



CATACHAN ONE NINE MARK FOUR MARK TWO

# BLOOD SPORT

BY STEPHEN J DUTTON



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## **5.2: BLOOD SPORT**

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

The presence of the Eldar brings an inquisitor of the Ordo Xenos to the colony world of THX-1138. The inquisitor brings with him an elite force of Deathwatch space marines to hunt down the source of the Eldar incursion and also an offer for Lieutenant Wolf...

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# 1.

As deployments in the Imperial Guard went, the posting of the Catachan VII Division to the newly settled world of THX-1138 was proving to be an easy one. The division had been deployed to the planets following a series of unexplained disappearances among settlers who had chosen to leave the more established settlements and head into the deep jungles. Given that there had been no signs of approaching starships the assumption had been that the initial explorer surveys had been wrong when they reported no significant threat to human life from the native lifeforms and that the planet could in fact be a deathworld where only the hardiest of humans could survive and prosper. The most notorious deathworld in the galaxy was the jungle planet of Catachan, where half the population died before reaching adulthood and the resulting society was regarded as one of the toughest in existence. Therefore, it had been only natural for a division of Catachan troops to be sent to THX-1138 to investigate. Their orders had been simple, discover what had happened to the missing settlers, determine whether the planet was indeed a deathworld and provide support to the settlers in adapting to such an environment.

Or at least that had been the theory.

A platoon of Catachans had been sent to one of the settlements with which contact had been lost and they had discovered that there was indeed an alien presence on THX-1138. The enigmatic Eldar had abducted the settlers for some unknown reason and spirited them away. Now the focus of the Catachans' mission was to locate the Eldars' base of operations and if possible rescue their human captives. With this in mind small groups of Catachans were being dropped into the jungle where they would patrol for a few days at a time to search for any signs of Eldar activity. Roving groups of Imperial Navy aircraft stood ready to respond to any Eldar found in this manner as well as increasing the area that could be searched by monitoring the jungle from the air. So far however, the Eldar had remained elusive and there had been only a handful of minor skirmishes during which the Eldar had fled deeper into the jungle rather than standing and fighting with the Catachan troops who were far better suited to jungle warfare. Overall this meant that the Catachans were deployed to an environment that they found very easy to operate in while their enemy was doing everything it could to avoid engaging them.

The platoon that had discovered the alien presence on THX-1138, the Second Platoon of the XIX Regiment's Fourth Company under Lieutenant Emilia Wolf had not been deployed back into the field since returning to their base and Wolf and her troops were enjoying the break from active duty. Wolf was not a native of Catachan herself, instead having been assigned to the regiment when she had become separated from her own. Catachans were notoriously suspicious of those they called outsiders and even now after several campaigns Wolf was still not regarded as one of them. This was not to say that they would not follow her orders, but Wolf had to be careful about suggesting that she knew jungle warfare better than they did unless she wanted to face the often unpleasant consequences. However, her relations with the troops under her command had progressed to the point where in off duty hours the Catachans of Second Platoon would allow her to join with them in whatever they were doing and on this occasion they had specifically sought her out. About a dozen members of her platoon were arrayed either side of her all of them hunched over and ready to move at a moments notice. Meanwhile facing them was a matching number of Catachans from Fourth Company's reserve platoon, made up of non-combat staff and included in this line up was their commanding officer Lieutenant Anna Selena. Generally speaking Catachans were physically tall, towering over Wolf who stood at barely one and a half metres. But Selena, also known behind her back as 'Short-Arse Selena' or occasionally 'Anna Asswipe' thanks to her role in the supply of toilet paper to the company was around the same size as Wolf. Therefore, in a contest that could rely on the physical stature of its participants having one smaller player on each team made things more even.

"Think you've got what it takes outsider?" Selena said, smirking at Wolf, "I grew up playing this. How many games have you played?"

"What were you? The ball?" Wolf responded, "Remember we're playing for forfeits here and when my team's finished with yours you're going to find out what it's like being stuck in that straitjacket you tricked me into requisitioning." but Selena still smiled.

"You know I was just going to have you do your ogryn squad's laundry but now I'm thinking how good you'll look all trussed up and hanging upside down from the flagpole for a day." she said and Wolf scowled at her.

"Can we just get on with this?" one of Wolf's team asked, a sergeant called Molla and Wolf nodded.

"Throw the ball." she said and Third Platoon's Lieutenant Lore, who stood tall even for a Catachan and had been invited to act as a neutral referee threw the ball he held up into the air.

"Play!" he yelled as he jumped back and both Wolf and Selena jumped up to try and grab it. However, at the moment the ball left Lore's hand both teams rushed forwards and the small statured officers both found themselves knocked aside, landing side by side on the ground while their teams rushed around them,

apparently ignoring their presence. Lifting her mud covered face up from the ground Wolf glared at Selena. "This isn't over." she said.

Just then the air was filled with the sound of engines as a pair of aircraft flew low over the XIX Regiment's camp and Wolf lifted her head just enough to be able to make out their shape. The aircraft had a similar twin tailed configuration to a standard Imperial Navy Valkyrie but their layout was different with a large transport hold being positioned beneath the aircraft rather than behind the cockpit while the hull itself had a more ornate appearance than a basic troop carrier. The aircraft soon passed overhead before they descended as if coming in to land.

The Catachans ignored this as they continued with their game until shortly after someone called out from the direction of the landing area.

"Marines!"

The players all ground to an abrupt halt and looked around before there was another shout.

"Marines!" and at that point the game was forgotten and the ball dropped as the Catachans started to run in the direction that the shout had come from.

"On your feet lieutenant." Molla said as he ran past Wolf and in the process reached down to drag her back to her feet and still coated in mud Wolf stumbled along with the Catachans as they rushed toward the landing area. The Catachans reached the area first, forcing Wolf to squeeze between them to get to the front and stood beside Molla to see what was going on and when she did so she was not disappointed.

Every member of the Imperial Guard knew about the Adeptus Astartes, more commonly known as the space marines. Recruited in adolescence from a relative handful of worlds in the Imperium of man, recruits to the Astartes were put through a process of biological and psychological manipulation that not all survived. But those that did emerged as something much more than human. Few in number, it was said that there was only one space marine for every planet in the Imperium and few guardsmen would ever encounter one. But right now there was an entire squad of the heavily armoured troops lining up as they marched out of one of the landed transports.

Wolf shuddered at the sight of this and instinctively moved a hand to where she had suffered broken ribs on a previous deployment. Then the VII Division had faced mankind's greatest enemy, traitor marines who had turned their back on the Emperor many years earlier and Wolf had only just escaped with her life when she faced their leader in personal combat. Like those enemies of mankind the marines now standing in front of Wolf were clad in black powered armour, but they lacked the strange spikes and ridges that the traitor marines had added. However, one area of their armour that these marines had customised was one of the thick shoulder pads. The left shoulder of each marine was a gunmetal colour and ornately carved. However, each of them had a right shoulder that was patterned differently in a variety of colours and each with a unique symbol marked on it. Most of the marines carried bolters that were as oversized when compared to an Imperial Guard las gun as the marines themselves were to ordinary human beings but one of them carried a flamer while a second had a bulky heavy bolter slung across his chest while the ammunition feed led to a large pack connected to his armour's back mounted power plant.

"Who are they?" Wolf said and Molla shrugged.

"Beats me." he replied, "But they didn't come here alone. Colonel Shryke and his staff met the transport themselves and then escorted one of the marines and a bunch of other people who walked out of it off somewhere. My guess is the command centre."

"Do you think there are more of them?" Wolf asked, "One squad of marines doesn't seem like much to wage war with. Even given what I've heard about them, there would have to be more." and Molla snorted.

"Who knows. Maybe they aren't here to help us."

"But why else would they come here?" Wolf replied. But before Molla could answer the marine that had been marching up and down the line of other marines, the one that appeared to be their squad leader and had a grey shoulder pad marked with the outline of a canine's head turned his attention to the growing crowd of Catachans and stared at her.

"You!" he bellowed and he pointed straight at Wolf.

"Me?" Wolf said, looking around to see whether there was anyone else nearby the marine could be meaning.

"You are the Wolf." the marine said, striding towards Wolf and staring at her continuously.

"Looks like he does mean you lieutenant." Molla whispered.

"But what did I do?"

"You are shorter than I expected." the marine sergeant said as he came to a halt right in front of Wolf, towering over her as he bent down to stare at her face to face.

"Err, yeah. I get that a lot." she said nervously.

"Really?" Molla commented, "A marine addressed you directly and that's all you have to say?"

"What can I do for you?" Wolf asked and the marine straightened up before removing his helmet to reveal a head full of blonde hair and pale blue eyes along with four metal studs set into his forehead just above his left eye. The he smiled and as he did so he revealed a pair of massive fangs where his upper canine teeth had once been.

"I told the others than anyone who carries the name Wolf would have to be a great warrior." he said, "In Russ's name."

"Be careful Sergeant Onund." a voice then called out from the other side of the landing area and the marine looked around to its source, "You are not a Space Wolf now. You are Deathwatch."

"And I remember where I came from little man." Onund replied, "I know my oath and I keep it. Even the son of the Lion over there will tell you that." and the sergeant nodded towards another of the marines who bore a dark green shoulder pad marked with a winged dagger, "Assuming he decides to speak today of course."

"The inquisitor wants to see Lieutenant Wolf and her squad leaders." the new arrival said, ignoring Onund's response, "She is to come with me now."

Wolf felt a shudder down her spine when she heard the word 'inquisitor'. The Imperial Guard was rife with rumours about a shadowy organisation that supposedly spanned the Imperium seeking out traitors and heretics even in the highest of places but there was little concrete information available.

"What about Sergeant Molla?" Wolf asked, looking at Molla and the man looked at him as well.

"Send him for your platoon's other squad leaders." he said. Then he turned around and started to walk away before pausing and glancing over his shoulder, "Perhaps not your ogryn though sergeant. I doubt he'll be able to contribute anything to this."

"Where are we going?" Wolf asked and the man smiled.

"To see your other guest of course lieutenant. The one you invited here."

## 2.

When Second Platoon had encountered the Eldar deep in the jungle they had successfully captured the aliens' leader and she had been brought back to the XIX Regiment's base camp for interrogation. Stripped and suspended from the ceiling of a heavily guarded tent the Eldar had been subjected to electrocution, burning as well as chemically induced pain and good old fashioned beatings designed to wear down her resistance. But although the Eldar's body was now covered in the evidence of these actions as far as Wolf knew so far none of this had resulted in any success and the translation servitor that stood at the rear of the tent had translated nothing but insults in response to the Catachans' questions. Now though the alien's behaviour seemed to have changed.

As well as Wolf and the stranger who had brought her here, the tent contained the XIX Regiment's commanding officer Colonel Shryke, two of his immediate subordinates, Regimental Commissar Garratt and half a dozen individuals that Wolf knew in an instant were not Catachans. One of these was a grey haired man with a scar running down his face with a bolt pistol holstered at his waist who stood between the colonel and the commissar and Wolf guessed that he was the person that had been referred to as 'the inquisitor.' In addition to this man were two armoured space marines, one of whom had armour that featured what reminded Wolf of the psychic hoods worn by some of the Imperial Guard's sanctioned psykers. Finally there were three other more mundane humans, two men and a woman, all of whom wore carapace armour plates over military style clothing that was not of a Catachan pattern. On her way into the tent Wolf had seen two more such soldiers standing outside with the Catachan sentries.

When Wolf entered the tent this trio was clustered around the Eldar prisoner who was now screaming something in her language as they fixed a close fitting helmet around her head that covered her eyes, ears and nose completely and Wolf also noticed that the Eldar's hands had been encased in spherical containers. "Ah lieutenant." Shryke said, "I'm glad you're here. Inquisitor Derren was just explaining why our interrogation methods have met with so little success."

"The Dark Eldar thrive on sensation." the man Shryke had just called Inquisitor Derren said, still looking at the Eldar dangling from the ceiling, "Any sensation will do, even pain. So when your people were attempting to use pain and discomfort as a means of soliciting information they were in fact only strengthening this thing's resolve. The equipment I have brought will remedy that by placing the prisoner in a state of sensory deprivation. In this state the prisoner's mental defences will crumble and we may be able to get some useful information out of it."

"Will we have the results in time for your mission?" Commissar Garratt asked.

"Unlikely." Derren replied, "But Adept Korret will remain here to guide the colonel's people through suitable methods of interrogation. Any information that comes to light can then be voxed to us in the field."

"Excuse me for asking," Wolf said, "but why am I here?" and Derren smiled.

"You are here Lieutenant Emilia Wolf to serve his Imperial majesty the Emperor of Mankind." one of the marines, the one without the psychic hood responded.

"I'm sorry lieutenant." Derren added, walking right up to Wolf, "But Captain Einhart takes his duty quite seriously. You are here because when I reviewed the reports on your last mission I decided to look deeper and what I found impressed me. An officer from a non-combat unit transferred to command a front line infantry platoon in a Catachan regiment? Given the reputation of Catachan units I would not have been surprised if you ended up dead before even coming into contact with the enemy and yet you not only survived, you prospered." then he took hold of her arm where it had been tattooed with a skull, "They marked you as a hero and as I understand it when your superior was presumed to be dead they almost selected you to lead your entire company. That requires a certain degree of resourcefulness lieutenant and I have need of people with such resourcefulness. I am here to deal with your little Dark Eldar problem and your platoon is going to help me. That's why I sent word that you were to be kept here rather than being sent out into the jungle again, I just couldn't risk anything happening to you before I got here."

Wolf looked at the two marines.

"You have them." she said, "What do you need my platoon for?"

"Your troops are naturally skilled in jungle warfare. Plus they are familiar with the area where the Dark Eldar were first encountered. The more first hand information I can get on the events of your last mission the easier this one is likely to be."

It was then that the tent opened and one of the Inquisitorial stormtroopers on duty stepped in.

"The lieutenant's squad leaders have arrived my lord." he said.

"Show them in Tello." Derren replied and the stormtrooper stepped aside to allow five Catachans to enter.

As well as Molla the group was made up of Platoon Sergeant Vance, Sergeant Grey of Second Squad and Sergeant Quinn of Second Platoon's veteran squad. The final member of the group was Corporal Mayer who

commanded the platoon's mortar squad and was known informally as 'Bomber'.

"Colonel." Vance said, nodding at the regimental commander.

"Sergeant." Shryke responded.

"I'm guessing we're about to be deployed with the marines." Grey added.

"Correct sergeant." Derren replied before Wolf could speak, "We are going to hunt for where the Dark Eldar are coming from and I want Second Platoon there with me."

"Dark Eldar?" Vance commented and he looked at the pale skinned prisoner.

"The term is used to differentiate this particular strain of the xenos Eldar species from the ones found aboard their craftworlds and the outcasts that inhabit isolated worlds." Korret answered.

"I didn't know there was more than one kind of them." Wolf said.

"You don't need to know lieutenant." Commissar Garratt said sternly.

"Abhor the alien." Einhart added without a hint of emotion.

"You won't get any argument from me." Quinn muttered, "Tau, Orks, Eldar, Necrons. They'll all as bad as each other."

"Quite." Derren said. Then he looked at Wolf again, "Lieutenant, I want your platoon ready to move out at first light tomorrow. We'll deploy to the forward base by air and then proceed on foot into the jungle in search of our target."

"What is their target exactly inquisitor?" Shryke asked, "You said something about where the Eldar are coming from. Do they have a base or a ship out there? Because our troops and the navy have been searching for more than a week now and-"

"It is neither colonel." Derren interrupted, "The Eldar are unable to use warp travel in the same way as we are."

"They are degenerate." Einhart added but Derren ignored him and continued with his explanation.

"Much of their interstellar travel is undertaken using an ancient network of conduits through the warp instead. These permit interstellar travel without the need for a starship, though some of the larger conduits are big enough to allow even our largest battleships to travel along them. This network is known to the inquisition as the webway and there are entry gates to it scattered across the galaxy. Since no unidentified craft have been observed by even the best of our auspexes it is my believe that THX-1138 is home to at least one such gate and the Dark Eldar have been using it as a means of launching their raids."

"Do we know what they want?" Wolf said, "Is this a prelude to an all out invasion?"

"No, that is not the Dark Eldar way lieutenant." Derren answered and he looked at the prisoner as he spoke, "If our settlers were not here then it is doubtful that the Dark Eldar would be either. They are here for resources, one in particular."

"They're taking slaves." Mayer said, "That's why all those settlers just vanished. They aren't dead."

"Then we need to rescue them." Wolf said.

"Impossible I'm afraid lieutenant." Derren replied, "Those people will have been taken through the webway to the Dark Eldar city of Commorragh by now and there is nothing we can do to get them back from there."

"A single city?" Shryke commented, "The Seventh Division can handle a single city. We've got three infantry regiments plus one of armour and the general's Baneblade."

"The term city is perhaps the wrong one to use." Korret said, "A better analogy would be to compare Commorragh to a small hive world. Hundreds of millions of Dark Eldar crammed in together in nightmarish conditions. A single division would be cut to pieces and the survivors taken for whatever use the Dark Eldar could put them to."

"So we find this webway gate. What then?" Vance said.

"I'm guessing we blow the fething thing to pieces." Grey responded.

"Correct sergeant." Derren replied, "If possible we will mark its position and the next navy vessel to come around will be able to destroy it from space with a lance strike. Alternatively we will attempt to get close enough to destroy it ourselves using melta bombs."

"The Eldar were able to jam our vox transmissions." Wolf pointed out, remembering how her platoon had been cut off while they waited for the XIX Regiment to notice that they had failed to make contact and sent a relief force in Valkyries.

"That will not be an issue lieutenant." Derren replied, "If we cannot establish vox contact with the Navy then Codicier Aman will send a psychic beacon to the Navy's astropaths." and he looked briefly at the marine psyker standing close beside him.

"Sounds straight forwards enough." Molla said, turning his head in the direction of Wolf, "We've had tougher ops."

"Do not underestimate the risks involved sergeant." Korret said, "The Dark Eldar are known for their devious ways. Tracking them will not be easy." but the leaders of Second Platoon just smiled as they looked at one another, "I do not understand. Did I say something amusing?" Korret added when he saw this.

"Sort of." Wolf replied, "The Dark Eldar may be devious but we've got something they don't."

"And what is that exactly lieutenant?" Korret asked.

"We've got Rull." Grey replied.

The Valkyrie transports that carried Second Platoon into the jungle flew with their side hatches open while gunners manned the heavy bolters mounted there, searching the jungle for any signs of Eldar activity and ready to unleash a storm of mass reactive explosive rounds. The upside to this as far as Wolf was concerned was that it gave her a better view of the jungle than just the vision slits set into the hatches made possible and she spent most of the flight looking over the shoulder of one of the gunners while her command section and Mayer's mortar squad sat in the seating provided. From here it was also possible to see the other Valkyries of the flight as well as the pair of Corvus Blackstars carrying Inquisitor Derren and his squads of stormtroopers and marines.

"Look!" she called out at one point, "It's General Fortnam's company." and she pointed out of one of the hatches to where an enormous super heavy armoured vehicle was driving through the jungle at the head of a convoy of other armoured fighting vehicles, flattening undergrowth and trees alike beneath its three hundred and sixteen tonne hull. Baneblades were some of the most powerful armoured vehicles available to the Imperial Guard but they were as rare as they were powerful and the Catachan VII Division could lay claim to just one of the machines. Used as the personal headquarters for General Fortnam this tank was now leading the vehicles of the Catachan XIV Armoured Regiment towards the same settlement that Second Platoon was heading towards. There were no real roads leading this far into the jungle so the Baneblade was being used to create one for the other vehicles to follow while behind them a force of Adeptus Mechanicus tech priests and servitors were clearing debris and carrying out the work necessary to lay down a proper highway.

"Looks like we'll be there before the general then." Vance said as he looked for himself and checked their location on his dataslate. This showed that the settlement they were heading for was still just over two hundred kilometres ahead. Just a few minutes travel time for aircraft like Valkyries and Corvus Blackstars but many hours for a Baneblade.

"Do you think Colonel Hatch will be pleased to see us?" Wolf asked. Colonel Bess Hatch commanded the Catachan XXV Regiment that had been deployed to the settlement where Second Platoon had come under attack by the Dark Eldar and her troops had been aggressively patrolling the jungle surrounding it since.

"You've met Colonel Hatch, right?" Vance replied and Wolf nodded.

"Yes, once." she answered.

"And did she seem any different to the rest of us Catachans?"

"Not really."

"So how do you think she'll react to us arriving?" Vance said.

"She'll probably be relieved that she doesn't need to worry about this inquisitor taking any of her men into the jungle." Wolf said.

"Exactly. Inquisitor Derren is an outsider." Vance said.

"Worse than that." Guardswoman Torrent, Second Platoons medicae called out, "He's an outsider with authority. Outsiders giving orders to Catachans should always watch their backs out in the jungle." and she grinned. Torrent had been with Second Platoon for less time than Wolf had been and she was one of the non-Catachan officer's harshest critics within it. However, rather than becoming angry she looked back at the medicae and smiled.

"I seem to remember we were in the jungle when I got the drop on you." she replied, "I think I can look after myself in that respect." and several of the other Catachan troops present laughed while Torrent frowned and Wolf went back to staring out of the hatchway.



### 3.

As the flight of aircraft came in to land Wolf saw that the settlement had expanded considerably since Second Platoon had made their camp here. Now the ring of prefabricated structures intended to hold just over a hundred settlers was just the core of the Catachan XXV Regiment's camp, with tents surrounding it to house the just over two thousand troops that made up the regiment. Of course this meant that a much larger area of the jungle had had to be cleared and the wood from the felled trees had been used in the construction of numerous strong points and barriers around the perimeter of the camp that now held tarantula automated sentry weapons or heavy weapon teams capable of delivering massive amount of firepower into the jungle in all directions.

The flight of aircraft came in to land in the centre of the original ring of structures and as Second Platoon and the inquisitor's forces disembarked Colonel Hatch and several of her staff approached.

"Ah Colonel Hatch." Derren said when he saw her, "I take it you have been apprised of my purpose here?"

"Yes I have." Hatch answered and then she glanced at Wolf, "Her man Rull handed me your orders when he arrived last night before heading off to start looking for tracks to follow."

"Very good then. Might we speak in your command post colonel? I'd like to know what progress has already been made. Lieutenant Wolf, Captain Einhart and Codicier Aman will join us." Derren asked.

"This way." Hatch replied and she led the unit's officers to the same structure that Wolf had used as her command post when Second Platoon had camped here. Now though it was occupied by more guardsmen than than Wolf had under her command and almost every open doorway that the group walked past seemed to be to a room that had been put to some purpose. Then when the group reached the room serving as Colonel hatch's personal command post they found it dominated by maps and data screens showing the jungle for dozens of kilometres around the settlement, each one divided up into sections and marked according to how recently it had been patrolled and any Dark Eldar presence that had been come across.

"As you can see the xenos are keeping out of sight as best they can." Hatch said, "The most promising sighting we've had was of some skimmers in this area here. But by the time the Navy got themselves in a position to intercept they were already gone."

"Have there been any further disappearances among the locals?" Derren asked.

"What locals?" Hatch responded, "This settlement was the only one for a hundred and fifty kilometres before those damned Eldar took the inhabitants. Now there's no-one around for them to attack other than us. Frankly I'm surprised they're still here."

"They are probably probing your defences colonel." Derren told her, "They may be keeping out of sight for now but mark my words they'll be back stronger than before now that they know there's sport to be had."

"They already are." Aman said unexpectedly, "We are not alone." and beside him Captain Einhart drew his sword, the blade humming with power as soon as it cleared the sheath.

"Vance, have the platoon stand to. There are enemy infiltrators within the perimeter." Wolf said, activating her microbead headset. Meanwhile around her Derren, Hatch and the other Imperial Guard personnel in the command centre were all readying weapons.

"Copy that lieutenant. Any idea of numbers?" Vance responded and Wolf looked at the marine psyker.

"Do you know how many there are?" she asked.

"We've got every approach covered by sentries and auspexes." Hatch said, "How in the Emperor's name did the Eldar get through?"

"These xenos are not normal, even for Eldar." Aman said as he drew his own sword and Wolf felt a shiver go down her spine as he gripped the strangely carved weapon tightly, "Follow me." and he walked out of the room.

Aman and Einhart walked side by side, filling the hallway while Derren, Wolf, Hatch and a squad of Hatch's troops followed behind them.

"So where are they?" Hatch whispered before there were sudden screams form one of the rooms up ahead and the two marines broke into a run, moving far faster than Wolf felt something as big and heavy as them ought to be able to do.

The bloodied corpse of a guardsman came flying out of a doorway unexpectedly and Einhart batted it aside before firing several rounds from his bolt pistol through the doorway and Wolf flinched at the loud report followed by the detonation of the rounds.

"Purge the alien!" he yelled as he charged into the room.

Wolf expected Aman to follow his commanding officer into the room but instead he suddenly spun around on the spot, swinging his sword into what wolf thought was empty air. But at the last moment a strange figure seemed to appear stepping out of the shadow cast by the librarian on the wall behind him and the blade crackled with power as it cleaved the Eldar in two at the waist.

"Throne!" Hatch exclaimed as the Eldar let out a screech before the two parts of its body seemed to evaporate and at that moment there was the sound of gunfire from outside. But this gunfire was not the powerful yet distant sound of the heavy weapons protecting the base's perimeter, instead it was the sharper sound of small arms fire coming from within the area of the original settlement.

"Sounds like there are more of them." Derren said.

"But what are they?" Hatch asked.

"Mandrake colonel." the inquisitor replied, "Specialist infiltrators used by the Dark Eldar. They appear to have some ability to move through the warp. Your men will have to watch their backs." then he looked at Wolf, "Lieutenant, perhaps you should get back to your platoon." he said and Wolf nodded before hurrying out of the building back to the landing area where Second Platoon had formed a circle with her command section, Sergeant Khor's ogryns and Mayer's mortar team in the centre. Meanwhile the squad of marines had split up and was moving around the edge of the landing zone and checking every potential hiding place for signs of Eldar infiltrators.

"Lieutenant," Vance said, "do you know what's going on? We've heard screams and firing after your warning but we've not seen any signs of the Eldar themselves."

"They're some sort of specialist infiltrator unit." Wolf replied, "Inquisitor Derren says that they can move through the warp so we can't afford to leave any avenue of approach uncovered. I saw one materialise out of thin air behind that marine psyker."

"Is he dead?" Vance asked, concerned at the thought of one of humanity's greatest warriors being so vulnerable to a surprise attack.

"No thank the Emperor." Wolf answered, "He seemed to be able to sense the alien before it appeared and he cut it in two without a second thought."

"Well that's one less at least." Vance said.

"More than that I'd say. I think Captain Einhart took out more of them." Wolf replied. Then she took her magnoculars from her belt and started to search the area for more of the strange alien creatures. Having witnessed one materialise from Aman's shadow she focused her search on areas of shadow between the settlement's structures and beneath the landed aircraft, "I don't see a thing." she commented.

"The shooting's stopped as well." Molla added.

"Lieutenant I've got Colonel Hatch for you." the command sections vox operator said and he held out the handset to the vox set he carried on his back.

"Lieutenant Wolf here colonel." Wolf said.

"Wolf do you have the enemy in sight?" Hatch asked.

"No colonel, wherever they are they aren't here." Wolf replied.

"It looks like they aren't anywhere any more lieutenant. We're still collecting reports but it looks like they hit several points inside our perimeter at the same time and withdrew after inflicting some light casualties. I don't have an exact count yet and there are still some people unaccounted for. It looks like it could have been a probing attack to test our reactions before hitting us with something bigger. Are your people ready to move out?"

Wolf looked around.

"Can we go?" she asked Vance and he nodded.

"Any time that inquisitor and his people are ready." he said.

"We can go as soon as Inquisitor Derren gives the order colonel." Wolf told Hatch.

"Very good. He's on his way down with those two marines now. You're to leave as soon as they reach you. If the Eldar are planning something then we'll be ready for them but you need to be out of here before they arrive."

In the space of just a few minutes the guardsman had lost most of his fingers and both of his eyes. Added to that the toxins coursing through his veins were burning him from the inside out and he screamed uncontrollably. The guardsman had been captured during the mandrakes' raid on the Catachan camp and brought back to the Dark Eldar camp to answer questions about the camp's defences. Unfortunately the means used to compel the guardsman to answer the questions put to him had merely served to prevent him from answering at all.

"Such agony is delicious." a Dark Eldar clad in ornately carved armour said as he looked down at the guardsman writhing in pain on the ground, "But it hasn't got me the answers to my questions about the defences that the beasts have in place. This Mon'keigh screams so much it cannot speak even its own crude words."

"Do not worry my lord archon." another alien replied. Unlike the other Dark Eldar gathered around their leader this one wore no armour at all, instead being clad in robes made from the skin of vanquished enemies and here and there were recognisable features such as a face with its orifices stitched shut or a finger left dangling, "The mandrakes reported the presence of the Mon-keigh's elite troops, their so-called space marines. We know how they make war and they will not stay hidden behind their barricades for long." he

added.

"Ah, so they will come to us. But I know of these marines, I have faced them before. Do you think you can break one haemonculus?"

"I can break any mortal creature my lord archon."

"Good. Because whereas the Mon'Keigh think that bringing their warriors here will drive us from this world I intend to make the most of it. Their best warriors will make excellent slaves to face the wyches in the arenas while I will feast on the souls of the rest for a long time to come."

While the members of Second Platoon moved through the jungle in their squads the marines of the Deathwatch spread themselves out so that they could provide as much cover as possible. Despite being clad in power armour the marines were surprisingly mobile and relatively stealthy in the jungle terrain, making little more noise than Wolf did as she moved and far less than the massive abhuman ogryns did as they crashed through the undergrowth. Most of the marines wore their full armour but Sergeant Onund had his helmet dangling from his side and every so often he appeared as if he was trying to smell the air. Seeing this Wolf wondered how even with an enhanced sense of smell he would be able to pick out any sort of scent while there were seven ogryns nearby whose hygiene was notoriously bad.

"Are your men trained specifically for jungle warfare captain?" Vance asked, also having noticed their ability to move without creating enough noise to alert every Eldar for a kilometre around that they were there.

"The Astartes are trained to operate in all theatres of war." Einhart replied, offering no further explanation and Vance looked at Wolf and smiled.

"Not the greatest conversationalists are they?" he said.

"You'll have to excuse Captain Einhart." Derren commented, "The Black Templars are among the most devout of the Adeptus Astartes and they are not known for their friendly demeanour."

"Black Templars?" Wolf commented, "That's the name of a marine chapter isn't it? But I thought that these marines were from the Deathwatch."

"That adept we left back at base mentioned something about Onund being a Space Wolf as well." Vance added and Derren smiled.

"The Deathwatch is a special case." he said, "Unlike ordinary chapters of the Adeptus Astartes, in as much as any space marines can be called 'ordinary', the Deathwatch do not recruit their own troops. Instead each chapter offers up some of its finest warriors to serve with it for a time before they return to their own chapters. During their time of service they wear the black armour of the Deathwatch except for one shoulder that retains their original chapter heraldry."

"Ah, so that explains the different colours and patterns. I wasn't sure if it was just personalisation." Wolf said, "So all of your troops are from different chapters then?"

"We are all Deathwatch." Einhart replied before Derren could answer.

"Marines cease to be part of their own chapter when they are serving with the Deathwatch." Derren explained, "A useful tradition when you consider the different ways of fighting each chapter has. Every member of the Deathwatch must be able to serve with any other regardless of rivalries or differing doctrines. For example, the Black Templars have no librarians," and he glanced at Aman while in turn the psyker glanced in Captain Einhart's direction, "while the Space Wolves and Dark Angels are bitter rivals and ordinarily every time they meet they each select champions to duel one another." then he paused for a moment before changing the subject, "So tell me about this place your men are leading us to." he said.

"It's just some little outpost in the jungle, little more than a hut in a clearing." Wolf explained, "The tech priest that Sergeant Quinn's squad escorted out here identified the generator as a basic pattern but wasn't able to determine what the purpose of it was before she was attacked."

"This was your first encounter with the Dark Eldar?" Einhart commented.

"Yes, well it was my platoon's. Sergeant Quinn's squad was on its own at the time while I had the rest of my men back at the settlement. At that point we still suspected that there was a natural explanation for all of the disappearances." Wolf explained.

"There may not be much left of it now of course." Vance added, "Quinn and his men didn't stick around to see how much damage that fire caused."

"Sergeant Quinn had his men use flamers to cover their retreat." Wolf added before Quinn contacted her using his microbead.

"Lieutenant we're coming up on the outpost now." he said, "I can already make out the damage from the fire. I'd say it's pretty big if I can see it already."

"Okay everyone be ready." Wolf announced, drawing her las pistol as she used her own microbead to broadcast her order to the entire platoon, "We know the Eldar have been here before and they still could be." Second Platoon reached the spot where Quinn's men had set light to the jungle just a few minutes later and now an area of jungle more than a hundred metres across had been burned down, turning densely packed trees and thick ground vegetation into charred stumps and ash. At the front of the platoon, Quinn's squad came to a halt at the edge of this area of devastation while Quinn took out his magnoculars and surveyed it.

"What's going on?" Derren asked as the rest of the platoon came to a halt behind Quinn's veterans.

"The Imperial Guard have stopped." Einhart responded before activating his own squad communication system, "Why are we not progressing?" he broadcast.

"Captain the guard squad on point has halted at the edge of a burned clearing. Their sergeant is observing it." one of the marines responded and upon hearing this Derren turned to Wolf.

"Your men are searching the burned area. Why?" he asked.

"If the burned area is big then going around it would take time." Vance replied before Wolf could answer, "On the other hand if we go across it then we'll be exposing ourselves to fire from anyone lurking in the treeline."

"Sergeant Quinn," Wolf said, activating her microbead, "Inquisitor Derren and Captain Einhart would like to progress. What can you tell me?"

"That burning promethium really did a number to the jungle here lieutenant." Quinn answered, "Thing is that it's left plenty of hiding places for someone to launch an ambush from. I don't see any signs of tracks in the ground but given how many skimmer the Eldar use I wouldn't put it past them to drop troops directly into position and leave them there. We could get across it in a few minutes but going around is likely take a few hours."

Wolf looked at Derren.

"Sergeant Quinn is concerned that the clearing could be a good place for an ambush." she told the inquisitor.

"So we're going around then?" Derren replied but Wolf smile and looked at the two space marines standing close by.

"Actually I've got an alternative idea." she said.

"The lieutenant means for my men to advance across the clearing first and draw out any attackers." Einhart said and Wolf's smile vanished.

"How did you guess?" she asked.

"It is an obvious plan." Einhart answered, "Which does not mean that it is without merit, however. Our powered armour will most likely protect us from the weapons carried by most Dark Eldar while Second Platoon's heavy weapons can be set up to provide cover from behind us."

"Well you're half right." Wolf said, "I also want my ogryn squad and Third Squad to go with you. They're equipped for short range engagements only. When you get to the other side of the clearing Sergeant Quinn will be able to confirm that your position is secure before the rest of us follow. My command section and Corporal Mayer's mortar team first. You and your people will accompany us as well inquisitor. Then First and Second Squads one at a time. We'll not expose more than the minimum number of troops at any one time."

"The lieutenant's plan is sound." Einhart said to Derren.

"Very well. Carry on." the inquisitor said, nodding in agreement.

"Sergeant Khor," Wolf called out, "have your squad advance and take orders from Sergeant Quinn."

"Ogryns! Forwards!" Khor bellowed in response and the massive ogryns who stood even taller than the marines in their armour started to march forwards while Wolf gave orders for Second Platoon's heavy weapons to be set up.

## 4.

Operating as a single unit for the first time since leaving Colonel Hatch's headquarters, the squad of Deathwatch marines and their officers led the advance across the clearing with Quinn's veteran squad and Khor's ogryns both following them. Meanwhile from just beyond the treeline they were watched by the rest of Second Platoon. Both the marines and Quinn's veterans paid close attention to every potential hiding place as they advanced, ready to defend themselves if necessary whereas the more slow witted ogryns simply marched along waiting to be given further orders.

The group made it across the clearing without incident and Quinn signalled for the next one to follow. "Okay we're up." Vance said and Derren's stormtroopers were about to dash into the clearing when he stopped them, "Where do you think you're going?" he hissed at them.

"We're in the next group." Talmat, the stormtroopers' sergeant replied.

"Yeah and so are Bomber and his men." Vance replied, pointing to where Mayer's squad was dismantling its mortars for carrying, "We wait for them and we go together."

"Remember who you are speaking to guardsman." Talmat responded.

"Inquisitor I recommend that your men follow my sergeants' instructions." Wolf said to Derren, making sure she spoke loud enough that the stormtroopers would hear her as well, "Take it from me, it isn't wise to upset them out here in the jungle."

"Do as the platoon sergeant says Sergeant Talmat." Derren responded, "After all we did request Lieutenant Wolf's platoon to aide us for their expertise."

"Yes my lord." Talmat replied, glaring angrily at Vance who just grinned.

As soon as the mortars were dismantled the next group made its way across the clearing as well, moving faster than the first now that there was less chance of being surprised by an attacker hiding somewhere among the burned remains.

What none of the Catachans or their inquisitorial allies realised was that they were indeed being watched from within the jungle but the observer had no intention of attacking while they were in the open. Instead he wanted them in the jungle where lines of sight and fire would be shorter. The Dark Eldar smiled as he saw the last of the Catachans cross the clearing and disappear back into the jungle. Able to see further into the infra red spectrum than a human, the Dark Eldar was able to make out the heat of their bodies and the power packs mounted on the marines' backs even after he could no longer see their outlines and before these traces vanished completely he looked towards the creatures waiting impatiently behind him for the order to attack.

"Hunt." the Dark Eldar hissed and the pack of creatures he controlled bounded off towards their prey.

The hut and machinery that had been in the clearing when Quinn's veteran squad had first discovered it were all still present when he led the rest of Second Platoon and the marines to it.

"Doesn't look like the Eldar were interested in any of this kit." Grey commented as he looked at it, noticing how the jungle was starting to absorb it as the undergrowth spread over it.

"Orks and heretics may depend on looting supplies from our armies but the Eldar do not follow such a pattern." Derren told him, "Their technology is too different from our own."

"It is heresy in itself." Einhart added.

"Dangerous though." Wolf commented, "I don't like the idea of getting poisoned."

"On that at least we can agree." Torrent said, remembering how just touching a drop of poison left behind by an Eldar blade had been enough to cause the worst pain of her life.

"That doesn't look like it's been there very long." Molla said and he pointed to the hut where a piece of paper was tucked between the door and frame.

"It wasn't here last time." Quinn replied and he walked up to take it. The piece of paper looked as if it came from an ordinary pocket notebook and was folded in half. On the outside was written just one word.

EMILIA.

"Looks like it's for you lieutenant." Quinn said as he unfolded the paper and read what was written on the other side, "Dear Emilia, you have been followed ever since getting through the burned out clearing. Expect close assault. Rull." he said.

"Where is your sniper?" Derren asked looking around in search of Rull.

"No where that you'll be able to see him." Vance replied as he too searched the jungle, watching for signs of movement that could herald the start of an attack by the Dark Eldar.

"Blood." Onund said suddenly, sniffing the air, "To the north and the smell is getting stronger."

"Perhaps some trophy carried by one of the enemy." Derren said.

"Lieutenant should we set up the heavy bolter?" Molla asked and Wolf looked at the marine carrying his squad's heavy weapon.

"How rapidly can you bring your heavy bolter to bear?" she asked.

"Seconds." the marine answered and Wolf nodded.

"I'm thinking that we should wait for the enemy to commit themselves." she said, looking at Derren, "If my men set up their heavy weapons and the Eldar are able to see how we've deployed them they could just attack from an alternate direction. If Captain Einhart's marines can hold them off for just a couple of minutes though, then we can set up our heavy weapons after we know which way they're attacking from."

"Brother Vallis, be prepared to lay down cover fire." Einhart ordered without waiting for Derren to agree with Wolf's suggestion.

"Yes captain." Vallis responded.

"Second platoon form a circle. I don't want to take the chance that this attack from the north is a feint. Be ready to redeploy immediately if necessary." Wolf ordered, "Sergeant Khor I want our squad with mine in the centre. Wherever the Eldar attack from, that's where I want you. Understood?"

"Yes lieutenant." Khor replied slowly and the cybernetically enhanced ogryn squad leader snapped to attention and saluted, waiting until Wolf returned his salute to relax.

"Here they come." Onund said, a smile spreading across his face as he flicked the activation switch of the chainsword he carried.

"Movement north!" Grey called out when he saw the undergrowth ahead of him start to shake as something moved through it.

"Mow many?" Wolf asked.

"Don't know, no visual contact." Grey replied and Wolf frowned as both she and Vance reached for magnoculars. But as they peered into the jungle they too saw only moving vegetation and no Dark Eldar themselves.

"Sergeant Quinn." Wolf said, "Flamers." and Quinn smiled.

"My pleasure." he replied, "Flamers to the front and wait for my command."

"Brother Rafen, join them." Einhart ordered and the marine armed with a flamer dashed to join the two Catachan veterans armed with similar weapons, all three aiming them into the jungle as the movement within the vegetation drew closer. Then as soon as the movement came within range Quinn gave the order to fire.

"Light them up." he said and the three flame weapons roared as they sent burning promethium into the jungle.

Over the sound of the flamers there came a series of howls and screeches from within the jungle before a group of almost feline creatures bounded into view, some of them burning where the fuel from the flamers had stuck to them. But was immediately obvious that these were no ordinary wildlife of THX-1138 or hunting beasts like those found on many worlds throughout the galaxy from the fact that none had any skin covering the the flesh of their bodies.

"Warp beasts!" Aman yelled as he sensed the nature of these creatures and he fired his bolt pistol towards them.

The sound of the pistol was drowned out almost immediately as Vallis turned on the spot and fired his heavy bolter, the mass reactive rounds ripping apart the jungle in front of him. But the Eldar attack creatures moved quickly and although two of them exploded as rounds from the heavy bolter struck them before detonating inside their bodies the rest were able to make it to the Catachan line and set upon Second Squad and Quinn's veterans. The Catachans met this charge with a volley of lasgun fire and shotgun blasts but the creatures were tougher than their skinless appearance made them look and they shrugged off most of this, only one more of the number falling to it and dissolving into a pile of goo

"Khor now!" Wolf shouted.

"Ogryns! Charge!" Khor bellowed and then the ogryns roared as they charged forwards towards the Dark Eldar creatures. Armed with rapid firing heavy calibre shotguns known as ripper guns, the ogryns opened fire as they ran and the barrage tore apart some of the slower moving creatures before the ogryns reached those that were engaged with Second Squad whereupon they began to swing the sturdily built ripper guns like clubs.

Without waiting to be ordered to do so, Aman also charged into the melee while the rest of the force waited to see whether there was another attack to come from elsewhere. Moments before he reached the combat Aman suddenly dropped to one knee and bowed his head.

"By the will of the Emperor." he said before he looked up and the lens of his helmet glowed brightly, "Burn aliens!" and a wave of white light burst from him, spreading out as it washed over the Catachans harmlessly. However, where it touched the Dark Eldar hunting beasts the light turned to flame that burned away their exposed flesh. The distraction this caused also gave the Catachans the chance to pull back far enough to use their las guns and shotguns from point blank range, putting blasts through the unnatural creatures' skulls where even these weapons were enough to kill. Meanwhile the ogryns continued to swing their ripper guns like clubs.

From further back within the jungle the beasts' handler scowled as he watched his precious pets die. He had personally hunted trapped and tamed every one of them on the warped surface of a daemon world within the Eye of Terror and now he could do nothing but watch them die. But as far as he was concerned he could still have his revenge on the humans who dared to take them from him.

"My lord archon." he said as he activated his communicator, "I have located the Mon'keigh force. They are at position-" then he hesitated as a red light flickered in his vision, and he flinched to get it out of his eyes moments before a bullet took off most of his head.

## 5.

"Torrent see to the injured." Wolf ordered as the last of the Dark Eldar beasts was slain by the ogyrns, "Everyone else hold position. There could be more of them out there. Grey, Quinn, what's our status?"

"I've got two dead and one injured." Grey replied.

"Just two injured in my squad." Quinn added, "But one of those was King and his flamer has been damaged. What were those things that just hit us?"

"Well inquisitor, can you enlighten us?" Wolf asked, looking at Derren.

"Some call them Khymera." he replied, "They are believed to what became of a species of predator that once existed on a world within the Eye of Terror, possibly on the original home world of the Eldar themselves."

"Well let's hope they left a trail we can follow." Wolf said, "Sergeant Molla, do you think you can track their path?"

"They didn't seem too worried about the damage they did while charging through the undergrowth so I expect there'll be a trail, yes." Molla replied.

"Good, get to it. But keep half your men back here just in case there are more Eldar out there waiting to attack."

"Yes lieutenant. I'll get right on it." Molla said.

"The transmission from the pack master was interrupted my lord archon." the kneeling Dark Eldar said and in response the archon snarled.

"I know that worm!" he hissed, "What I want to know is why. The pack master sent his Khymera to attack the Mon'Keigh while he watched from a distance. How could they have killed him?"

"I do not know my lord."

"Then I suggest you go and find out. Take a Raider and a squad of warriors but do not come back until you know how the Mon'Keigh are able to track us." the archon ordered angrily.

"Yes my lord archon." the kneeling Dark Eldar responded and he got to his feet and ran from the archon's presence.

"Does the loss of one pack master and a handful of Khymera concern you so much my lord archon?" the haemonculus asked from behind the Dark Eldar commander, "Such things can be replaced easily in Commorragh."

"The pack master appeared unaware that he was being targeted." the archon replied, "If the Mon'Keigh are capable of tracking and monitoring one of us without their knowledge then all of our forces may be vulnerable. We now that the Mon'Keigh are bringing up armoured reinforcements to their base camp and I want to be able to destroy these vehicles before they can bring their firepower to bear on us. That cannot happen if we are unable to approach them unseen."

At that moment the arc shaped structure behind the archon started to hum, a sound that grew in intensity and both the archon and haemonculus turned to watch as lighting flashed beneath the arch. This formed itself into an expanding sphere of light from which several Dark Eldar vehicles suddenly emerged. All looking somewhat like ancient sailing vessels floating in the air, three of them each carried squads of Dark Eldar warriors while two others mounted multiple heavy weapons designed for destroying armoured vehicles.

"Our forces grow in strength my lord archon." the haemonculus said, "Do you really believe that the Mon'Keigh can stand against us?"

"Not once our forces are at full strength. But the Mon'Keigh marines are most likely hunting this place with the intention of destroying it before that can happen. That will leave us trapped here while the Mon'Keigh can bring in as many troops as they have to to destroy us. I want that force dealt with before that can happen." the archon explained.

"Then allow me my lord archon." the haemonculus said, "I can take my forces and destroy the Mon'Keigh foolish enough to try hunting us. I ask only that those I do not kill I am allowed to take back to Commorragh for my own uses."

"As you wish." the archon said, "They are yours. But I warn you Dhullaris, do not fail me or you may the one put to another's uses upon our return to Commorragh."

"I bet even the lieutenant could follow this trail." Grey told his squad as they made their way long behind Molla's First Squad. The Dark Eldar's hunting creatures had been so keen to reach their intended prey that they had charged through the jungle without any sense of stealth and in doing so had left a trail of broken and crushed vegetation that the Catachans used to track their path back to the point where they had been unleashed. However, beyond that point the path they had taken became much less obvious and Molla halted to study the ground.



"Losing your touch Tari?" Grey asked as he left his squad and walked up behind Molla to see what was happening.

"Whatever those things were I think they waited here for a while." Molla replied, "Look, their tracks go round in circles over there as if they were waiting for something."

"The order to attack?" Grey suggested and Molla nodded.

"I think so. Plus if you look carefully you'll see that there are the imprints of a much more humanoid foot over by that tree." he said just before his microbead activated.

"Molla what's your status?" Vance asked.

"I think we've found where the attack began from." Molla replied, "Though I think that there was a handler of some sort for those creatures."

"That makes sense." Vance said, "Rull just checked in and he says that he caught an Eldar watching us while those things were attacking. He said that it looked like it was reporting in when he blew whatever the Eldar use for brains all over the nearest tree. He could have been quick enough to stop it from telling its friends where we are but-

"But we could be about to have company." Molla interrupted.

"Exactly. So we're going to set up camp in a more defensible position for the night and wait to see whether the Eldar come after us."

"Understood. We're on our way back." Molla replied.

Acting on Molla's advice Second Platoon set up their camp on high ground not far from a small stream. The stream was large enough to provide them with a plentiful water source but not so large that it created a gap in the trees that the Dark Eldar could use as a roadway in their anti-gravity vehicles to approach their camp easily. While the squads of Second Platoon armed with heavy weapons prepared firing positions for them Quinn and his veterans laid a series of trip wires connected to flares and mines around the perimeter of the camp to make up for the lack of a proper barrier.

"We'll need to draw up a schedule for maintaining a watch." Wolf said as she, Vance, Derren and Einhart observed the preparations being made by the rest of their force, "I'd normally do a rotation by squads but I don't know how to include the marines in this. Should we have their squad take a shift like mine or we're better splitting them between shifts."

"We do not need sleep in the same way as you lieutenant." Einhart replied while still watching the work being done to prepare what defences were possible, "We will watch all night." and Wolf frowned.

"But surely you must have to rest sometime." she said.

"The Astartes are a wonder of technology lieutenant." Derren commented, "One of the changes made to their bodies during their induction enables them to rest just part of their brain at a time. Just like you and me they cannot go without sleep indefinitely but they can last far longer than us."

"Okay then, so I'll just have Molla, Grey and Quinn's squads take turns and tell that they'll have the marines watching with them as well."

"That would be my recommendation as well." Einhart agreed and Derren smiled.

"Platoon Sergeant Vance, could I ask you to brief your men? I'd like to have a word with Lieutenant Wolf." he said and Vance looked at Wolf for confirmation.

"Go. I'll join you later." she said and Vance nodded before turning and walking away.

"I shall brief my men also." Einhart added before leaving Wolf and the inquisitor alone.

"So what's all this about inquisitor?" Wolf asked.

"How much do you know about the inquisition lieutenant?" Derren asked.

"Just rumours." Wolf replied and Derren smiled.

"Such as it should be lieutenant. Such as it should be." he said, "The inquisition permits its agents a great deal of latitude in their operations and there are almost as many opinions on how we should best act as there are inquisitors. All of this makes it harder for our enemies to avoid detection of course, even those who become aware of our existence will never know quite how they are being targeted."

"So nothing like the Imperial Guard then." Wolf commented, "Even Catachan Regiments have their chain of command and regulations to follow."

"As all armies must. However, I have noticed that despite the rigid structure of the Imperial Guard you have shown yourself capable of excelling without direct oversight. You have faced down more alien threats and survived than most in your line of work manage. Tau, Orks, Necrons and now Eldar as well. That is a rare talent lieutenant and one that the inquisition could find useful."

"You sound like you're offering me a job." Wolf said, "I'm not really sure that I'm cut out to be an inquisitor?" and Derren laughed momentarily.

"Oh no, at least not yet. Perhaps in a hundred years or so if you continue to excel. What I am suggesting is that once we are finished here and the Eldar webway gate is destroyed you and your platoon will leave your regiment and join me instead. As you know I have a small squad of stormtroopers assigned to me permanently and I can call upon the Deathwatch if I need to. But having a full platoon of experienced troops

on hand could come in very useful.” he explained.

“My entire platoon?”

“Of course. A leader is only as good as the troops they lead and your troops have supported you in numerous campaigns.” Derren said and Wolf frowned.

“I think you should check your reports again.” she said, “I wouldn't call their attitude towards me exactly supportive. More like they're all following me around so they can be there when my luck finally runs out and I get killed.”

“In which case you should have no trouble in persuading them to join you in leaving to serve me. If it helps you can point out that the pay is also significantly better than that of a guardsman.”

“That'll get their attention all right.” Wolf said, “Can I give this some thought?”

“Of course lieutenant. The offer will stand until I depart.” Derren said before Wolf walked away.

“Inquisitor.” Talmat said from behind him and he turned to face the stormtrooper.

“Yes sergeant?” he asked.

“I just wanted to let you know that we're set up. Sergeant Quinn has us covering the eastern approach.”

“Very good.” Derren replied and then he noticed Talmat peering past him towards Wolf.

“Something bothering you sergeant?” he asked.

“Just wondering whether she really does have what it takes to be one of us sir.” Talmat said and Derren smiled again.

“I rather think that that attitude is something Lieutenant Wolf is used to by now sergeant.” he said.

“So what did the inquisitor want?” Vance asked when Wolf rejoined her squad as they put the finishing touches to a camouflaged hide located where they would be able to monitor all possible approaches to their position.

“Would you believe he was offering me a job?” Wolf answered, “He thinks that I could be useful commanding a private attack force.”

“So you'd be leaving us?” Torrent said with a smile when she overheard this.

“That depends.” Wolf replied.

“Oh don't say you're going to be turning down this opportunity lieutenant.” Torrent said, “If it were me I'd jump at the chance. Honest.” and then it was Wolf's turn to smile.

“Guardswoman Torrent,” she said, “you have no idea how pleased it makes me to hear you say that.” and then she looked at Vance, “So that's her in as well.” she said to him, “Now I just need to ask everyone else.”

“Huh?” Torrent said, confused.

“Oh didn't I mention it?” Wolf said, “Inquisitor Derren doesn't just want me. He wants our entire platoon. Welcome to the inquisition Torrent.”

“Fighting is fighting.” Vance said, “What difference does it make whether we're in the guard or part of an inquisitor's private mercenary army?”

“The inquisition pays more apparently.” Wolf told him.

## 6.

Haemonculus Dhullaris watched his forces boarding the Raider transports that would carry them through the jungle. Most of these were the twisted creatures known simply as grotesques that Dhullaris had created himself from prisoners brought to his laboratory. Most but not all of these were other Dark Eldar who had fallen victim to the constant infighting in Commorragh, while others were from species taken as slaves in one of the many raids across the galaxy. Many more than the five squads he now commanded had died during the process of being injected with assorted chemicals intended to promote muscle and bone growth that left them much larger than an ordinary human or Eldar. After that Dhullaris had removed body parts he felt unnecessary or unsatisfactory and fitted artificial components to fill the void of some. This procedure had driven those that had survived insane and only radical surgery to remove further tissue from their brains had prevented them from running amok the instant they were released from the restraints they had been kept in during their transformations. Now these mindless creations followed his every command and with a simple command he could turn them from shambling automatons into chemically enhanced killing machines. But as strong and resilient as they were, the grotesques were merely tools to be expended as needed. In Commorragh there were always more prisoners and slaves available to be transformed against their will. On the other hand the unit of wracks that had accompanied Dhullaris to THX-1138 were far more valuable. Drawn from those Dark Eldar who served the haemonculus, the wracks had volunteered themselves to have their bodies experimented on and enhanced. Now they would function as Dhullaris' elite guard that would stand ready to strike when the grotesques had been used to overwhelm the humans' defence. The weaponry that Dhullaris had grafted onto their bodies was designed with keeping victims alive in mind, killing a prisoner attempting to escape meant losing that prisoner anyhow. But simply inflicting great pain on them left them available for further experimentation. Now Dhullaris intended to use them to take as many of the humans alive as possible.

However, despite the fighting potential of the wracks and the numbers of grotesques that Dhullaris had at his command he knew that they would not be able to defeat a human force dug into a fixed position and with multiple heavy weapons. For that he needed the last of his creations that he had brought with him to THX-1138.

The two Talos Pain Engines had been large and muscular creatures even before Dhullaris had begun his work on them. Now they were a hideous blend of technology and flesh that floated on built in anti-gravity motors that meant they had no need of transport, their arms terminating in massive blades that could cut open even armoured vehicles while the bio-mechanical tails that had been grafted onto them ended in weapons pods that mounted twin linked splinter cannons.

"Haemonculus." a wrack called out as he approached Dhullaris before dropping to one knee and bowing his covered head, "The raiders are loaded and the pilots inform me that they are ready to depart. All they require is a destination."

"We have the pack master's position when he made his final transmission. We will begin our search for the Mon'keigh party there." the haemonculus replied as he started to walk towards the raider carrying his wrack servants. Then as soon as he and the wrack who had spoken to him leapt up onto the open deck of the lightweight vehicle the pilot began to move off. Behind it the other Raiders fell into line while the Talos Pain Engines brought up the rear. Ordinarily the raiders would have been able to easily outpace the bulky pain engines, but that required a clear path in which to make the most of the raiders' top speed. In the jungle that typically meant increasing altitude to fly above the trees but that went against the standing orders of the archon. It was known that the humans had spacecraft in orbit and patrolling aircraft just waiting to spot a target to engage and raiders out in the open would be very tempting targets indeed. Worse still by plotting their course back it could allow the humans to locate the growing Dark Eldar base camp at the webway gate and allow them to destroy both the camp and the gateway. Therefore, forced to operate at a low level the pilots of the raiders were also forced to limit their speed to avoid crashing their fragile craft into the trees ahead of them and this enabled the Talos Pain Engines to match their speed.

The sun set soon after the haemonculus' raiding party set out from the Dark Eldar's main base camp at the webway gate but this did not hinder the pilots at all. Striking from darkness and shadow was precisely how the Dark Eldar preferred to wage war and though their vehicles mounted none of the crude illumination devices used by many of the galaxy's less advanced species such as humans and Orks the pilots' helmets included advanced sensor systems that enabled them to see in the darkness just as easily as in bright daylight. The Raiders moved gracefully through the jungle heading towards the place where the pack master had made his final transmission from.

"Five thousand metres." the pilot of Dhullaris' Raider announced as they closed in on their destination and the haemonculus snarled.

"Prepare." he announced and around him the wracks performed final checks on their weapons while the gunners of each Raider kept watch for human troops. Dhullaris knew that humans performed less well during hours of darkness and he hoped to use that to his advantage, having his Talos Pain Engines come charging out of the jungle before the humans could react while his force of grotesques advanced behind them under covering fire of the raiders.

"Four thousand metres." the pilot announced a short while later.

"Hold at one thousand metres." Dhullaris ordered, knowing that he would need to search for the humans before having his troops complete their advance on foot.

"Yes sire." the pilot replied while Dhullaris looked at him and then as the pilot slowed his Raider down the haemonculus noticed something odd. A tiny glowing red dot had appeared without warning on the pilot's chest and it took a moment for the haemonculus to realise what it was. But before he could warn the pilot to take evasive action a hole was suddenly punched in the pilot's armour by a bullet that even Dhullaris' superior Eldar senses did not hear and the Dark Eldar slumped forwards over the controls of the Raider. The Raider lurched suddenly as its dead pilot fell on the controls and its engines produced a loud whining as more power was put into them. But the pilot had also fallen against the steering controls and the Raider turned towards a particularly dense patch of trees that the pilot had been trying to avoid. At the same time the nose of the craft dipped and as it pressed onwards the Raider ploughed into the undergrowth before it hit the ground.

The nose of the Raider crumpled upon impact and the gunner was thrown over the front of the vehicle into the trunk of a tree while on the open passenger deck Dhullaris and the wracks grabbed hold of whatever they could in order to avoid the same happening to them. The Raider rolled after hitting the ground and its passengers were forced to grip tightly to its hull to hang on. One of the wracks failed and fell to the ground while the Raider continued to roll and she let out a shrill screech as its hull came down on top of her, crushing her slowly enough for her to be aware of it for several seconds before dying.

"There is a sniper!" Dhullaris exclaimed when the Raider finally stopped rolling and he could broadcast a warning to the other vehicles, "Lock all vehicles in position while you search for it." and then he began the process of untangling himself from the wreckage of his transport.

While Dhullaris and the remaining wracks were pulling themselves free the crews of the other Raiders hunted for their attacker. In accordance with Dhullaris' orders the pilots of the five remaining vehicles came to a halt and locked the drives in a stabilising mode normally used when loading or unloading outside of a combat zone. This still allowed the Raiders to pivot on the spot, however and all five slowly turned as their crews searched the jungle for the human sniper.

"Lieutenant wake up." Quinn said, shaking Wolf as she lay in her sleeping bag.

"Quinn? What time is it?" she replied as she opened her eyes.

"Coming up on oh-one-hundred." he answered, "We've just heard from Rull. He says that the Eldar are on their way in force. Six transports plus what look like two massive servitors of some kind."

"Throne!" Wolf hissed as she hurried out of bed, grabbing hold of her boots and shaking each one upside down to make sure that nothing had either crawled or been placed inside while she slept, "That's a lot of troops. How far away are they?"

"Three kilometres, coming in from the south." Quinn told her, "But not quite as many now. Rull's taken out one of the transports. He didn't hang around for a full casualty count mind you, but at least now some of them will be limited to travelling on foot."

Wolf then looked around and saw that the rest of her command section was already awake and out of bed.

"Is everyone awake?" she asked.

"Apart from the inquisitor and his team, yes. Of course the marines were never asleep to begin with." Quinn replied.

"Okay I want our squads deployed to focus on the south. But put Mayer's mortar squad in dead ground and have Khor's ogryns join him. We'll use them as a reserve. I need to go and see Captain Einhart." Wolf said and then she hurried from her section's shelter out into the night.

Einhart and his squad of marines were easy to locate. As soon as word had come that there was a Dark Eldar force approaching from the south the captain had moved his men there to meet them head on.

"Captain." Wolf called out as she rushed up to him.

"Yes lieutenant?" the marine responded, tilting his head down to look directly at her as she stood in front of him on slightly lower ground that exaggerated the already massive difference in their heights.

"Captain I'm pulling my ogryns back to the far side of this hill. I was thinking that you should join them."

"You wish to us to counter attack after the xenos attack and reveal their hand?" Einhart asked, "A reasonable plan." then he looked at Aman, "Codicier, join the lieutenant and her command section. Inform us as soon as the xenos are committed. I will want to know their exact deployment so that we can be most effective."

"Yes captain." the psyker replied. Then as the marines were starting to reposition themselves Einhart looked down at Wolf again.

"I can see why Inquisitor Derren thinks so highly of you lieutenant." he said and then he turned away from her again.

"Come on then." Wolf said to Aman, "We better get to my command post before the Eldar arrive. I don't want them catching sight of any of you before we're ready."

"Lead the way lieutenant. I am right behind you." Aman said calmly.

Returning to her section's shelter Wolf found that Derren and his stormtroopers were already there along with her own section and when Aman was added it became very crowded. Derren's stormtroopers had set themselves up to be able to fire to the south along with Guardsman Davos, the member of Wolf's section armed with a grenade launcher. It was known that the vehicles operated by the Dark Eldar were not heavily armoured and Wolf hoped that one or two krak grenades fired from the launcher would be able to bring one down.

"All squads report in." Wolf broadcast using her microbead when she saw that everyone in her own shelter was prepared to fight.

"First Squad ready." Molla replied first.

"Third Squad ready." Quinn added.

"Second Squad ready." Grey said.

"Mortars ready." Mayer said.

"Ogryns ready." Khor's voice rumbled.

Then another voice responded that Wolf had not expected to join in.

"Deathwatch is ready lieutenant." Einhart told her.

"So what now?" Torrent asked.

"Now we wait." Wolf replied, "Either for the Eldar to attack or the sun to come up so we can move out."

## 7.

Something about the sniper who had been good enough to shot the pilot of a Raider while in flight and also to avoid detection after taking the shot did not make sense to Dhullaris. When the sensor systems built into the Raider crews' helmets as well as their own senses had failed to locate the sniper Dhullaris had ordered his troops to dismount and conduct a search on foot and it was then that one of his wracks had finally located a trail that the haemonculus had ordered his force to follow. But the problem with this was that the marks found in the ground were clear and it was easy to get a bearing from each of them once they had been located, however they were also suspiciously few in number and it took some time to locate each one. It was as if every so often the expert sniper paused to deliberately to leave a trail for the Dark Eldar to find and follow.

"Sire." one of the wracks signalled from up ahead.

"What is it? Another track left for us?" Dhullaris responded.

"No sire. There are Mon'Keigh ahead, dozens of them. I have found their camp." the wrack told him and Dhullaris smiled.

"Excellent." he said, "If their sniper was attempting to lead us into a trap then he has failed. I shall join you shortly to see this camp for myself."

The haemonculus and the other wracks converged on the position of the one to have found the human camp and Dhullaris looked towards it. The humans had selected an area of raised ground for their camp and had constructed several shelters on it that were concealed against casual detection. However, the body heat of the shelters' occupants still gave them away to the watching Dark Eldar. Four such shelters were visible between the trees from where the haemonculus and his wracks were positioned, one on the side of the hill facing them and one on each side while what Dhullaris guessed was the command post was located at the top of the hill. From this deployment Dhullaris guessed that there would also be another shelter on the far side so that all approaches would be covered. Then he noticed something else, another shelter that he had almost missed thanks to it having no-one inside to heat it up. But it had either been left incomplete or had been abandoned and in the process part of its camouflage had been damaged, making it visible. This posed a problem for Dhullaris. If this shelter had been abandoned then where were its previous occupants? The presence of an empty shelter could represent a group of humans deployed to patrol the surrounding terrain and give advance warning of the Dark Eldars' approach. It seemed reasonable that they would now know of their presence in the area from the sniper that had managed to elude capture so expertly. This meant that the humans had had chance to prepare their defences and Dhullaris wanted to know as much about them as possible before he committed his troops to an attack.

"Lieutenant. One-six-seven." Quinn signalled.

"What does that mean?" Derren asked when he overheard the transmission.

"It means Quinn's spotted something." Vance replied as both he and Wolf took out their magnoculars.

Meanwhile the inquisitor's stormtroopers looked in the direction that Quinn had just given, making use of the optics built into their carapace armour to look through the jungle.

"Targets confirmed at one-six-seven." Talmat said when he saw the Dark Eldar concealed in the undergrowth.

"Yeah, I see them." Vance added, "They don't look like any of the Eldar we've seen so far."

"A haemonculus and wracks." Aman said. Even without the auto-senses in his armour the space marine would have been able to see the watching Dark Eldar, but the advanced detection system made it possible for him to pick out far greater details than was possible even with magnoculars.

"This is worrying." Derren commented when he heard this.

"What's a haemonculus?" Wolf asked and Derren glanced at Torrent.

"In a sense it is the Dark Eldar equivalent of a medicae." he told her, "Combined with some of the functions of a magos biologis. They are feared even among their own kind for the nature of their experimentation that is often carried out on unwilling subjects. If such an individual is present in the force we face then we should also expect to encounter some of its creations."

"You mean like those things standing around it?" Vance asked as he focused his magnoculars on the wracks,

"They don't look normal to me, even by the standards of the Eldar we've already seen." then he glanced at Aman, "What did you call them? Wracks?"

"Wracks are but the least of a haemonculus' creations." Derren answered, "They are the willing assistants to a haemonculus. What we could be facing is likely to be far worse than them."

"I don't like the sound of that." Wolf replied.

"Don't worry lieutenant." Vance said with a smile, "We're dug in and ready. We'll cut them to pieces."

"Begin." Dhullaris hissed and then he waited as almost a hundred metres behind him the Raiders unloaded their cargoes of grotesques and driven on by a mix of chemical and technological stimulation the surgically altered slaves began to charge towards the human positions.

"Here they come." Talmat said when he heard the crashing of dozens of Dark Eldar troops rushing through the jungle.

"The Dark Eldar are not typically so clumsy." Aman commented.

"No they aren't." Derren agreed, "I think they are about to hit us with a wave of slave troops. Lieutenant you may want your men to deal with them at the longest possible range."

"I see them!" Voss exclaimed when the first of the grotesques appeared between the trees and she took aim.

"Hold your fire." Wolf ordered before she could shoot.

"But they're right there. They're heading this way." Voss replied and she looked at Derren, "Sir?"

"Do as the lieutenant says." he said, looking at Wolf and smiling.

"Thank you." Wolf said, "Quinn's squad set snare mines all around our perimeter. Let's let some of them thin out the enemy a bit before we give away our deployment." then she activated her microbead, setting it to broadcast to the entire platoon, "Wait for them to hit the mines." she ordered, "I don't want to give away too much just yet."

"What about Bomber?" Vance suggested and Wolf nodded.

"Corporal Mayer, standby to lay HE just inside the mines." she signalled.

"That's cutting it close." Torrent commented, knowing just how close the mines would have been laid.

"Don't worry, we'll be safe enough in here." Wolf responded before she added, "I hope."

It was then that the first of the grotesques ran into a tripwire connected to a snare mine and there was a loud explosion as the device propelled several hundred pieces of shrapnel into the forward members of the charging hoard.

But although the blast killed several it did nothing to stop the others. Even those maimed by the shrapnel attempted to keep coming, staggering on without arms or dragging themselves along the ground while blood poured from the stumps of their ruined legs while behind them the rest of the hoard charged forwards into the line of mines, triggering more and opening gaps that allowed more of their number to pass through uninjured. "Bomber now. Single salvo. Fire for effect." Wolf ordered and from the far side of the hill there was the booming of his squad's three mortars being fired in unison.

The range was less than two hundred metres and the rounds had to be fired with minimal charge in order to target a location so close. But this meant that even the relatively slow moving mortar rounds still landed within a few seconds of being fired, by which time they were in the midst of the grotesque hoard. These added further to the toll of deaths among the Dark Eldar's slaves and now almost half of the hoard was out of action.

Dhullaris snarled. He had not expected the grotesques to be able to overrun the humans on their own but he also had not expected the humans to have been able to defend their camp so well either.

"Unleash the pain engines." he said, reluctantly deciding to commit his two Talos Pain Engines to the fight before he could determine whether or not the humans had any heavy weapons available to them other than the mortars they had cunningly concealed on the far side of the hill on which they had made their camp, "And order the Raiders to move in as well. They are to engage from long range only, do not remain in one place long enough for the Mon'Keigh to make use of any heavy weapons they may have."

Wolf was just about to order her platoon to engage the advancing Dark Eldar with small arms when the two monstrous Talos Pain Engines appeared behind them, floating above the undergrowth as they came towards the camp.

"Throne! What the hell are they?" she exclaimed.

"Talos." Derren said, "Destroy them quickly lieutenant. It will take your most powerful weapons."

"This is Wolf." Wolf broadcast to her troops, "All launchers engage those large creatures. Use anti-armour munitions. All other troops fire at will."

Immediately Davos fired a Krak grenade towards one of the pain engines but the creature dodged at the last moment and the round instead struck a tree trunk, blasting a hole right through that caused it to snap and the tree toppled over just behind the Talos. In response to this the Talos turned its tail towards the command post and opened fire with the splinter cannons mounted on the tip. The hail of projectiles tore up the ground just in front of the command post as the Talos moved in a zigzag pattern to try and evade further fire just as the rest of Second Platoon also opened fire. The grenade launchers in First and Second Squads targeted the Talos while their lasguns were aimed at the still closing grotesques. Equipped with much shorter ranged weapons, Quinn's veterans held their fire for the time being, waiting for the grotesques to get closer.

The second Talos also opened fire, targeting Molla's shelter and several of the rounds struck the guardsman armed with the squad's grenade launcher. The guardsman was fortunate that one of the crystalline

projectiles punched through his flak jacket and went straight into his heart, killing him before the poison coating it could inflict the intense agony it was intended to. Another guardsman reached for the grenade launcher but another of the projectiles had struck the mechanism and when he attempted to fire it the weapon failed to function.

"Forget it." Molla said, "We'll get it fixed later." then he looked at the heavy bolter team that had been firing their heavy automatic weapon at the grotesques, but now he wanted them to change their target, "Shift your target. Let's see how that thing out there stands up to some heavy bolter fire."

Swinging their heavy bolter around on its mount, the Catachan gunners fired a sustained burst of explosive rounds at the floating Talos Pain Engine and it jerked in mid air as the rounds pierced its flesh before detonating. But they did not penetrate deep enough that the explosions caused any significant damage to the bizarre misshapen creature's vital organs and it returned fire with its splinter cannons.

"Down!" Molla snapped as the projectiles tore through the shelter, ripping apart the camouflaged fabric cover while the Catachans inside ducked down into the hole dug beneath it as poisoned projectiles sped above their heads, "This is Molla, we're pinned down. We need help." he signalled using his microbead.

"We've got your back." Quinn responded as the Talos moved into range of the veterans' weapons.

One of Quinn's men thrust the muzzle of his flamer out of one of the firing slits built into the veterans' shelter before squeezing the trigger and there was a sudden 'whoosh!' as flames erupted from it. The jet of burning promethium struck the Talos Pain Engine and the liquid stuck to its skin as well as the grafted on mechanical parts. Like the heavy bolter fire before it the flames were not enough to kill or disable the bizarre creation thanks to the changes made to its nervous system that made it almost impervious to pain itself, but the Talos was aware that it was on fire and it knew that prolonged exposure to flame could cause serious damage.

Therefore, it turned its splinter cannons towards Quinn's veterans and fired at their shelter as it backed out of range from their flamers.

At the same time as the two Talos Pain Engines were driving headlong into the Catachans' camp the Raider transports were forming a line beyond its perimeter from where their gunners could just about make out the flashes of las gun fire from the shelters. The dark lance each vehicle carried in its prow was designed to be able to destroy even the most heavily armoured vehicles but their relatively slow rate of fire made them less effective against squads of infantry, though that was not to say that they were totally useless in that role. The beam that erupted from the muzzle of the first weapon fired appeared to be a negative image of a las cannon shot, instead of a bright beam of light the energy beam seemed to suck light in to create a path of total darkness. The beam was targeted at Wolf's crowded command post and it struck a supporting post at one corner, causing it to burst into flames.

"Him on Earth! Where the hell did that come from?" Wolf exclaimed as Vance looked through his magnoculars, following the path of the beam back towards its source.

"The Eldar have more of those troop carriers that look like flying sailing ships. I count five of them." he said.

"Wolf to Grey." Wolf transmitted using her microbead, "We have five enemy vehicles beyond the perimeter. Take them out."

"Copy that lieutenant. I see them." Grey responded and inside his squad's shelter he looked at the two man crew of the squad's missile launcher, "Go." he told them and the two Catachans quickly climbed out of the shelter and began to set up their weapon.

Using the missile launcher inside the shelter would have meant filling it with the exhaust blast when it was fired and so the crew had no choice but to risk getting out into the open. Fortunately it was possible to use the weapon from a prone position and so the gunner lay flat on his stomach before the loader slid a round into the launcher and slapped him on the back.

"Locked." he said.

"Target acquired. Firing." the gunner responded and there was a massive blast of flame from the rear of the launcher as the krak missile's exhaust ignited and it shot from the front of the weapon. The gunner's aim was good and the missile sped between the trees before it slammed into the prow of a Raider before detonating. Designed to be used against armoured targets, the warhead sent a blast of molten metal forwards that had no difficulty in penetrating the lightweight plating of the Raider and the gunner standing at the front of the vehicle was killed almost immediately as his weapon exploded. But the damage did not end there and the blast continued ripping apart the Raider until it reached the vehicle's power plant and when this exploded the entire Raider was consumed in a ball of flame that set fire to the undergrowth beneath it as the burning wreckage came crashing down to the ground.

But there were still four Raiders remaining and they opened fire in unison, their dark lances targeting the Catachans' shelters and while none of the beams caused any deaths or injuries they did cause all fire to cease from the Catachans as they were forced to duck for cover as the roofs of their shelters were destroyed.

"Captain Einhart, we need support." Wolf said into her microbead, "We have four enemy vehicles engaging us."

"Understood. We are on our way lieutenant." Einhart replied and moments later the marine captain along



with half of the Deathwatch squad appeared outside the command post, dashing past it before dropping into a crouching position and aiming their weapons into the jungle towards the Dark Eldar raiders. Vallis was one of these marines and he was the first to fire, unleashing a prolonged burst of heavy bolter rounds at one of the Raiders. Rather than keep his weapon pointing in the exact same direction he swung it around ever so slightly so that the explosive rounds first struck the prow of his target before they made their way along the barely exposed flank of the Raider, killing the gunner, damaging the power plant, tearing through the vehicle's sails before a round finally struck the pilot in her chest and she exploded from the inside out. As this second Raider came crashing to the ground the other marines opened fire with their bolters at the remaining three. These were little more than a nuisance to the Dark Eldar but the chance that the bolter rounds could find a weakness in the Raiders' structure or hit one of the crew could not be ignored and the pilots began to move their vehicles further back, looping around the Catachan camp to try and get out of the firing arc of the missile launcher team before they could fire again.

It was then that the rest of the Deathwatch marines revealed themselves. On orders from Captain Einhart, Sergeant Onund had taken the remainder of the squad, including Rafen with his flamer into the jungle to circle around the camp. Onund had correctly predicted that the Dark Eldar would try to get out of the missile launcher's line of fire so the Space Wolf had led his unit the other way and now they came charging at the Raiders head on, firing their bolters on the move. The Dark Eldar tried to engage the marines with their dark lances but the armoured warriors moved surprisingly quickly for people of their size and wearing such heavy armour and they evaded the deadly energy beams with ease while all around them trees were being cut down.

Then the marine with the green shoulder pad marked with a winged dagger dropped to his knees and plucked a Krak grenade from his belt. Arming the explosive device he hurled it as hard as he could towards the nearest Raider. Auto-stabilising in flight so that the warhead was pointing in the correct direction when it hit the Raider, the grenade punched a hole through the forward section and the vehicle began to burn.

"Well done Dark Angel!" Onund yelled as he charged past the kneeling marine, "Now let this son of Russ finish your job for you." and then he leapt up onto the deck of the Raider and before the gunner could react he swung his chainsword at the Dark Eldar and cleaved the alien in half. Turning towards the rear of the Raider Onund broke into a run once more, sprinting along its deck as the pilot reached for his splinter pistol. The alien drew his weapon quickly and fired at the charging marine, but although every round hit Onund not one of them managed to penetrate the thick ceramite plating of his power armour before he raised his own pistol and put a single round right between the pilot's eyes that blew off his entire head.

Leaping from the burning Raider before it ploughed into the ground, Onund turned towards the nearby Dark Angel.

"See Trethor?" he called out, "It's easy when you know how."

## 8.

While the Catachans and their Deathwatch allies had been engaging the Raider transports the hoard of grotesques and two Talos Pain Engines had continued their advance and Wolf only realised how close they had got when she heard the distinctive sound of the shotguns carried by Quinn's veterans being fired. At the same time both Talos Pain Engines focused their fire on the Deathwatch marines, spraying them with fire from their splinter cannons that seemed to do nothing against their armour. However, the closeness of the grotesques was a clear threat and Wolf knew that once they entered hand to hand combat even the hardened Catachans would have difficulty in fighting them.

But as big and muscular as the grotesques were they were still much smaller than Second Platoon's primary close assault unit.

"Khor, we need you." she signalled and then over the sounds of the fighting she heard a shout from the other side of the hill.

"Ogryns! Charge!" Khor bellowed and then there were several roars as the seven abhumans came rushing over the hill and charging towards the oncoming hoard.

As they ran the ogryns fired their ripper guns, sending short limited bursts of shot blasts into the grotesques and even where the impact of the heavy pellets did not blow off an arm or a leg the force of the impact was enough to knock them to the ground so that when the massive abhumans charged headlong into the hoard the first row of them was lying prone and helpless on the ground, easy prey for the simple minded ogryns who simply stamped on their heads and chests until they split open before swinging their ripper guns by the stocks or barrels as the remaining grotesques started to crowd around them.

No longer worried about engaging the grotesques, Quinn looked around for another target and he saw the Talos Pain Engine that was still burning quite close at hand. Having seen how ineffective flamers were against the creature he instead decided to try a weapon with much greater hitting power and he looked at the Catachan armed with his squad's meltagun.

"Jackson, take that thing out." he ordered and the guardsman took aim.

When Jackson first pulled the trigger of his weapon nothing seemed to happen. But as he held the trigger back a beam of growing brightness appeared between it and the Talos Pain Engine that became brighter the longer the trigger was pulled. At the same time there was a roaring sound that grew in volume along with the brightness of the beam. Like the krak missiles fired by Second Squad's missile launcher the meltagun was intended to destroy heavily armoured targets and was even more effective at it than the heavier weapon, its only real drawback being its short engagement range. The beam struck the Talos Pain Engine centrally and its armour plating was useless to prevent it from burning a hole right through not only the plating but also the flesh beneath. The Talos Pain Engine let out a roar of fury rather than the pain it could not feel and started to turn towards the source of this new attack. But this only moved the point of impact of the beam, allowing it to burn away even more flesh and the Talos suddenly spasmed as several critical systems were struck before it dropped to the ground and landed in a heap of burning flesh and metal.

Dhullaris watched as the creature he had laboured so many hours to create was destroyed in such a short time by the Catachans and he snarled at this affront to his skill. At the same time he could see that his grotesques were steadily decreasing in number as well and although he saw them as expendable he did not wish to see them thrown away for no reason. Then he saw another missile fly from Second squad's launcher that came close to destroying yet another Raider, this time merely succeeding in blowing a hole through its main sail.

"The Mon'Keigh are dug in too well." he hissed, "We must withdraw from battle."

"But sire, you promised the archon-" one of his wracks began.

"Silence!" Dhullaris interrupted, "I promised the archon that I would bring him Mon'Keigh captives and kill those I did not take. I never made any promises about how I would go about achieving this. Now we must withdraw our forces. We will monitor the Mon'Keigh when they leave the safety of this position and see how well they can defend themselves then. Now carry out my order."

Outnumbered by the grotesques, Khor's squad of ogryns could not hold them all back and three of the Dark Eldar creations slipped past them and came rushing towards Wolf's command post. There was a volley of shotgun blasts from Quinn's veterans as they ran but this did nothing more than make one of them stumble. "Concentrate fire on the front one." Talmat ordered and the five inquisitorial stormtroopers fired bursts from their hell guns at the closest of the grotesques. The upgraded lasguns had little difficulty in piercing the grotesque's toughened hides and the creature staggered under the multiple hits before falling forwards. But by this time the other two were almost upon the command post.

There was a sudden loud booming sound from close by as Aman fired his bolt pistol at one of the grotesques and Wolf flinched at the unexpected sound. The bolt round blew off one of the grotesque's arms at the shoulder but it did not stop running until a second round fired by Derren blew off a kneecap. While the injured grotesque flailed about on the ground the final one swung a bladed gauntlet at the stormtroopers and Tello let out a brief cry that was suddenly silenced as his throat was torn open.

"Torrent, see to him!" Wolf snapped as she took aim with her las pistol, intending to fire as many shots as she could in the shortest possible time, hoping that one of them would strike a weak spot. But before she could even fire her first shot she heard Aman suddenly let out a loud shout.

"Burn xenos!" he yelled and everyone around him suddenly had to avert their gaze as a brilliant beam of light appeared to connect the librarian's psychic hood with the grotesques, enveloping the creature before it abruptly burst into flames.

Without waiting for an order Aman then leapt up out of the command post and joined the other nearby marines, standing ready to engage the next wave of attackers. But this next wave never came. Instead the surviving Talos Pain Engine that had been occupying most of the attention of Second Platoon and the Deathwatch began to retreat, now firing short bursts of fire from its splinter cannons at different targets rather than focusing on a single target as it had prior to this.

The surviving grotesques were also retreating back towards the camp's perimeter. Without any orders to disengage, the seven ogryns continued to assail the enemy as they retreated.

"Captain Einhart!" Wolf called out towards the Deathwatch marines, "Can you get a status report from Sergeant Onund?"

"His force have destroyed another of the Dark Eldar vehicles lieutenant." Einhart responded, "Now the remainder are in retreat." and Wolf reached for her microbead.

"Sergeant Khor pull back." she ordered.

"Ogryns halt!" Khor then shouted loud enough that he could be heard from the top of the hill and the abhumans came to an abrupt halt before starting to retreat back up the hill, allowing the grotesques to disengage. However, since the grotesques were still in the ogryns' line of fire the abhumans fired their ripper guns at their retreating enemies even after they had passed beyond the effective range of their weapons. In all fewer than a quarter of the grotesques managed to make it to the safety of the jungle while behind them they left the bodies of most of their comrades, including a handful that were still alive and Derren looked at these carefully through a set of his own magnoculars before turning to Wolf.

"Lieutenant we will need to organise a detail to finish off the injured grotesques." he told her and Wolf nodded.

"I'll have my men do it." she replied before she in turn looked at Torrent, "I want you to check on the other squads." she said, "We'll move out as soon as it's light enough to see properly and I want everyone patched up by then. We can't afford to sit around and wait for more Eldar to turn up."

The archon was already aboard his personal Raider when the flight of Razorwing fighters along with a pair of Voidraven bombers sped out of the webway gate. Bringing aircraft out of the gate was risky and the positions of every human air and spacecraft had to be carefully plotted to make sure that they would not detect this use of the webway gate before any of the Dark Eldar attack craft were sufficiently clear to prevent their arrival from being used to pinpoint it. The archon then looked around at the array of Raider transports laden with Dark Eldar warriors and wyches, Reaver jetbikes and Ravager gunships armed with multiple heavy weapons for attacking both infantry and armour. If the Dark Eldar's intelligence was right then the main human base camp was close to receiving heavy reinforcements that would overwhelm their own forces in terms of numbers and sheer firepower. Now though the Dark Eldar themselves were at full strength with almost a thousand warriors ready to attack the human position. The only disappointment was that the haemonculus Dhullaris had not yet reported back to say that he had captives that could be interrogated about the extent of the human defences. However, the archon still commanded a powerful force and if all went to plan then all the human armoured forces would find on their arrival was an empty camp, its occupants already killed or spirited away as slaves.

"All units begin." he broadcast to the assembled army, "I promise great rewards to those who bring me the most souls and great punishment to those who fail me." and with that order the Dark Eldar vehicles began to head towards the settlement where the XXV Regiment was based.

Smarting from the unexpected defeat, Dhullaris studied the forces he still had left to him. Now only a single squad of grotesques remained along with three raiders and one of his prized Talos Pain Engines, the rest had been destroyed by the humans.

"What now sire?" one of the wracks asked, "We dare not return to the archon having failed to destroy or take any of the Mon'Keigh captive."

"We are not returning to rejoin the archon's force yet." the haemonculus replied, "The Mon'Keigh have the numbers and the firepower to hold a fixed position against us but they cannot stay where they are forever."

We shall wait for them to move and do what we always do, strike when they are weakest and do not expect it."

It was then that a roaring sound came from overhead and the cluster of Dark Eldar looked up into the sky, expecting to see another of the human air patrols flying over them. However, instead of the shape of a Valkyrie aerial transport or a Thunderbolt heavy fighter they saw a group of Razorwing fighters flying in an arrowhead formation with three Voidraven bombers at its centre flew over, heading towards the settlement several kilometres away and the haemonculus scowled. It was obvious that the archon had ordered the main attack to commence without him and that meant fewer captives for him to practice his craft on. The only chance he now had of sharing in the spoils was to defeat the unit that had already defeated him once.

Colonel Hatch hurried into her command post when she heard sirens sounding.

"What's going on?" she demanded.

"Colonel, auspex arrays just picked up a group of contacts heading in at high speed and low altitude." one of the command staff replied.

"Not ours I take?" Hatch asked.

"The Navy says that it has nothing in the air at this time. That's why I ordered the alert."

"Good." Hatch said, nodding in agreement of the officer's actions, "Tell the defences to open fire as soon as they have targets."

Outside Catachans manning Sabre defence platforms searched the skies for targets. Each operated by a single crewman, these lightweight platforms had been deployed by air to provide the XXV Regiment with some basic anti-air defence in addition to shoulder fired missiles until their Hydra self-propelled AA batteries could arrive with General Fortnam. These platforms fell into two basic types, the first mounted no weapons and were instead equipped with powerful manually operated searchlights that were shone up into the sky to pick out targets for the armed versions. These armed platforms were further broken down into versions that mounted four linked heavy stubbers for short range defence and those mounting twin linked auto-cannons for longer ranged operations.

The first of the Dark Eldar aircraft to pass over the camp was one of the Razorwing fighters and it moved so quickly that the gunners of the defence platforms were still turning their weapons as it passed out of range before they could even fire off a single shot. But as the second fighter approached the Catachan defenders were ready and it was met by a barrage of ground fire from both guns and missiles. With the advanced countermeasures of his fighter active the pilot was able to ignore the missiles that simply tumbled out of control as they lost their lock on the craft while to evade the streams of heavy stubber and auto-cannon rounds the pilot put his fighter's agility to the test and made a series of sudden and sharp turns. However, this was not fully effective and from inside his cockpit he heard the impacts of several lightweight rounds. But the pilot was not concerned about this and he quickly gained altitude to put himself out of range of the guns while the first of the Voidraven bombers approached silently, unlike the Razorwings that screeched as they flew to try and intimidate their enemies. The crew of the Voidraven had watched carefully as the previous Razorwing was fired at by the Catachans, marking the position each gun battery and missile launcher team. The bomber then unleashed a flurry of missiles towards the most densely packed clusters of gun batteries that detonated in the air above them to release clouds of chemically impregnated crystals similar to the projectiles fired by the Dark Eldar's splinter weapons. These fell on the exposed crews of the defence platforms and even the slightest scratch was enough to leave them writhing and screaming in agony as the toxins coating the crystals entered their bloodstreams.

As the first bomber pulled away the other two followed and opened fire with their own missiles, also targeting the Catachans' anti-air defences. However, this time a heavy weapons team with a missile launcher that had been too slow to engage the earlier Razorwings was able to lock onto one of the bombers and launch a missile at it. Not expecting the attack and flying at a very low level gave even the Dark Eldar crew insufficient time to activate their countermeasures and the missile slammed into one of the aircraft's engines, blasting the wing away from the bomber and sending the remains ploughing into the jungle where it exploded.

As the surviving bombers pulled away from the Catachan camp the reason for their targeting the anti-air defences became clear as out of the jungle rose scores of Raiders, Reavers and Ravagers. Moving at just over treetop height these sped towards the camp with the jetbikes taking the lead before diving down on the Catachans as they rushed to take up defensive positions. Many of the riders of the jetbikes used the blades built into the structure of their mounts to decapitate Catachans caught out in the open while others made use of hooked chains to snare guardsmen and drag them up into the air behind their jetbikes, screaming in pain and terror.

After the jetbikes came the Raiders and Ravagers. The first of these descended on the near side of the camp, firing at defensive positions and disgorging troops that quickly fanned out to attack. Meanwhile the later waves flew further over the camp, setting down all over it so that the Catachans were being attacked from multiple directions at once and nowhere could be considered safe by them.

The raider carrying the archon himself was part of a group of four such vehicles that set down within the area

of the original settlement. From his own vehicle he and his armoured retinue disembarked while from the others squads of Dark Eldar wearing even less armour than the typical lightly protected warrior leapt from their transports before they had even finished descending. Acting under the influence of drugs injected into their systems at the moment they disembarked these wych squads howled as they charged towards the startled Catachan support troops who had not expected the fighting to be get so close to them so quickly. Inside the command centre the numerous vox operators did their best to keep Colonel Hatch updated on the state of the fighting but it changed so rapidly that by the time reports of the Dark Eldar attacking a specific position, the aliens had already retreated from that location to attack a different one instead.

“Get me General Fortnam.” Hatch snapped as she picked up a vox handset but as the communication technician attempted to open a channel she pulled the handset away from her ear as it suddenly emitted a loud screeching sound, “What the feth is that?” she exclaimed.

“Colonel the enemy are jamming our vox signals.” the technician replied.

“We'll have to try and send a courier.” the commissar stood on the opposite side of the table Hatch was leaning on said and she nodded.

“Problem is getting someone through everything going on outside.” she said.

“Give me a platoon and a courier.” the commissar replied, “I'll make sure they get clear.”

“You'll need this.” Hatch said as she wrote a hurried note and she passed it to the commissar. Looking at the piece of paper he saw that not only did it contain a request for aid from General Fortnam, it also ordered whatever Catachan unit the commissar presented it to to follow his orders and get the courier out of the camp, “Now go.” she added, “That note ought to stop our side shooting you. Now all you have to worry about is the warp damned Eldar.”

Hatch then watched as the commissar drew his bolt pistol and then ran from the command centre and she smiled as he disappeared.

“If nothing else,” she said, “at least those Eldar have got that fething leash of my back. Now let's see what we can do about getting rid of them without the general's help.”

## 9.

Bodies of Dark Eldar littered the ground as the XXV Regiment's commissar, escorted by a platoon of infantry made his way to the hastily erected stables of the regiment's rough riders. When they had come under attack the Catachan cavalymen had resorted to opening the pens in which they kept their mounts. Unlike most cavalry regiments of the Imperial Guard the Catachans did not ride into battle on horseback. As a deathworld, Catachan was too hostile an environment for horses to be able to survive and instead the Catachans made use of a native reptile for riding. Like everything else on Catachan these creatures were predatory and dangerous and they had to be securely confined while not being ridden. Therefore, when the pens had been opened the startled Dark Eldar warriors had found themselves being suddenly charged by more than a hundred ravenous reptiles that could move even faster than they could.

"Hello, is anyone left?" the commissar called out, looking around for any signs of Catachan survivors.

"Over here." a voice with the familiar Catachan accent responded and a small group of guardsmen appeared from inside one of the pens armed with a motley assortment of weapons. Some had las guns or las pistols while others were armed with privately owned stub pistols or hunting rifles.

"What are you doing back there?" the commissar demanded, looking at the pen they had been hiding in.

"Our captain's injured. We were guarding him." the leader of these guardsmen replied, "Check it out if you don't believe me."

"That's not important right now." the commissar said and he held out the note from Colonel Hatch, "I need one of you to ride to General Fortnam and tell him to send help ahead of his column."

"Slight problem there, we don't have any mounts left." the Catachan replied.

"Then catch one." the commissar ordered, "Our voxes are being jammed. Either this message gets to the general or we all die."

The Catachan snarled and then looked around.

"Teller, Vash, go find us a mount while I prep a harness. I'm riding out." he said.

It took less than ten minutes for the two cavalymen to locate and snare one of the released mounts before dragging it back to the stables. It took both Catachans to hold the beast steady using their snare poles wrapped around its neck while the saddle and harness were fitted and the rider climbed onto the beast's back.

"Good. Now let's get you out of here." the commissar said.

The infantry platoon emerged from the stables first, firing at any Dark Eldar they saw. By moving and firing alternately while using liberal use of automatic fire the infantry was able to escort the lone cavalryman the short distance from the stables to the edge of the camp with relatively few losses. But along the way their actions did come to the attention of the Dark Eldar who rapidly figured out why a single rider was being escorted away from the combat zone. However, by the time a pair of Raiders laden with Dark Eldar warriors arrived to engage them the Catachans had already reached the edge of the jungle.

"Go!" the commissar yelled before he fired his bolt pistol at the Dark Eldar disembarking from their transports and the Catachan rider set off into the jungle.

The rider could hear the sounds of fighting behind him and he glanced over his shoulder to see if there were any signs of pursuit and when he saw none he pressed onwards. But as he got further away from the camp he heard the sound of a powerful engine as a pair of Dark Eldar mounted on jetbikes sped through the trees towards him. The rider drew his las pistol and fired it behind him, hoping that even though he doubted he could be accurate enough to hit either of the bikers the random fire would at least drive them off. But instead they just adjusted their position to be directly behind him where he could not fire at them while still facing forwards. Then the lead biker fired a rapid burst of projectiles from the splinter rifle built into his jetbike, one of which struck the rider in his throat and he fell from his mount, choking as his lungs filled with blood and the toxin coating the projectile started to paralyse his nervous system. His last sight before death claimed him was his now riderless mount continuing to run through the jungle while the note he had been supposed to deliver to General Fortnam fluttered in the breeze where it had become caught in the undergrowth.

Wolf and her command section were waiting at the bottom of the tree as Molla descended it after climbing to the top to investigate the distant sounds of shooting.

"Just like Rull said lieutenant." he said, "The Eldar are swarming all over the twenty-fifth. I saw aircraft, jetbikes and troop transports. I'd say their triple-A assets have been taken out and they're being overrun."

"Then we're too late." Wolf said and she looked at Derren, "We should turn back."

"We have yet to complete our mission lieutenant." Derren pointed out, "The webway gate must be destroyed."

"You'd sacrifice an entire regiment of troops for that?" Wolf asked.

"I'd sacrifice an entire division, ten divisions even to succeed in my mission." Derren told her, "Besides there is no point in turning back now."

"Why not?" Wolf said and before the inquisitor could respond Torrent spoke up.

"Haven't you figured it out outsider? Because by the time we got back there with our one little platoon the entire regiment will be gone." she said.

"Your medicae speaks the truth Lieutenant Wolf." Einhart commented, "Only by completing our mission can we avenge their loss."

"Besides," Vance added, "maybe if we can find that gateway fast enough we'll be able to draw some of the Eldar away from Colonel Hatch's troops." and Wolf sighed. Then she smiled, "Maybe we can help them." she said and she looked towards her command section's vox operator, "Kline, give me that handset." she said. "Yes lieutenant." the Catachan replied as he handed it over. Wolf then set the vox to the XXV Regiment's frequency and started to speak.

"This is-" Wolf began but the screeching sound that came from the handset as soon as she attempted to make contact with Colonel Hatch made her pull the handset away from her head.

"The Eldar are jamming us just like they did last time." Vance said.

"Maybe not." Wolf replied, "Maybe it's just the Twenty-Fifth that they're jamming." and Vance smiled.

"In which case they won't be able to signal for help but we might be outside the range of the jamming." he said.

"Exactly." Wolf said as she adjusted the vox frequency again to the one she knew General Fortnam's divisional command unit used, "This is Catachan One-Nine Mark Four Mark Two calling Catachan Seven Command. I need to speak with General Fortnam. Over." Wolf transmitted and she smiled when there was no jamming signal to be heard.

"This is General Fortnam," the general's voice replied, "go ahead Catachan One-Nine Mark Four mark Two. Over."

"General the Twenty-Fifth are under heavy Eldar assault. The enemy have air and mechanised support and appear to be in urgent need of support. Over." Wolf said.

"Colonel Hatch hasn't contacted us with any word of this." the general said, "Are you certain? Over."

"We have made a visual confirmation general. Our attempts to contact have been met with jamming but we appear to be beyond its range. Over." Wolf answered and for a moment there was silence before the general spoke again.

"Understood. Over and out." he said before the channel went dead.

Sat inside his Baneblade, General Fortnam looked at the display on his tactical dataslate.

"Order the Fourteenth's artillery to hold here and target the Twenty-Fifth's position." he said, "Then I want all our light armour and mechanised infantry to press on ahead of us. Use Hellhounds to clear them a path. That should get them to the Twenty-Fifth in a little under two hours. Then somebody get me a line to the Navy. I want whatever they can get us into the air immediately."

"Maybe now they'll have a fighting chance." Wolf said as she gave the vox handset back to Kline, "Okay, so I guess we're going straight on now then." she added and Vance nodded.

"Rull says that there's damage to the undergrowth from the suspensor fields keeping those Eldar transports in the air." he said.

"Then let's keep on. Somehow I get the feeling that that the Eldar that ran off this morning are still around somewhere and I'd rather not stay still long enough for them to be able to locate us again."

Second Platoon set off once more with Molla and Quinn's squads taking the lead while Mayer's mortar squad and Khor's ogryns brought up the rear. The small force advanced cautiously through the jungle, following marker left by Rull who moved far faster on his own. But after they had been moving for just over an hour Mayer came rushing up to the command section.

"Bomber, what's wrong?" Vance asked as they continued to advance at the same cautious rate and Mayer pointed toward the rear of the column.

"We're being followed." he replied.

"You're certain?" Wolf said and Mayer nodded.

"They're doing their best to stay out of sight but that thing with the cannons in its tail is pretty hard to hide." he said, "My guess is that they're following the trail left by the ogryns until they can figure out a way to ambush us."

"We should lay mines." Talmat suggested.

"That is impractical." Einhart replied, "To avoid the ogryns triggering them they would have to be set from the rear of our column and the Dark Eldar would be able to observe that taking place."

"I agree with Bomber." Vance added, "The Eldar are probably just waiting until they have the opportunity to launch an ambush. If they could hit us before we get the chance to set up heavy weapons then that thing with the cannons-"

"The Talos Pain Engine." Derren interrupted.

"Yeah, whatever." Vance said, "It'll cut us to pieces. The marines' heavy bolter is the only real fire support we'll have."

"What if we ambush them first?" Wolf asked.

"And how do you propose to do that lieutenant?" Derren asked.

"Well I can see how the ogryns would be easy to follow." Wolf replied, "They're loud and clumsy. Even I could track them through the jungle."

"I wouldn't be too sure about that." Torrent muttered and Vance glared at her briefly.

"So that means they aren't watching the front of the column." Wolf continued, ignoring the jibe from Torrent, "We can have Molla and Quinn take their squads off to the side and conceal themselves in the jungle. That way after the Eldar have gone past we'll have them caught between two forces. I doubt we'll be able to use our mortars but then again I expect we'll be too close for them to be really effective."

"An interesting idea lieutenant. But the Eldar have excellent heat vision. They can pierce jungle quite well." Derren pointed out.

"What about dead ground?" Vance suggested, "If Rull could find us a dip deep enough for our men to hide in then would that shield them from detection?"

"Yes, I believe it would." Derren replied.

"Okay then, that's what we'll do." Wolf said, "Sergeant Vance I want you to go ahead and tell Rull what we need and also the others what they are to do. When Molla and Quinn take their squads out of the column Grey will have to take over their position and his men need to be ready to deploy their missile launcher as quickly as possible."

"Got it." Vance responded and he hurried away from the command section.

"What about me?" Mayer asked.

"Get back to your squad and keep as good a watch on the Eldar as you can." Wolf told him.

"My men can assist with that." Einhart said, "Our senses are superior and our armour gives us even better vision."

"Thanks." Wolf said, "Two marines perhaps?"

"That sounds reasonable. It would avoid us looking like we are redeploying for combat." Einhart said and the he signalled to the squad of Deathwatch marines moving just in front of the command section, "Onund, Trethor. Fall back to cover the rear of the column. The xenos are plotting an ambush and Lieutenant Wolf has a plan to turn the tables on them. I want constant updates on their deployment."

"Yes captain." Onund replied, "We'll show them what it means to defy the Emperor."

The two marines went with Mayer as he returned to his squad. There was no real way to hide their presence and so the rest of the Deathwatch squad also had to be spread out more, giving the appearance that they were being deployed to provide all round coverage in support of the Catachans.

As Second Platoon continued to advance Molla and Quinn noticed markers left by Rull to indicate a suitable hiding place for their squads.

"What do you reckon? Two at a time?" Molla asked and Quinn nodded.

"Should be possible without attracting too much attention." he said, "I'll send two of mine first then I suggest your heavy bolter team goes and finds themselves the best spot."

"Okay, after that we alternate and we go last." Molla replied.

"Agreed." Quinn said before glancing towards the rest of his squad, "Jackson. King. You're up first." he ordered and veterans armed with a flamer and meltagun moved out of formation and headed into the jungle. A few seconds after this the two guardsmen carrying First Squad's heavy bolter were waved out of position by Molla and they followed the veterans into the undergrowth. This process continued, with pairs of Catachans leaving the column and heading into the jungle until only Quinn, Molla and First Squad's vox operator were left.

"Here goes." Quinn said and then all three men quickly darted into the undergrowth.

Making their way through the jungle the three men went for about twenty metres before they heard a whistle and looking around they saw Jackson beckoning them towards him.

"What do we have?" Quinn asked.

"Just a dip with a stream at the bottom really." Jackson answered, "But it should be enough to keep our body heat hidden. Or at least masked enough that it won't stand out."

Quinn advanced further and saw that Jackson's description was accurate. Rull had marked out a shallow channel eroded by a stream that now filled only a small part of the lowest point. This left a wide sloping bank either side that was just about deep enough for a man to lie in and not be seen from above. Now the two squads of Catachans lined up along this, all making sure to keep their heads low. First Squad's heavy bolter was hastily set up at the top of this before both the gunner and loader also retreated into the dip, ready to man their weapon as quickly as possible once the order was given.

"Molla to Wolf." Molla transmitted using his microbead, "We're in position."

"Copy that sergeant." Wolf responded, "We'll let you know when the enemy is in position."



"How long do you suppose that will take lieutenant?" Derren asked and Wolf looked at Vance.  
"Perhaps you should answer that one sergeant." she said.  
"At the rate we're moving and figuring that the Eldar stay as far back as Captain Einhart's men are saying they are we should have them right between our two groups in about ten minutes."  
All of a sudden Aman stumbled and reached out to steady himself against a nearby tree.  
"What's wrong with him?" Wolf exclaimed, unable to think of anything that would have such an effect on one of the superhuman Astartes.  
"The webway." Aman said as he stood back up, "I can feel its presence."  
"Then we are close." Einhart said and Aman nodded.  
"I can't give you an exact distance but I can feel the presence of the warp around it." the librarian said.  
"Can we just call in an orbital strike from here then?" Torrent asked.  
"No, without an exact fix it would have to be a saturation bombardment." Wolf replied and Vance groaned.  
"I've seen that before. I'd rather not be there for a second one." he said, remembering the first mission Second Platoon had undertaken with Wolf as its leader.  
"This presents us with a problem lieutenant." Einhart said, "The webway gate is likely to be guarded. That means that with our current deployment we are also caught between two groups of xenos troops."  
"I hadn't thought of that." Wolf said as she looked behind her, unable to see the Dark Eldar forces following them even though she knew that they were still there somewhere, "We're going to need another plan."

## 10.

It was the pilots of the Dark Eldar aircraft that first became aware of the arrival of Imperial reinforcements. Deploying directly from an orbiting starship, an entire wing of Thunderbolt heavy fighters descended through the atmosphere towards the settlement. As soon as they first detected the Dark Eldar craft on their auspex systems the Thunderbolts began to try and lock onto them with the air-to-air missiles they carried beneath their wings. But the Dark Eldar pilots detected this immediately and activated their countermeasures, blocking the attempt and forcing the Imperial pilots to close to cannon range.

Even without the use of their missiles the Thunderbolts were still more heavily armed than their Dark Eldar opponents, mounting four auto cannons and two las cannons in their noses. But both the Dark Eldar Razorwings and Voidraven bombers were the creations of far superior technology and they danced in the air, rapidly adjusting their course and speed just as the Imperial pilots were about to fire and causing the bursts of fire to go wide and the ammunition expended to be wasted.

The first air-to-air kill went to the pilot of a Razorwing fighter, launching a missile that bypassed the defences of a Thunderbolt to strike the rocket exhaust at the rear of the craft. Though this was shut down for atmospheric flight the warhead detonation was still able to ignite the stored fuel and the fighter exploded in a ball of flame. But the Dark Eldar pilot gloated for just a moment too long and as he howled in victory he saw a second Thunderbolt flying right towards him. Breaking off before the Imperial pilot could open fire he suddenly found himself flying right through the sights of another pilot who opened fire with his auto-cannons. The Razorwing flew right into the stream of powerful shells, the first of them striking the nose of the craft, After that the Razorwing's own momentum carried it onwards and the auto-cannon shells raking along its entire length, destroying the cockpit and turning the pilot into mush as one of the shells passed straight through his body. After that the shells continued to punch holes right through the Razorwing and it broke up in mid air, its wings separating out as they tumbled towards the ground below.

The archon was in the midst of decapitating a human, one of the black clad leaders known as commissars that he had found only a handful of so far among the Catachans when he heard the sonic boom of the arriving Imperial fighters and he looked up and hissed. Though he knew that the human aircraft were inferior to those supporting his own force he could also tell that they had a massive advantage in numbers, outnumbering his own aircraft by around two to one. These would have to be destroyed before the Dark Eldar could take prisoners back to Commorragh or the Imperial aircraft would easily pick off the raiders used to transport them before they made it back to the webway gate.

"All Ravagers deploy for anti-aircraft defence." he broadcast. Ordering his force's gunships to redirect their efforts from ground to air targets robbed his force of much of their heavy firepower but fortunately the Catachans had no armoured ground vehicles, these having been unable to penetrate the thick jungle yet and so the Ravagers could be spared for now.

An unfamiliar screeching sound made the archon turn and he saw one of the reptilian creatures that the Catachans had unleashed come rushing into the centre of the original settlement. This took a squad of nearby Dark Eldar by surprise and the beast picked one of the startled warriors up in its jaws and shook him wildly as the rest of his squad scattered. In response to this the archon raised his pistol and fired a single shot that took the creature between the eyes, the crystalline projectile killing it before the toxins could take effect. Then the archon turned his attention back towards the Catachans blocking his access to their command post.

However, before he could organise a push to try and dislodge the building's outer defenders another human built aircraft flew low overhead. Unlike the Thunderbolts currently doing their best to dogfight the Dark Eldar Razorwings this had a twin tailed configuration and wings that bent downwards. Beneath its wings the Vulture gunship mounted a pair of hellstrike anti-armour missiles and as the archon looked up and watched one of these dropped from the wing it had been carried under before its rocket motor ignited and it raced towards a Ravager. The missile struck the vehicle centrally and the warhead, designed to pierce the thick armour of tanks, blasted the entire vehicle apart as the Vulture gained altitude once more. Looking around the archon saw several more of the Vulture gunships armed with a variety of weapons. But worse was yet to come.

In the distance the archon saw that the sky was discoloured by smoke that was getting close to the edge of the jungle.

"I need to know what is happening to the north." he broadcast, "Someone find out what is causing that cloud."

"Understood my lord." one of the riders of a Reaver jetbike responded and a group of the riders broke off from the attack and raced across the open killing ground towards the jungle. Gaining altitude the bikers flew

above the trees towards the smoke and as they got nearer they saw flashes of flame coming from beneath the jungle canopy. It was then that they descended again, dropping down through a gap in the foliage and dodging between the trees as they headed for the source of the flames.

The noise of their own jetbikes limited how much the Dark Eldar riders could hear and so the first thing they knew of what they were riding towards was when they saw an Imperial Guard Hellhound flame-throwing tank crash through a clump of burning undergrowth. More light tanks followed this and they in turn were followed by Chimera infantry fighting vehicles.

Only one of the Reaver jet bikes was armed with a weapon capable of destroying armoured vehicles, a short ranged heat lance and its rider accelerated towards the lead Hellhound. The rapidly moving jet bike moved too quickly for the Hellhound's turret to track it but before the rider could open fire on his target there was a burst of fire from the multi-laser mounted in the turret of one of the Chimeras. The bright red beam sliced through the body of the jet bike and the Dark Eldar rider screamed as he was thrown clear. The jet bike ploughed into a tree and exploded while the rider landed on the ground and rolled across it until being brought to a halt by the thickness of the undergrowth. A dull rumbling sound filled his ears and he looked up just in time to see the Hellhound coming towards him and ripping up vegetation before it ran over him, crushing him beneath its tracks and grinding his remains into the ground.

Left with no way of harming the oncoming armoured column the surviving dark Eldar riders all turned their jet bikes around and angled them upwards to punch through the jungle canopy to get into the open air where they could make the most of their speed as they rushed back towards the fighting to warn the archon about the approaching danger.

"I'll take my forces on ahead." Derren said to Wolf, "Your platoon will remain behind to keep that haemonculus from attacking our rear."

"Will just two squads be enough?" Wolf asked and the inquisitor smiled.

"Yes lieutenant." he replied as he looked at Captain Einhart, "I have all the troops I need to get close enough to mark the position of the webway gate. If I do need reinforcements then I will be sure to request them. The onus is on your troops to deal with our pursuers quickly enough to be of benefit."

"We'll do our best inquisitor." Wolf said.

"Marines, form up to advance." Einhart ordered and the squad of Deathwatch marines regrouped, gathering together between Wolf's command section and Grey squad ahead of them.

"The enemy are in position back there." Onund told Wolf, "You can spring your trap any time you want." and Wolf nodded.

"We'll hold position here." she said, "Maybe when we start shooting we'll be able to draw out some of the Eldar defending the target."

"That would be appreciated lieutenant." Derren said and then he looked at Einhart, "Shall we be going then captain?" he asked.

Without saying a word in response Einhart started to walk ahead, with Aman pointing him in the direction that he could sense the webway gate in. Derren and his stormtroopers followed the marines closely, using their armoured forms as protection from any Dark Eldar that might be lying in wait for them.

Meanwhile Wolf and Grey had their squads deploy in the undergrowth as Mayer and Khor continued to advance, giving the Dark Eldar following them the impression that the entire column was still advancing.

"Sergeant Grey, what's the status of that missile launcher?" Wolf asked and Grey looked around at the heavy weapon team.

"Locked and loaded." he replied when the gunner nodded back at him.

"Then you may fire when ready sergeant." Wolf said.

The guardsman carrying Second Squad's missile launcher took aim through the jungle, using the weapon's sight to acquire one of the Dark Eldar vehicles before firing. The missile shot out of the launcher and raced between the trees towards the Dark Eldar who barely had time to realise what was happening before it struck the Raider and the detonation broke the vehicle in two.

At the same time Mayer's men turned and fired their las guns towards the aliens while Khor raised a fist into the air.

"Ogryns! Charge!" he bellowed and the bulky abhumans all roared as they charged back the way they had come, firing their ripper guns while they followed the same path that they had trampled flat as they ran towards the startled Dark Eldar.

Though the Dark Eldar had not expected to come under attack in this way it did not take them long to respond and dark beams of energy lashed out from the remaining Raiders, blasting their way through trees as the gunners hunted for the heavy weapon team that had already destroyed one of their number.

"Disembark!" Dhullaris ordered. Fortunately for him the missile had destroyed the only remaining raider not to have been carrying any troops. He and his wracks were aboard one while the remaining grotesques were aboard the last and now all of them leapt down to the ground before their transports could be destroyed and them killed along with it. As soon as their feet touched the ground, Dhullaris activated the control mounted on

his sleeve that sent a cocktail of stimulant chemicals into the grotesques and they howled as this took effect. Then they began to run, heading towards the ogryns to meet them in battle. But before they could reach the squad of abhumans the heavy bolter of Molla's squad opened fire, sending a steady stream of explosive projectiles towards them. Driven forwards by the chemicals flowing through their bloodstreams the grotesques lacked the necessary survival instinct to take seek cover and the heavy bolter rounds tore through them before they got close enough to be finished off by the ogryns' ripper guns.

To try and deal with the heavy bolter team one of the Raiders accelerated, circling around towards the section of low ground that the Catachans had used for cover. The Raider's dark lance fired again, the beam passing over the heads of the heavy bolter team and forcing them to cease fire while they took cover. The pilot of the Raider pushed on, intending to fly his vehicle right over the squad of Catachans so that the gunner could strafe them. But his course brought him close to Quinn's veterans as well.

"Melta, now!" Quinn yelled and King leapt to his feet, aimed his meltagun at the Raider and fired.

The Dark Eldar pilot tried to veer off when he realised that there was a second squad of Catachans in front of him but all this meant was that the beam from the meltagun struck his vehicle side on rather than head on and it started by burning away much of the open passenger deck. Realising that his raider was doomed the pilot leapt from his seat and then from the Raider entirely, yelling at the gunner to do the same. The burning Raider ploughed onwards before it crashed into the ground and the two crewmen drew their pistols as they looked towards the Catachans.

"Go!" Quinn yelled as he got to his feet and ran towards the two Dark Eldar crewmen. Bringing his shotgun to his shoulder he fired repeatedly, cycling the pump action as rapidly as he could while putting one round after another into the Dark Eldar gunner. The pilot took aim to return fire but there was another shotgun blast from one of Quinn's men that made the alien dive for cover, ending up behind a large moss covered rock. Without bothering to aim his weapon, the Dark Eldar fired several shots around this and Quinn's squad was forced to take cover just in case they were hit at random. But they were close to the rock by this point and Quinn plucked a grenade from his webbing.

"Ready?" he asked the Catachan beside him and the other man nodded, aiming his shotgun towards the rock. Quinn pulled the pin from the grenade and let the lever fly off. Then he counted to three before he hurled the explosive over the rock. The Dark Eldar hiding there saw the grenade coming towards him and jumped up to run before it could explode. But the Catachan beside Quinn was waiting for this and as soon as the alien made his move he fired his shotgun. The blast just clipped the Dark Eldar and he fell to the ground clutching at his side right before the grenade exploded next to him.

"Fall back." Dhullaris ordered his remaining forces, now consisting of just his personal squad of wracks, a Talos Pain Engine and the last of the Raiders. The human forces he faced now had overwhelming superiority and the Dark Eldar way of war was not suited to defensive actions, they used hit and fade attacks to strike where their enemy was least prepared. However, by falling back Dhullaris hoped to lure the humans into following him so that while their attention was focused on what remained of his forces they would open themselves up to attack from another source, "This is Haemonculus Dhullaris," he said into his communicator, "I am under attack and need assistance. Lock onto my position and send what troops you can."

"Received Dhullaris." another Dark Eldar voice hissed, "We will join you shortly."

At the same time in the camp set up beside the webway gate two squads of Dark Eldar warriors that had been left behind to protect the gate rushed towards a pair of Raiders while a third squad of troops armed with a number of heavy weapons in place of the standard issue splinter rifle spread the wings that had been surgically grafted to their backs before leaping into the air and taking flight.

These raced above the trees, aiming to reach the haemonculus as quickly as possible and in doing so they flew right over the advancing inquisitorial forces.

"The lieutenant's forces have drawn some of the enemy away from the webway." Derren said as he looked up to see the two Raiders and winged figures pass overhead oblivious to the presence of him and the troops under his command. Then he looked at his stormtroopers, "Sergeant Talmat, kindly inform Lieutenant Wolf that she has company coming."

"Yes my lord." Talmat replied before activating the communicator built into his armour, "Lieutenant Wolf this is Sergeant Talmat. Do you read me?"

"I read you sergeant." Wolf responded, "The Eldar are in retreat but rather than pursue I'm holding position for now. I don't want to get drawn too far from you."

"Well you've got more enemy forces moving in on your position. Expect mechanised and jump infantry to be with you soon."

"Understood sergeant. Thanks for the heads up. Over and out." Wolf said.

"Lieutenant Wolf is ready my lord." Talmat told Derren and the inquisitor looked at Aman.

"How much further codicier?" he asked.

"Not far." the Deathwatch psyker answered, "We should be able to see the target soon."

"Contact. Twenty metres ahead." Onund suddenly announced, using his armour's communicator to broadcast his warning to the rest of the force and the marines raised their bolters.

"Report sergeant, what is their strength?" Einhart asked.

"I estimate fifty infantry plus at least three light vehicles." Onund replied and Einhart and Derren looked at one another.

"That is still a significant force." Einhart commented.

"Yes it is. I think we will require assistance from Lieutenant Wolf's platoon to finish this." Derren responded.

The winged troops dropped through the jungle canopy first and landed beside Khor's ogryns. In unison they fired their carbines and heat lances at the abhumans before they could react. The carbines had little effect, the toughened hides of the ogryns along with the flak armour they wore preventing most of the crystalline projectiles from breaking their skin. Even in the handful of instances where this did happen the mass of the ogryns was so great and their nervous system so basic that the dosage of toxin that entered their bloodstream was too little to do more than cause the victim to cry out in pain. However, the Dark Eldar armed with heat lances were able to focus their fire on just one of the ogryns and the concentration of energy beams was enough to incinerate him in an instant.

Reacting to this Khor produced a grenade that he hurled into the midst of the Dark Eldar and they scattered before could detonate. However, the large wings that enabled the aliens to fly also presented a large surface area and when the grenade exploded it sent shrapnel flying through the wings of several Dark Eldar, preventing them from leaving the ground.

"Ogryns fire!" Khor yelled as his squad turned to face the winged Dark Eldar and returned fire on them.

Caught at short range and subjected to repeated bursts from the rapid firing weapons, the Dark Eldar stood little chance and in a matter of seconds the ripper guns had torn them apart.

But before the Catachans could have the chance to reorganise themselves the two Raiders came crashing through the jungle canopy, the Dark Eldar warriors standing on their decks firing down into the undergrowth. This fire was intended only to keep the Catachans away from where the Raiders arrived while their passengers disembarked and none of Second Platoon were hit.

"Lieutenant." Talmat's voice said through Wolf's microbead.

"Wolf here. We're kind of busy right now." she replied as she slapped the member of her squad armed with a grenade launcher on the back, "Lay down frag." she told him and the Catachan nodded before firing off several shots in rapid succession that sent explosive fragmentation rounds towards the nearest cluster of Dark Eldar.

"Lieutenant, Inquisitor Derren needs you to bring your forces forwards. There are large numbers of xenos troops guarding the webway gate. We cannot get to the target without clearing them first."

"I thought we'd drawn out the defenders. We're engaged with them now." Wolf said.

"Not all lieutenant. The inquisitor is ordering you here. We are six hundred metres south-south-west of your position.

"Oh very well. Wolf out." Wolf said before shutting off her microbead.

"Trouble lieutenant?" Vance asked, firing a shot from his las pistol around a tree that took a Dark Eldar warrior off his feet.

"We're to move out." she said, "Inquisitor Derren wants us to join up with his force. Apparently there are more Eldar at the target than he was anticipating."

Vance then looked at the two squads of Dark Eldar that were now spreading out and firing their rifles in all directions.

"I doubt these guys are going to just let us go." he said.

"I know. We'll have to leave someone behind to cover our rear." Wolf said and then she activated her microbead again, setting it to address her entire platoon, "This is Lieutenant Wolf. Inquisitor Derren has ordered us to advance to his position. Sergeant Khor will keep his squad here to block the Eldar from following us. Guardsman Rull you are to stay as well. If you see any signs of an officer among these things then take it out. Everyone else lay smoke and get moving. Corporal Mayer, we'll be assaulting a fixed position so we may have need of your mortars."

Tossing smoke grenades between themselves and the Dark Eldar warriors, Second Platoon began to relocate towards the webway gate. Their senses blocked by the thick cloud of smoke the Dark Eldar could not make out any distinct targets from the squads moving away from them and instead they turned their full attention to the ogryns. But the half dozen remaining massive abhumans carried with them a significant amount of firepower and the concentrated barrage forced the Dark Eldar to take cover rather than their weapons driving back the ogryns.

"Ogryns! Transports!" Khor shouted and he turned his ripper gun towards the nearest raider. Thanks to the Raiders' lightweight construction, the powerful shotguns posed a threat even to these vehicles and the pilot of the targeted Raider tried to get his vehicle out of the way as quickly as he could. However, the storm of shot still tore through the armour of the Raider's gunner and she collapsed in place, her weapons sagging uselessly on its mount the moment she let go of it.

"Here." Mayer said when Second Platoon reached a point about half way to the location of the webway gate, "This is the best spot for the mortars."

"Then get them set up," Wolf told him, "and we'll go on ahead. My guess is that you'll get one or two shots per tube and then you'll need to move in to join the rest of us."

"Understood lieutenant." Mayer replied and while the rest of the platoon continued on their way his squad set up their three mortar tubes and started to prepare a set of bombs that could be fired on rapid notice.

Captain Einhart turned towards Second Platoon as they advance, having heard even the Catachans' cautious approach.

"What's the situation?" Wolf asked but it was Derren that answered.

"The webway gate is located up ahead in an area of open ground that is covered by the jungle canopy overhead." he told her, "According to Sergeant Onund the enemy have several squads of troops and a number of vehicles present."

"I have deployed my squad forward." Einhart added, "But we will need the added firepower of your platoon to guarantee victory."

"We need to get close enough to the gate to plant melta bombs." Derren said, "With the Dark Eldar engaged against the Twenty-Fifth it will take too long for a warship to get into position to carry out a lance strike from orbit."

"Well Corporal Mayer has set up his mortars about three hundred metres back. I was expecting you to want to assault the target so I told him to be ready to fire a couple of quick salvos then have his men join us here to act as another rifle squad." Wolf said.

"Then you should move your other squads into position lieutenant." Einhart said, "Brother Vallis will target one of the xenos vehicles and your heavy weapons should target the others. We will engage them all at the same time as your mortar squad bombards the area to take out their infantry."

"Yes captain." Wolf replied, nodding. Then she activated her microbead, "First and Second Squads advance

to the marines' line. Deploy heavy weapons and co-ordinate with the marines to target enemy vehicles. Do not fire until ordered. I say again, do not fire until ordered to. Wolf out."

Molla and Grey moved their squads forwards to where the main group of Deathwatch marines was already deployed, crouching among the vegetation and monitoring the Dark Eldar around the gate.

"Where do you want us?" Molla asked.

"Either side. Each of our squads will target the vehicle matching our relative positions." Onund replied without taking his eyes off the Dark Eldar visible ahead and Molla looked ahead to see a trio of Ravagers lined up beside the alien structure of the webway gate, "But be cautious. The xenos can sense heat so make sure you keep plenty of cover between you and them."

"Okay everyone, get on the ground." Molla said.

"Second squad, you heard him." Grey added and both squads of Catachans lay flat on the ground before dragging themselves through the undergrowth into position. Both squads deployed their heavy weapons pointing towards the Dark Eldar vehicles while the other squad members aimed their las guns towards the infantry, ready to fire on any that survived the mortar bombardment.

"First Squad in position." Molla whispered into his microbead when his squad's heavy bolter was set up, though to avoid making too much sound the ammunition belt had been inserted but no round had yet been chambered.

"Second Squad in position. Launcher locked and loaded." Grey added after watching an anti-armour missile loaded into his squad's missile launcher.

"We're set." Wolf told Derren and Einhart and the inquisitor smiled.

"Then I think we should begin, don't you captain?" he said and Einhart nodded once.

"This is Captain Einhart to all units, Deathwatch and Imperial Guard. Corporal Mayer is to begin bombardment, three rounds rapid from each tube. Other squads will engage when the first of them land. Begin." he broadcast.

## 12.

Three hundred metres behind the force's command units Mayer looked at his waiting men. "Go!" he snapped and immediately three of them dropped mortar rounds into their weapons before ducking out of the way as they were propelled back up and into the air. With more rounds already prepared and ready to be handed to them they were able to fire two more bombs from each mortar before the first had even landed and when the final rounds were airborne Mayer activated his microbead, "Mortar rounds incoming. We're moving forward to join you." he signalled. "Copy that Corporal. See you soon." Wolf responded.

The Dark Eldar guarding the webway gate were the first to hear the whistling sound of the mortar rounds falling towards them and they ran for cover among the supply containers littering the area. "here it comes." Onund broadcast to his men when he too heard the sound, "The Emperor's judgement on the xenos."

The first mortar bomb that burst through the jungle canopy struck the top of the webway gate itself, exploding on impact. The explosive was not powerful to damage the ancient alien mechanism but it did send shrapnel flying out over a large area and signalled the squads hiding in the jungle that it was time to engage the dark Eldar.

Vallis was the first to open fire, his enhanced reactions giving him the edge over the Catachans and he unleashed carefully placed short bursts of heavy bolter fire towards the centre Ravager that took the crew entirely by surprise. Rather than attempt to destroy the gunship directly he targeted the exposed crew instead. First the forward gunner was torn apart by a trio of rounds that detonated inside his torso before Vallis turned his attention to the nearest of the two sponson gunners. The shrouded sponson provided little protection the Dark Eldar and his headless corpse slumped sideways as another bolt round explosively decapitated him. Next came the pilot and another short burst caused his remains to collapse on the deck where he stood at which point the Ravager began to drift, canting to the side before plunging into the ground and trapping the remaining gunner beneath its hull.

The missile launcher team from Grey's squad was the next to open fire, just as Vallis was engaging the pilot of his target. Unlike the marine the Catachan targeted the Ravager directly, firing an anti-armour missile into the craft's centrally mounted engine. The explosion broke the Ravager in half and the flame consumed its crew as it fell to the ground.

Finally came First Squad's heavy bolter. Its gunner chambered the first round on the belt as rapidly as he could and then fired at the final Ravager. Unlike Vallis who had used carefully targeted bursts the Catachan gunner fired one long sustained burst that raked across as much of the vehicles as he could manage. Though lightly armoured, the Ravager's structure was not entirely proof against the heavy bolter rounds and sparks flew as weak points in its protection were hit. Several of the rounds tore through the gunship's steering sail and the damage caused it to start swaying violently while the pilot struggled to regain control. With the other two Ravagers just wrecks by this point, Vallis turned his attention to the last one and added his heavy bolter to the barrage. With the Ravager moving randomly he was unable to pick out the crew as he had on his own target and so he too unleashed a sustained burst of rocket assisted projectiles. One of the gunners attempted to return fire at the Imperial forces but the movement of the Ravager was too much even for the advanced targeting systems built into its weapon mounts and the beam of dark energy went wide, instead slicing through several trees before the gunner finally ceased fire. The continued barrage of heavy bolter rounds started to take their toll on the Ravager and one system after another failed, triggering more alarms on the pilot's console until there was a sudden flash from the engine housing as a fire was triggered inside it. The Dark Eldar pilot immediately shut down the engine to avoid an explosion and ordered the crew to abandon the vehicle. But as they disengaged themselves from their positions the Dark Eldar crew made themselves easier targets and they were torn apart by the continuing hail of bolter rounds.

While the heavy weapons were engaging the Dark Eldar vehicles the other marines and guardsmen targeted the accompanying infantry with small arms fire and launched fragmentation grenades. Already in cover the Dark Eldar ducked out of sight for protection while one of their number engaged his communicator. "Lord archon," he exclaimed, "the Mon'Keigh are at the webway gate in large numbers. We are under heavy fire and need support."

The call for help reached the Dark Eldar commander just as he slit the throat of the last of the Catachans defending the entrance to the building being used as their command centre. Above him his air support was getting the upper hand over the Imperial Navy fighters and gunships while the Catachans' armoured reinforcements were being held back by fast moving Ravagers and squads of troops armed with dark lances



and shorter ranged electromagnetic pulse emitting haywire weapons. However, the loss of the webway gate would doom his expedition regardless of victory here. The archon knew that an even more powerful Imperial force approached and he was ill prepared to face it. The Dark Eldar way of war relied on rapid, powerful strikes and retreat but without the webway to retreat through he would be forced to fight a more conventional war of attrition against a far more numerous foe that would rule the skies above as well.

"Retreat!" the archon yelled angrily, broadcasting his order to the entire army, "The Mon'Keigh are attacking the webway gate. All units fall back and defend it."

The Dark Eldar disengaged from their Catachan opponents, rapidly withdrawing to where Raider transports touched down. The archon himself stormed towards a vehicle, furious that he was being forced to retreat while on the verge of victory to defend an asset that was supposed to have been secure and as the Raider rose into the air the archon swore that he would make someone pay for this.

While Molla and Grey held their forces back Onund raised his fist in the air and ordered the Deathwatch to attack the Dark Eldar more closely.

"Forward!" he yelled, "Purge the xenos!" and the marines charged forwards, crashing through the undergrowth with their bolters still firing, dropping empty magazines and reloading their weapons on the move.

The Dark Eldar attempted to return fire but this only served to expose them to the bolter fire of the marines or the covering las gun fire from the Catachans in the jungle. On the other hand the handful of rounds they were able to fire back from their splinter rifles bounced harmlessly off the marines' thick power armour.

As the marines closed in Rafen discharged his flamer and a sheet of burning liquid engulfed many of the Dark Eldar while the other marines used thrown fragmentation grenades to help clear their way as they charged into close combat. Even though the Dark Eldar warriors' reflexes were faster than even the genetically enhanced marines they lacked the necessary strength or endurance to resist them properly and the poison present on their combat knives was rendered useless by their inability to land any blows that penetrated the marines' armour. On the other hand the marines possessed enough strength that they could break the bones of the Dark Eldar with their bare hands and they soon despatched their alien foes without losing a single one of their own number.

"Onund to Einhart. The target is secure." the sergeant signalled.

"Understood sergeant. Hold your position, we are on our way." Einhart replied just as the two squads of Catachans that had been supporting the Deathwatch began to emerge from the jungle, spreading out to confirm that all of the Dark Eldar were indeed dead and when the force's command elements arrive with Quinn's veterans and Mayer's mortar squad there was still the occasional shriek as a Catachan drove one of their traditional knives into an injured alien.

"Excellent." Derren said, looking up at the webway gate. Then he looked at his stormtroopers, "Sergeant Talmat, set the charges." he ordered.

"Yes my lord." Talmat responded and the stormtroopers ran towards the webway gate before taking melta bombs from their webbing that they began to fix to the base of the alien structure.

"At least one should be attached to the warp array at the top of the arc." Aman called out to the stormtroopers, "Even if we are unsuccessful in-" and then he suddenly stopped speaking.

"What's wrong?" Wolf asked.

"They're here." Aman responded right before there was the sound of engines and several Dark Eldar raiders came crashing through the trees covering the area around the webway gate. One of the vehicles remained overhead while the Dark Eldar troops aboard it fired their weapons at the squad of Deathwatch marines. However, unlike the splinter weapons that had proven ineffective against the marines' armour these aliens were equipped with haywire blasters and as the pulses of bright blue light they emitted struck the marines they shuddered uncontrollably as the electromagnetic pulse effects overloaded their armour. Meanwhile the other Raiders took advantage of the marines being incapacitated to descend to a point where they could deploy their passengers, more of the drug enhanced Dark Eldar wyches armed with a wide variety of close combat weapons. Significantly many of these aliens carried nets that they hurled towards the Catachan troops they charged to immobilise them.

Above these more Raiders descended, with the archon looking down from the deck of one.

"I will not return to Commorragh empty handed!" he shouted, his words broadcast to his entire force, "Anyone who kills a Mon'Keigh will pay with their own life. I want them all alive!"

"Fall back!" Wolf yelled, "Into the jungle." and then she fired her las pistol, shooting a Dark Eldar warrior in his faceplate.

"Lookout!" Vance shouted from beside her and he slammed into her just as one of the Dark Eldar wyches somersaulted towards them and delivered a kick that sent both Wolf and Vance flying.

Einhart stepped forwards and raised his bolt pistol but before he could fire it the wych released a grenade that when it detonated released a blue flash similar to the haywire blasters used to disable Einhart's men and both he and Aman suddenly found themselves trapped inside armour weighing one hundred and eighty

kilogrammes that would not respond to their movements, immobilising both of them.

Derren fired his bolt pistol as rapidly as he could, killing another Dark Eldar with each pull of his trigger until the weapon was empty. At this point he ejected the magazine and inserted another, chambering the first round as he prepared to fight on.

Looking up from where she had landed, Wolf was about to try and get to her feet when she suddenly felt herself being grabbed by alien hands that pulled her to her feet while disarming her at the same time.

Turning her head she saw the same thing happening all around her as Dark Eldar restrained Catachans, stormtroopers and even the marines trapped inside their useless armour.

On the other hand Inquisitor Derren remained free as the Dark Eldar archon in his ornate armour jumped from his Raider to land right in front of the Imperial agent. Then the alien did something unexpected.

It spoke.

"Put the weapon down Mon'Keigh." the archon said as the inquisitor pointed his bolt pistol directly at him, his words translated from his own language to Gothic by a device built into his helmet, "I may not have this world but I still have all of you and now I shall take you back to Commorragh."

Derren just stared at the archon for a moment and the alien stared back at him. But then the inquisitor looked at Wolf instead.

"I am so sorry lieutenant." he said, "I am sure that I would have enjoyed working with you." and then he placed the muzzle of his bolt pistol beneath his jaw and blew off his own head.

"Take them!" the archon shouted, pointing towards the webway gate and the Dark Eldar began to drag their captives towards it.

"You can't do this!" Wolf shouted, "This world belongs to the Emperor and you are trespassing here."

"Do you really think they care outsider?" Torrent shouted back at her before she was dragged through the expanding portal into the webway.

From behind him the archon heard movement and he turned to see Dhullaris and his few remaining troops stepping into the clearing.

"Lord archon." the haemonculus said, bowing his head.

"Fool." the archon hissed.

"My lord I-"

"You failed me haemonculus." the archon interrupted, "I take it that these are the Mon'Keigh you were supposed to deal with and yet they made it all the way here. Now instead of thousands of captives to take back to Commorragh I must return with just a few dozen."

"My lord we can bring more troops." Dhullaris replied, knowing that he was arguing for his life, "We can take more captives."

"If the other Mon'Keigh know the location of this portal then they will destroy it first." the archon said, "I must return to Commorragh with what I have. You on the other hand will remain here."

"Here my lord?" Dhullaris said, expecting to be killed at any moment and wondering whether a new clone of himself would be activated to take his place.

"Yes, here. If the Mon'Keigh know of this place then they will attack soon. On the other hand if they have not attacked after two days then we can assume that these Mon'Keigh were unable to warn the others and we can return with fresh troops. Do you understand?"

"Yes my lord." Dhullaris replied and without another word being said the archon turned and walked through the webway gate.

Dhullaris and his remaining troops watched as the rest of the Dark Eldar army retreated into the webway, taking with them the force that had attacked it until only they remained. Just in case a quick escape was needed the haemonculus left the webway gate active and then sat down to wait on one of the supply canisters nearby.

Glancing at the hovering Talos Pain Engine, Dhullaris noticed something odd. There was a tiny red spot moving across the pain engine's flesh towards its misshapen head. When the spot reached the Talos' head it suddenly stopped and then there was the sound of a suppressed rifle shot that even Dhullaris' heightened hearing could barely perceive and the pain engine was hit. The bullet passed right through its brain and the bulky creation came crashing to the ground as Dhullaris looked on in surprise.

"Mon'Keigh!" he shouted, drawing his pistol. But before any targets appeared there was another shot and Dhullaris was hit through the heart.

Despite the loss of both the Talos Pain Engine and their leader the squad of wracks held their ground and raised their weapons as they hunted for targets. At which point there came a loud shout from the jungle.

"Ogryns! Charge!" Khor yelled and his squad of abhumans came running out of the jungle with their ripper guns firing. The sudden fury of this assault was too much for the small number of wracks to resist and all but one were torn apart by the powerful ripper gun blasts. The only survivor pointed his weapon at Khor but before he could fire another of the ogryns swung a fist at him and sent him flying through the air. The wrack then saw the ogryns as they gathered around him and in unison they began to stomp him to death.

With the final wrack dead and no more Dark Eldar in sight Khor looked towards the glowing sphere of energy

that was the active webway gate.

“Ogryns forward.” he said before leading his squad into the webway.