



WARHAMMER[®]
40,000

ONYX

Chris Wraight

A SPACE WOLVES STORY

The logo for Warhammer 40,000, featuring the word "WARHAMMER" in a stylized font above the number "40,000".

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Kaivon had always considered Valmar's Gorge a fortunate posting. He made good money, which he was able to transfer back to his family on Herephalomos Tertius. He planned to work for another two years or so, relying on the crackly vid-bursts of his two daughters and single son that arrived on data-slates with each six-month deep-void transport to keep him sane.

It was hard graft, working the lifters that carried the ore up from the mine-face and into the greedy maws of the processing hoppers. Dangerous, too – the infirmary was usually full of broken limbs, respiratory problems, the occasional cloth-covered corpse – but then everything worth doing, he had always told himself, carried danger with it. The priests reminded them of that often enough, and he paid attention to what the priests told him, and so worked harder.

In any case, there wasn't much else to do on Valmar's Gorge besides work, sleep, and listen to devotional screeds. The rest of the workers, men and women both, were just like him – scraping together enough of a nest-egg to set up somewhere more civilised, keeping sweat-dripped heads low, working the machinery, thinking of better times ahead.

They would come. They all knew that.

The mining installation was small by the ancient standards of the Phalomos ore-belt – a single building cluster occupying a speck on the rocky face of the deep-void asteroid Valmar. There had once been dozens of similar stations – Valmar Primus, Valmar's Edge, Saint Violetta, Karlspar Magna – but they had been mined out over the centuries, and were now abandoned to emptiness. Only Valmar's Gorge remained in operation, though all knew that even there the workings would one day wind down.

Kaivon occasionally speculated on what would happen when all the worlds of

the galaxy had been exploited. The quantity of minerals in the charted Imperium must once have seemed infinite, though he had overheard mutterings from overseers that supplies of all but the most abundant raw materials were becoming harder to locate. Humanity's peerless fecundity, its endless wars and voracious appetites had, over ten thousand years, done the near-impossible and depleted what had once seemed limitless.

Still, that mattered little to him. He was twenty-nine standard years old and, if lucky, could expect to live for twenty more. He'd be reunited with Janna in time, and the children, and they'd petition for a work-slot on an agri-commune, using the product of his labours to procure passage, permits and grease the palms of the officials where necessary.

It was a good plan. It was sober and considered. It was industrious. He was doing his duty and advancing the cause of his family, just as the Imperial cult demanded. Kaivon had every reason to believe that it would cause him to prosper.

The installation itself clung like a limpet to the inner cliff-edge of a vast caldera of gouged rock. The chasm below, broken open by ancient tectonic movements, delved into the very heart of the obsidian-dark asteroid, its edges limned only faintly by a distant sun. Valmar's Gorge was a motley collection of constructions, dominated by the colossal shell of the processing foundries. Mined ores were funnelled into the receiving end via hundreds of trackways, beyond which kilometres-long manufactories beat, sorted, hammered and refined the contents into usable ingots. At the far end of the production lines lay the lifter stations, each capable of berthing massive Grade IX ore-carriers.

The station's accommodation section was tiny in comparison. The main domed assembly hall was capable of holding the roughly five thousand workers who were stationed on the Gorge's edge at any time. Radiating out from that hub were the administratum buildings, the infirmary, the comms station, the chapel complex, the armoury, then the long, grim lines of dormitory blocks. It was all covered and insulated, for Valmar's old terraformed atmosphere was now barely thick enough to breathe. The installation was a precarious thing, established with the sole objective of sucking up the vital resources needed to keep the starships and hive-spires of the Imperium functioning.

One day they all knew it would be gone. All of them believed that day would be a long way off.

Kaivon was returning to his dorm-unit after a five-hour shift at the ore face when

it happened.

He was covered in a thick layer of dust, and, as ever, wanted nothing more than a scrape-shower, to dump his fatigues in the corner of his hab-unit and crawl into his bunk. Every muscle throbbed with lactic acid, and his head was beginning to ache. If he could summon the energy, he might take a detour to the infirmary and see if he could grab some anti-inflamm from the dispenser he'd become friendly with.

As he reeled down the corridor with the drunken fatigue-walk that all off-shifters affected, the sodium lamps set in the walls suddenly flickered out. Kaivon stood still, surprised. He could hear the breathing of the other workers around him, all doing the same thing.

Then the lights came on again. Kaivon found that he'd been holding his breath. That surprised him – it was just a power fluctuation.

'End of the world,' said the woman next to him wryly.

'Yeah,' said Kaivon.

He'd got to the end of the corridor and into the dorm-unit's antechamber before the lights failed again. This time, they didn't come back on. Instead, emergency lumens glowed up from the floor, red and flickery.

Now he was unnerved. Everyone else in the antechamber did the same thing – look stupidly up at the low ceiling where the lumens were now unlit. Why were they doing that?

Then he heard it. It was a like the wind moaning across the distant rooftops, except that Valmar's meagre atmosphere had no winds. Something about that noise chilled Kaivon to his stomach – it was like nothing he'd ever heard before, not even on vid-reels.

He went over to a cogitator pillar placed at the centre of the antechamber. It was a communal facility, one capable of patching into the installation grid and showing up processing movements and carrier positions. He brought the pict screen into life and punched in the command for a full system overview.

For a moment, he thought that the system might have gone down with the main lighting grid, as the readings made no sense to him – there were location markers shooting all over the installation schematic, whirring in and out of life like insects. They might have been flyers, but for their speed – nothing moved that fast.

Then he heard a crash from deep in the heart of the installation, followed by more high-pitched whines. An alert klaxon started to sound and was quickly silenced. The emergency lights flickered badly, threatening to plunge them all

into darkness.

Kaivon felt his heart thumping hard. Something about what was happening scared the hell out of him. The others, too – they were already hurrying for their dorm-units, shouting contradictory things about core-breaches or processor malfunctions.

Kaivon didn't follow them in. There were procedures for events like this, protocols to be followed. He started to run, jogging back down the corridor he'd walked along, heading towards the installation's heart. If there had been some major systems failure then they had to congregate in the main assembly area and await instruction. He tried to ignore the sweat on his palms as he went. Why was he so scared?

As he closed in on the station centre, he saw that others had had the same idea, and soon dozens of ore-workers and administratum staff were jostling to get into the assembly hall's outer chambers. More crashes made the walls shake, and the high-pitched whine began to mask out all other sounds. Kaivon heard people shouting – or was it shrieking? – from both ahead and behind. He began to doubt whether he was doing the right thing. Perhaps he should have stayed in the dorm-cluster and waited for more data from central command, but by then it was too late, and he was being carried along by the crowds.

They all broke into the domed assembly area, and Kaivon instantly found himself gagging. The air felt painfully thin, as if the hall's outer skin had been pierced and the compensators hadn't kicked in yet. He looked up, towards the high curved roof that covered the main seating area, and his heart missed a beat. A perfectly circular hole had been burned into the apex, and there were intruders streaking down to ground-level on lengths of gossamer-thin wire.

For a moment, all he could do was stare at them. They were outlandish figures, oddly compelling, kitted out in glossy black plate armour with tall, smooth helms. At first Kaivon thought they were human, until he saw the way they moved.

He tried to back up then, to push his way into the doorway again and out of the hall, but the press of bodies kept pushing him inward. More armoured figures emerged, seeming to spin out of the air like black twists of lightning. Crackles of cold energy snaked across the chamber's width, followed by the stink of ammonia.

Kaivon began to panic. Others around him shoved and jostled, and the whole mob surged further in. As they did so, the intruders opened fire.

Their slender-barrelled rifles were near-silent but the projectiles were deadly.

Kaivon saw the man in front of him ripped into shreds by a rain of razor-sharp slivers. The dying man's blood splattered hotly across his face, shocking him into immobility.

By then the screaming had started in earnest. Kaivon did what everyone else did – frantically kicked his way through the masses to get out. More bodies exploded around him, throwing blood up against the walls. He heard laughter, but it wasn't human. He was screaming himself by then, tearing at those around him to get to the safety of the doorway. Somehow, propelled by the energy of sheer terror, he made it to the portal before the razor-shards caught up with him, and he stumbled over the threshold.

As he broke clear of the hall, he risked a last look over his shoulder. The intruders were now at floor level and opening fire with their shard-guns. Others were swooping into the crowds on grav-boards, grabbing their prey and hauling them up into the heights. The xenos were killing, but not quickly or cleanly. They were enjoying themselves.

He ran on, feeling vomit rise in his gorge. He staggered down the feeder corridor, knowing they'd be after him soon, knowing he couldn't possibly escape them. As he gave in to primordial urges, running like an animal, only one cogent thought flashed through his terrorised mind.

Why us?

The chamber was lit intriguingly. Inquisitor Aoart Halliafiore of the Ordo Xenos, was a man who enjoyed the theatre of the clandestine, and every station he oversaw was kitted out in an almost parodic image of the secretive. Shadows pooled and clustered. Sigils nestled under the faint glow of lanterns, tracing old lineages back to the distant days of pre-Crusade Terra. Perhaps he even knew what they signified. It was not impossible; the Inquisition had a long memory.

He was a thin, spare man who wore finely tailored robes. The only badge of office he allowed himself was an iron aquila icon on his left breast; otherwise, he could have been any courtier on any civilised world. His skin was smooth, almost youthful despite his several centuries' service, and he had tight features, the result of over-aggressive rejuvenat work. His movements were measured, precise and contained.

He stood in the centre of a circular chamber, illuminated by a single shaft of blue light. Seven giants stood around him, each towering over the slight figure in their midst. They wore black armour, relatively unadorned, in the Mk VII pattern. Only the right pauldrons varied, giving away the Chapter origins of the

squad-members: Ultramarines, Dark Angels, Blood Angels, Executioners, Angels Puissant, Iron Shades, Space Wolves. They were helm-less, which was the only other source of variation. Callimachus of the Ultramarines, the squad leader, had a close-cropped, blocky visage. Jocelyn of the Dark Angels wore his dark hair long. The Blood Angel Leonides's pale skin looked almost ghostly in the low light.

Ingvar of the Space Wolves struggled to maintain the icy composure of his brothers. Halliafiore's mannerisms wore at his nerves. The mortal was so quiet, so dry, half-dead, hardly worthy of a warrior's attention. The others were nearly as bad. They were deadly – he had trained with them long enough to know that – but they were... bloodless. None of them, not even the Blood Angel, truly had the rage, the heart.

Perhaps that would come out during the mission. It felt like he had been waiting months for it to come, though it was hard to mark the passage of time in the lightless tunnels of an Inquisitorial fortress.

'This is your target,' said Halliafiore, summoning up a ghostly hololith from his outstretched palm. It showed a schematic star-cluster. Several of the systems were marked with a death's head. 'The Phalamos Belt. Value to the Imperium: production of raw materials, rhodium, magnesium, sundry rare earths. Predated by xenotype eldar, sub-species tertius, for nine standard years. Seven installations lost. Three hive worlds raided, resulting in heavy loss of life and, more to the point, frequent interruption of tithe production.'

The inquisitor's manner, more suited to a scrivener than a lord of the Allfather's everlasting realm, never ceased to grate.

'Study the pattern,' Halliafiore said. 'What do you note?'

Ingvar looked at the star-map, and saw nothing but a trail of destruction. The raid-marks all had a date-stamp on them, which told him nothing.

Xatasch, the spectral member of the Iron Shades Chapter, was the first to respond. 'The mark is incomplete,' he said in his near-whisper.

Halliafiore nodded. 'Elaborate.'

'Xenotype datum 347,' said Xatasch, recalling the element of Deathwatch training pertinent to the species. 'Attack-patterns subordinate to aesthetic considerations. The breed takes pleasure from marking the void in certain symbolic forms. They are tracing a rune.'

The hololith zoomed in, homing down to a point on the edge of the attack distribution. Soon it showed a single point – a remote asteroid bearing the ident 'Valmar'.

‘This completes the symbol,’ said Halliafiore. ‘Xenosavants identify it as the rune yllianua, known to be significant for seven eldar factions operating in the subsector. One of these is of particular interest, given the physical presence, so reports allege, of a flesh-twister.’

Flesh-twister. The colloquial name for the xenos subtype haemonculus, identified in Inquisitorial intelligence as being part of the species’ command hierarchy. To catch one on the battlefield was rare, for their attacks were so rapid and so well-coordinated that few records were ever left behind. Ingvar remembered the scarce scraps of vid-footage he’d been shown in orientation training – grainy images of warped, hunched grotesques floating on suspensor cushions, their long clocks hanging with hooks. The purpose of the haemonculi was not fully understood, though it was clear that they were the often the architects of the raids, and therefore the primary target for retribution.

‘Then we know where they will strike,’ said Callimachus. ‘We can protect it.’

The Ultramarine was always keen to propose the squad’s course of action, as if itching to gain the inquisitor’s approval. Ingvar loathed that and was pleased to see Halliafiore give Callimachus a disdainful look.

‘Do you think they would strike, if we were known to be protecting the station?’ he asked.

Callimachus glanced at the installation statistics, undeterred. ‘Its annual tithe production is significant. Its loss will harm weapon production in the subsector.’

Halliafiore gave him a tight smile that said stop talking now. ‘The flesh-twister is the target. It will be disabled, contained and brought here, to be placed under the instruments of information-extraction. All other considerations are negligible.’

The inquisitor turned his pristine visage to the rest of them, looking at them in turn. ‘Your first mission, Onyx,’ he said, using their squad designation. ‘Always a delicate time. Greater tests will come, should you perform adequately.’ Hallifiore fixed Ingvar with a particularly lingering gaze. ‘Operate as a unit. Do not deviate from the mission parameters.’

He smiled for a final time, just as mirthlessly and perfunctorily as before.

‘The Emperor protects,’ he said, which told them all that the briefing was at an end.

Tallia ran down the corridor, pushing past the bodies around her. They had lost their heads, all of them, giving into a kind of herd-like panic at the first sign of trouble. Throne, they disgusted her. There were standing orders to follow. In her

service in Phalamos's militia she'd had the importance of discipline drilled into her, and the old habits hadn't quite gone away. At forty years of age, and having seen plenty of foulness on the battlefield, she was better equipped to deal with what had just happened on Valmar than most of her counterparts.

The whole place was now slippery with blood. The xenos were beginning to move through the complex. They worked incredibly quick. The Emperor only knew what had happened to the automatic defence grid – it seemed to have shut down as soon as the enemy arrived, perhaps jammed by some forbidden xenotech, or – as was entirely possible – maintained so badly it had failed to detect the incoming threats at all.

Tallia swore aloud in frustration. Valmar's Gorge was such a backwater – she should have arranged a transfer back to Tertius months ago.

She skidded around the last corner before the comms-array chamber, and the volume of bodies lessened. They were all running the other way now, down towards the armoury to kit themselves out and lock themselves in. That was pointless, and would do little but slow the inevitable. The only chance, to the extent that any still existed, was to call for help.

The slide-doors of the comms-chamber were open and gaping. Tallia threw herself inside and punched the lock controls. The doors hissed closed behind her, sealing her into the perfectly dark interior. As the bolts clicked home, she scrabbled around for a lumen activator. Her fingers closed over the controls and she depressed the switch.

Carmine emergency lights flickered briefly, showing up a circular space dominated by a central console. She caught a glimpse of equipment lockers running around the edge of the far wall, each one several metres tall and wide, enough to house the racks of spare machinery needed by the array. Beyond that was the transmission room, stocked with standard message canisters. All she needed to do was get there, slot a distress canister into the proper cogitator housing and activate the transport. It would be relayed through the system network in seconds, hopefully being picked up by a Guard patrol before they were all wiped out.

She stumbled through to the transmission room, tripping on cables snaking across the floor, and the lights blew again. Cursing, she felt her way forward, running her hands over the equipment ahead of her. She traced the outlines of the central console and hurried around it towards the transmission room doorway. Guessing she'd come far enough, she edged out into the dark, her arms outstretched. Her fingers brushed against the door-frame, and she clung on tight.

Too late, she realised that no door-frame was that smooth.

With a lurch of horror, she tried to jerk away from it. A slender fist clasped tightly around her wrist, hauling her back. Two jewelled eyes, slanted like a snake's, glowed in the dark before her.

How long had it been there? Had it been waiting for her the whole time? Or could they even slip through locked doors?

She saw a blade flicker up towards her in the cold blue light of the glowing eye-lenses, and a soft, alien breath from behind a twisted metal vox-grille. It was taking its time.

Tallia hauled with all her might, yanking her arm free with a sudden burst of strength that surprised even her. She managed to scramble away from the creature, falling on to all fours and scrabbling away in panic. Somehow she found the inner doorway in the dark, and scampered through it. Behind her, she could hear a delighted hiss of pleasure and a soft swish as the xenos followed her in.

The emergency lights snapped on again, for just a split-second, showing up the interior of the transmission room. One of the equipment lockers stood open, a black gulf in the otherwise uniform walls.

Then the darkness returned, and she felt the cold grip of an alien hand around her ankle.

She screamed. Terror lodged deep in her psyche ripped the sound from her throat, and though she thrashed again, this time the grip was secure.

For some reason, though, the expected dagger-strike never came. She kept on screaming long after the vice at her ankle relaxed. She would have screamed further, had a metal gauntlet not been clamped over her mouth.

'Be silent,' came a grinding, vox-deepened voice close to her face.

Tallia opened her eyes. A black helm loomed over her, different from the one the xenos had worn. It was far larger, built with the angular bulkiness that marked all Imperial construction. Even in the almost complete darkness, broken only by the faint glow of the lenses above her, she knew what that helm represented.

She could have wept. If it had not been for the crushing sense of awe, she could have grabbed hold of the monster crouching over her and hugged him. As it was, it took all of her scant remaining wits not to move and to do as he had told her.

'We must transmit,' she urged, whispering as she gestured towards the comms mechanism.

The Space Marine rose, activating his armour-lumens so she could see, and shook his head. ‘Negative. They believe they are undisturbed.’

He stowed the shortsword he’d used to gut the xenos warrior, and drew his bolter from its holster. As he did so, Tallia noticed the blue-and-white pauldron on his otherwise perfectly black armour. The Space Marine reached into the open equipment locker, located a lasgun, checked the charge and threw it over to her.

‘Stay here,’ he ordered. ‘Do not activate the comms. If they come back, defend yourself with this.’

Tallia nodded mutely. The aura of command possessed by the Space Marine was absolute – if he had ordered her to charge back into the living hell of the assembly area, she would have complied.

‘By the Emperor,’ she managed to stammer, ‘thank you.’

He looked down at her strangely, as if he didn’t quite understand. Then he turned and stalked through the outer doors, already searching for the next target.

The empty ore storage hoppers were lined with 50 millimetre-thick adamantium. No light or sound penetrated their interior, and even augur readings were subject to interference. Remaining stationary for six weeks inside those coffin-like spaces had required the partial use of sus-an immersion to shut down peripheral bodily functions, but they had mostly remained conscious, mentally reciting battle-litanies and tactical outlines to remain sharp.

Ingvar had found it harder than the others. He was closeted with Leonides and Prion, neither of whom were troubled by the long inactivity. Prion was complete in himself, perfectly content to slip into the long trance knowing that it would be followed by explosive action. He was a siege specialist, used to boarding actions in the genestealer-infested Aymar Belt, and had spent literally years cooped up in the creaking holds of immense space hulks. Leonides, by contrast, simply enjoyed the subterfuge. Like all Blood Angels, he had a deep-grained appreciation for intrigue, birthed from Baal’s complex and radiation-soured culture. Perhaps the hopper reminded him of the coffin-capsule he had once emerged from.

For Ingvar, though, it was torment. He was unable to fully lapse into complete immersion and spent long days waiting fruitlessly for the call to arms. At times he felt close to ripping the locks free and blasting out of the ignominious hiding place, roaring out his defiance before the startled looks of the menials around him.

But that would only have reinforced the verdict his brothers had already formed of him: rash, barbaric and insular.

When the order came, though, flashed across his helm display, he could have screamed with relief.

Operation commences. Enact retrieval action.

Prion stirred instantly, coughing slightly as he swam to full consciousness. Leonides took a moment longer, struggling against the deep trance before snapping back into focus. Ingvar's helm quickly lit up with Xatasch and Vhorr's locator-signals, just a few metres away.

'At last,' he growled, reaching for the locks and slamming them free. The hopper's shell cracked open and cantilevered clear. Ingvar was the first out, grabbing the hopper's edge and swinging himself over. He landed heavily, his muscles sluggish after weeks of inactivity.

Leonides landed next to him more expertly. 'Rusty?' the Blood Angel asked.

Ingvar ignored him and pulled his bolter from his belt. Six of Onyx squad were in a mined-out section of the installation's underbelly, at least three hundred metres above the main workings but a long way below the inhabited sections. Insertion into the unused cavern had been easy enough, given the station's meagre defences and the sloppy guard-rotation, and there had not been a sniff of disturbance since.

From the far side of the cavern, the other two emerged, their black armour glistening from helm-lumens. Ingvar had already learned to identify his battle-brothers solely from the way they carried themselves – Vhorr strutting, Prion heavy, Leonides lithe, Xatasch like a liquid shadow. All of them carried stalker bolters with attached silencers and Deathwatch-issue rounds that would explode with no more noise than a fist crunching into flesh.

They ran their checks and final weapon-rites efficiently, in moments, ensuring the mechanisms were free of defect. Ingvar was still getting used to the sheer perfection of Deathwatch wargear – he had been shocked to discover just how far it outmatched his old Fenrisian battleplate. In it, his senses were sharper, his movements smoother, his reactions even quicker.

'All done?' asked Vhorr, blunt as ever, eager to be going. Ingvar liked Vhorr.

Leonides ran an augur sweep of the levels above. In Callimachus's absence, he was in command. 'Objective located,' he reported calmly. 'Multiple targets, moving out from ingress point. *Shade* incoming. Suffer not the xenos to live.'

They repeated the mantra, then broke out into the dark, heading for the heavy ore-lifts that would take them up into the heart of hell.

Callimachus sped through the dark corridors, the way ahead lit up with his helm's false-colour images. There were no mortals out in the open now. Those who had bolted for the sanctuary of the main assembly hall were already dead or rounded up; the rest were being culled at the xenos' leisure. The squad had precious little time: the entire assault would be over in minutes, after which no ship in the Imperium would be able to catch the fleeing xenos landing craft.

He reached an intersection and crouched against the nearside wall, listening. Standard power armour was audible even to mortal human ears, but his was as quiet as the tech-adepts of the ordo could make it, and if used with care might just fool even a xenos' hearing for the necessary microseconds.

Proximity scans revealed nothing, so he slipped around the corner and ran towards the main dorm-unit antechambers. The volume of screaming was decreasing, which was bad news – the xenos were getting through their prey quickly.

The corridor turned sharply. Beyond the corner, fifty metres ahead of him, he saw the first of them – a slender figure, two metres tall in armour, its helm splattered with gore and skulls of different sizes clattering from chains at its belt. Three humans trailed behind it, blind in the dark, their wrists manacled and spikes driven between their bleeding lips. The eldar warrior had just disabled another and was stooping to shackle its prey for delivery.

Callimachus aimed and fired in one movement, striking the eldar in the chest and hurling it back against the wall. The bolt-round punched through the creature's breastplate, exploding with a wet pop and cracking the shell from within.

A second later and Callimachus was standing over it. He placed the bolter-muzzle against the creature's forehead and fired again. The xenos's head exploded, throwing black brain-matter across the floor.

Two of its human prey stretched their chained hands out to him, moaning weakly as they tried to part bloody lips. Callimachus glanced down at them, just for a fraction of a heartbeat.

That was enough. Another xenos warrior opened fire as it raced down the corridor towards him, moving in a blur of speed, leaping from wall to wall as it came. Callimachus's armour took hits, showered with projectiles that scythed through the upper layer of ceramite.

He fired back one-handed, reaching for his blade, but the xenos closed too quickly, bounding into him and lashing out with a flickering sword. Callimachus missed with his shot and only just managed to parry with his blade. Up close, the

eldar's movements were astonishing – like a snake striking, it punched out with its own hooked blade, gouging deep into his pauldron, before loosing a second flurry of shard-projectiles at point-blank range.

One of Callimachus's helm-lenses shattered, and he felt the hiss of cabling rupturing. He swung hard, using his greater bulk in place of speed, and managed to smash the barrels of the xenos' rifle. That didn't slow his enemy, who slashed across Callimachus's breastplate, driving him back with a whirl of ink-dark steel. Callimachus, off-balance, crunched into the corridor's near wall, just managing to block a swipe at his throat. The defence left him exposed, and the xenos whipped a blade-strike into his chest.

The edge never cut. The eldar was blown sideways, limbs bent like a crushed spider. More bolt-rounds slammed into it, pulverising what remained of the brittle armour-shell.

Callimachus looked up to see Ingvar and Vhorr crouched down at the far end of the corridor, both bolters still trained on the eldar's twitching body. He pushed clear of the wall, bent down and cut the xenos's neck.

That had been too close. He would have to learn from it.

'*Shade* incoming?' he asked calmly, noting the interference from his damaged armour-augurs.

Vhorr nodded, as Ingvar, bristling with palpable battle-anger, swept his bolter muzzle back down the other direction. The two of them backed up towards him.

'Two minutes,' said Vhorr.

'They have mustered in the assembly hall,' said Callimachus, setting off. As he did so, the shackled humans on the floor started moaning again.

If there had been time Callimachus would have helped them, but there was none and he kept going. As he did so, Ingvar pushed past him.

'Space Wolf...' warned Callimachus, but it was too late. Ingvar broke the mortals' bonds with his own hands, twisting the metal shackles into pieces. Then he stood up again and looked at Callimachus defiantly.

Callimachus felt the old frustrations flare up instantly. The Space Wolf was impossible to command, chafing against every imposition of authority like a caged beast pacing the bars. He did it to provoke, to challenge and demonstrate his superiority to the orders that bound them.

Savage.

'We move now,' he ordered again, setting off, filing away the slight for another day. 'No more delays.'

Kaivon couldn't stop weeping. As he crawled along the air-duct passages, scraping against the hot metal in the dark, the tears streamed down his face.

The things he'd seen. The things he'd heard. It was burned into his mind now, flash-frames of horror he would never be able to erase. There just shouldn't have been that much cruelty in the universe – and for what? Why did they do it?

He'd seen dead men before, and he'd seen some bad things in the lower hive-levels, but nothing, nothing, compared with what he'd witnessed back in the hab-units. Even when he screwed his eyes closed he still couldn't shift the images of torn skin, the sutures being pulled tight, the extractions, the incisions, the long gouges...

Enough. He had to find a way to get out. He tried to fix his mind on Janna, the family, the old friends back on Tertius, anything to keep his limbs moving and his mind from seizing up.

He'd somehow managed to break free of the central hub, though he was one of only a handful that had done so. There were only a few dozen of the xenos, but they appeared to be everywhere at once, throwing bolas and spiked netting and hauling dozens of human prey at a time.

Right at the end, just before he'd managed to break into the cramped network of air-ducts, he'd seen the worst one of them all, hovering over the entire flesh-carnival like a corrupted saint in a devotional picter. That one had been more twisted than the rest, clad in a cloak of skins and draped with chain-length hooks. Kaivon had seen a withered face, as dry as ash, and eyes that radiated such chilling ennui that his heart had almost stopped beating. The monster had been gazing over the slaughter with a kind of dull-eyed, scientific curiosity, deaf to the horrific tide of screaming.

After that, Kaivon had just run, and run, and run. He knew the ducts wouldn't keep them out for long, but there was nowhere else left to go. He had no idea where he'd crawled to – perhaps over the comms station? Or the chapel units?

He stopped, listening hard. His own heartbeat thudded in his ears, hard and erratic.

For a moment, he thought he'd managed to get away. Then, with a lurch that made him want to gag, he heard the scratching from further down the duct. It was already close, and getting closer. He imagined his pursuer – scrabbling like a spider up the narrow twists, the needles held ready and a collar to drag him back with.

Kaivon pressed on doggedly, fighting against the raw panic that threatened to freeze him up completely. He saw a break ahead, a maintenance panel that he

could lift up and drop through. He scurried over to it, fumbling as he tried to lift the security catch.

From behind, the scrabbling got closer, echoing up the shaft, surely no more than a few metres behind him now. His fingers shook, and he slipped on the catch, expecting at any minute to feel the touch of cold fingers on his ankles.

He heard a thin chuckle just as the last catch broke free. There was a thin whine, like a weapon powering up, and the panel broke open.

Kaivon dropped through the duct's floor, carried down by the panel's fall. As he fell, an intense heat passed over him, and he detected the stink of melting metal.

Then he hit the floor, hard. It was a four metre drop, and it nearly stunned him. He reeled, tasting blood in his mouth, knowing his pursuer was right on his heels. He tried to twist onto his back, to at least see what was coming after him, but then agonising pain spiked through his left shoulder. Something thin and metallic had speared him, pinning him to the metal floor. He craned his head, and saw something black, almost insectoid, crouching in the gap in the ceiling. It was going to leap, to follow him down. It was already reaching for something that looked like a cluster of hypodermics.

As he screamed out his terror, he barely noticed the las-beams whipping up from floor-level, one after the other, all aimed with unerring precision. The xenos's armour deflected some of them, but the volume of fire was too much, and it tumbled from the gap, crashing to the floor next to Kaivon.

Kaivon pushed himself away, crying out in pain as his shoulder ripped free from the barbed spear, and shuffled away from the xenos's corpse. In his bewilderment, he had no idea where the las-shots had come from – the chamber was dark, lit only by flickering emergency lumens, and all he saw were more shadows.

'Get away from it,' hissed a woman's voice from floor-level, over by the wall.

Kaivon did as he was told. The woman edged gingerly over to the downed xenos, aimed her weapon carefully at its head, and sent another four las-blasts into it. Soon the stench of burning flesh, subtly different to human aromas, filled the chamber.

The woman turned to him. Kaivon was trembling so badly by then it was hard to even focus on her. He was in shock, and couldn't kick himself out of it.

'Any others?' she demanded.

Kaivon could only shake his head. He had no idea.

Tallia hefted her lasgun, unclipping the charge pack and slamming in another.

‘Stay down. If any more try to follow, they’ll get the same.’

Ingvar broke into the central hub, flanked by Callimachus and Vhorr. For a moment, just a fraction of a second, even his psycho-conditioned senses rebelled.

The domed roof was broken, neatly breached at the apex. Long chains hung down from a circular hole, each one hauling a struggling body up into the gap. More than a hundred humans were being extracted, all impaled on the chains like fish on a line. Many more victims were waiting at floor-level in improvised pens, all of them bearing signs of recent mutilation. The stench of faecal matter and sweat mingled with toxic aromas from the xenos’ chem-weapons. Blood and filth swilled freely across the floor, the slick studded with floating eyeballs.

Twenty eldar were corralling the slave-chains, lashing out with barbed whips that sliced chunks of flesh from the shivering victims. Rows of eviscerated corpses hung on hooks from the vaults, their empty rib cages twisting in the thin air, slopping trails of gore to the floor below. The chamber had been turned into a charnel-vision of utter depravity, a slaughterhouse stocked with human meat.

Ingvar’s hunt-sense kicked in. The three Deathwatch Space Marines opened fire, each picking his target. At the same time, Prion, Xatasch and Leonides burst in from the far side of the hall and did the same, filling the space with the soft whoosh and thud of stealth-shells impacting.

Taken by surprise, several eldar were downed outright. More were felled as they tried to extract themselves from their torturing, and the numbers rapidly evened.

Ingvar leapt across a railing and ran into the centre of the hall, firing all the while. He saw Leonides charge towards one of the lead slave-takers, peppering its slender body with round after round until the armour blew apart in flecks of ebony. Callimachus, Vhorr and Prion maintained ranged fire, picking out the eldar with merciless accuracy, while Xatasch moved silently to block the far exit.

The xenos had been caught, their attention focused on whatever rites they had come to enact. Even with their peerless reactions, it took time to switch from torture instruments and take up their splinter weaponry.

Ingvar had been told not to use his Fenrisian battle cries on the operation, but as he charged towards them his throat unlocked in a ragged howl of fury. He kept on firing, whirling through the meagre projectile hail that the xenos mustered, smashing his way through the broken seats of the old assembly chamber and towards the nearest enemy. The eldar warrior tried to get a blade up

at his throat, but by then Ingvar's momentum was unstoppable – he crashed into it, punching out with his gauntlet and shattering the creature's fragile carapace. His fist plunged up into its viscera, and he hoisted it clear from the floor, bellowing death-curses as its foul blood rained down on him.

'Vlka Fenryka!' he roared, hurling its broken corpse away and sending it slamming into the edge of an overturned torture-slab with satisfaction.

As he tensed to charge on into the remaining xenos, his helm-display flashed with a single command – flesh-twister – and his head snapped up.

The haemonculus emerged into the open, ascending from the piled-high bodies at the centre of the hall. It soared high above the bloody floor, its hide-cloak twisting under the buffeting lift of suspensor columns. All six Space Marines immediately opened fire, and its skeletal body was shrouded in explosions.

That didn't stop it – bolter-detonations splash-patterned across some kind of energy-field. Ingvar could see an impossibly aged face in snatches within, glaring at them with pure contempt. It made some kind of gesture, and the chains hauling bodies up to the dome's aperture fell away, coiling down to the floor in clanging spirals.

The few remaining eldar warriors fought back then, launching splinter-volleys at the Space Marines, but their challenge was no longer significant. Vhorr and Prion filled the chamber with wide-scatter bolter-fire to lock them down while the others pursued the haemonculus.

Leonides was quickest, firing the whole time as he leapt up to grasp at the xenos's chain-tails. His gauntlet grasped on to a flailing length of metal, but his whole body immediately spasmed with fork-lightning, and he slammed to the floor, his armour steaming.

Ingvar ran over to him, scanning for life-signs even as he maintained fire on the haemonculus above. By then, Leonides was already dragging himself back to his feet.

'It's got some tricks,' rasped the Blood Angel, hefting his bolter again.

'As do we,' hissed Xatasch, reaching for a bulbous object at his weapon-belt, one that looked more eldritch and alien than anything else in the chamber. He primed it with a flick, then hurled it at the haemonculus. Before the creature could react, it exploded in a whirl of neon, sending a blast-pattern sheeting out in radial spirals.

The haemonculus's energy-field shattered, exploding like glass, and something like a high-pitched wail broke out amid the carnage. It plummeted, thrashing out with prehensile hook-chains even as Xatasch's arcane weaponry ate through its

protective aegis.

Callimachus was already in position, hefting a claw-shaped weapon that looked to have been carved from ivory. He trained its sights on the haemonculus and opened fire just as the creature crashed back to earth. A flare of eye-burning light enveloped the struggling xenos, enclosing it in what looked like rapidly-solidifying crystal. It cried out words that none of them could understand in a voice that sounded like iron nails being dragged across granite. Then the crystalline lattice entirely engulfed it, ending both its screeching and its movements.

When the debris of Xatasch's weapon had subsided, they could see the result – a solid-mass stasis field, with the haemonculus caught in its centre like a wasp in amber. Its outraged scream was frozen on its face, lost amid translucent layers of xenotech.

Ingvar still hated to see that – witch-weapons, forbidden to all but the servants of the ordo. Bolter and blade should have been enough. There was no time to regret their use, though, for with the capture of the haemonculus the remaining eldar warriors were roused into a frenzy. As if their lives depended on it, they came clawing back into the fight. Reinforcements from the rest of the installation came careering back into the hall through unguarded entrances around its edge, cartwheeling and pirouetting as they fired their deadly armour-cutting ammunition.

'Defensive,' ordered Callimachus, hefting his bolter again and laying down a fresh wave of fire.

The Onyx squad members retreated towards the centre of the hall, drawing back to where the haemonculus's stasis-enclosed body lay on the floor surrounded by stray slivers of electric-discharge. As they ceded ground, those humans still capable of speaking cried out for aid, reaching out with bloody hand stumps and eyeless faces. They knew that the bringers of pain were coming among them again, and what sanity remained in them forced them to cleave to the deliverers that had arrived so suddenly.

Ingvar hunkered down next to Vhorr, and the two of them launched bolter-round after bolter-round into the enemy. It felt like they'd already killed all the xenos in the installation, but more emerged all the time, spinning into view as if bursting out of the rockcrete itself. Their already balletic fight-style took on a frenzied edge as they weaved and ducked through the hurricane of shells to get at their prize.

Ingvar watched his ammo-counter tick down to zero, and instinctively reached

for his blade. He'd already seen how quickly Callimachus had been outmatched, and relished trying some sword-work out for himself.

Just a little closer... he thought, watching the nearest xenos dance towards him.

Then a massive explosion ripped the roof apart in a cloud of shattering metal and armourglass. A heavy, thudding sound followed, growing louder as the debris bounced around them. The xenos were hurled back, knocked from their feet by the downdraft of enormous engines.

Ingvar didn't need to look up to know what was descending through the annihilated roof-dome. A second later, heavy bolter-fire opened up, carving through the surviving xenos and blasting their fragile outlines into explosive clots of blood and armour-shards. The whole chamber drummed with the rubble of the Thunderhawk's descent, stirred up by the hurricane of the gunship's arrival.

'So, you have something for me?' came Jocelyn's sardonic voice over the squad-comm.

'Open it up,' snapped Callimachus, backing towards the haemonculus's cocoon.

Only then did Ingvar look up. The ink-black outline of the *Shade* hung less than ten metres above them, filling a large chunk of the assembly hall's broken dome and labouring on atmospheric thrusters. Like all Deathwatch-issue craft, it was kitted out with bulky archaeotech artefacts along its flanks, and the only insignia was the deathshard sigil of the Ordo Xenos. Its sponson-mounted heavy bolters juddered on full-power, ripping apart any surviving eldar careless enough to keep moving. As the guns swept the hall, the far walls were lost in blooms of dust and blown masonry.

The gunship dropped down further, and with a screech of metal on metal the fore crew-bay door swung down, revealing an illuminated interior lined with esoteric field-amplifiers. An open casket lay within, twice the height of a man, connected by lengths of cable to the hull.

Once the gunship was hovering two metres up, Callimachus and Leonides leapt into the crew-bay, boosted by their armour-servos. Lengths of adamantium chains clattered down, fastened to the haemonculus's stasis-cocoon by Xatasch and Prion. Ingvar and Vhor kept up the punishing barrage of shells until their ammo-counters finally clicked empty.

'We leave,' voxed Callimachus from the gunship's interior.

The haemonculus was hoisted into the crew-bay and secured within the casket. Working quickly and expertly, Leonides fastened a series of probes to the

exterior of the crystal, and lights began to flicker along the edge of the instruments. By then the others had hoisted themselves up into the gunship's interior.

Ingvar was the last to leave. He looked around the hall for a final time, his attention snagged by the scene of complete destruction. The remnants of the old Imperial architecture slumped amid the pools of blood left by the torturers. Hooks and eviscerators swung from what remained of the ceiling-arch, glistening from the gobbets of flesh still attached.

'Space Wolf,' growled Callimachus.

Ingvar pulled himself over the edge of the crew-bay door and away from the gore-swilled floor. As he did so, the hatch-pistons hissed and pulled tight, closing off his view. *Shade* powered up its thrusters, and lurched towards the broken-tooth edge of what had been the hall's roof.

By the time Ingvar had clambered up into *Shade*'s cockpit, the Thunderhawk was high above the installation. From the nearside real-view portal he could see the sprawling structure clinging to the obsidian surface of the asteroid. There was very little sign of damage, save for the shattered dome of the assembly hall. The far vaster ore-workings were entirely intact, and the gunship's sensors reported the full functioning of all life-support systems.

Five hundred metres away, smouldering gently in Valmar's thin atmosphere, lay the remains of a xenos starship. Its vanes and sails were crumpled, and its swollen hull was open to the elements.

Jocelyn grunted with satisfaction as he powered past the downed eldar vessel. 'It was fast,' he remarked, 'but fragile.'

Ingvar studied the wreckage carefully. The human prey had been herded into it during the assault, hauled through the roof like raw meat. Presumably most were still inside the lightless hold, perhaps alive, or perhaps succumbing to the wounds they had suffered.

Every fibre of his being strained to go back, to at least cut them loose. As *Shade* gained height, the window for opportunity was shrinking quickly.

'I know what you are thinking,' said Callimachus, sitting next to him in the cramped cockpit.

Ingvar looked at him. The Ultramarine's helm had been ravaged by the xenos shard-weapons, and it would take the artificers weeks to restore it. The tone of Callimachus's voice was just as it always was – reasonable, calm, phlegmatic. If Ingvar had defied his commander on Fenris in the way he had done with

Callimachus down in the corridors, he would have new scars to adorn the old. That was what infuriated him so much – the reasonableness.

‘We could secure the station,’ Ingvar said, already knowing all the arguments against but unable not to at least protest. ‘Alert the Guard, get them help.’

Callimachus shook his head. ‘Mission orders,’ he said, though there was no great satisfaction in his voice. ‘The system’s authorities will respond. They must not know we were here.’

Ingvar’s irritation flared up again, and he was about to tell Callimachus what he thought of mission orders when a warning alarm chimed from the command console. Jocelyn immediately banked the Thunderhawk hard to the right and brought it back down close to the asteroid’s surface.

‘Incoming,’ the Dark Angel reported, powering up the gunship’s weapons again.

On the far side of the curved horizon, more than one signal had been picked up. They were closing with tell-tale speed – no Imperial vessels moved that fast.

‘Xenos, fighter-class,’ said Ingvar, taking in the tactical reading and reaching for the gunnery controls. ‘We can down them.’

There were four blips on the augurs, nothing that *Shade* couldn’t handle. It was just as Jocelyn had said – they were fast, but they were fragile.

‘Negative,’ ordered Callimachus. ‘Resume exit trajectory, full velocity.’

Jocelyn did as he was ordered, and the Thunderhawk screamed along at low-level, leaving the installation far behind.

‘We’re running?’ demanded Ingvar, disbelieving.

Callimachus nodded. ‘We are.’

‘They’ll finish what they started,’ protested Ingvar. ‘They’ll harvest them.’

Callimachus turned on him. Through the broken helm-lens, Ingvar thought he could see an anguished expression on the Ultramarine’s face, but it was hard to tell.

‘We have what we came for,’ Callimachus said. ‘Nothing will be allowed to jeopardise that.’

‘*Skítja*, we can take them out!’

Callimachus snapped his gauntlet out, catching Ingvar on the chest and slamming him back into the cockpit’s inner wall. ‘And that is your answer to everything, is it not, Space Wolf?’ he snarled. ‘Nothing you can’t fight, nothing you can’t kill.’ He shook his head disgustedly. ‘They will keep coming, and the longer we stay, the more will come. They bend space in on itself. You know this.’

Callimachus let go. Ingvar's first instinct was a strike out in turn, to avenge the insult, to establish his place in the squad. It was what he would have done on Fenris. If he hadn't, he would not have lasted a week in the packs.

But the Ultramarine had already turned away from him, ready to assist Jocelyn in the task at hand. *Shade* was powering clear at full thrust now, its huge engines augmented with all the forbidden technology the ordo had at its disposal. The pilots had more to worry about than him.

Ingvar, feeling his blood pumping in his temples, glanced down at the tactical display. The xenos craft had pulled out of the pursuit, and had returned to the installation. They were already descending on the ruined dome, no doubt preparing the ground for landing parties.

There was no going back now. *Shade* would make the rendezvous with Halliafiore's command ship as planned, on schedule and with no casualties to report. The flesh-twister would be delivered alive to the tender mercies of the interrogators, and over long decades imprisoned in the void-shielded depths of the Inquisition's darkest oubliette-fortresses would have priceless information extracted.

It was a valuable prize, one worth celebrating. That knowledge would save countless more installations, and ones worth much more to the Imperium than Valmar's Gorge.

Ingvar punched the wall hard, denting the metal and sending a clang resounding around the cockpit's interior. None of the others so much as looked at him – they were already busy with course-plotting, or securing the cargo in place, or just reflecting on a clean first mission.

He imagined how it would be if he could have gone back. He would have drawn his blade and taken on the xenos, bringing them down one by one. They would have come in their dozens, and he would have slaughtered them in their dozens. If they had brought him down, it would have been a fine death, standing between them and the mortals like the warrior-kings of the old ice.

They would be inside the perimeter by now. They would be creeping back through the corridors, their needles already withdrawn and their dark minds turning to vengeance.

Ingvar turned off the scanner. He could already picture Halliafiore's sleek, satisfied face welcoming them back, and more than anything else he had seen on Valmar's Gorge, he knew it would make him sick to his stomach.

The comms room remained dark. Both of them had heard explosions for a long

time, like grenades going off. Then there had been the huge booming noise, like a starship coming to land, that had made the whole station shake. They'd felt a massive impact, like a hammer blow against the asteroid's core.

Then, for a while, nothing.

Kaivon was the first to speak. 'Do you think they've done it?' he whispered.

Tallia and he were both crouched in the flickered dark. She still had her lasgun trained on the air-duct opening, her eyes locked on to it with impressive dedication.

Kaivon admired that. She was everything that he wasn't – disciplined, focused. He could hardly stop shaking still, and every time he blinked he saw again the horrible sights that made him want to start weeping again.

Eventually, Tallia relaxed. She lowered the weapon by a fraction, though she kept her finger tight on the trigger.

'They've done it then, have they?' asked Kaivon again, anxious and urgent. He wished he'd seen one of them himself now – an Angel of Death, just as the stories said they were, emerging at the time of darkest need, the protectors of the faithful, the guardians of the immortal soul of humanity.

'He said to stay here,' said Tallia, warily.

Kaivon scrambled to his feet. He found that moving helped him a little. If he started to walk, the trembling ebbed slightly. 'They must have killed them all,' he said, his voice picking up. 'Praise the Emperor!'

Tallia tried to grab him, to haul him back down, but missed the edge of his jacket. 'Remain still!' she hissed.

By then, Kaivon wasn't listening. A kind of euphoria had taken over, an ecstatic release from the vice of fear and nausea that had clamped on him since the first inklings that something was wrong.

He edged into the larger chamber beyond, the one with the central column where Tallia had dragged the two xenos bodies up against the walls. They held little fear for him now, for the true masters of battle were in the station now, and with all his remaining strength Kaivon determined that he would at least lay eyes on them.

They had to be thanked. They had to know, even if it only lasted seconds, that he was grateful, and that their arrival had vindicated every scrap of faith that he had ever possessed, for it was one thing for the priests to tell them that the Emperor's Angels would always be there for them, but it was another thing to have it demonstrated.

He reached the outer door, and paused. The lights had been partially restored

on the far side, and he could see a ribbon of red glowing around the joints. Something was moving outside, coming towards the doors. He saw the light broken.

He found himself suddenly unwilling to open the lock. Suddenly, the fear returned, as sharp and debilitating as before.

‘Don’t open the door!’ hissed Tallia, staying where she was and keeping the lasgun trained for firing. ‘Get back here!’

He didn’t know why he still reached for the lock mechanism. He saw his hand moving long before he realised what he was doing, and the portal slid open.

Tallia opened fire, sending lasbeams fizzing past him and into the dark. A return burst of splinter-shards ended the barrage, somehow missing him entirely and whistling into the chamber beyond. Tallia gurgled and gagged, and the lasbeams ceased.

Kaivon stood perfectly still, his eyes wide, his limbs frozen. Before him, in the dark, hung two glowing lenses, like a snake’s eyes. He heard the faint sound of alien breath coming from a glossy mask.

He wanted to scream, but no sound came from his mouth. He wanted to resist as the hooks and the collar came towards him, but his body no longer obeyed his mind’s commands.

If he’d had any wits left, he would have wished for death to come quickly, but from somewhere, deep down, despite all the choking fear that consumed him again and made his thoughts sluggish, Kaivon knew that he would be alive yet for a very long time indeed.

As the first of the hooks went in, he couldn’t even close his eyes.

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Chris Wraith is the author of the Horus Heresy novel *Scars*, the novella *Brotherhood of Storm* and the audio drama *The Sigillite*. For Warhammer 40,000 he has written the Space Wolves novels *Blood of Asaheim* and *Stormcaller*, and the short story collection *Wolves of Fenris*, as well as the Space Marine Battles novels *Wrath of Iron* and *Battle of the Fang*. Additionally, he has many Warhammer novels to his name, including the Time of Legends novel *Master of Dragons*, which forms part of the War of Vengeance series. Chris lives and works near Bristol, in south-west England.

[Wolves of Fenris](#) is a collection of Space Wolves short stories by Chris Wraight that spans the Horus Heresy and Warhammer 40,000.



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