off the asteroid altogether. It was still a very real danger. The kill-team would lose precious time hunting for him and Felbaine could even become irretrievable in the asteroid belt. A member lost before the operation even began would be a particularly ill omen.

The thoughts raced through Courlanth's head in less time than it takes to tell it. He ached to give direction but he had ordered comm-silence from the outset and was loath to be the one to break it. This was Courlanth's first real test of trust for

the kill-team. All of them were members of the Emperor's finest and should be able to resolve the crisis without any orders from him. He was not to be disappointed.

Maxillus was closest and lunged forward without hesitation. The Ultramarine grabbed Felbaine's flailing arm and planted both of his feet and his other hand in a three-point stance for maximum traction. With Maxillus anchoring him, Felbaine managed to bring his own momentum under control and get his own boots properly down on the surface just at the edge of the chasm. Thucyid and Gottrand took up immediate overwatch positions and left Maxillus to his work when they saw what was happening. In less than three seconds, the situation was under control again with nothing but a floating cloud of dust and grit to betray Felbaine's misstep of a moment before.

Courlanth snapped his own attention back towards the pirate lair, looking for any sign that their landing had been seen. No alarm signals rippled the airwaves, no alerted guards appeared above the lip of the chasm; everything seemed quiet. The sergeant released a breath he hadn't realised he had been holding, hearing it whisper away through the tubes of his rebreather. He held up his gauntleted hand with palm outward and fingers spread to order the team to spread out. The kill-team silently moved apart and began to advance with him in low, loping bounds across the rocks.

Within minutes they had reached upper gantries that led down into the valley. Courlanth now had a clear view of a dozen system ships berthed untidily around it. The smallest was no more than a dozen metres in length while the largest was more than a hundred. The ships had the appearance of a selection of haulers and luggers that had been converted for more nefarious activities. They were bedecked with auxiliary engines, covered in crudely painted skulls and had prows barbed with antennae. The landing platforms the ships sat upon dominated all of the other structures in view. Near each platform shutter-like metal doors were sunk into the rock, this last presumably being airlocks leading to underground tunnels.

Courlanth scanned around carefully but he could see no signs of life. Gottrand pointed to his own eye-pieces and then to a set of landing platforms on the far side of the valley. After a few seconds Courlanth detected movement there: an open hatch in the flank of a ship and moving shadows that indicated men at work just out of sight. Felbaine signalled for his attention and moved closer to touch helmets with him. By using direct resonance they were able to talk with no risk of detection.

‘The spirit of my auspex-scanner was somewhat disgruntled after my terrible landing,’ Felbaine explained, ‘but I believe that we’re safe to use our communicators. We’ve passed inside their sensor net and I’ve found nothing that would pick us up this close.’

‘You ’believe?’” Courlanth said warily. ‘I need certainties, Felbaine, not to risk discovery because you’ve made another mistake.’ He saw the Techmarine tense inside his armour and regretted his harsh words immediately. Courlanth had spoken to Felbaine as he would have done to a Chapter Brother of the Howling Griffons – short and direct, unafraid to offer challenge or criticism. But within the confines of the kill-team, where every battle-brother consciously or unconsciously felt himself to be representing the honour of his own Chapter, it had been too much.

‘I am certain our communications won’t be detected,’ Felbaine replied stiffly, ‘but there is always a risk. The decision is yours.’

Felbaine was already castigating himself over his mistake in the landing and criticism had only added fuel to the fires of martyrdom. Courlanth turned back to the squad, struggling to think of how to reassure Felbaine that he still had his sergeant’s trust. After a moment the Howling Griffon pointed to the side of his helmet and spoke via communicator.

‘Communications cleared for use. Report in.’

‘Gottrand, ready.’ A small wolf icon sprang into being within Courlanth’s autosenses as the Blood Claw spoke.

‘Thucyid, ready.’ A clenched fist appeared beside the wolf.

‘Maxillus, ready.’ An Omega sign joined the row of icons.

‘Felbaine... ready.’ A small sunburst completed the row.

The icons flashed as the suit’s communication systems tested their signal strengths and returned a positive green across all of them. When he was satisfied that all was well, Courlanth began rapidly issuing his orders.

‘We’re here and the enemy has no idea of our presence, so we still have the advantage of surprise. No guards are visible so we’ll take ourselves across to the occupied ship on the landing platform and find some prisoners there to question about the rest of the complex. Felbaine, I want you to place melta bombs on the other ships we pass and set them to a forty-minute delay. Take Maxillus with you to guard your back. Gottrand, Thucyid, you’re with me. Any questions?’

Silence.

‘Move out.’

The five Space Marines split up and disappeared into the shadowy tangle of

walkways and gantries. They were rendered almost invisible by their night-black armour and the airless asteroid rendered their progress silent, save for the internal hiss of their retreaters. It seemed as if ghosts of vengeance stalked into the pirates' lair, grim revenants called up to exact retribution for their victims at last.

Buke hauled open the main door into the audience chamber and rushed inside with his robes flapping. Beyond it a wide circular chamber rose in roughly-hewn tiers to a domed ceiling high above. The chamber was the largest open space in Bukehall and many more entrances dotted the upper tiers. Once upon a time it had been the main mining hall, a central hub from which galleries had been cut seeking the rich metal ores of the asteroid. The remains of old mine machines still littered the floor of the chamber, while torn conveyor belts hung uselessly from the upper tiers.

The Discovery had changed everything about Bukehall, changed it completely from the failing mining colony it was then to the pirate den it was now. Directly opposite, Buke could see the open mouth of hell. It looked like just another gallery sunk into the rock from the floor of the chamber. A little wider than the rest perhaps, and maybe a little taller, but unremarkable in itself. There was no indication that tens, perhaps hundreds of thousands of people had disappeared down that innocuous tunnel and never returned, starting with the first unlucky crew of miners that had been digging it. The weird music was coming out of it, a broken, haunting melody that hovered maddeningly close to the edge of perception.

A dark shape fluttered down from the rocky tiers above to alight on curved claws in front of Buke. The black bird was taller than him and rake-thin, with long limbs that were as narrow as spindles. Magnificent, black-feathered wings extended from above its shoulders to scrape the floor. Dark, malevolent eyes glittered at him from a face dominated by a cruelly hooked beak. The voice that issued from the being was cool, clear and indescribably ancient.

'Buke, Arlon Buke, here to make sure all goes smoothly,' the black bird said, cocking its head to one side. 'You are a wise man, King Arlon Buke.'

'Ha-yes, all the others are coming and the offerings are being brought,' Buke stammered, feeling the sweat running down his face. 'Naturally I came as soon as I heard. We were ready for-for--'

'This one--' the black bird interrupted, pointing a claw to a crumpled, bloody mass on the floor of the chamber. 'This one ran from our presence before the

message was delivered. It died horribly. Not all are as wise as Arlon Buke, it seems; not all remember our pacts.'

'I-I remember the pacts we've made with the Crimson Blossom in every detail,' Buke said quickly and succinctly, 'and I regret that my man did not greet you with the proper obeisance, the – ah, the magnificent terror of your appearance must have been too much for him to bear.'

The black bird made a sound but Buke couldn't decide whether it was a snort or a titter as it turned away, flexing its wings noisily.

'May I ask a question to better make preparations to full satisfaction?' Buke ventured tentatively. The predatory, beaked face swung back towards him, half-opened as if in silent laughter.

'Speak your question,' the black bird said.

'What is the music I can hear being played? What is it for?'

'Celebration. A paeon to the arrival of one so great that it is necessary to bring beauty as his vanguard into this benighted realm.'

'That's– ah that's wonderful news,' Buke said quietly. 'But what does it mean? Who is coming?'

'Sad, silly king Arlon Buke not to know,' the black bird mocked. 'Rejoice, you are to be in the presence of an archon of High Commorragh within the hour. Pray to your gods and give thanks that you will be permitted to grovel in his presence.'

As Courlanth crept through the long shadows cast by the pirate ships he got his first good look at them from close quarters. What he had taken for being barbed antennae from a distance were obviously nothing of the kind up close. Felbaine had called them lances and the name was highly appropriate. The xenos weapons were extremely long and slender. They tapered down from a metre-wide bulb-shape at the rear to no more than a hand's-span in width at their tip. The greasy-looking metal they were made of seemed to shimmer oddly between black and olive-green as the light reflected from it. These clearly alien-built weapons were mounted in clusters of twos and threes on the prow plating of the ships, in some cases protruding from holes crudely cut straight through it.

'How are those charges coming along, Felbaine?'

'Almost done, sergeant,' Felbaine's voice replied after a nerve-wracking pause. 'I will not have enough charges to destroy all of the ships, but I have rigged all of the ones along our route satisfactorily.'

'Will the xenos lance-weapons be destroyed?'

‘I’ve placed the melta-charges to cause reactor meltdowns on the ships. I pray that the fires will be intense enough to destroy the alien weapons – they should be by all accounts.’

Courlanth hesitated for a moment. Again Felbaine presented him with uncertainties instead of solid facts, but this time he quelled the urge to demand a more specific answer. The Tech-marine was no doubt simply trying to be as accurate as he could be under the circumstances.

‘Good enough,’ Courlanth replied. ‘Rendezvous with us at the loading dock.’

There were six humans at work inside the ship’s hold, although ‘work’ was a loose definition of their activity. Four stood around watching while two others struggled to free a cargo sled that had spilled part of its load and wedged itself firmly into the rim of the hatch. The four gawkers supplied unhelpful commentary on their comrades’ efforts via crude, unencrypted radio.

‘Told you – gotta unload the whole thing,’ observed one.

‘No way you’re getting that outta there,’ chirped another.

‘I already said. Jus’ leave it or we’re gonna be late,’ warned a third.

‘...and that’ll get us skinned alive for sure,’ whined a fourth.

All of the pirates wore light vac-suits that amounted to little more than rubberised coveralls with bubble-like hoods. All were armed with a variety of pistols and vicious-looking knives that were obviously intended to make for a ferocious show. Courlanth surveyed the open hatch critically and decided it would be hard to fit more than one of his fully armoured battle-brothers through it at a time.

‘Gottrand, take the lead, I’ll cover your back. Remember, I want one alive. Everyone else: overwatch. Gottrand wait – damn it!’

The Space Wolf was already darting out of cover and pounding for the open hatch. Inside it one of the pirates looked up quizzically, some premonition warning him of the danger heading towards him. Gottrand made a powerful leap in the low gravity and slammed both boots full into the wedged cargo sled. His combined mass and momentum popped the sled free like a cork from a bottle and sent it hurtling across the cargo hold. Men scattered with cries of alarm but one was too slow to dodge the caroming sled. He disappeared behind it with a shriek terminated by ugly cracking sounds as it struck the far wall with bone-crushing force.

Gottrand crushed the skull of the first pirate to speak with the butt of his bolt pistol. A split-second later he shot another pirate as they reeled back in horror from the hulking figure that had sprung up in their midst. The mass-reactive bolt

went off in the man's chest and burst it open with a spray of gore that blinded the rest. It was an unnecessary nuance. Panic had already gripped the pirates, sending them running and screaming in all directions as they tried to escape.

The Space Wolf's gap-toothed chainsword, *Hjormir*, licked out and slashed through two of the survivors in a single, gory sweep. The last pirate darted around Gottrand and towards the hatch, skidding to a halt as he saw the armoured bulk of Courlanth blocking his path. The pirate opened his mouth to speak – to plead for his life, or curse, or pray – Courlanth never found out. Gottrand's chainsword crashed down through the gore-slicked bubble-hood of the last pirate, its contra-rotating teeth flinging out twin sprays of blood and bone as it chewed through to the spine. Courlanth ground his teeth silently as he bit back anger. The sergeant tried to recall the lesson he had already learned with Felbaine.

'An approach worthy of your Chapter Brothers,' Courlanth grated. 'But what of the prisoner I sought?'

'Fear not, sergeant,' Gottrand replied smugly. 'I had not forgotten.' The Space Wolf dragged the wrecked cargo sled back from the wall to reveal one crushed, mangled, but very much alive pirate behind it. Courlanth slapped aside the autopistol the pirate was trying to raise and seized him by the throat.

'You know that you will die,' Courlanth told the wretch. 'Only the absolution of death will cleanse you of your crimes against the Immortal Emperor of Mankind. You may ease your passing by answering my questions. If you do not, then Gottrand here will crack open your skull and ingest what we need to know from your still-living brain. Do you understand?'

'Yes!' the wretch squawked past the grip of Courlanth's steel hard fingers. 'I'll tell you anything you want to know!'

'Where did the alien weapons come from? Who maintains them?'

'The Crimson's bring them up from the hell-mouth! When they stop working we take them back and get new ones!'

'Who are these "Crimson's"? Describe them to me.'

'Tall! Thin! Not men! Something older they say, old as daemons! They demand tribute and we give it to them. They give us the guns and lots of red sacra, tell us where to find ships to hit.'

'And what do they demand in return for their help?'

'P-people! All kinds of things, but people most of all! They want slaves to take back to hell with them.'

'You prey upon your fellow men and trade the survivors to xenos as slaves,

you deserve a worse death than I have the time to mete out.’ Courlanth’s fingers tightened inexorably as he struggled to maintain control of himself. ‘Now... Tell me where I can find these Crimson.’

The pirate clan was gathering in the audience chamber in dribs and drabs. They were being slow enough to make Buke nervous and he sent some of his bodyguard off as enforcers to hurry things along. Each crew that arrived dragged along their own tithe for the Crimson of a dozen or more prisoners chained together. The slave coffles were gradually filling the floor of the chamber in ragged rows. Their suffering generated a low whine of misery throughout the chamber. It had taken Buke some time to notice it, but the sound mingled seamlessly with the weird music emanating from the hell-mouth in a number of disturbing ways.

The black bird had flown up to the tier above the hell-mouth and squatted there, enfolded in its wings like a patient carrion-eater poised over a carcass. It fluttered its wings as the alien music dipped and then swelled suddenly, crying out in a voice modulated so that it cut across the buzzing audience chamber.

‘He comes! Grovel before your true master, meat-slaves!’ the black bird announced. ‘Archon Gharax of the Kabal of the Crimson Blossom approaches!’

Purple light was growing in the hell-mouth, a darkling illumination that seemed to show nothing but shadows. Within it, Buke could see shapes moving, twisted inhuman shapes that were approaching up the tunnel. At the last moment he remembered himself and dropped to his knees, pushing his sweating face down on to the dirt floor. Around the chamber it was as if a silent scythe swept through the other pirates as they all followed Buke’s example. The wailing and whimpering of the chained slaves grew more intense as they realised something was happening, the weird music swelling to match it before dropping away to a sudden silence.

‘Look up, King Arlon Buke,’ the black bird said in hushed tones. ‘The archon orders you to meet his gaze.’

Buke looked up from the dirt to see that the hell-mouth was no longer empty. A sinister company of beings now filled it. Each was as inhuman as the black bird but in different ways. There were slender warriors in insect-like armour carrying rail-thin rifles like barbed stingers. There were exotic, half-naked females as alluring as visions from a drug-fuelled dream that bore cruelly hooked knives and a look of awful hunger on their beautiful faces. In the background a trio of hunched, iron-masked creatures clustered around an upright

device like a glass-fronted, tube-covered casket at the sight of which Buke was filled with an unspeakable thirst. Beyond them, hulking, furred monsters twice the height of a man filled the hell-mouth with their bulk, their long claws twitching menacingly as they stood quiescent – for now.

At the centre of the horrid company stood two figures who dominated the others as a sun dominates the sky. One was the individual that Buke had dealt with on every occasion previously that the Crimsons had issued from the hell-mouth. This was Maelik Toir. His angular, bone-white face and human-skin robes were not usually a reassuring presence, but on this occasion Buke felt relief to see him. Maelik was the purveyor of many things, most of all the red sacra Buke relied on to maintain his hold over the pirate enclave. Of all the Crimsons Buke had encountered, Maelik was the one who seemed least disgusted at dealing with him, projecting an aura of amused disdain instead of withering contempt.

But Maelik Toir was standing to one side, leaving the centre stage for another that could only be Archon Gharax. The eldar physically stood no taller than the others in his presence, but seemed larger somehow. He was clad in armour like burnished ebony and cloaked with a material so black it seemed to drink light into itself. One hand rested lightly on the gem-encrusted pommel of the long, curving blade sheathed at his side, the other holding a spike-crowned helm evidently just removed. Buke met the gaze of the archon as ordered and found that he could not look away. The alien's pitiless black gaze gripped him like a vice, its crushing presence wringing a gasp from Buke's lungs.

'Impressive, isn't it?' Maelik Toir whispered in his precisely-accented Low Gothic. 'An inheritance from his mother's side – they say that the Lhamaen Yesyr could turn one to stone with the poison of her glance.'

Buke could feel his soul being laid bare beneath the archon's gaze. Every petty malice he had inflicted, every base betrayal he had committed, felt like open pages in the archon's presence. King Arlon Buke could feel himself being weighed and measured by an intelligence infinitely older and more wicked than his own, his fears, limitations and secrets being picked over and discarded as irrelevances. After what seemed like an eternity, Archon Gharax broke the contact by glancing up toward the higher tiers of the chamber with a faint smile on his face.

'The archon finds you... suitable... to remain in his presence,' Maelik Toir told Buke. 'He will not disgrace himself by giving tongue to slave languages and so will speak through me. Address your replies to me alone, your words will

offend his ears.'

Buke grovelled, keeping his face away from the archon's terrible gaze. 'W-we have brought our tithing as promised, illustrious one,' the pirate king stammered. 'We have held up our part in the pact, w-will you uphold yours?'

The words were old, a formula dating back to the Discovery, otherwise Buke would never have dared to use them right now. Maelik Toir nodded approvingly. Men had died horribly for diverging from the words of the pact in the past.

'Yes, Arlon, we will give you what you call the red sacrament in exchange for the slaves you've brought. Let us begin.'

Relieved to have someone else to brutalise, Buke turned on the nearest group of quailing captives and began kicking them to their feet. Stung by a sharp sense of self-preservation other pirates quickly joined him, half-dragging and half-carrying the unfortunates toward the hell-mouth. Maelik Toir examined each captive briefly before sending most onward to be hauled off into the tunnel by the great clawed beasts. One captive was deemed unsuitable and consigned to the casket attended by Maelik's assistants.

Buke and the other pirates salivated to see the machine at work so early in the exchange. The gurgling, reddening tubes surrounding the casket were almost hypnotic as they pumped and purified, distilling drops of the precious red sacra. He had to slap and curse at several of his fellows to remind them to keep the other prisoners moving before they became fractious. Cowed, beaten and emaciated as the prisoners were, even the very dullest of them could see their fate laid out before them now. Many would fight back rather than face being given to the aliens.

The archon stood to one side, surrounded by his warriors and entirely aloof from the proceedings. Buke wondered why the archon had troubled to come as a lord surveying his estates, with no orders to give. He noticed the archon looking expectantly towards the upper tiers of the chamber again and glanced there himself. There was nothing to be seen up there but shadows.

'We can take them!' Gottrand's guttural sub-vocal whisper came over the comm carrying a thick tocsin accusation with it. Courlanth was failing them as a leader by skulking and hiding when their opponents stood before them. Courlanth was nothing but a contemptible coward.

The kill-team crouched out of sight near the top of the large, circular chamber they had found. Below them were the pirates and their captives. To their left was the contingent of eldar they had just witnessed entering the chamber from a

connecting tunnel. The kill-team's view of events was narrow and fish-eyed, a by-product of the fact that Felbaine was using a sensor tendril to spy on them without risk of exposure.

Courlanth stared intently at the view Felbaine was communicating to his own suit's autosenses. By his count at least a dozen eldar were at the tunnel mouth with more behind, with thrice that number of pirates handling the hundreds of prisoners filling the chamber. It was true that the more he delayed the greater the chance they would be discovered became, and yet he hesitated to start a battle that would inevitably kill so many innocents in the cross-fire.

'This is only their meeting point, we have to track them to their lair—' Courlanth began, just as the first wailing prisoners were dragged before the eldar. His heart sank as he saw one of them sent to the torture device the eldar had brought with them. Even now, cold tactical logic would have dictated that the prisoners and even the pirates were of secondary importance to the real goal – that of rooting out the alien. Some in the Deathwatch would sacrifice a million innocents to achieve such a goal without blinking an eye.

But tactical logic could not make it acceptable for Courlanth to sit still and witness aliens torturing and murdering humans at will. He knew the kill-team felt the same way and that only his command had held them back so far. They must act now, even when the logical choice was to wait. Honour demanded it.

Courlanth outlined his plan in a terse series of commands. Wordlessly, Maxillus and Thucyid moved away left and right along the ledge, creeping cautiously to positions where they could maximise their crossfire. Felbaine readied a thick-bodied plasma gun, checking its temperamental coolant rings before setting it to maximal power. Gottrand, for his part, squatted back on his haunches with *Hjormir* in his hands, watching Courlanth expectantly. The Blood Claw had removed his helmet without orders as soon as they had entered the atmosphere-filled tunnels of the asteroid base. Now Gottrand's long braids and coarse beard jutted free in the light gravity, fully lending him the barbaric aspect of his native tribesmen on icy Fenris.

Courlanth hefted his own chainsword and bolt pistol in his hands. He committed his soul to the Emperor with a silent prayer before issuing the final order to begin.

'Execute.'

Thucyid's heavy bolter roared instantly to life, the staccato beat of its fist-sized shells an accompaniment to all that followed. A split second later, Maxillus's bolter added its sharper bark to the thunder of heavy bolts ripping across the

chamber.

Courlanth and Gottrand leapt down from the ledge and saw the chamber for the first time with their own eyes. The pale ovals of hundreds of faces stared up at them from the chamber floor, both prisoners and their guards frozen in shock. A few looked up with hope, but most with abject terror at the two black-armoured giants landing in their midst.

‘Suffer not the alien to live!’ Courlanth shouted, his enhanced voice cutting across the thunder of explosions. His bolt pistol kicked in his hand as it hurled flame-tailed meteors into the nearest pirate guards. Blood sprayed as the explosive bolts punched his chosen targets off their feet with deadly accuracy. Gottrand had already bounded ahead of him, the Blood Claw having leapt down the stepped ledges to the chamber floor with reckless abandon. Courlanth pounded after him, doing his best to avoid crushing the prisoners huddled at his feet.

The chamber was in bedlam, with groups of prisoners turning on their guards while others tried to flee in panic. Panicked pirates were firing indiscriminately in all directions and sometimes cutting each other down in their own crossfire. Even though he felt a few solid slugs rattle off his armour, Courlanth ignored them as he surged after Gottrand. Maxillus was tasked with eliminating the pirates from his vantage point; each bark of his bolter marked another one being pulped by a single bolt round.

The tunnel mouth where the eldar had been gathered was lit by a lurid mass of flames where Thucyd’s Inferno rounds had been at work. In the uncertain, flickering light Courlanth briefly glanced at the eldar bodies twisting and leaping. At that moment Felbaine’s plasma gun spoke with a crack like thunder, its actinic blaze flashing down on the eldar torture device like a finger of judgment. The device exploded instantly at the touch of the plasma bolt and sent gobbets of molten matter scything through its attendants. An animalistic howl of pain rang through the chamber, twisting a grim smile onto Courlanth’s lips.

Two huge shapes shouldered their way out of the tunnel mouth and rushed at Gottrand. Courlanth recognised the beasts instantly as donorian clawed fiends – alien monstrosities of near legendary size and ferocity. He shouted a warning to the Space Wolf, but giant claws were already sweeping down on him with eye-blurring swiftness.

Arlon Buke had nerved himself up enough to edge a little closer to Maelik’s casket in readiness to collect the first harvest of red sacra. It was dangerous stuff

to take undiluted – it could kill a man in frothing agony if he took too much – but Buke reasoned he had a good enough tolerance to stand a few drops here and now. He'd earned it, kept up his end of the bargain and dealt with the Crimsons, so he deserved a reward. His mouth, his whole body felt parched in a way that only the red sacra could refresh.

The first explosions surprised Buke so much that he thought some sort of accident had occurred. His instinct for self-preservation threw him to the ground before he had time to think about it. In an instant the scene changed from the more or less orderly handover of slaves to the Crimsons to a roaring, flame-spitting battle. Buke saw a stream of bolter rounds hose across the hell-mouth and splatter it with a wreath of flames that made it truly worthy of its name. The eldar darted away from the stream of searching bolts with preternatural agility, twisting and leaping incredibly in the low gravity. Some were still caught by the bolts and brutally pounded into bloody, burning ruin but most escaped, scattering among the broken mining machinery in the blink of an eye. The archon swirled his black cloak about himself and vanished with all the alacrity of a stage devil in a morality play.

All around him screams and confusion reigned as the prisoners tried to get away: Curses and shouts among the roar of explosions, the panicky chatter of his clansmen firing their weapons at unseen foes. Buke kept his face in the dirt and crawled towards Maelik's casket, unaware that his rich garb of silk and satin kept him alive as Battle-Brother Maxillus of the Deathwatch methodically picked off the other pirates in the chamber.

Buke raised his face again just in time to see Maelik's casket immolated by a plasma bolt. The delicate structure of metal and crystal shattered outwards as its contents were explosively vaporised. In the same instant, unthinkable pain lashed across one of his eyes and blinded it. He fell back and howled like an animal with the hideous sizzling meat smell of his own burned flesh in his nostrils.

Half-blinded, Buke scabbled in the dirt with clawing fingers searching for pieces, fragments, anything that might give him hope. Screams and detonations surrounded him but his own world had shrunk to the reach of his arms. His torn hands brushed something smooth and curved that was still hot from the fires. He twisted around trying to focus his one remaining eye on his discovery.

It was a piece of tubing from the casket that was still sealed at one end. His heart leapt to see the tiny puddle of thick red liquid settled in the bottom of it. Weeping and laughing, Buke raised the broken glass to his lips and tilted it back

to let the red sacra drop on to his tongue.

Explosions of orgasmic pleasure rolled through his body at the touch of the first drop. The pain from his eye was swept away, lost in a sea of absolute ecstasy. Energy flowed through him, revitalising every part of him from his brain to his glands. Every sense became crystal clear and hyperacute. Buke's pulse pounded in his ears as he struggled to his feet and roared his defiance at the universe. He could feel his muscles rippling, ripening with rich, red blood. He felt strong, stronger than ten men, faster than the wind. Everything he'd experienced from the red sacra before was nothing compared to this.

Buke took a step forwards. Two Space Marines in black armour were in the audience chamber and were cutting their way to the hell-mouth. The Crimson's huge bear-like pets had rushed out of the tunnel to attack them. Bloodlust swept through Buke at the sight. To see Imperial Space Marines, such fearsome giants of legend, dwarfed and overborne by the monsters set his pulse racing even faster. He would join in the victory, tear the hated Space Marines apart with his bare hands and bathe in their blood...

King Arlon Buke sprang forward with his fingers hooked like claws. He rushed into the fray shrieking like a daemon, ducked under the swinging claw of one of his bestial allies and leapt onto one of the Space Marines. The hulking, black-armoured warrior all but ignored Buke, shrugging off his grasp as if the pirate king were nothing but a small and overly rambunctious child. Buke was sent sailing past to land flat on his back beside a ruined mining machine.

Buke roared in frustration and tried to spring to his feet, but at that moment his overwrought heart virtually exploded with the strain it had been placed under. The hyperawareness given to him by the tainted red sacra ensured his dying moments were riven by indescribable agonies that, subjectively at least, lasted a long, long time.

Gottrand attacked the towering fiends like a blood-mad wolverine. A slashing claw of the first fiend was half-severed at the wrist by his long-bladed chainsword, even as his bolt pistol sent round after round ripping into the torso of the second. Courlanth joined the fray, hacking and slashing at the mountainous bulk of the twin monsters. It was as if they hewed at stone, the tough alien flesh resisting blows that would have cleaved a man in two. What injury the Space Marines inflicted seemed only to redouble the monster's fury, putting them in a whirlwind of snapping jaws and reaching claws. They needed help to beat the things quickly.

‘Give us supporting fire,’ Courlanth ordered. It was a risk to order fire into a melee, but the fiends were big enough to make prominent targets. A split second passed and no supporting fire came in. Gottrand was struck by a blow that sent him reeling, the fiend’s claws tearing ragged holes in the Blood Claw’s armour.

‘Support fire, NOW!’ Courlanth snapped as he rushed forward to protect the staggered Space Wolf. Still no bolts came in support. The sergeant realised that Thucyid’s heavy bolter no longer sang its song of death.

‘Under attack!’ Maxillus’s voice shouted back urgently. ‘Thucyid and Felbaine are down! Poison! They’ve got—’ The comm went dead.

Courlanth’s mind reeled as he tried to fend off the gigantic fiends. More than half his team down in moments, what horror had the xenos unleashed? Maxillus had shouted about poison but no toxin should be able to overwhelm a Space Marine’s genetic-ally enhanced constitution so quickly. A glancing claw ripped at his shoulder plate and drove him down to one knee.

Courlanth’s anger and frustration coiled through him as he surged back to his feet. His chainsword flashed down on the leering, dome-shaped head of the fiend as it leaned in to bite him. Churning monomolecular teeth snarled and spat as they tore their way through the monster’s iron-hard cranium before pulping the grey matter inside to slurry. Even brain-panned the monster remained a threat, the reflexive jerk of its claws knocking Courlanth back a dozen metres.

The sergeant skidded to a halt, half-sprawled against a piece of broken machinery and tried to stagger upright. He felt as if he had been hit by a gunship, icons in his autosenses were flashing warning amber as they began to take stock of his armour’s condition. He looked up to see Gottrand plunge his sword, *Hjormir*, into the other fiend with an eviscerating uppercut.

Gottrand did not withdraw his blade, instead dropping his bolt pistol so that he could heave the whirling chainsword upward with both hands. The furred giant collapsed, gripping the Space Wolf with its claws in an effort to crush him against its chest, but only succeeding in driving the blade ever deeper. Gottrand staggered free covered virtually head to foot in foul alien ichor.

The sudden silence that enfolded the scene was broken only by the crackle of flames and the moans of the injured. Courlanth looked quickly up to the ledge where Maxillus and the rest of the kill-team should have been, but he could see only shadows.

‘Grip like an ice troll,’ Gottrand muttered unsteadily. Courlanth saw the Space Wolf’s scalp was laid open to the bone, and blood had slicked his braids into a thick mass. There was also the hint of stealthy movements in the shadows,

meaning the eldar had not fled. They were still here and they were stalking the two surviving members of the Deathwatch kill-team. An unfamiliar chill ran down Courlanth's spine at the thought.

'Gottrand, we have to get back to the others, I—' Courlanth began before a barrage of shots swept across them. Hypervelocity needles rang off their armour in a scatter of ceramite chips and plasteel fragments. Decades of training took over as both Space Marines moved instantly to attack their assailants. Lithe figures sprang up to bar their path, wild and half-naked eldar that fought with the ferocity of daemons.

Gottrand was rapidly surrounded by darting combatants, his two-handed swings with *Hjormir* too slow and cumbersome to connect with his opponents. As Courlanth turned to assist he barely saw a blade flashing in at his side and had to twist desperately to avoid it. He turned to confront an eldar that seemed to have sprung from nowhere. The alien was clad in polished, insectoid armour with a spike-crowned helm, a black cloak swirling about its shoulders as it wielded a curved blade with fearsome speed and precision.

'My archon wishes you to know that it is Archon Gharax of the Crimson Blossoms that delivers your doom,' a voice called out in precisely accented Low Gothic from another part of the chamber. 'You should feel honoured.'

'Alien scum,' snarled Courlanth in response. 'You will all die!'

'Never, and certainly not by your hand, *sergeant*,' the voice gloated.

Courlanth fought with every ounce of his fury and skill, but the archon quite simply outmatched him. The sergeant felt like a stumbling child as he struggled after the elusive figure, every slash and shot was evaded without seeming effort, while every riposte the archon made left a new gouge in Courlanth's armour. Warning icons were flaring amber and red at the edges of his vision. The alien was toying with him, Courlanth was sure, and the thought of it drove him to new heights of rage.

The sergeant unleashed a furious whirlwind of blows with his chainsword, forcing his opponent to skip backwards a few paces. In the momentary breathing space he snapped open a frequency to the *Xenos Purgatio*.

'Lochos! Immediate kill-team extraction,' Courlanth was sickened by the thought of retreat but his duty was clear. The kill-team had failed and now the Exterminatus weapons on the strike cruiser must be unleashed to obliterate the pirate's nest once and for all. Something dark, terrible and corrupt had taken root in the Teramus system and Courlanth felt shame that it was beyond his strength to overcome it.

Only the hiss of static could be heard through the link. Inhuman laughter rang through the chamber.

‘My archon insists that you remain,’ the taunting voice called, ‘after so much trouble has been taken to bring you here.’

The archon darted forward, deflecting Courlanth’s swing with a thrust that slipped inexorably in beneath his guard. The sergeant felt the impact of the point piercing his armoured shell and sheathing itself in his guts. He felt the blade grate against bone as it was withdrawn as quickly as insect’s stinger. Courlanth had been injured in worse ways before but this felt completely different. Icy numbness spread out from the wound site and didn’t stop spreading. Poison!

The speed of it shocked him. Within a few heartbeats his whole body was unresponsive. The ground lurched beneath Courlanth as his legs buckled and blackness rushed into his sight. His last impressions were of falling forever.

Sight returned, at first without colour, vague splotches of light and shade in a moving pastiche. Courlanth’s fogged mind tried to make sense of the scene. He was on his side with his helmet gone and his arms locked somehow behind him. Near him other figures in black armour lay prone on the rocky ground and he could see that their arms and legs were manacled. The sergeant could vaguely feel blood oozing sluggishly from his gut-wound and decided that meant that only a short time had passed. Such a wound would have been fully sealed by his superhuman constitution otherwise.

More detail swam into focus. Nearby was a curious structure, a tall arch of twisted silver and bone that was filled with multicoloured mists. Courlanth recognised it as a warp portal, a gateway into the inter-dimensional pathways the degenerate eldar used to move themselves around the galaxy. Such artefacts were always a curse wherever they turned up. This one had no doubt been lost for millennia until the unwitting asteroid miners unearthed it. Loyal citizens would have reported their discovery but the temptations offered by the eldar had corrupted the miners, turning them into slavers and pirates.

Lithe eldar shapes were moving around the warp gate. One, noting Courlanth’s movement, turned and came closer. The sergeant saw a bone-white, angular face as it bent over him with a triumphant grin on its narrow lips.

‘Simply amazing, the recuperative properties of your kind,’ it said with what seemed genuine affection. It was using the same precisely accented Low Gothic that taunted Courlanth during his battle with the archon. ‘After centuries of study you can still surprise me on occasion.’

Courlanth did his best to spit into the face before him but he could only drool. The alien carried on as if it were talking to a pet.

‘You’re probably thinking this was all for you, aren’t you? That we planned to trap some *Deathwatch* here – well, you would be right. Give out some weapons and it’s only a matter of time, as I told dear Archon Gharax, before the alien hunters arrive. You see, in Commorragh we have an insatiable hunger for diversion and your kind, your perfect, genetically-enhanced, muscle-bound kind, make for some of the best diversions this tired old galaxy has to offer.

‘You will be taken from here to fight and die for our entertainment in the arenas, save perhaps for one or two of you that I will take for my own experiments. My toxin was pleasingly effective on this occasion, but that’s no reason to neglect perfect–’

A sudden explosion of white light half-blinded Courlanth and cut off the alien’s gloating in mid-sentence. The continuous hammer of bolter-fire split the air in the aftermath, mass-reactive bolts pulping the angular bone-white face in a shower of gore. The sergeant looked up to see figures in black Terminator armour towering above him, the twin flames of their storm bolters stabbing relentlessly as they cut a swath through the shocked eldar. The silver skull of the *Deathwatch* gleamed on every shoulder. In their midst, the grim face of watch captain Ska Mordentodt cracked in a rare smile as he and his men ruthlessly purged the aliens.

When the bodies were counted Archon Gharax was not found amongst them. Maxillus was dead, killed by a reaction to the toxins brewed by the eldar haemonculus Maelik Toir, while Felbaine was paralysed from the waist down by a spinal injury. The other members of the kill-team responded well to the Brother-Apothecary’s ministrations and could stand on their own feet before Ska Mordentodt.

‘Remember this day, brothers, teleport homers work better to summon aid than retreat,’ the watch captain began.

‘You used us as bait,’ Courlanth said. He could not keep the bitterness from his words.

‘I saved your lives,’ Mordentodt reminded him, ‘and many others besides by locating the gate. One less hole for the eldar to creep in through and the universe becomes a better place.’

‘But why not tell us we had help to call upon at need? Maxillus is dead and Felbaine crippled!’

‘The alien has a thousand times a thousand ways to glean such knowledge from you; what chance then of them leading us straight to their most secret places? They had to believe you defeated, just as you had to believe yourselves defeated.’ Mordentodt shrugged. ‘You volunteered for the mission without any such promises – if I have lied to you it is by giving you help you had no right to expect.’

‘So this is the way of the Deathwatch – secrets within our own ranks – never knowing why or when we may be sacrificed to further some other design?’

‘This is the way of the Deathwatch,’ Mordentodt agreed.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Author of the Path of the Dark Eldar series, along with the novel *Survival Instinct* and a host of short stories, ANDY CHAMBERS has more than twenty years' experience creating worlds dominated by war machines, spaceships and dangerous aliens. Andy worked at Games Workshop as lead designer of the Warhammer 40,000 miniatures game for three editions before moving to the PC gaming market. He now lives and works in Nottingham.



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