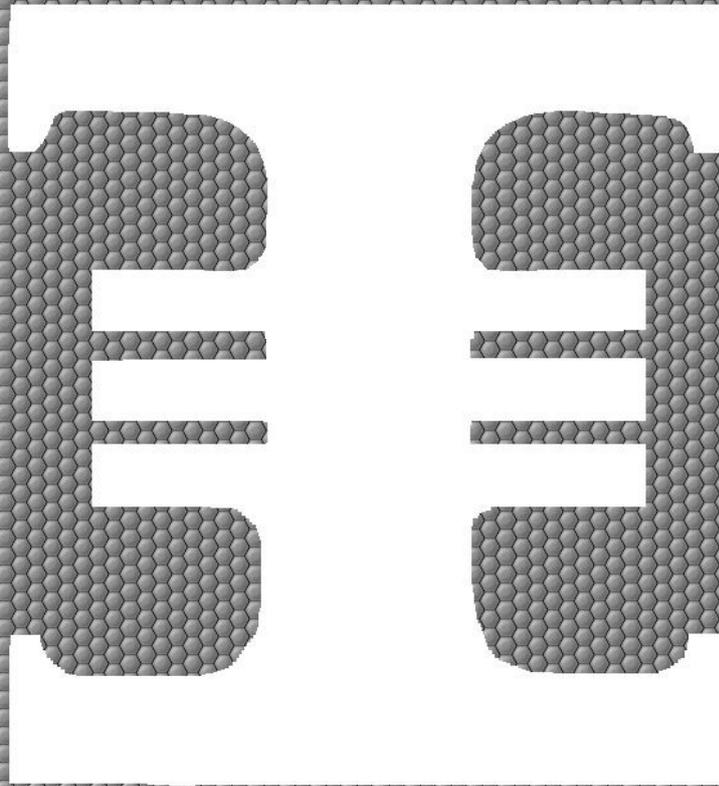


POST MORTEM



BY STEPHEN J DUTTON

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By Stephen J Dutton BSc (hons) BEng (hons)

The marines of the Deathwatch chapter are experts at battling all manner of xenos creatures. Following a mission to eliminate an alien presence on an Imperial world a Deathwatch kill team finds itself returning to base bearing with them the body of their fallen comrade only to find that the threat still exists and is closer to home than they had believed...

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Brother Sergeant Tauros handed his bolter to the armoury serf and then spread his arms apart while a half human servitor moved in to remove his armour one piece at a time.

“Speak.” he said when he sensed the approach of another chapter serf. This one was more high ranking than any of the armoury serfs and she served as the commanding officer of the Deathwatch vessel Tauros and his squad were aboard. This particular vessel was small by the standards of warp capable ships, barely a thousand metres long, but if necessary it could still transport a large force of Deathwatch marines across the galaxy. A small gold name plate pinned to the woman's chest identified her simply as Collest.

“We have broken orbit and are accelerating towards the Mandeville point.” she told him.

“I know.” Tauros replied, “I sensed the firing of the engines.”

“Of course.” the woman commented, “I estimate that we will translate to the warp in sixty two hours. Our estimated time of arrival at the fortress is eight days relative.”

“Very good.” Tauros said as the servitor handed him a simple robe and sandals to wear instead of the armour that was now being placed in storage, “Now I must go and pay my respects. Return to the bridge.”

“Yes sir.” Collest answered, nodding as Tauros walked past her.

From the armoury Tauros proceeded to the ship's chapel. Here the walls were not as utilitarian as the bulkheads in other areas of the ship. Instead almost every square inch was decorated with some image or carving of Deathwatch victories, showing the elite marine force vanquishing alien threats to the Imperium. But Tauros had not come to admire the artwork or offer up prayers. Instead he headed towards a doorway towards the rear of the chapel. As with most doors aboard the ship this was built to allow the bulky form of a space marine to pass through without needing to bend over. Tauros was glad of this since to have to stoop while entering the room beyond could be interpreted as being disrespectful.

Inside the room a figure in the black power armour of the Deathwatch was laid out clutching his bolter across his chest with rows of candles placed either side of him and two ornate brass carvings supporting the back of his head and his feet given that his armour's backpack mounted power supply lifted his torso above the platform he had been placed on. Brother Vexis had been slain in battle, the only one of Tauros' kill team to have lost his life in their recent assignment. Exactly how Vexis had died was a mystery, but there was a single puncture in his armour where his helmet was connected. The small number of marines in the kill team had necessitated them deploying separately and all contact with Vexis had been cut off unexpectedly. By the time Tauros and fellow marine Barachiel had reached Vexis' last known location they had discovered his body surrounded by alien corpses. It appeared that one of the aliens had been able to get behind him and stabbed him in the neck, though how this had been achieved was unknown.

“You died well brother.” Tauros said, knowing that Vexis could not hear him, “Your body and your geneseed will be returned to your chapter.” Vexis had been a member of the Swords Of The Emperor chapter of marines and in keeping with Deathwatch tradition one of the shoulder pads on his armour retained his chapter colours. A marine's geneseed was the key to creating more genetically enhanced marines from baseline humans, so its recovery was essential to a chapter's survival. Satisfied that the body of his former comrade in arms had been correctly laid out by the ship's serfs Tauros turned to leave. His enhanced senses warned him of a presence in the room and he spun around. Muscle memory took over for a moment and he reached for the spot on his hip where his bolt pistol would be holstered in battle. But the weapon was in the armoury with the rest of his equipment and so when he searched for whatever it was that he had sensed he did so empty handed.

Surprisingly there was nothing there and Tauros was confused. He had been certain that there had been something else in the chamber with him, but apart from the body of Vexis he was alone. Tauros relaxed and turned back towards the doorway, putting the sensation down to the lingering effects of being in combat where the slightest movement could be a warning of imminent doom.

Exiting the chamber where Vexis had been laid out Tauros saw another figure entering the chapel. This was Inquisitor Levent of the Ordos Xenos, a specialist in investigating alien threats to mankind. An experienced alien hunter, it was the inquisitor that had summoned Sergeant Tauros' squad to help storm the nest of creatures he had discovered in the sewers under the planetary capital.

“Is something amiss sergeant?” the inquisitor asked.

“No inquisitor. I was just paying my respects to Brother Vexis.”

“I see.” Levent replied, “I too am here to pay my respects to our fallen comrade.”

This disturbed Tauros somewhat. As a normal human, even one with the authority and experience possessed by an inquisitor, who possessed the authority to kill every living being on an entire world, Levent could hardly be said to be a comrade of any space marine.

“Tell me sergeant,” the inquisitor went on, “are your weapons and armour safely stowed in the armoury?”

“They are.” Tauros answered, not seeing how it was any concern of Levent's and wondering if the question was meant to suggest that he could not be trusted to follow proper procedure.

“Then I shall leave you to return to your men while I pay my respects.” Levent said and Tauros noticed that again the inquisitor seemed to be telling the marine how he ought to be acting. Nevertheless, Tauros just nodded his head respectfully before leaving the chapel.

From there Tauros headed directly for the barracks where the rest of his kill team were billeted and from down the corridor he heard a loud voice.

"So the man said, that's not an ork, that's my mother!" and this was followed by a single laugh, clearly from the same individual.

Tauros would not have needed to enter the barracks to see the laughing marine to know that it was Asbjorn, the Space Wolf. Asbjorn was physically the largest of the kill team and had an appetite to match.

Unsurprisingly he was sat at a small table eating from a bowl as he told the joke neither of the other two marines present seemed to have appreciated. On the other hand, Barachiel the Dark Angel sat silently

reading from a dataslate and Tauros doubted he would have been paying much attention to Asbjorn's joke. When Tauros had first met Barachiel he had observed that the shoulder pad of his armour reserved for his chapter colours was painted bone white rather than the dark green that was the traditional colour of the Dark Angels, indicating that he was a member of their elite first company, the Deathwatch. However, when questioned about his experiences Barachiel said nothing.

The Dark Angel rarely spoke about anything else either and when Tauros had once asked him about this he had simply replied, "Why bother when Brother Asbjorn can say enough for us all?" The Space Wolves and Dark Angels were rival chapters, but the pair had managed to put aside any animosity they may have felt towards one another while they were attached to the Deathwatch though the two frequently spared with one another. The results of these bouts could go one way or the other, but each one was characterised by much vocal goading by Asbjorn while Barachiel would maintain his silence while he fought.

The final member of the kill team was Vincus of the Raven Guard who was exercising at the far side of the barracks when Tauros entered.

"Ah, brother sergeant." Asbjorn said when he saw Tauros, "Made sure those serfs have laid our little brother out properly?"

'Little brother' was how Asbjorn had always referred to Vexis. The four surviving members of the kill team all came from chapters that had originally been legions of the first founding at the start of the Emperor's Great Crusade more than ten thousand years earlier. Tauros himself was one of the famed Ultramarines, whose primarch had laid down the Codex Astartes to which most other chapters adhered. On the other hand the Swords Of The Emperor chapter was the product of one of the later foundings and this was something that Asbjorn would never let Vexis forget.

"What do any of you know of our esteemed Inquisitor Levent?" Tauros asked, closing the door behind him so that the conversation would not be overheard by any member of the ship's crew who happened to be passing.

"He's an inquisitor, what else is there to know?" Asbjorn responded.

"Prior to his request for our aide I had never even heard of him." Tauros said, "What of the rest of you?"

"His name was unknown to me." Vincus replied, "Though I had seen him before. Never with any of the Deathwatch though."

"He is a radical." Barachiel hissed, "He and his henchmen have been witnessed using the tools of the xenos."

"What henchmen?" Asbjorn asked, "All his little minions were slaughtered by those aliens we've just killed."

"Before we arrived Vincus pointed out."

"That brings me to another question." Tauros said, "When we were ordered to assist the inquisitor I looked up the aliens we were to fight in the Deathwatch's records."

"As did we all." Vincus said, "There was no mention of them. The Deathwatch has never been called in to fight them before."

"Because they've never been stupid enough to come anywhere near an Imperial world before now." Asbjorn commented, "They know we are strong and are too afraid of our reaction."

"Maybe so." Tauros said, "But I cannot help but wonder whether there is a connection between an inquisitor that has never sought the intervention of the Deathwatch and a strain of xenos that never required our presence before either."

The scream that woke the marines came from some distance from their barracks, but a marine's senses were heightened to the point that it took more than a bulkhead designed to resist hard vacuum and the rumbling of even more distant machinery to prevent them from hearing it.

"That did not sound promising." Vincus said as he climbed from his bunk.

"That was the sound of fear." Asbjorn added.

Without speaking Tauros headed to investigate, opening the bulkhead and stepping into the corridor outside.

"There is no-one here." he said. Then he took a deep breath, "But I smell blood."

The four marines exited their barracks, following Tauros down the corridor.

"A lot of blood." Asbjorn said, "This isn't good."

Rounding a corner the four marines discovered just how accurate Asbjorn's statement was. At their feet lay what was left of a chapter serf. The unfortunate man's body had been ripped wide open and organs lay

scattered across the deck. But of his assailant there was no sign.

"No human being did this." Barachiel said.

"A human armed with a chainsword could have done it." Asbjorn replied.

"We'd have heard the motor." Vincus pointed out, "Even over the sound of your incessant talking."

"This was done with someone's bare hands." Tauros said sternly, "And apart from us there is only one other individual aboard this vessel that is capable of such a thing." then he began to stride along the corridor.

"Where are you going?" Asbjorn called out after him.

"To the chapel." Barachiel replied, "So he can see if our little brother really is dead."

The chapel was as deserted as it had been when Tauros had last been there, but now the mangled remains of the door to the side chamber lay on the floor. The four marines approached the doorway with caution, alert for an ambush. But when they reached the door they found the room beyond empty. It was however, in ruins. The candles that had been laid out with Vexis were now extinguished and scattered about the floor while the platform upon which Vexis had been laid out was now upturned and smashed.

"What happened to our brother?" Vincus asked.

"Levent." Tauros hissed.

"What about him?" Asbjorn asked, "That little man couldn't have done this."

"No. But he caused it to happen." Tauros answered, "When I came here to pay my respects to our fallen brother I sensed something amiss but failed to act. Now there is a killer loose on this ship."

"A killer with all the skills of one of us." Barachiel added.

Asbjorn snorted.

"Then it's a good job there's four of us isn't it?" he said, "Though I'll still feel better when I've a good bolter in my hands."

"Levent again. It has to be." Tauros said when the marines stood in front of the armoury hatch.

Typically the armoury would be guarded by two armed serfs who would automatically stand aside at the approach of a marine. But now the guards were gone and the hatch was sealed, half a dozen strange devices placed around the door frame.

"Explosives." Vincus hissed, "No doubt rigged to explode if anyone attempts to gain access to the armoury. Someone definitely does not want us getting our weapons or armour."

"And you suspect the inquisitor?" Barachiel asked, turning to Tauros.

"He was there when I visited Vexis in the chapel and he seemed keen to confirm that our weaponry was all stowed in the armoury. I suspect he wanted to make certain that we would be unable to use it against Vexis."

"Well I could hardly allow you to destroy what I've worked so hard to obtain now could I?" Levent suddenly called out from behind the marines.

Whirling around on the spot, Tauros sprinted down the corridor and grabbed the inquisitor by the throat, lifting him off the deck.

"What alien foulness have you brought aboard this ship inquisitor?" he demanded, snarling at the man, "Tell me now or I will snap your neck."

Asbjorn sniffed.

"You know it's going to be difficult for him to tell you anything while you're choking him like that brother sergeant." he said, "Of course I'm happy to just let you kill him."

Tauros released his grip and the inquisitor fell to the deck, landing in a heap.

"Now answer my question inquisitor." he told the man, "What is going on here? It has nothing to do with a nest of aliens has it?"

"On the contrary sergeant it has everything to do with the nest." Levent said as he pulled himself back to his feet, "The xenos infestation your men dealt with was a result of a parasitic infection of an otherwise irrelevant species that the Imperium's only previous contact with has been as the result of Rogue Traders visiting their system. The infected aliens stowed away aboard a Rogue Trader's vessel and made their way to the nearest Imperial planet. The one you have just cleansed."

"A parasite?" Vincus asked.

"Yes, a parasite. A tiny organism embedding itself inside a larger host."

"We know what parasites are inquisitor." Tauros said.

"Well this particular one is rather more interesting than most." Levent went on, "You see when it infects its victim it makes its way to their brainstem, severing it and killing them instantly. Then as it consumes the tissue around it, it is able to merge with the now deceased victim's nervous system and reanimate their corpse. It appears to be a method of encouraging the spread of the parasite. It simply gets up and wanders off in search of new hosts for its offspring."

"You knew." Barachiel said, "You knew Vexis was infected."

"I suspected so, yes. That is why I went to check on his body and when I saw the damage to his helmet seal I realised the opportunity that had presented itself." Levent answered.

"Opportunity?" Tauros hissed.

"The parasite cannot live long without a host. Only with it inhabiting Brother Vexis can I take the sample back for study."

"What's to study?" Asbjorn said, snorting, "The aliens we killed weren't much threat. Five of us killed hundreds of them."

"He's not interested in killing them, are you inquisitor?" Tauros asked and then he looked at Barachiel, "Brother Barachiel told us that you are known as a radical. You have some scheme to use the parasite don't you?"

"Of course I do." Levent replied, "They can reanimate the dead and display simple problem solving abilities. Like stowing away on an Imperial starship. Imaging what we could do with a thousand trained to fire las guns."

"An army of the dead?" Tauros said.

"A totally expendable army." Levent replied, "Imagine every warrior that falls in service of the Imperium being able to continue fighting after death and without the concept of dying they would never falter or-" but before he could continue Asbjorn struck, punching the inquisitor in the face and there was a 'crunch' as his nose caved in as he fell to the deck again.

"You would deny those warriors their place with the Allfather?" the Space Wolf bellowed.

"Asbjorn is correct." Barachiel added, sneering at Levent as he held his hands over his ruined nose, "What you speak of is an abomination."

"Come brothers." Tauros said, staring down at the inquisitor, "We must put an end to this. It shames me to say this but we must find and kill Brother Vexis again."

"You can't." Levent gasped.

"You are in no position to give orders inquisitor." Tauros replied.

"I'm not giving you an order, I'm just pointing out the obvious." Levent said and the marines standing over him looked at one another before he continued, "Vexis still wears his armour and though he may not have the ability to fire his weapons yet it will be only a matter of time before the parasite figures out how to operate them. He's already figured out how to open doors it would seem since only this one has been smashed. On the other hand you are unarmed and unarmoured. Attack him and you will all die."

"So you think that we will just allow him to wander this ship at random, killing any of the crew that get in his way? What if he happens across the bridge or engineering section? How will you sample reach the inquisition's laboratories if we are dead in space?" Tauros asked.

"No." Levent replied, "The lower decks of this ship are containment areas for dangerous xenos breeds. Lure him there and we can seal him in. Then when we reach our destination I can bring my people aboard to subdue him without harming the parasite. Let his death count for something."

"Get back to the bridge inquisitor." Tauros said, "Tell Collest to get her people out of the way." and he began to walk away.

"Are we really going to trap our brother like some animal for that little man?" Asbjorn asked when the marines were far enough away from Levent to be overheard.

"He has become an animal." Vincus commented, "Vexis is dead. Now there is only the parasite."

"A parasite we will kill." Tauros said, "Levent has forgotten that there is more to being Astartes than our weapons and our armour."

"Fine words won't penetrate ceramite brother sergeant." Asbjorn pointed out.

"No, but a well placed bolter shot will." Tauros replied.

"Yes, but we don't have our bolters do we?" Asbjorn asked rhetorically.

"Vexis does." Barachiel said, "The brother sergeant plans to take them. Don't you?"

"Precisely." Tauros replied with the hint of a smile, "When we find Vexis will take his weapons and use them against him. I have no intention of allowing Inquisitor Levent to use him as some test subject like a common servitor."

"And how do you suggest we find a single individual on a ship this size?" Vincus asked.

"That crewman was torn apart." Tauros answered, "Such an assault would leave the attacker covered in their victim's blood." then he looked at Asbjorn, "More than enough for a hunter to sniff out."

As it happened the parasite that infected Vexis had taken his body towards the lower levels where Levent had wanted him lured. But rather than heading for the containment area the parasite preferred to seek out the cooler areas near the water storage and treatment works. Here the conditions were similar to those in the underground nest that the marines had cleared, though it made little difference inside a suit of powered armour.

A scream alerted the trailing marines to the presence of their former comrade, evidently Collest had failed to warn all of the crew to withdraw to secure areas of the vessel.

"Quickly, before he can escape." Tauros exclaimed and the marines broke into a run, heading towards the source of the scream.

Powering ahead of the others, Asbjorn was the first to arrive on the scene. Not one, but two crewmen had

found themselves cornered by Vexis and the parasite controlling his corpse had launched straight into an attack. The first crewman had been killed without a sound, his head caved in when Vexis had slammed it face first into a bulkhead. The scream that the marines had heard was the reaction of the second to this before the parasite turned its attention to him, tearing open his ribcage and silencing him as well. As expected Vexis' weapons were still right where they had been when Tauros had seen his body laid out in the chapel. His sidearm and blade were still holstered on his belt, while his bolter hung loose on the sling wrapped around his torso. Evidently the parasite had yet to realise their significance.

"Xenos scum!" Asbjorn yelled as he charged into Vexis. Even without his own armour the Space Wolf still struck with enough force to knock his armoured opponent to the floor and the pair slid across the blood covered deck until they crashed into the bulkhead opposite, "I have him brothers!" Asbjorn shouted as his three comrades arrived. But before any of them could attempt to wrest a weapon from Vexis the deceased marine delivered a blow to Asbjorn's face that disorientated him just long enough for him to hurl the Space Wolf from him.

Vexis got to his feet just as Vincus was within arms reach and he struck again, lashing out and striking the Raven Guard's jaw. Blood and the fragments of several teeth flew across the passageway as Vincus fell. Tauros was next, bending forwards to tackle Vexis and grab him around his waist. Tauros had planned to try and push Vexis back into the bulkhead and pin him up against it, giving the others the chance to disarm him. But the parasite stood its ground and the combined weight of both Vexis and his armour was too much for Tauros to move more than two paces.

Vexis made to bring his fists down on Tauros' spine but Barachiel intervened first, grabbing hold of Vexis' wrists and gripping them firmly. Straining as hard as he could he then tried to lift Vexis arms up over his head.

"We have him brothers!" Barachiel called out, "Disarm him quickly."

But before either Asbjorn or Vincus could get to Vexis' weapons he head butted Barachiel. The impact of his helmeted head stunned Barachiel and he relaxed his grip, allowing Vexis to get his hands free. Hands that reached out for the Dark Angel's throat and dug deep. Barachiel staggered backwards, clutching at his throat and letting out a surprised gargle as blood poured from his mouth with each breath he tried to take. Vexis then kned Tauros in his stomach and pushed him away before turning to face Asbjorn and Vincus again. It looked as if Vexis was about to strike, but before the parasite could act the passageway was filled by the thunderclaps of a bolt weapon being fired. First came the sound of the launching propellant detonating as the trigger was pulled, then came the sound of the rounds' internal rocket motor igniting, followed by the explosions as the rounds all struck Vexis armour. To a normal human the sounds would have been indistinguishable from one another, all three merging into one almighty booming when Tauros pulled the trigger on the pistol he had been able to rip free of Vexis' holster when he was pushed back. Only the marines' heightened hearing allowed them to pick out the three different sounds. Upon hearing this Asbjorn and Vincus dived aside rather than remain in Tauros' line of fire.

But the power armour of the Adeptus Astartes offered what was amongst the finest protection of any personal armour in the galaxy and every last one of the exploding bolt rounds failed to penetrate, pitting the ceramite surface but leaving the reanimated marine within unharmed. When Tauros' attack did achieve however, was to divert the parasite's attention back towards him and Vexis turned to face the Ultramarine. As Vexis advanced Tauros fired again, the noise of the bolt pistol echoing around the passageway with each shot. Once more Tauros' aim was true, but yet again he watched as each round in turn detonated against Vexis' armoured chest plate and did nothing more than chip the aquila design sculpted into the armour. When Tauros realised that he had only one round left in the pistol he lifted his aim and fired it into Vexis' faceplate. The armour of the helmet may have been somewhat thinner than that of the chest plate, but it was shaped to deflect the energy of an attack away from the wearer's head and it did just that. The bolt round once again detonated harmlessly, doing nothing more than jerk Vexis' head back.

Unlike the Deathwatch marines surrounding it however, the parasite inhabiting Vexis did not know that Tauros was now effectively unarmed once more. All it knew was that its prey had just shown itself able to deliver a powerful blow against it. Unsure of how to deal with this, the parasite's instincts of fight or flight kicked in and it charged forwards, simply pushing Tauros out of its way as it made its escape.

Asbjorn began to give chase, but Tauros called him back.

"No!" he yelled, "We must wait and plan our next move more carefully." then he looked down at Barachiel. The Dark Angel lay still, a large pool of his own blood beside his head, "This alien has cost us the life of another brother already."

"He will escape us." Asbjorn exclaimed.

"No, he will not. We will follow him from a distance and see whether we can uncover anything about how this parasite reacts. Only when we are certain that we have the advantage will we strike." Tauros replied.

"This is a waste of our time." Asbjorn commented as the marines continued to follow Vexis through the lower levels of the ship, "He wanders randomly. We should strike now."

"Not yet brother." Tauros replied, "Remember that I am in command here. Besides, our former brother's movements are not so random."

"He's heading towards the containment section." Vincus added and Asbjorn scowled.

"You can't seriously be suggesting that we give that worthless radical what he wants are you?" he asked with contempt.

"We cannot allow the inquisitor to use our brother in his experiments." Vincus added.

"Of course we cannot." Tauros reassured the others, "But to ensure that specimens stored in the containment section can be loaded and unloaded without contaminating the rest of the vessel there is a docking port located there."

Asbjorn grinned.

"I see where you're going with this. We get Vexis to take a little walk outside eh?" he asked, but Tauros just smiled.

"So how do we ensure that Vexis finds his way into the docking port?" Vincus then asked.

"I'm surprised that isn't obvious to you." Asbjorn responded before Tauros could answer, "We're the bait."

"Correct." Tauros added, "We need to split up. We strike at Vexis individually, attack once and then withdraw. The next of us strikes before it can catch up with us. If I am correct, the parasite will give chase so long as it feels it is stronger than us."

"Which individually it is." Asbjorn commented. Then he sniffed and pushed the other two marines apart, "Now stand aside and let me show you how this is done."

Asbjorn broke into a run, roaring as he rushed down the corridor towards Vexis. The sound of his running alerted Vexis and the parasite turned to face him. Tauros and Vincus had ducked out of sight, so the parasite assumed that Asbjorn was alone and stood its ground, spreading its arms out in anticipation of grabbing hold of him. But the Space Wolf had expected this and at the last moment he dived and slid forwards across the deck, slipping underneath Vexis' outstretched arms and kicking one of his legs out from underneath him. Vexis struck the deck and the sound of the impact resonated in all directions. Asbjorn saw that the bolter still slung across Vexis' chest was within reach and he tried to grab it. But although the parasite had yet to determine the usefulness of the bolter it realised that the weapon as something its assailant wanted and so it reached out to stop Asbjorn just as he took hold of the bolter's grip.

The sound of bolter shots filled the passageway as Vexis' hand was wrapped around Asbjorn's and the trigger was pulled back. Fortunately for Asbjorn the weapon was aimed upwards and the entire burst went into the ceiling. Asbjorn flinched, averting his eyes as fragments of sharp, hot metal fell from above. But the parasite's reaction was far greater. Linking the sound of bolter fire with the attack Tauros had carried out earlier and also the Deathwatch's attack on the nest it elbowed Asbjorn in the face, knocking him away before it got its feet and ran.

"That is not sending him in the right direction." Tauros said as he saw Vexis running down the corridor away from him and Vincus.

"Never send a Space Wolf to do a Raven Guard's job." Vincus commented and Tauros smiled.

"You ought to be able to head Vexis off at the junction to the ventral vent access. Make sure he follows you." he said and Vincus just nodded before he turned and ran down the corridor.

The Raven Guard way of fighting was to strike from the shadows, infiltrating enemy positions and attacking where least expected or striking from ambush and then withdrawing before a counter attack could be organised. So for Vincus luring Vexis to the containment facility was just the way he liked things, he had trained and fought this way for decades.

The sound of heavy armoured footfalls told Vincus that his quarry was close by and as he rounded a corner he saw Vexis crossing the passageway ahead of him.

"Foul xenos!" he yelled, "I dare you to try and outwit me."

As expected Vexis turned. But what Vincus had not expected was for him to raise his bolter and open fire. Vincus was saved mainly by his enhanced reactions, diving out of the line of fire before the parasite inside Vexis could pull the bolter's trigger and the passageway was filled with the din of bolter shells firing and exploding against bulkheads. But more significant was the parasite's inexperience in operating the weapon. Knowing what it was intended for was a far cry from the training marines underwent in the use of their weapons and holding the bolter in one hand the parasite sprayed rounds at random, unable to keep the weapon stable while it fired. Another thing that the parasite had yet to learn was trigger discipline and with the bolter set to fully automatic the rattle of it firing was quickly cut off as the last of the rounds in its magazine was expended. Not knowing how to reload the bolter the parasite just looked at it for a few moments before letting it drop back to the end of its sling.

"I am still here xenos! Come and get me." Vincus shouted, peering around the corner to check on why the bolter had stopped firing. Then he started to run once more and the sound of heavy footfalls behind him told Vincus that the parasite was giving chase.

The parasite was not yet used to moving in powered armour and Vincus found that he could easily outpace

the alien and with this realisation he adjusted his own behaviour. Previously he had been alert for places he could conceal himself in, leaving Vexis to rush past him while another of the marines took over as being the lure. But now Vincus knew that he could lead the alien all the way to the containment section and he slowed down just enough that it saw him change direction.

"It is behind me!" he called out, knowing that Asbjorn and Tauros would hear him, "I can take it all the way to the docking port."

"I hear you brother!" Tauros shouted in response and despite the echoes created by the ship's bulkheads Vincus knew that the reply came from ahead, meaning that the Ultramarine was already positioned close to the containment section.

The entrance to the containment section was blocked by a heavy armoured door surrounded by warnings that it should remain sealed. Beside the door was a control panel featuring a numerical keypad. Tauros approached this and entered the twelve digit access code.

"Warning!" an automated voice announce, "Security seals released. Hatch opening. Unauthorised access is punishable by death." and then there was a rumbling as the door rolled back into the bulkhead beside it. There were footsteps from behind Tauros and he turned to see Asbjorn running towards him.

"So I got here before Vincus and the alien then?" he asked.

"Yes, fortunately." Tauros replied, "I will require your assistance to get Vexis into the docking port air lock." Asbjorn nodded.

"Just tell em what to do brother sergeant." he replied.

"First we get to the docking port and open the inner door." Tauros said and the pair set off, aware that Vincus could arrive with Vexis at any time.

The containment section consisted of numerous compartments each sealed with an armoured door. The environment inside each of these could be customised to enable samples to be kept alive long enough to reach an inquisitorial facility, where no doubt that life would end with the alien being dissected. But these compartments were of little interest to Tauros and Asbjorn, the only one they had a use for was the one directly opposite the air lock at the docking port.

"Quickly," Tauros said, "I will open the air lock while you disable the illumination in there."

Like the entrance to the containment section, access to the docking port required an authorisation code that Tauros entered while Asbjorn opened the door to and smashed the lumen panels in the cell opposite. The air lock door opened with a hiss and even before it was finished Tauros was already dashing into the darkened cell with Asbjorn.

"Now we wait for Vincus." he said softly.

As he had expected, Vincus found the way into the containment section wide open as he ran through the doorway and he ground to a halt, turning to look behind him.

"Here I am!" he shouted when all he saw was an empty passageway in front of him and moments later he saw Vexis appear from around the corner, "Come and get me!" Vincus yelled, waving his arms and backing away before he broke into a run.

The parasite pursued him, seeing the lone marine as an enemy it could defeat and it ran into the containment section without understanding the warning notices surrounding it. Vincus remained just far enough ahead that Vexis could keep following him all the way to the docking port.

When the air lock leading to the docking port came into view Vincus also saw the open and darkened cell opposite it and he knew instantly what Tauros was planning. No true member of the Adeptus Astartes would ever blunder into so obvious a trap, but the parasite that now controlled Vexis' body lacked even the most basic of a marine's skills and all it focused on was Vincus as he continued to run, coming to a halt and whirling around to face Vexis when he was past the air lock.

"Now!" he shouted as Vexis drew level with the air lock and Asbjorn and Tauros burst from their place. The combined force of both marines striking Vexis simultaneously was enough to push him sideways into the air lock and before the parasite could determine what had happened Tauros' hand came down on the control panel, closing the inner door.

There was a viewport set into the inner door and the three Deathwatch marines peered through at their former comrade. The parasite inhabiting Vexis looked around the air lock it was trapped in, searching for an exit. Through the viewport it saw the three marines looking back in at it and it charged towards them, hammering on the door in an effort to reach them. Meanwhile Tauros moved his hand towards the emergency lever that would vent the air lock and smashed the transparent cover. But when he had the lever in his grasp he paused.

"Go and fetch the inquisitor." he told Vincus, "He needs to see this."

"You have it?" Levent exclaimed when Vincus returned with the inquisitor. The damage to Levent's nose had been repaired by one of the ship's medical staff and now a pale blue polymer compound covered it to hold it

in shape.

"In there inquisitor." Tauros replied, looking towards the air lock and Levent walked up to the viewport.

"Incredible." he said as he looked into the airlock. Inside the parasite had determined that it could not escape and for now at least was just waiting to see what would happen next, standing close to the exterior door and now staring back at Levent.

"Incredibly convenient." Tauros commented.

"What was that sergeant?" Levent asked.

"I was just noting how convenient all this was." Tauros answered.

"I'm not sure I understand sergeant."

"Oh I doubt that inquisitor. But let me explain." Tauros began, "Somehow Brother Vexis' armour was penetrated by aliens fighting with crude hand to hand weaponry. Furthermore the damage to his armour just so happened to allow an alien parasite to enter it at just the location it needed to in order to kill him before he could summon help. Do you know what I think really happened inquisitor? I think that someone with detailed knowledge of Astartes battle plate approached Brother Vexis and that someone had to be someone that he trusted or he would have opened fire on them before they could get close enough to strike, infecting him with the parasite. As well as preventing Vexis from alerting the rest of us about what was happening, the parasite had to injected where it would kill him quickly to prevent his own immune system from killing it first."

Levent scowled at Tauros.

"Now listen to me sergeant-" he began, but before he could continue Tauros grabbed him by the throat again.

"No, you listen to me inquisitor. The Deathwatch does not exist for you to use in your unauthorised experiments. Now since this has already cost me the lives of two of my squad I think it only reasonable that you get a closer look at your prize and then you can tell me whether it was worth it." and Tauros opened the inner door to the air lock and shoved Levent inside before closing the door and sealing him in with Vexis.

"No!" Levent screamed, slamming his fists against the door and glaring out through the viewport, "I am an inquisitor of the Ordos Xenos and I command you to release me."

The parasite inside Vexis looked at the inquisitor, considering why he had been forced into the air lock.

Coming to the conclusion that Levent was not the host to another of its kind, the parasite began to advance.

"Let me out!" Levent yelled as he watched Vexis start to move closer, "In the emperor's name, I command you to open the door." and it was then that Tauros pulled the emergency release lever.

Inside the air lock Levent screamed in the moments that a klaxon sounded before the outer door opened and there was a rush of air that blew both Vexis and the inquisitor into space.

"You know," Asbjorn said as he watched through the viewport, "I'd have thought a man like Levent would have known to be more specific about which door he wanted opening."

Two figures stepped into an elevator and waited for the door to close behind them.

"You've heard?" the first asked.

"Of course." the second replied, "I tried to warn Levent that using the Deathwatch was a mistake, but he just wouldn't listen."

"Unfortunate what happened to him though."

"Unfortunate yes, but also very predictable. But at least we know that the parasite does what we want it to.

Next time we'll be better prepared."

"Yes, much better prepared."