



CATACHAN ONE-NINE MARK FOUR MARK TWO

5.3: CITY OF DARKNESS

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Taken to the Dark Eldar city of Commorragh, the Catachans of Second Platoon are forced to fight for their lives in the dark city's gladiatorial arenas. When the chance of escape appears they are presented with enemies in their own ranks while help comes from some unexpected sources.

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In a society where knowledge of alien civilisations was often considered heretical, few humans knew anything of the existence of the webway, the network of passageways through warp space that spanned almost the entire Milky Way galaxy and fewer still ever entered it. Created millions of years earlier by a species now gone from the galaxy, the webway was the primary means by which the Eldar travelled between different worlds. Not all of the passageways remained intact, over the millennia some had been breached by creatures from the warp and sealed off to prevent them from running amok throughout the entire network. Of those that remained some were narrow paths that were suitable for just a few individuals to make their way along on foot while others were so vast that the gigantic starships operated by the Eldar or any of the younger races could fly down them. Here and there were even larger pockets where it was possible to construct entire cities. At one point in the distant past many of these would have been trade ports where goods could be offloaded from a ship without it needing to leave the webway but over time these cities had been abandoned and fallen into ruin. One noticeable exception to this was Commorragh, the nightmarish city of the Dark Eldar. Here tens of millions of Eldar existed, often fighting among themselves between sending out raiding parties into the real universe where they would cause terror and panic before returning to their city laden with trophies of their most favourable kills and slaves mainly to carry out the menial labour that the Dark Eldar considered beneath them. Other slaves would be put to other uses, some taken by the Haemonculi to become the living test subjects of their experimentation while others would entertain the Dark Eldar in the gladiatorial arenas.

One such raid on the human world of THX-1138, a planet where the process of colonisation was so new that it had not even been properly named yet had netted the Dark Eldar just a handful of slaves before the human troops that had been deployed there had been able to mass in sufficient force to drive the dark Eldar back into the webway. However, the last group of those taken had been a military unit deployed to locate and destroy the webway gate itself and although they had failed in this they had come close enough to succeeding that the Dark Eldar archon hoped they would still net him a good price. Most of this last batch of slaves were human soldiers from the Imperial Guard but they had been led by an inquisitor, one of the Imperium's elite secret agents and it had been he who had planned to destroy the webway gate. In addition to the ordinary human troops he had commanded the inquisitor had also commanded a unit of the elite Adeptus Astartes, the famed space marines. These genetically modified super soldiers represented the best that the Imperium had to offer and the archon knew that just these twelve captives would make the entire expedition worth while.

The cages in which the captives were kept were slung beneath a convoy of anti-gravity vehicles that resembled the ancient sail powered vessels that had travelled the oceans of ancient Terra tens of thousands of years ago. Made of a strange bone like material, Lieutenant Emilia Wolf found the bars of her cage disconcerting to the touch.

"What do you suppose this is?" she asked, looking at the other prisoners held in her cage. Most of these were members of the infantry platoon she commanded, the Second Platoon of the Catachan XIX Regiment's Fourth Company. Unlike her all of her troops came from the jungle planet Catachan, widely known as the most dangerous planet in the galaxy where more than half the population died before reaching adulthood. This meant that the planet bred some of the toughest troops in the Imperial Guard but they were also notoriously independent and even after several years of serving with them Wolf was still considered an outsider.

"Thinking you can bend it lieutenant?" one of Wolf's sergeants said, Sergeant Grey of her Second Squad. Grey remained more hostile to Wolf than most of the other platoon members though he would still follow her orders, "Somehow I don't think you've got the muscles."

"I was wondering whether we could cut through it when the Eldar aren't looking." Wolf said, "Then maybe we can make our way back through the gate to THX-1138."

"Slight problem with that lieutenant." Grey said, "I think we've arrived at our destination." and he pointed ahead of the line of vehicles to where the webway passage that the Dark Eldar convoy had been moving along suddenly opened out and the Catachans got their first look at the ancient city of their captors. Dark towers covered in spikes and blades rose up into the air above the city, many of them interconnected by walkways and roads high above the ground but many of the Dark Eldar had no need of these and they zoomed between the imposing structures riding on jetbikes or skyboards while others used various skimmers to avoid having to set foot on the ground below. Meanwhile the centre of the city was dominated by the gladiatorial arenas where thousands fought to the death everyday. From the vantage point of where the convoy approached the city it was also possible to see that portions of it were in ruins, the ancient towers

having either collapsed for lack of repair or been destroyed in any one of the many internal conflicts that were so common in the city. Meanwhile what would ordinarily be thought of as the 'sky' above the city was a disturbing mix of shifting purple and blue patterns that were not much lighter than the towers dominating the city itself. This was a result of Commorragh's location within the webway and here and there were more of the passageways that allowed access to the tunnels that made up the network, several of which were large enough to allow the transit of starships thousands of metres long. Even now one of the ominous vessels could be seen flying towards one of the webway passages on its way to raid somewhere in the galaxy. The frequency of conflicts between rival groups of Dark Eldar meant that the alien troops escorting the convoy of captives did not relax when they entered the city. Instead they remained at a state of high alert as the numerous skimmers flew between the towers of Commorragh and when the ambush came they were ready for it.

Half a dozen jetbikes flew around one of the towers, firing on the similar vehicles acting as outriders to the convoy and the riders of two were cut to pieces by splinter fire. The attacking gang had launched their attack purely for the thrill of it and they had no intention of trying to challenge more than a dozen transports filled with troops. Instead after they had claimed the blood of the two outriders they turned away and began to accelerate. However, their jetbikes were not fast enough to be able to outrun the return fire from the convoy and a combination of dark energy beams and splinter rounds shot all six jetbikes out of the sky.

"What was that?" Wolf said.

"Did you think that these pirates would be unified Lieutenant Wolf?" a deep voice asked in response and Wolf turned to look at one of the captives sharing her cage that was not from Catachan. Captain Einhart was a space marine and even after the Dark Eldar had stripped him of his powered armour he still stood a head taller than even the tallest of the Catachans, all of whom towered over the somewhat diminutive Wolf, "The Dark Eldar will kill one another as gladly as they will kill you or I." he added.

"Nice." Platoon Sergeant Vance, Wolf's platoon second in command said, "Think we can start a fight between them big enough to let us slip away?"

Before anyone could answer this question the convoy descended towards an opening in one of the towers that was approximately a hundred metres above ground level and the transports that had the cages suspended beneath them flew through this into a large hangar of sorts where the cages could be lowered to the floor before being detached from the transports that then turned around and flew back out of the hangar. Another transport set down on the floor just long enough for the Dark Eldar leader to disembark along with a unit of heavily armoured bodyguards who positioned themselves in front of him when a doorway expanded to permit the entrance of another group of aliens. Most of these were also Dark Eldar but there was a single alien that looked more like a four armed serpent as well as a single emaciated looking human being in the group. Naked, this human had been badly mutilated by his captors. He had been castrated and both his ears and nose had been hacked off. More gruesome than any of this however, was the cluster of organic looking tubes that erupted from the back of his skull and snaked around him to the bizarre staff he held in front of him.

As this group neared the waiting archon the armoured incubi raised their bladed weapons in a defensive posture and the new arrivals came to a halt.

"What do you suppose is happening?" Wolf said.

"You lieutenant, I've got a bad feeling that those xenos are negotiating our worth." Vance replied.

"Your platoon sergeant is correct." Einhart added, "The new arrival is a slave trader who will pay for us in souls then decide how each of us can profit him the most."

"You seem to know a lot about the way these creatures work captain." Wolf said.

"The Deathwatch has vast resources." Einhart replied, "We had Dark Eldar themselves tell us about the city in exchange for a favourable death."

The archon then stepped out from behind his bodyguards and led the slave trader up to the cage holding Wolf where he reached through and suddenly grabbed hold of Second Platoon's medic, a woman named Torrent who he pulled right up against the bars.

"Get your fething alien hands off me!" she hissed and she kicked through the bars, striking the archon in his chest. Dark Eldar troops wore little armour but it was still sufficient to absorb the damage from the kick. The archon reacted to this attack quickly by reaching out and grabbing hold of her by the ankle and twisting it sharply until there was a sudden 'crack' and Torrent screamed as her ankle was broken. The archon then released his grip on her and the two Dark Eldar stepped away from the cages to continue their discussion.

"Torrent!" Wolf called out to the other cage, "Are you okay?"

"Of course not you fething outsider. That thing broke my ankle." Torrent responded.

"At least she's her usual pleasant self." another of the prisoners in the same cage as Torrent added. This was First Squad's Sergeant Molla and he crouched down beside Torrent and clamped his hands onto her damaged ankle, "We need to brace this with something." he said.

"I know." Torrent replied, "But I don't have my medical kit do I?"

"Then we'll just have to hold it steady until we can find something." Molla said and Torrent snarled. "Just what I need." she said, "You getting the excuse to feel me up. Just remember it's only my ankle you get to touch."

The two Dark Eldar then walked around each of the cages as the slaver inspected what the archon had brought him. The pair stopped when they reached a cage that contained four of the Deathwatch marines, including the psychic Codicier Aman and began to talk further.

"I think that slaver's interested in you and your men captain." Sergeant Quinn, the leader of Second Platoon's veteran squad, commented and he threw a glance at Einhart.

"The archon is probably reminding him of how much of a draw we would be to crowds in their gladiatorial arena." Einhart replied.

The two Dark Eldar then walked towards the transport that had brought the archon and his bodyguards here and as they drew closer the archon called out to the crew. In response the gunner opened up one of the containers on the deck and took out a standard issue Imperial Guard lasgun, tossing it to the archon who caught the weapon in one hand.

"Looks like they brought our kit along." Molla said from his cage and Torrent looked around.

"Hey you pointed eared alien freaks!" she yelled, "How about you give me my medikit so I can fix my ankle?" but none of the Dark Eldar reacted to her shout.

"Whoa, what's this?" Vance said when he saw the slaver suddenly draw a knife, but rather than attack the archon with the weapon the slaver held up his own hand and slashed his blade across his palm. The archon then did the same, removing a gauntlet before drawing his dagger and slicing open the palm of his hand.

"Aren't their blades poisoned?" another of the Catachans in the same cage as Molla asked and the sergeant nodded.

"All the ones I've seen have been Bomber." he replied to the leader of Second Platoon's mortar squad whose proper name was Corporal Mayer.

"Maybe they consume the antidote to their own poisons." Torrent said, "I got stuck with some of that stuff by accident and it hurt like hell. If I was carrying a knife covered in it I'd take precautions against accidentally stabbing myself with it."

The two Dark Eldar then pressed their bloody palms flat against one another and the archon shouted at his squad of guards. Instantly the more heavily armoured aliens turned and embarked back on the transport, the archon following them before the vehicle rose up and left the hangar.

"I think we've just been sold." Mayer said.

"Yeah, but what have we been sold as?" Quinn added.

The slaver returned to his own retinue and the mutilated human slave held out the staff he held. The slaver took the staff and placed the base on the floor so that the top of the staff where the tubes connecting to the slave's head were attached was right in front of his mouth and the alien then began to speak.

The human winced as the slaver spoke but then he began to speak in gothic, the language of the Imperium and it was obvious that he was a living translation device.

"Mon'keigh, you are now mine. Before today is done I shall take you to the arenas where those of you able to fight shall perform for the crowds while the others shall be used for alternative purposes. Carry out your duties to my satisfaction and you shall not be harmed further. Fail me and I shall sell you on to the haemonculi so that they may use your flesh for their art."

The slaver then returned the staff to his slave and turned around before he and his retinue departed the hangar. As they left a large group of malformed figures that looked to have been stitched together from the parts of different creatures and mixed with pieces of Dark Eldar technology lumbered into the hangar. These brutish things positioned themselves around the cages and lifted them up off the floor before starting to carry them from the hangar as well.

The cages were carried via several of the larger walkways connecting the towers of Commorragh. Several times Dark Eldar riding on jetbikes or skyboards came near but the sight of the creatures carrying the cages appeared to be enough to prevent them from attacking and they all flew off in search of easier prey. The cages were carried as far as the gladiatorial arenas where the slaver and his new possessions were ushered inside.

Within the arena's processing area there were numerous masked Dark Eldar armed with a variety of close combat weapons and they surrounded one of the cages before the door was opened. One of the aliens yelled something at the captives inside the cage but they did not react and so several of the Dark Eldar armed with weapons that resembled spears stepped forwards and pushed the tips of their weapons through the cage bars to encourage the occupants to leave. As they spilled out of the cage more Dark Eldar began to sort through them, pushing all of the men one way while the only two women, one Catachan and an Inquisitorial stormtrooper named Voss were pushed a different way instead.

As these captives were being led away the next cage was opened, this one Wolf's and the prisoners inside

knew to exit it before the guards started stabbing their spears through the bars. Einhart was one of the first to exit the cage, jumping down to the ground where he promptly grabbed hold of a spear being pointed towards him and pulled the Dark Eldar wielding it towards him. He easily snapped the alien's neck and before its body had even hit the ground Einhart had turned the spear around and was pointing it towards another of the guards. However, before he could do anything more there was a screeching sound and from some unseen perch high above where the cages were being unloaded a pair of winged Dark Eldar swooped down towards the marine captain. Both Dark Eldar wielded whips of some kind and they lashed out at Einhart with them. This produced a flash of light when they struck him and even Einhart's massively increased resistance to pain could not prevent him from crying out as he collapsed before more guards moved in around him to restrain him while the other prisoners were being unloaded behind him. This time though the prisoners were split into three groups, with Einhart being kept separate from the rest as the third cage was being opened. "Wait!" Wolf called out when she looked to see that Molla was now helping Torrent out of the cage. There were no other women in that cage and Wolf knew that the platoon medic would never be able to walk unaided.

Wolf tried to break away from her guards to help Torrent but the winged Dark Eldar swooped down and landed in front of her, screeching at her.

"No." Wolf said and she pointed at Torrent, "I need to help her."

"I'll crawl." Torrent said, scowling at the idea of accepting help from Wolf.

"Not in front of these foul xenos you won't." one of the marines still in a cage shouted. Onund was the marine squad's sergeant and without his armour the member of the Space Wolves marine chapter looked almost bestial with his long blonde hair and fangs, "In the Allfather's name do not debase yourself before them."

"Okay." Torrent said and Molla began to carry her towards Wolf before the guards blocked his path. However, at this point the winged Dark Eldar understood what Wolf wanted to do and they let her take Torrent and carry her away.

2.

A pair of female Dark Eldar led Wolf and Torrent to a passageway that was lined with doors along both sides and one of these was opened to allow them to enter. Carrying the injured Torrent into the room beyond Wolf was surprised at what she saw. From everything she had been told about the Dark Eldar and their sadism towards others she had expected to find herself in a dungeon equipped with hideous implements of torture but what she instead found was a room that was dominated by a large bed that looked quite comfortable. However, more surprising was when she saw that the bed was already occupied by a female Eldar who sat up when she heard Wolf and Torrent enter.

"Mon'keigh." she said.

"Yeah I know. We're all monkeys to you." Torrent muttered.

"That one is injured." the Eldar woman said as Wolf sat Torrent down on the end of the bed and she reached out for a robe before getting out of the bed.

"You speak gothic?" Wolf commented.

"Yes, I speak your language." the Eldar said as she approached the two guardswomen, "I have walked the path of the outcast and visited some of your worlds. I learned to speak your tongue then."

"You went to Imperial settlements?" Wolf commented, frowning at the thought of this, "So how many slaves did you bring back here?"

All of a sudden the Eldar woman lashed out at Wolf, striking her across the face.

"I am no Drukhari Mon'keigh!" she snapped, "I am just as much a prisoner here as you. I thought this would be my cell alone. I never suspected that I would be sharing with you."

"Doesn't look like much of a cell to me." Torrent comment, unconcerned about Wolf being struck, "More like a cheap hotel. The sort joy girls rent out by the hour." then she frowned, "Hey wait a second." she said as the Eldar woman smiled in a way that was disconcerting.

"Yes Mon'Keigh, that is our purpose here. When the fighting is done the victorious slaves will be given us as their reward." she said. Then she looked at Torrents ankle, "How did you injure yourself?" she asked.

"The one who brought us here broke her ankle." Wolf told her, still rubbing the side of her face as she looked around, "I need something to act as a splint."

"There is nothing." the Eldar woman said, "We don't need to be able to walk or stand for what the Drukhari have in mind for us."

"That's just great. I'm the door prize." Wolf said. Then she looked at the Eldar woman, "So if the Eldar who live here are, what did you call them?"

"Drukhari." the Eldar woman replied.

"Yes, Drukhari. So if they are Drukhari then what does that make you?"

"I am Aeldari. An Eldar of the craftworlds."

"So how did you end up here?" Torrent asked while she carefully began to remove the lace from her boot so that it could be more easily removed.

"After following the path of the outcast for many years I found that I was unwelcome on my craftworld. Instead I made my way to one of the many exodite worlds I had visited during my travels intending to settle there. But when I arrived I found that it was under attack by the Drukhari. I did what I could to help but most of the inhabitants were slaughtered by our dark kin and the survivors brought here. The Drukhari considered it amusing to give me the full details of how I would be made to offer my body to Mon'keigh savages. Until I realised that you were both female I thought perhaps that the first victor had arrived to claim his prize."

"Well I'm Lieutenant Emilia Wolf and this is Specialist Guardswoman Harriet Torrent." Wolf said, "What's your name?"

The Eldar woman then said something in the language of her species, a long flowing word that Wolf could not hope to pronounce.

"Perhaps it would be best if you called me Lhurara." the Eldar woman added.

"Perhaps it would." Wolf agreed.

Meanwhile the male Catachans and the remaining inquisitorial stormtroopers were taken to a cluster of pens located close enough to the arenas themselves that they could hear the sounds of crowds cheering at the fights taking place all around the clock. The marines however, were not with them. After being separated out when removed from the cages they had been taken somewhere else under heavy guard. Led through the pens by more of the Dark Eldars' patchwork creations the Catachans got to see that they were being held among a wide variety of races and as well as other human captives, some of whom also wore various Imperial Guard uniforms, they also saw Orks, Tau, Kroot, Tarellians, other Eldar and aliens from species that were unknown to any of the Catachans locked inside the pens. Significantly all of the prisoners appeared to

be armed. They had only basic close combat weapons but they were weapons nevertheless and many of the captive Orks could be seen rubbing theirs against the stone floor to try and maintain their edges. It was at this point that the Dark Eldar demonstrated that they clearly had some understanding of who their captives were as the platoon was split up into different pens. Although all of these were clustered together the new arrivals were divided up by their position within the force with each of Second Platoon's squad leaders, including Platoon Sergeant Vance and Sergeant Talmat of the remaining inquisitorial stormtroopers being placed together while their men were placed in other pens in groups of between five and ten.

"Hey!" a voice called out in gothic from another of the pens as the Catachans were locked in when the squad leaders looked around they saw a man in a tattered Imperial Guard uniform leaning on the bars of his pen and waving at them, "Who are you?"

"Catachan Nineteenth." Vance replied. Then he glanced at Talmat and added, "Well most of us. He's *Militarum Tempestus*. What about you?"

"Terex Sixty-Third."

"How long have you been here?" Quinn asked but the Terexan shrugged.

"Who knows. There's no real day or night cycle here, only periods of rest and fighting." he said.

"Fighting who?" Mayer said, "Are we supposed to fight the Dark Eldar?"

"Sometimes. But take a look around. More often our hosts just want to see how well we kill each other. Then the winners fight against some of their best."

"So if we lose we die but if we win we just get to keep on fighting until we eventually die?" Molla commented and at that moment the Terexan cracked a smile.

"Oh no. There's a point to winning." he said, "These Dark Eldar have captured themselves some mighty fine women as well. Win your match and you get to spend some time with them if you know what I mean."

The Catachan squad leaders gathered together and looked at one another.

"I don't like the sound of that." Molla said.

"I have thought it would have been just your thing Tari." Grey commented.

"It's no fun without the chance of failure." Molla replied.

"Obviously we need to find a way out of here." Talmat said.

"Let's see what the locals know then shall we?" Quinn suggested and he turned back towards the nearby Terexan, "Hey, anyone ever get out of here?" he asked, "Other than feet first?"

"Every so often some of those flesh cutters come by and pick out a few new subjects." the Terexan replied.

"I was thinking of escape." Quinn said.

"Of course you were but what's the point? There have been a lot of escapes over the years from what I hear but there's nowhere to go. Even after getting out of the arena then you're still here in Commorragh and the streets of this place are even more dangerous than the arenas are. There doesn't seem to be much in the way of law and order here. I've heard it said that there are camps of runaway slaves on the outskirts of the city but I don't know if they're true or not."

"That's good news." Molla said, "If there are established camps of runaway slaves then we have somewhere to head for once we get out of here."

"Which we need to do quickly." Vance added, "We may be able to take care of ourselves fighting in the arena but what chance do you think that the lieutenant, Torrent and the other women will have if they decide to put up a fight?"

"Which they will knowing them." Mayer added.

"Any ideas on how to find them then?" Grey asked and Molla smiled at him.

"Didn't you hear what that Terexan over there had to say?" he responded, "They're our prize for winning. All we need to do is win and we'll be taken right to them."

Even with their powered armour taken from them, the twelve marines from the Deathwatch were an imposing sight and only some of the largest of the Dark Eldar haemonculi's creations were assigned to prevent them from attempting to escape before they could fight in the arenas. Each marine was held between two of the creatures as they were taken to their own holding arena that was considerably different to that where the Imperial Guard troops were taken. There was no large collection of cages holding captives of different species here, instead there was just a single large holding cell with three solid walls and one that was barred. Both the barred wall and the one opposite it featured a barred door and this allowed the marines to see out into a large roughly circular area on the far side of the cell.

"We have ringside seats for the fights." Onund said as he walked over to the door in the far wall.

"No doubt this door will open when it is our turn to fight." Captain Einhart added as he joined the sergeant, "Look, there are more dungeons such as this all around the perimeter of the arena." he added, pointing towards where more barred doors could be seen. Filling the walls between these doors were racks of close combat weapons of all shapes and sizes from simple daggers up to pole arms that would be considered large and unwieldy even by marines. To an ordinary human the barred doors would have been all that was

visible of the other cells but the enhanced vision of the marines enabled them to see a short distance inside the other holding cells and what they saw inside them was concerning.

The Dark Eldar obviously reserved this arena for their most dangerous captives and creatures such as Genestealers, large Orks, ambulls and the giant strains of beastmen known as minotaurs could be seen within them.

"Brother Matros." Captain Einhart said and one of the squad stepped forwards.

"Yes captain?" he asked.

"Try your Betcher's Gland on the lock." the captain ordered him and the marine nodded. Then there was a sucking sound as Matros built up a mouthful of saliva as the marine approached the door they had entered the cell through. When he was about a metre away from the lock Matros opened his mouth and exhaled strongly, propelling the saliva towards the lock. The Betcher's Gland was one of many surgical modifications made to space marines during their recruitment process and it enabled them to spit acid from the glands implanted in their mouths. In some chapters these implants no longer functioned as well as they once had or at all, but in the case of Matros' chapter the acid was highly concentrated. However, although the corrosive fluid drenched the lock holding the cell door shut the alien material it was made of was able to resist it and there was not a mark left on it as the saliva dribbled off onto the floor.

"Obviously the Dark Eldar know a thing or two about holding marines captive." Onund commented.

"Captain." another of the marines said, "You should see this."

"What have you found Codicier Aman?" Einhart asked the psyker assigned to his unit.

"There is a crack here in the wall." Aman answered.

"I see nothing." Einhart replied.

"The material that the Dark Eldar use is designed to contain my powers and prevent me using them to escape." Aman explained, "Where the two sections meet I can sense the breach." and he ran his hand down the corner of the cell.

"Check the other corners." Einhart said and the psyker moved to the far end of the wall.

"Another break captain." he said.

"A secret door?" one of the other marines suggested.

"Ha!" Onund exclaimed, "Just like a Dark Angel to suspect subterfuge. You all live for your secrets Trethor."

"The Dark Eldar have no need of a secret door." Einhart pointed out and he looked at the opposite wall,

"Codicier, check that wall as well. I suspect that that wall will also have breeches at each end."

"A trap." Onund commented.

"A means of forcing us out into the arena." Trethor replied.

"Quite." Einhart agreed, "If we refuse to partake in their entertainment the Dark Eldar will threaten to crush us between the walls"

"Captain what are your orders?" Aman asked, "What do we do when the gate opens?"

"We go outside and fight." Einhart said flatly.

Six bulky humanoids carrying large belt fed weapons arrived at the outer edge of the webway nexus that held Commorragh and looked at the dark city ahead of them. There were four Dark Eldar guards here but all of them were dead, shot by well placed bullets between their eyes. Each of the bodies had then been posed so that one of its arms pointed in a specific direction that the person responsible for the slaughter wanted the ogryns to go in. The leader of the squad had been upgraded with cybernetics in his skull that massively increased his intelligence to about that of an ordinary human child and the way in which the bodies had been posed did not escape his attention.

"Ogryns." Sergeant Khor said, "Follow." and the ogryn squad began to head towards the city itself.

The interval between Dark Eldar coming to the pens and selecting groups of captives to fight was not very long and soon one of the selectors arrived with a party of the patchwork creatures that maintained the pens and pointed to the pen containing the Terexans.

"Come." the Dark Eldar said, a device strapped around his neck translating his words into gothic, "Your turn to fight. New arrivals for reward."

"You hear that lads?" the Terexan that had spoken with the Catachans earlier asked as he exited their pen, "Fresh meat."

"I don't like the sound of that." Quinn commented.

"Neither do I." Molla replied and as soon as the selector and his guards were gone with the Terexans he checked to make sure that the coast was clear before he began to kick at the door to the pen, doing his best to break through the lock. All around him other captives cheered at his efforts but although it was made of the same lightweight material that the Dark Eldar used rather than metal the lock was too sturdy to break under the force of Molla's boot.

However, the Catachans did not need to wait long as another Dark Eldar selector arrived with a group

patchwork servants who carried a large crate between them. Molla backed away from the door as the aliens halted outside and set down the crate they carried. Then when this was opened it revealed inside the equipment belts taken from the Catachans when they were captured and the pen door was opened so that the crate could be slid inside.

"This is our stuff alright." Quinn said as he knelt down and picked up a belt at random. He soon found that although the belts were being returned a great deal of the equipment from them was not. They still had their canteens, ration bars and knives but everything else had been taken. There were also the equipment belts taken from the inquisitorial stormtroopers and Talmat picked out one of these at random for himself. On the other hand the Catachans checked each belt as they removed it from the crate, drawing the knives they still held and inspecting. Every Catachan carried a knife that was unique to themselves and the squad leaders made sure to locate their own knives before fastening the belts around their waists.

"Hurry Mon'Keigh!" the Dark Eldar outside the pen ordered and Grey glanced at him.

"Think this could be our moment?" he asked but Vance shook his head.

"Too soon. We need to know where Wolf is first." he said.

3.

Surrounded by the large patchwork creatures, the small group of Catachans and Talmat were led from the holding pens to a large doorway where more Dark Eldar stood guard and it was here that the selector addressed them again.

"Now you fight." he told them, "Win and you will be rewarded. Lose and you will die."

The large door then began to rumble as it slid upwards and there was an alien cheer as the assembled crowd of Dark Eldar waited in anticipation for the fighting to commence. The patchwork creatures pushed the Catachans forwards and when they emerged into the arena they saw that another door on the opposite side had also opened to allow another group of combatants to enter the arena. This group was made up of the Terexans from the pen close to the Catachans and the one who had spoken with them grinned.

"Well, well Catachan Nineteenth." he called out, "Looks like we won't get to be the good friends I hoped we would be. Still maybe I'll pass on your regards to any of the women that were taken with you."

"I'm going to slit that fether's throat." Vance hissed.

"Feth his throat." Molla added, "My knife's going somewhere else first."

Behind the two groups of combatants the doors slid shut one again and there was a shrill screaming sound that prompted a massive uproar from the crowd. The Terexans knew that this heralded the start of the fight and they all charged forwards, their knives in their hands. It was clear that there were more of the Terexans than there were of the Catachans, suggesting that the Dark Eldar did not intend for this to be a fair fight. However, if that was their intention then they had obviously underestimated the fighting skill of the Catachans.

"Think these guys know what they're letting themselves in for?" Quinn commented as he drew his own knife. "Let's explain it to them." Grey replied and before Talmat could react the Catachans charged towards their opponents.

"Wait for me!" Talmat called out but the Catachans did not slow down.

"Keep up outsider." Grey responded moments before the Catachans crashed into the Terexans charging in the opposite direction.

Mayer rolled at the last moment, causing his opponent to stumble as he tried to run him through but now he found himself over extended and Mayer quickly kicked his legs out from under him. Quinn also acted to avoid a stabbing attack but he dodged just far enough to get past the blade so that he could trap his assailant's arm under his before twisting it around behind the Terexan man who screamed in pain as his shoulder was dislocated.

This was followed by a far more high pitched scream and another roar from the crowd as a scantily clad Dark Eldar leapt into the area and began to somersault towards the fight in the centre.

"Wych!" the Terexans currently wrestling with Vance for control of his blade shouted and he kicked Vance away from him so that he could dive out of the path of the alien warrior. With her intended targets no longer in her path the wych circled around the fighting and the first alternate target she came across was Talmat.

The stormtrooper sergeant adopted a fighting pose as she came straight towards him with his knife held out in front of him and the moment she was within arms reach he struck, lunging forwards in an attempt to insert his knife just beneath her ribcage. However, the wych reacted far too quickly for the stormtrooper and she easily dodged his attack. Furthermore as she passed by him she lashed out with her own knife and Talmat felt a stinging sensation in his knife hand. All of a sudden his knife fell from his grasp and looking at his hand Talmat saw that the wych had just expertly sliced off all of his fingers on that hand.

This provoked another cheer from the crowd and one of the Terexans charged at Talmat as he grasped his mutilated hand, hoping to finish him off quickly. The wych had other ideas though and before the Terexan could deliver a killing blow she landed right in front of him and knocked his knife from his hand. The alien then grabbed hold of the Terexan by his jaw, squeezing so that his mouth was forced open as she dragged him right up to her. It then appeared that she was delivering a passionate kiss to the struggling man but he let out a muffled scream until moments later she withdrew and spat his bitten off tongue onto the ground before she sliced open his abdomen so that his intestines spilled out to join it.

The wych then withdrew to allow the humans to continue to fight among themselves and Molla found himself knocked to the ground by the man who had spoken with them in the holding pens.

"So tell me Catachan," the man said as he pushed his knife towards Molla's face while Moll tried to push it away, "what are your women like?"

"More than you can handle." Molla replied, "They need a man who's aware of all of his surroundings, not just what's going on right in front of his face." and all of a sudden Molla thrust his knife up between the Terexan man's legs and he let out a sudden shriek. Molla then had no trouble in pushing the man off him and to add further insult he slashed the blade of his knife across the back of the man's neck so that his spine was

severed, paralysing him totally.

Rather than killing the man whose shoulder he had dislocated, Quinn chose to use him as a battering ram and he hurled the man into another Terexan before using his knife to despatch both men in rapid succession. Quinn was just about to move onto another target when all of a sudden there was another alien scream as the wych returned for another pass and the combatants did their best to dive out of the way. However, Talmat was still in a state of shock after losing his fingers and as she passed him the wych struck again. This time she slashed at the side of his leg, striking him on the back of his knee and Talmat collapsed in a heap. The wych then came to an abrupt halt and spun around, looking down at Talmat.

"Mon'keigh!" she hissed at him before suddenly bringing the heel of her boot down on his head and there was a 'crunch' as his skull was fractured with such force that a large chunk of bone was pushed into his brain. Leaving the lifeless body of Talmat behind the wych then somersaulted away again so that the fighting could continue.

The numbers of Catachans and Terexans were equal now while Talmat was the only casualty that the Catachans had suffered. Seeing how badly they were faring the Terexans fell back and formed a line facing their opponents while the Catachans formed a looser group looking back at them.

"Everyone okay?" Vance asked and the others nodded and indicated that they were uninjured while the Dark Eldar crowd jeered at this pause in the bloodshed.

"You can't win." one of the Terexans said, "We've been fighting in this arena for too long."

Quinn smiled at this.

"We're Catachans." he said, "We've been fighting since the day we were born."

"Go!" Vance snapped and in unison the Catachans charged forwards. This prompted the Terexans to do the same but as the gap closed Vance shouted, "Break!" and the group split into two that moved away from one another to create a gap that the Terexans were running towards.

"Stick together." one of the Terexans shouted, guessing that it was the Catachans' plan to divide them where they would be easier to deal with piecemeal. However, the real reason for Vance's order had been the waiting wych who suddenly began to leap head over heels towards the centre of the arena again from behind the Terexans. By splitting up the Catachans gave themselves the room they needed to avoid her attacks whereas the Terexans remained clustered together and when the wych leapt over them she swung her knife below her to slice off an ear from each of three of them before slitting the throat of a fourth.

Molla had watched the way that the wych moved each time she attacked and the moment that she leapt up over the Terexans he knew roughly where she would land. As he dived he reached down with his free hand and scooped up a handful of the dirt on the ground in the area that he then hurled through the air to form a cloud that was centred on where the wych landed just as she came back down to the ground. The wych's lack of protection extended to her face and when the thrown dirt got into her eyes she screamed and began to lash out wildly with her knife as she rubbed at her eyes with her other hand.

Taking advantage of her temporary blindness, Grey ran towards her and drove his knife into her back, twisting the blade to widen the wound and when he withdrew it she fell forwards and landed face down in the dirt. This drew a gasp from the crowd and even the remaining Terexans stared in amazement at the dead wych, not understanding how a human could have defeated one of the aliens' elite warriors. The Catachans took maximum advantage of this distraction and they charged at the Terexans, most of whom were now nursing injuries. Mayer was the first to reach them and he slammed his fist into the face of one, knocking him backwards before he grabbed hold of the man by his hair and then pulled him forwards onto his knife. Molla was next and he thrust his knife up underneath his opponent's jaw to sever his brainstem. After this came Quinn whose opponent lashed out with his own weapon as the veteran ran towards him but Quinn used the hilt of his knife to deliver a blow to the man's hand that sent his knife flying from his grip. Quinn then followed this up with the traditional Catachan headbutt and the other man fell dazed, allowing Quinn to easily move in for the kill and stabbed the man in his chest.

Vance and Grey targeted the final Terexan together and Vance moved in first, deliberately making a slow strike so that the Terexan could reach out and grab him by the wrist to hold the large Catachan blade away from him. Vance then did the same to the Terexan and gave the impression that he was attempting to wrestle his own larger knife free. However, Vance was really just distracting the man while Grey moved in.

"Behind you." he whispered into the Terexan's ear before reaching around him and calmly slitting his throat open.

As the last of the Terexan bodies hit the ground there was a loud wailing sound and a mix of cheers and boos from the crowd depending on who they had supported in the fight.

"Now what?" Mayer asked as the Catachans looked around.

"I think we're about to find out." Molla said as the large door they had entered the arena through opened and a single Dark Eldar flanked by two rows of the patchwork creatures marched towards them. The Eldar halted several metres away from the Catachans while the other creatures formed a circle around them before the Eldar spoke through his translation device.

"Put your weapons away and now claim your prize Mon'keigh." he said.

The many street gangs of Commorragh tended to the arenas, there were too many powerful weapons mounted aboard the vehicles that brought high ranking Dark Eldar here that would be able to put a permanent end to their fighting. However, there was a great deal of fully justified paranoia among the Dark Eldar and so every landed pad was guarded by troops loyal to whoever owned the vehicles to ensure that they were not sabotaged while the owners were watching the fighting inside the arena.

Five such guards stood around a Raider landed on a pad several hundred metres above the ground to protect it from attack or theft. Three of them stood still, evenly spaced around the vehicle while the remaining two walked around it. These two guards not only circled the vehicle on the landing pad but also patrolled the walkways around it, especially those leading from the pad to the entrance to the arena where the guards' employer would be walking when he left the arena so that it could not be booby trapped before the vehicle's owner returned to it.

As the two patrolling guards returned to the landing pad after checking the walkway again they found that the guard normally positioned at the end of the walkway was gone while his splinter rifle was lying on the pad itself. Both patrolling guards raised their own splinter rifles and looked around for any indication of what had happened before they began to circle the pad. When the position of the next guard came into view they found her sprawled across the pad and rushed to investigate. In turn this revealed the third guard also lying dead with blood sprayed over the side of the Raider. Looking down at the first body it was clear that the female warrior had been struck in the head by a single solid projectile, something that did not match Dark Eldar weaponry. One of the patrolling guards reached for the communication device he carried but before he could lay a hand on it his comrade noticed a tiny glowing red dot appear on the front of his helmet and shouted a warning. However, this came too late as a bullet punched through the warrior's faceplate and he fell backwards over the edge of the landing pad and plummeted towards the ground far below. The final Dark Eldar guard looked around, attempting to locate the source of the shot but as he turned his head he flinched when a concentrated light shone in his eyes moments before a bullet ended his life as well.

The ogryns had followed the signs left for them through the streets of the city. Moving at ground level they had encountered many of the outcasts of Dark Eldar society on their way. Many of these had been intimidated by the abhumans' three metre height and heavy muscular build as well as the bulky belt fed ripper guns that each of them carried and scurried away when they saw them approach. However, there were a handful that were brave enough to make the mistake of attacking. Most of these fled as soon as the first volley of ripper gun fire tore through some of them but some needed to be finished off with the butts of the ripper guns used as clubs by their owners.

The trail laid for the ogryns to follow ended at the base of a tall web-like structure that had the body of a Dark Eldar warrior lay beside it. This body was smashed and broken after having fallen from the top of the structure but it was also plain to see that it had been shot in the head first. The ogryns stood and waited, looking upwards until they saw another body come plummeting towards them and they moved backwards to allow this second dead Dark Eldar land not far from the first one. Then a tiny red dot flashed against the side of the structure and Khor slung his ripper gun over his shoulder.

"Ogryns." he said, "Climb."

"This way Mon'keigh. This way." the stunted Dark Eldar slave creature said as it beckoned for the victorious Catachans to follow. The creature spoke gothic with an odd accent but it was impossible to tell whether or not it really was human at its core. As with the larger patchwork creatures following behind them it looked to be the product of warped surgeries that had combined parts of multiple creatures into one with the aide of cybernetic implants that looked almost biological themselves. Unlike the guard creatures however, this slave had obviously been permitted to retain a high degree of intelligence in place of physical strength that was distinctly lacking. The slave seemed to be male but the extent of the modification meant that it was difficult to tell for certain and the Catachans had already observed how the Dark Eldar would cruelly make the designation meaningless if they wanted to.

"Where are we going?" Vance asked and the slave smiled back at him, exposing a row of gums that had had most of its teeth replaced with some sort of crystal equivalents.

"Claim your prize." the slave told him, "Females. Use as you want. Make you happy."

"What about them?" Grey asked and the slave shrugged.

"Always more available." he said.

"We need to get out of here quick. The lieutenant too." Molla muttered.

"Escape not good." the slave said, demonstrating that he had at least been given excellent hearing, "Hunt you down."

"Who?" Quinn asked.

“Everyone.” the slave replied and then he came to a halt at the start of a passageway lined with doors along both sides, “Chose.” he said, pointing down the corridor.
“You mean we get to pick which door we go through?” Mayer said and the slave nodded.
“All good. All ready.” he said and the Catachans looked at one another.
“How do we know which doors to pick?” Grey asked.
“I think I may have an idea.” Molla replied and he looked at the slave, “Point us to the freshest meat.” he told the slave.

4.

The sound of the door lock being released made Wolf turn towards it. She and Lhurara had just finished lifting Torrent onto the bed and supporting her injured ankle with pillows when the sound alerted them to the arrival of someone else.

"I don't suppose that this would be someone else like us would it?" Wolf asked.

"I doubt it Mon'keigh Wolf." Lhurara replied and Wolf frowned.

"Could you stop calling me Mon'keigh? It makes it sound like you're calling me a monkey." she said.

"Hey, if the term fits." Torrent commented right before the door opened and Quinn was shoved through by one of the patchwork guards.

"Sergeant Quinn!" Wolf exclaimed as the door shut behind Quinn and he smiled back at her.

"Lieutenant, are you okay?" he asked.

"I'm fine, thanks. It's a relief to see you." Wolf said.

"My ankle's still broken. Thanks for asking." Torrent added.

"What's going on out there?" Wolf asked, glancing towards the door.

"The Dark Eldar sorted out all of us squad leaders." Quinn explained, "They gave us back our knives and put us in a gladiatorial match against another lot of prisoners."

"Was anyone hurt?" Torrent said.

"That stormtrooper Talmat's dead." Quinn answered, "The rest of us got out of there alive though. You're supposed to be my reward."

It was at this point that Lhurara spoke up.

"So do you intend to claim your prize?" she asked.

"Who's that?" Quinn asked, looking at the Eldar woman.

"An Eldar." Torrent told him and Quinn reached for his knife."

"She says she's different." Wolf said, placing a hand on Quinn's arm before he could draw his weapon.

"I believe her."

"If you say so." Quinn said, keeping his gaze trained on the Eldar and his hand on his weapon.

"He did not answer my question." Lhurara pointed out.

"Of course he's not going to harm us." Wolf reassured her.

"Aliens aren't to be trusted lieutenant. You know that." Quinn said, still staring at the alien.

"Sarge, I think that the little outsider may have a point." Torrent said from her bed and Quinn looked at her instead.

"I can help you Mon'keigh." Lhurara said and Quinn turned his attention back to her.

"How?" he asked.

"Do you speak the language of the Drukhari?" Lhurara asked.

"That's what she calls the Dark Eldar." Wolf added.

"If we take her back with us then we'll all be declared heretics." Quinn said, "Speak not unto the alien, remember?"

"Throne you sound like Botherer Black sarge." Torrent said.

Wolf looked at Lhurara.

"Can you guide us through the webway?" she asked the Eldar woman.

"So you know what it is called. I am impressed." Lhurara said.

"Yeah, an inquisitor explained it to me." Wolf said, "But you didn't answer my question. Can you guide us back to THX- one one three eight?"

"I do not know the human names for your worlds." Lhurara answered, "But I can guide you to a world controlled by your Imperium and show you how to operate the gate from inside the webway. The price will be my own freedom."

Wolf and Quinn looked at one another.

"We'd be in no worse situation than we are here I suppose." Quinn said and Wolf looked at the bed where the Dark Eldar intended her, Torrent and Lhurara to be raped by whoever as victorious in the arena.

"Trust me sergeant, I'd much rather take my chances on a random Imperial world than here." she said.

Khor was the first of the ogryns to pull himself up onto the landing pad where the raider's guards lay dead and he unslung his ripper gun as soon as his hands were free. Ahead of him he could see the main structure of the arena and the walkway that connected the landing pad to it. The procedure known as Biochemical Ogryn Neural Enhancement that gave squad leaders such as Khor their alternative title of BONEHead allowed him to determine that it would be wiser to wait for his entire squad to reach the platform before guiding them onwards in response to the instructions he had received via his microbead communication

headset and so he stood beside the alien vehicle and waited as the other five bulky abhumans dragged themselves up onto the landing pad as well.

"Ogryns," he announced when the last of them unslung his ripper gun, "follow." and he headed for the walkway.

Although the walkway was designed for three Dark Eldar to be able to walk along it side by side, the powerful build of the ogryns meant that they were forced to travel single file as they made their way towards the door leading into the arena. This was closed and Khor was planning to use the butt of his ripper gun to simply smash it down when it slid open as he neared it. This was not as a result of Khor's presence however, instead it was because the owner of the Raider on the landing pad had returned from the arena. The Dark Eldar's assumption was that the ogryns had been sent by one of his rivals to assassinate him and he yelled at his bodyguards to protect him. Not trusting any members of his own species to protect him, the Dark Eldar lord had instead hired a pair of reptilian Sslyth mercenaries to act as bodyguards and these two four armed aliens slithered forwards, each of them drawing a pair of pistols and a pair of swords. The Sslyth were not as fast as the Dark Eldar themselves and Khor reacted quickly enough to bring up his ripper gun. The large calibre automatic shotgun was designed specifically for close quarters engagements such as this and when Khor pulled the trigger his weapon unleashed a cloud of shot that tore one of the alien bodyguards to pieces. The second alien was hit and it let out a loud hissing sound but it remained upright and lunged forwards towards Khor who was forced to use his ripper gun to parry a blow from one of the Sslyth's swords. Unable to get around their leader to help him, the other ogryns roared in defiance and pushed forwards anyway, slamming into Khor from behind. In turn this pushed him forwards into the Sslyth and his bulk crushed the alien up against the wall beside the doorway. This created just enough of a gap for the ogryn behind Khor, the squad's only female to squeeze past and she grabbed hold of the startled Dark Eldar lord who had expected his bodyguards to see off this assault. With just one hand she lifted the Eldar off the floor and hurled him into a nearby wall with such force that the sound of his bones breaking was audible from the walkway. This was not sufficient to kill the alien instantly, but as his broken body dropped to the floor the ogryn was ready and she stomped her foot repeatedly on his head and chest, breaking yet more delicate Eldar bones and crushing his organs even after her first stomp had ended his life.

Meanwhile Khor pushed the Sslyth towards the edge of the walkway and the reptilian let out a screech as it toppled over the side. Able to wrap its tail around the safety rail, the Sslyth hung upside down from the walkway, its four arms waving as it tried to reach up and pull its back onto the walkway. Khor had no intention of allowing this, however and he pressed the muzzle of his ripper gun to the alien's tail and fired. Three rapid shots from the weapon were enough to blast right through the tail and sever it, sending the screeching alien plummeting downwards out of sight.

With the way ahead now clear, the ogryns proceeded into the area.

"Did you hear that?" Quinn said when there were several far off booming sounds.

"Gunfire?" Wolf replied and Quinn nodded.

"That was not Drukhari weapons fire." Lhurara commented, "Only primitive species such as Orks and Mon'keigh use such loud weapons."

"I think that Eldar bitch just insulted us." Quinn said, "Doesn't she need us to help her get out of here?"

"Never mind that now." Wolf said, turning look at the Eldar woman, "Do the Dark Eldar give any of the combatants in the arenas firearms?" she asked.

"I have not been here long enough to know." Lhurara replied.

Then there was more noise from outside the door, this time shouts in an alien language and a smile spread across Lhurara's face.

"What is it?" Torrent asked.

"A call to arms. The arena is attacked." Lhurara answered.

Immediately Quinn rushed up to the door and started to bang on it with his fist.

"Hey!" he shouted, "Open up. I'm done in here. Open up."

At first there was no response but then the door opened to reveal the slave that had brought the Catachans here.

"You wait. You wait." the slave said but Quinn pushed him out of the way and stepped out into the corridor.

All of a sudden the slave started to cry out in the Eldar language and Quinn responded by drawing his knife and thrusting it between the slave's ribs to silence him. Unfortunately he was not quick enough in doing this and a Dark Eldar armed with a bulky weapon appeared at the end of the corridor. Aiming this towards Quinn, the alien fired his weapon and unleashed a powerful blast of electricity that sent Quinn's knife flying from his hand as he convulsed and collapsed. Fortunately for Quinn, the Dark Eldar guard was there to capture escaping prisoners rather than kill them. As Quinn lay dazed on the floor the Dark Eldar guard advanced towards him, keeping his weapon trained on the Catachan and it was then that Lhurara struck. The Eldar woman moved incredibly fast and before Wolf or Torrent knew what was happening she had made it across

the room to the doorway and she scooped up Quinn's dropped knife. The guard turned to face her but Lhurara was too fast for him and she brought the knife up under one of his arms, slicing through it at the wrist. Unable to support his weapon with just one hand the guard dropped it as he clamped his remaining hand over the stump of the missing one. Lhurara then kicked the guard to the floor and leapt on top of him, pressing Quinn's knife to his face but not killing him yet.

"Stay silent or I'll take out your eyes." she hissed in the Eldar language, "See to your man Wolf." she then added in accented Gothic.

"I'm fine." Quinn croaked as he used the wall to steady himself while he got back to his feet.

All of a sudden there was another shout in Gothic from somewhere in the distance.

"Ogryns crush!"

Wolf and Quinn looked at one another in surprise.

"Khor? How did he get here?" Wolf said.

"Do you care?" Quinn responded.

"No, not really." Wolf said and she ran down the corridor until she reached the junction at the end, "Sergeant Khor!" she shouted, "Sergeant Khor can you hear me?"

"Lieutenant!" Khor's booming voice responded from somewhere in the distance, "Lieutenant where?"

"Follow the sound of my voice." Wolf shouted, "Keep following it and you'll find me."

"Ogryns follow." Khor shouted.

"This way." Wolf called out, repeating the words to lead the ogryns towards her.

"You do realise that your shouting will attract more guards as well, don't you?" Lhurara pointed out.

"Lady, I think that the guards have got bigger things to worry about than us." Quinn told her, "Much, much bigger."

Alien voices from behind them made Wolf and Quinn turn to face that way but before they could finish Lhurara dived into them, knocking the pair of the flat.

"Get down!" she yelled right as the two guards fired their weapons, the disabling energy bolts passing over the humans' heads thanks to the Eldar's actions.

Now that she had released her hold on him, the Dark Eldar guard that had been restrained by Lhurara saw his opportunity to try and escape. However, as he tried to rise to his feet Quinn reached out and grabbed him by the ankle, dragging him back down to the floor before punching him in the face and breaking his nose.

Meanwhile before either of the newly arrived guards could adjust their aim Khor and his squad of ogryns came around the corner beside Wolf and Quinn. In response to this both guards targeted the abhumans instead, correctly judging them to be the much greater threat. However, although their aim was good and the blasts of electricity struck the ogryns their weapons proved no match for the abhumans' physiology and what little energy was able to penetrate the ogryns' thick hide was unable to disrupt their limited nervous system.

"Ogryns fire!" Khor bellowed and know what to expect both Wolf and Quinn clamped their hands over their ears just as the entire squad of ogryns opened fire. The abhumans would have quite happily emptied their entire ammunition drums at the Dark Eldar but the Imperial Guard had taken this into account when issuing their weapons and the ripper guns were fitted with burst limiters that restricted the number of rounds that could be fired at once. Thanks to these devices, the ripper guns ceased fire after just a few rounds and when the ogryns saw that their volley of fire had cut the two guards to pieces they lowered their ripper guns.

It was then that Khor noticed Wolf lying on the floor and he snapped to attention and saluted, the members of his squad copying the action.

"Sergeant Khor reporting as ordered Lieutenant Wolf." he announced.

"Very good sergeant." Wolf replied as she stood up and then returned the salute. Only at this point did the ogryns relax, "How did you find us here?" Wolf asked, "No wait, how did you even get here?"

"Green man." Khor answered simply.

"What is this green man?"

"Rull." Quinn said as a smile spread across his face.

"Our sniper." Wolf explained, "He wasn't captured with the rest of us. I guess he must have followed us into the webway with Khor's ogryns and tracked the force that brought us here. Now he's loose in the city where he probably feels right at home."

"A killer among killers." Quinn commented.

"Impossible. No ordinary Mon'keigh can navigate the webway." Lhurara said, "Let alone these beasts."

"Ah, now the key word there is 'ordinary'." Quinn said, "Rull is the best tracker I've ever met. He even puts the rest of us Catachans to shame."

"Hey!" Torrent called out from where she still sat on the bed, "What's going on out there?"

"Khor's ogryns are here." Wolf told her, "Rull brought them here."

"So does that mean we can leave now?" Torrent asked and Wolf looked at Quinn.

"No time like the present." he said.

"Sergeant Khor." Wolf said and the BONEHead snapped to attention again upon being addressed directly.

"Yes lieutenant." he said.

"Sergeant Specialist Torrent is injured. I need one of your troops to carry her until we can locate suitable treatment. Then I want the rest of you to break down all of these doors." Wolf said and she pointed down the corridor at the doors she assumed led to other bedrooms like the one she and Torrent had been imprisoned inside.

"Yes lieutenant." Khor responded and then he turned to his squad, looking first at the sole female member, "Toola, carry." he told her, pointing into the open bedroom and she nodded. Then as she squeezed through the doorway that was not built for someone of her size Khor addressed the rest of his squad, "Ogryns smash." he ordered and then he walked up to the nearest close door and started hammering at it with the butt of his ripper gun. The other ogryns then pushed forwards and began to do the same, each of them using their ripper gun as a club.

Though the doors were designed to keep prisoners inside the bedrooms, they were not designed with being attacked by creatures as powerful as the ogryns were and although it took several blows to achieve the ogryns were able to smash their way through each door in turn.

With more than a dozen rooms to break into the majority of them held only terrified captives who screamed at the sight of the ogryns breaking through their doors until Wolf could attempt to calm them down. Most of the women being held here were ordinary Imperial citizens who had been captured by the Dark Eldar just as the Catachans had been but there were also a handful of female Imperial Guard troops among them, including all of the missing female members of Second Platoon and the only female stormtrooper from the late Inquisitor Derren's retinue. In addition to the captive women the rest of Second Platoon's squad leaders who joined Wolf and Quinn in the corridor.

"Where the feth did Khor's lot come from?" Vance said as he watched the abhumans continue to break through the doors.

"Rull followed us from THX one-one-three-eight." Wolf replied, "Hopefully he'll be able to lead us back again and Lhurara here has agreed to show us how to activate the gate."

"We're working with an alien?" Molla commented and Grey grinned.

"Well we work with the lieutenant." he said, "Not much difference in my book."

"What about weapons?" Mayer said, "How far are we going to get with just half a dozen ripper guns and our knives?"

"We saw our gear when those two aliens traded us and we know that at least our knives were brought here with us." Vance pointed out, "We just need to figure out where these xenos have got the rest of it stashed."

"That thing can tell us I bet." Quinn said and he looked down at the captured Dark Eldar guard still bleeding on the floor.

"That inquisitor said that beating information of them doesn't work." Wolf said, "How are we supposed to get him to talk?"

"Easy." Molla said, "Get me a pillow case and some jugs of water. I'm guessing that she can do the translating for us?" and he looked at Lhurara.

"I speak your tongue as well as that of all the Aeldari peoples." she told him.

"Then lets get this thing into one of the rooms." Molla said.

"Sergeant Khor." Wolf said as her other squad leaders were dragging the Dark Eldar guard into the nearest bedroom.

"Yes lieutenant." Khor responded, snapping to attention again.

"I want your squad to stand watch while we interrogate the prisoner." Wolf told him and Khor smiled.

"Yes lieutenant." he said again, saluting.

Wolf returned the salute and then headed into the bedroom just in time to see the Dark Eldar guard being held down while a pillow case was pulled over his head while Molla stood back holding a jug of water.

"Now ask him where our weapons are." Vance said to Lhurara and she repeated the question to the guard in the Eldar language.

The guard responded with harsh sounding shouts and the Catachans looked at Lhurara for a translation.

"He questioned the genetic quality of your species." she said and Molla grinned.

"Then it's time for him to get a little wet." he said and he began to pour the water over the Dark Eldar's face. Immediately he began to struggle as the water blocked the passage of air through the pillowcase and the Catachans held him down tightly.

"What is this?" Lhurara asked, looking at Wolf.

"What, don't you have water boarding on your planet?" Grey responded before Wolf could answer.

"It induces a feeling of drowning." Wolf said, "We've been told that physical pain isn't something that will intimidate one of his people but maybe he'll panic enough at the thought of drowning that he'll give us the answers we need."

"And if he doesn't?" Lhurara said.

"Then eventually we leave the bag over his head and he chokes." Quinn replied.

"Talking of which, let him breathe for a moment." Wolf said and the pillowcase was pulled from the Dark Eldar's head, "Now ask him again and tell him if I don't like his answer then I'll increase the amount of time we spend doing this until he either answers or dies."

Lhurara began to speak but before she could finish the Dark Eldar cried out.

"He says he will guide us to where your weapons are kept in exchange for his life." Lhurara translated.

"I honestly didn't think this would work that quick." Vance said, "Can we trust him?"

"No." Lhurara replied, "He will betray us at the first opportunity."

"Then we watch him closely." Wolf said, "Now let's get going. It's only going to be a matter of time before more Dark Eldar turn up and sooner or later they're going to be carrying more than just those stunners."

5.

With a Catachan knife held to the base of his spine, the threat being to paralyse him and abandon him to his fellow Dark Eldar's mercy, the guard led the escaped prisoners and their ogryn allies down through the structure of the arena, showing them obscure passageways that had long fallen into general disuse but that remained open to those who were familiar enough with the building to still know of their existence.

"These passageways look in even worse state than the cages." Mayer commented.

"The Drukhari do not need to maintain these forgotten places. But if they did not maintain the cages then all of the prisoners would escape." Lhurara pointed out.

The Dark Eldar suddenly pointed ahead to a doorway that appeared to have been sealed shut around its edges with some sort of adhesive compound.

"Is that it?" Wolf asked, "How are we supposed to get through?"

"Our usual way I suppose." Vance replied and he looked at Khor's ogryn squad.

"He says that this is a back way into the chamber used to store the possessions of prisoners." Lhurara said, translating the Dark Eldar's words.

"Anything about how the door opens?" Wolf asked.

"No. Just that this door has not been used in several hundred years. Only the arena guards still know about it." Lhurara answered.

"Sergeant Khor. Kindly open this door." Wolf said and Khor grinned.

"Ogryns smash!" he yelled and then he threw himself at the sealed door. Even just this one impact was enough to shake some of the compound used to seal the door loose and it was rapidly followed up by more as the male ogryns took turns to charge at it. Only the single female ogryn did not take part in this while she still carried Torrent. Each impact not only caused more of the sealing compound to fall away, it also put a significant dent in the door itself and it was clear that it would not be able to retract into the wall in such a state. However, when the ogryn squad was half way through their third run at the door there was a sudden 'crash' as the ogryn who had just thrown himself at it smashed right through, leaving a gaping hole in the ruined door. Looking through this hole the Catachans saw that the room beyond it was filled with stacks of packing crates. Many of these looked to be of Eldar origin but there were also types common to Imperial as well as other alien forces.

"Spread out." Wolf ordered as she climbed through the hole, "Look for our own gear primarily but keep an eye out for anything else that may be useful."

"What about her?" Grey asked, looking at Lhurara, "Do we trust her with a weapon?"

"A sidearm." Wolf replied as she also looked at the Eldar woman, "Plus a close combat weapon if she wants. But nothing more."

"I will agree to that." Lhurara replied and she walked up to a nearby container of Eldar manufacture and opened it up. Inside there was a lightweight armoured suit in a pale bone colour as well as a power sword and pistol, also of obvious Eldar origin.

"How the hell did she go straight to that?" Molla said and Lhurara paused in the process of putting on the armoured suit and smiled at him.

"I read the label Mon'keigh." she said and then she pointed to a nearby stack of Eldar made containers,

"Those indicate that the contents were taken from your species very recently." she said.

Vance and Quinn made their way to the containers and opened one up.

"This is our stuff alright lieutenant." Quinn said as he took out a plastic bag that held a simple stub pistol.

Second Platoon had come across a supply of the weapons dating back to the Dark Age of Technology some time earlier and now most members of the platoon used one as a reserve weapon.

"I've got hell guns and carapace armour here." the stormtrooper Voss said as she opened another container close to the first.

"Okay grab what's yours. I want small arms and microbeads. Don't bother with the heavier weapons and vox sets that will just slow us down." Wolf said, "We'll use the ogryns to carry the rest while we go and free everyone else."

"What exactly do you mean by everyone lieutenant?" Mayer asked as he unpacked a lasgun and loaded a power cell into it.

Wolf paused for a moment. Her thoughts had focused solely on freeing the rest of Second Platoon and getting them safely back to THX-1138 but if the sheer quantity of equipment in this room indicated that there were far more prisoners than just a single platoon and a handful of stormtroopers. In addition to the Imperial Guard troops there were also all of the alien prisoners such as Lhurara to think of. Wolf's Imperial Guard training had taught her the importance of never associating with aliens even though that was what she was doing right now with Lhurara. However, the more prisoners that were turned loose, the harder it would be for

the Dark Eldar to round them all up.

"I mean everyone." she said, "We'll take weapons for as many of our own people as we can and if there are any more then they'll have to come down here to arm themselves. But we're going to let loose as many of the prisoners as we can. We'll use them as a distract to cover our escape."

"Sounds like a plan." Vance said.

"Yeah, a dumb one." Grey added, "We'll be trusting aliens." then he glanced at Lhurara and smiled as he added, "Present company included."

"Just get on with it." Vance said, "Everyone can carry a couple of extra lasguns." and then he reached into a container and pulled out two of the weapons one after another, loaded each one in turn and slung them both over his back.

"Think you can find your way back to where you were held?" Wolf asked while fastening her gun belt around her waist.

"Easy." Quinn replied.

"Good. Then you and Mayer are on point." Wolf said, selecting the two Catachans with more powerful weapons to take the lead. Then she looked at where Torrent was bandaging her injured ankle, "Are you fit to travel?" she said and Torrent nodded.

"I found a couple of spare heavy stubber barrels." Torrent replied, "I've used them as splints as well as shooting myself up with pain killers. I can walk but not very far or fast."

"Perhaps Toola could carry her again." Molla suggested and Torrent frowned.

"I'd rather limp." she said, "It hurts more but smells better. A lot better."

Other Imperial prisoners had informed the newly arrived Catachans what the alarms that were sounding meant, somewhere within the structure of the arena there were either escaped slaves or intruders that the guards were trying to round up. This was not an uncommon occurrence as beings held captive by the Dark Eldar often considered that they had nothing further to lose by attempting an escape. Then when Quinn suddenly appeared at one of the exits from the holding area with a shotgun in his hands they cheered.

"We knew it was you sarge!" one of Quinn's veterans called out. Then the Catachan pointed to where a Dark Eldar guard had just appeared to investigate the strange noise, "Over there!"

Quinn fired his shotgun at the guard twice, hitting the alien both times while Mayer dropped to his knees and raised his lasgun just in time to be able to take aim at the next guard to appear and he put a single shot through the alien's chest.

"Open the cages!" Wolf shouted as she followed the two squad leaders into the holding area and looked around to see just how many prisoners there were here, "Imperial troops first."

Quinn ran to the nearest of the cage that held members of Second Platoon and he passed one of the two lasguns he was carrying through the gaps between the cage bars. The guardsman who took this then pressed the muzzle of the weapon against the cage lock and fired a single shot that blew it off. Then as soon as the door swung open the Catachans rushed out. Arming themselves from the supply of weapons brought by their squad leaders and the ogryns, the men of second platoon started to spread out through the cages, shooting off more locks and freeing the prisoners inside. Seeing what was happening the other prisoners started to call out, each group calling to be next. This was not limited to just the human troops either and alien voices joined in the calls, shouting out in their own languages while the captive Orks just roared and banged the bladed weapons the Dark Eldar permitted them to keep against the inside of their cages.

"Are there any more of your people here?" Wolf asked Lhurara.

"No lieutenant Wolf." the Eldar woman replied as she looked around, "Whatever purpose the Drukhari put my people to, they are not here."

"Lieutenant the marines aren't here either." Vance pointed out.

"Then we have to find them. Captain Einhart and his men will make getting out of here a lot easier." Wolf replied.

"We did see their gear downstairs in the armoury." Vance pointed out, "Wherever they are, they can't be too far away."

"Human." a deep growling voice suddenly said and Wolf became aware of a large Ork standing in a nearby cage that was pressed up against the bars. Like the others in the cage its clothing seemed to be made up of a patchwork of pieces from various sources. But unlike that worn by the other greenskins in the cage who wore clothing made either plain animal hide or dyed in some garish colour that identified their clan, the clothing worn by this Ork had been made to have a pattern that was reminiscent of the camouflage applied to Imperial Guard uniforms and equipment. In her experience of fighting Orks, Wolf had encountered a few such as this and she knew that they came from the infamous Blood Axe clan. There were rumours within the Imperial Guard that the Blood Axes could on occasion be negotiated with and would fight as mercenaries for human armies. However, it was also known that attempting either of these in the field was an easy way to end up standing beneath a gallows or in front of a firing squad. Assuming that a commissar did not simply

carry out a summary execution for treason.

"Human." the Ork said again and Wolf rested her hand on the las pistol in her holster.

"What?" Wolf asked with suspicion.

"Open da cage human." the Ork said, "Da lads kill da pointy ears." and he jabbed a finger towards the other Orks in the cage with him.

"Open that cage and they'll run amok." Vance told her quietly.

"I agree." Wolf replied, nodding, "Leave the Orks and anyone suspected of being a traitor or heretic inside their cages."

"Human! Let out da boys!" the Blood Axe yelled as the Catachans moved away and it banged on the inside of its cage.

"Lieutenant," Molla said, rushing up to Wolf, "we've got a problem."

"What's wrong sergeant? Are the Dark Eldar coming?" Wolf asked.

"Worse." Molla said seriously, "It's one of the other prisoners. He's a fething leash."

"Oh great. That's just fething great." Vance hissed, "Now bad enough we're all stuck here without a fething leash to deal with as well."

"I do not understand." Lhurara said, "What is this 'leash'?"

"A commissar." Wolf said, "They enforce discipline in the Imperial Guard."

"Something that we're quite capable of doing ourselves without an outsider to tell us how to do it." Molla added.

"Lieutenant Wolf." a stern voice called out and Wolf winced.

"Here he comes." Vance whispered.

"Commissar." Wolf responded as a tall man in a tattered long coat marched towards her. His clothing showed a few signs of repair that suggested he had been here long enough that it needed some fixing but not so long that mismatched replacement patches had been needed.

"Lieutenant I am Commissar Thorne. I will ensure the moral of the men while Captain Franz determines our strategy."

"Captain Franz?" Wolf asked.

"Yes, Captain Franz of the Fourteenth Stanar Rangers is the ranking officer here. He will take command of our troops." Thorne told her.

"Another outsider." Molla muttered and the commissar scowled at him.

"Is there a problem sergeant?" he said.

"No commissar." Molla replied, "I'm sure that I speak for the whole of Second Platoon when I say that your presence with us here now is every bit as welcome as any commissar who joins us on a deep jungle patrol. Now if the lieutenant agrees I need to go and see to the freeing of the prisoners. Plus I'll find out which of them need flogging."

"Go sergeant." Wolf told him, knowing exactly how guardsmen in general and Catachans in particular felt about having commissars around. The casualty rate among such political officers assigned to Catachan units was significantly higher than in others though this was not down to enemy action in combat. Instead the Catachans themselves often found ways of removing the commissar.

Then the commissar noticed Lhurara standing close by and he instinctively reached for his hip where he would normally keep his bolt pistol holstered.

"What is the meaning of this Lieutenant Wolf?" he demanded, "Why is there an alien standing beside you?"

"Ah." Wolf said, "Commissar this Lhurara. She has agreed to assist us in getting back to the planet we were captured on."

"Contact with aliens is a crime lieutenant." Thorne snapped, "I am sure that Captain Franz will rescind any agreement you have made with this thing."

"Actually commissar the agreement was with the inquisition." another voice said from behind the commissar glanced over his shoulder at the trio of approaching inquisitorial stormtroopers. Among the citizens of the Imperium there were few that knew anything for certain about the inquisition, most knowledge was nothing but rumour and myth. Of those that had any understanding of the power wielded by the organisation knew that challenging it was not wise. Even the most mighty governors and generals could find themselves on the receiving end of inquisitorial censure, "She will be co-operating with us."

"Very well." Thorne said, sneering at Wolf, "Though I shall be monitoring her to ensure that her contact with Imperial Guard personnel is kept to a minimum."

"Dark Eldar!" someone yelled and there were calls from those prisoners still in cages to be released. Some claimed inside knowledge that would make their involvement in any escape attempt essential while others issued threats. The most vocal of the latter type came from humans whose scarred appearance suggested that they had sold their services to the ruinous powers many years ago.

"Stand to!" Wolf shouted out over the noise and without waiting for an order from Commissar Thorne she hurried towards the sound of the warning with her las pistol in her hand. Taking their lead from her the other

members of her command squad as well as Molla followed her. Only the injured Torrent remained behind but she still made sure to move away from the commissar. The sound of las gun fire confirmed to Wolf that the Dark Eldar were approaching and there followed the sound of alien weapon fire. This was not the same sound as produced by the energy weapons the arena guards encountered so far had been armed with though. Instead it was the sharper sound of the projectile weapons used by Dark Eldar warriors. Most of the troops clustered round the entrance now coming under attack were Wolf's own soldiers, her squad leaders having targeted the troops they knew for release ahead of everyone else but there were a few in other uniforms as well. At the same time as Wolf arrived there was the sound of much heavier footfalls as Khor's ogryns also responded to her shouted order and the abhumans snapped to attention when they saw her.

"Ogryns reporting." Khor announced but for the time being Wolf did not offer a direct response.

"Sergeant Grey." Wolf said when she spotted him, "What's the situation?"

"A small number of Dark Eldar troops turned up a couple of minutes ago." he told her, "For now they're just taking a few pot shots at us but I'm guessing that won't last."

"I agree." Wolf replied, "They be working to surround us before coming at us from all sides at once."

Just then there was another burst of fire from the splinter weapons carried by the Dark Eldar and a man in the uniform of an Imperial Navy armsman cried out as he was hit in the arm.

"Medicae!" one of the two other troops that pulled him away from the door called out but it was already too late. The crystalline projectiles fired by the Dark Eldar weapons were coated in a deadly toxin and the injured man's screams intensified as the chemical attacked his nervous system. Only when he began to choke on his own blood did his screams cease and moments later he was dead.

Everyone present had already seen the brutal effectiveness of the Dark Eldar weaponry so the armsman's unpleasant death came as no surprise to any of them. Instead it spurred on the troops beside the doorway to return fire at their alien attackers and this time they were joined by the combined fire of six ripper guns, the thundering sound of which drowned out the discharge of the lasguns that the ordinary human troops were armed with.

"Lieutenant Wolf?" an unfamiliar voice said from behind her said and she turned to see Commissar Thorne standing behind a man she did not recognise.

"The Eldar are attacking." Wolf said and she noticed that the man was not currently carrying a weapon,

"Grab a gun and help or get out of the way."

"Lieutenant this is Captain Franz." Thorne said.

"Ah. Oh." Wolf replied.

"Lieutenant all of the Imperial prisoners have been freed. We need to pull back to the armoury you located and arm the rest of our men." the captain said.

"Sir the other prisoners could-"

"The other prisoners are aliens lieutenant." Thorne interrupted, "Do not pity them for they are an abomination."

"But they could-" Wolf began.

"Lieutenant!" Thorne snapped, "The captain has given his order. Follow it or I will have you replaced. There are other officers here."

"Yes sir." Wolf said and immediately the captain and commissar turned around and started to walk away.

"Nice of them to offer to help." Molla commented.

"Notice how they left organising the rear guard to us?" Vance added.

"Typical outsiders." Grey said.

"Never mind that now." Wolf said as she looked around. All together she had most of First and Second Squads with her as well as her own command section, Khor's ogryns and about another squad's worth of troops from a variety of other regiments, "We'll fall back by squads." she said, "Sergeant Khor, your squad is to stick with mine as a reserve. First and Second Squads will alternate between providing cover and falling back, as will a squad made up of the other troops with us. Now let's move."

"Ogryns back!" Khor yelled and the bulky abhumans began to withdraw, following Wolf and her command section. The other squads took it in turns to lay down covering fire while the rest retreated towards the doorway at the other end of the holding area. Along the way the retreating troops were forced also forced to fire shots into some of the cages as the prisoners still locked inside them reached through the bars to try and prevent them leaving, shouting curses at them as they continued on their way.

Whether or not the Dark Eldar were attempting to mass enough troops to attack the holding area from all sides at once they launched their attack from just one direction initially, perhaps realising that the humans were escaping in a different direction. The first Dark Eldar to appear was immediately struck by a shot from a lasgun and fell dead. This was followed by a storm of splinter fire as the following Dark Eldar laid down covering fire for their advance. Inevitably this hit some of the remaining prisoners who had nowhere in their cages where they could seek cover and the survivors in the cages struck resorted to using the bodies of the

dead for cover.

"Back! Back!" Wolf shouted as Second Platoon continued to withdraw and just as they were nearing the exit being used by the Imperial troops to escape she heard a shout.

"Human!" the large Blood Axe Ork bellowed, "Open cage!"

Wolf looked towards the Dark Eldar troops that were now spreading out around the holding area, checking each cage to make sure that it was secure and she knew that she did not want to have to deal with a hostile force pursuing them while they looked for a way out of the arena. She pointed her las pistol towards the cage that held the Orks and the Blood Axe stepped back from the door. Then Wolf fired repeatedly until one of her shots struck the cage lock and destroyed it.

In an instant the Blood Axe let out a roar as he threw himself at the now unlocked door and smashed it off its frame. Seeing that the way was now open for them, the other Orks in the cage also spilled out into the holding area while the Blood Axe raised his crude close combat weapon into the air and let out a shout that was disturbingly familiar to every Imperial Guardsman who had ever faced Orks and lived.

"Waaargh!"

Behind the Blood Axe the other Orks raised their own weapons, waving them in the air as they joined in his battle cry and then in unison they all broke into a run. The Blood Axe turned out to be as good as his word and rather than charging at the human troops attempting to escape they all headed towards the Dark Eldar. Several were cut down by fire from the Eldar's splinter rifles but more than half lived long enough to get within arm's reach and they roared again as they set about attacking the smaller Dark Eldar troops with their close combat weapons as well as their bare hands or even their teeth if the mood took them.

"Let's go." Wolf ordered, still somewhat startled that their escape was being made possible by a group of Orks and when she looked back over her shoulder one last time she saw the large Ork who had spoken to her snap the neck of a Dark Eldar with his bare hands and then smile at her.

"Go human!" he yelled, "I ain't forgetin' dis." and then he spun around and hurled the corpse of the Dark Eldar he held towards more of the alien warriors.

6.

Quinn and his veteran squad led the main group of escapees to the armoury where those without weapons immediately set about smashing open containers to try and find suitable weaponry for themselves.

"Perhaps the captain should consult with the Eldar woman." Quinn suggested, "She understands the markings placed on the crates by the-

"Perhaps the sergeant ought to remember his place when addressing an officer." Captain Franz interrupted, "There is a chain of command and proper procedure for a very good reason. If you have something to say to me then take it to your lieutenant. Then she may bring your point to me."

"Whatever." Quinn muttered as he turned to walk away.

"Aren't you going to salute me sergeant?" Franz called out after him.

Quinn snarled and then spun around, snapping to attention and saluting.

"Dismissed sergeant." Franz said but just like the ogyrns who inevitably followed regulations they could understand to the letter Quinn remained at attention.

"What is your problem now sergeant?" Commissar Thorne asked.

"pardon me for saying sir but I am sure that neither the commissar nor the captain needs to be reminded of regulation IG three six seven eight slash forty-seven." Quinn said and Franz scowled.

"Something to do with uniform dress code isn't it?" Franz commented, "My uniform may not be in tip top shape but it is still-

"Any soldier who fails to salute a passing officer or anyone of higher rank shall be flogged." the commissar said.

Yes, my point exactly. Now move along sergeant." Franz said.

"All salutes are to be held until returned." Thorne added and Franz glared at Quinn, his face going red with anger as he realised that he had been made to look like a fool. Then he saluted quickly and turned towards the guardsmen smashing their way into crates, "Remember I want one special weapon and one heavy weapon for every ten men." he called out.

"What's going on?" Mayer asked as Quinn returned to the other Catachans present.

"Bomber I don't think that our new commanding officer has ever pulled a trigger outside of a firing range." Quinn replied.

"He's non-combatant?" Mayer responded, looking towards the captain and commissar.

"That's right. But unlike our own lieutenant who ended up surrounded by real soldiers who know exactly what they're doing, this guy has a leash behind him telling him that he's always in the right." Quinn said.

"Here's the lieutenant now." Mayer said when he saw Wolf come rushing into the armoury ahead of the rest of Second Platoon.

"Wait here Bomber." Quinn told him, "Make sure that none of our guys end up stuck carrying any crap they don't need just because some quill pusher says so." and then he headed towards Wolf, reaching her before she could get to where Captain Franz had gathered together his hastily organised command section.

"Sergeant Quinn." she said when she saw him.

"Lieutenant we've got a problem in the shape of a captain." Quinn said.

"You mean because he's an idiot?" Wolf commented.

"And a coward." Vance added.

"And an outsider." Torrent said, looking at Wolf as she spoke.

"He's trying to do everything by the letter of regulations." Quinn said, "Right now he's got troops sorting out specific weapon and equipment assignments instead of just grabbing whatever's convenient before we get out of here."

"Well we may have a little breathing room on that matter." Wolf said, "When we left the holding area the Dark Eldar were a little distracted."

"Those greenskins won't hold them for lieutenant. Not forgetting that there are most likely a lot of ways around them." Vance pointed out.

"We need to secure an exit route." Quinn said and Wolf nodded. Then she took a deep breath.

"Oh well, here goes." she said and then she made sure that she was standing up straight as she marched towards Captain Franz and came to attention, saluting as she did. Remembering his run in with Quinn, Franz frowned as he returned the salute.

"At ease lieutenant." he said, "Make your report."

"The rear guard has successfully disengaged from the enemy sir." Wolf said, "However, it is my belief that the xenos forces are attempting to form a perimeter to cut off our escape. I request permission to carry out a scouting mission to secure a route for withdrawal."

"You're not a Catachan are you Lieutenant Wolf?" Franz commented, "I can tell by the way you look and

speak.”

Wolf was irritated by this. Her small stature and accent set her apart from the Catachans but she did not see the relevance of this right now.

“Now sir. I was transferred.” she said, “Now if I may-”

“If we manage to make it back to the Imperium I intend to petition for this force to be established as a company in its own right with me as its commander.” Franz said, “That means I'll need loyal officers to staff it. I know how those death world savages are lieutenant so if you play your cards right with me I'll see to it that you get moved to a position away from them. One immediately under me.”

Wolf shuddered at the thought of having to serve closely with Franz.

“Well lieutenant, what do you say?” Commissar Thorne added.

“Thank you sir.” Wolf lied, “But about-”

“Yes, yes. Scouting. Take that platoon of yours and find us a way out of here. Take those stormtroopers and that alien thing with you as well. They're no good to me here. The rest of the company will follow along shortly.” Franz said.

“Yes sir.” Wolf said and without bothering to salute as she left she turned around and hurried away.

“Well lieutenant, how'd it go?” Vance asked when she returned to her platoon.

“Creepy.” Wolf replied, “He thinks that this is his way of getting appointed as an infantry company commander and he wants me to serve under him.”

“Now when you say serve under him-” Molla began and Wolf scowled at him.

“Oh not like that!” she exclaimed. Then her eyes widened, “Oh throne I hope not like that.”

“Look on the bright side lieutenant.” Grey said, placing a reassuring hand on her shoulder, “We've not escaped yet. There's still plenty of chance for the Dark Eldar to capture, rape, torture and kill you.”

Wolf looked at him.

“You always know how to make me feel welcome sergeant.” she said. Then she addressed all of her squad leaders, “At least the captain has been willing to agree to us carrying out a scouting mission. We'll move out immediately but we better grab a single vox set, I don't want to have to come all the way back here to give our report. Our assignment is just to make sure that the Dark Eldar don't get to surround us but I also want see if we can find out where Captain Einhart and his men have got to. If we can find and free them then I'm sure we won't need to worry about Franz or Thorne. I doubt either of them would risk countermanding the orders of a marine officer. Oh and can someone tell me where Lhurara and those stormtroopers are? The good Captain Franz has seen fit to assign them to our group as well.”

Ordinarily Wolf deployed Molla's squad at the head of the platoon but that was based upon his expert field craft and tracking skills honed as the son of a tour guide on Catachan who grew up escorting wealthy off world visitors into some of the deepest and most dangerous parts of the jungle. Molla also claimed that this was where he honed other skills practised on the daughters of those same wealthy visitors. However, in the Dark Eldar city of Commorrhagh the environment was so radically different to Catachan that Wolf opted to have Quinn's veterans take the lead.

The Catachans had seen the outside of the arena from their cages when they were brought here and so they had a basic familiarity with the arena. The obvious exit points were the walkways and landing pads that extended out from all sides of the structure. But without a waiting aircraft to take the escapees away these would only take them to some of the dark city's other towers that would undoubtedly be filled with more Dark Eldar themselves. In addition to this, the journey to other towers would leave them exposed to any of the Dark Eldar moving around on their anti-gravity vehicles and only serve to invite attack. This left heading down into the under city as the only option open to them and Second Platoon descended through the structure of the arena. As they went they marked the walls with arrows pointing in the direction they went so that the Imperial troops still inside the armoury would be able to follow them. If they reached a dead end or the passageways started to turn back upwards and had to double back they simply crossed out the last arrow and tried a different route.

The lower down they got the worse the state of repair became. The structure itself remained sound but while the illuminator units had failed they had not been replaced and in some place mounts for burning torches had been fitted to the walls instead, suggesting that someone other than the Dark Eldar who ran the arena called this place home after it became abandoned and forgotten by the original owners. Many of the doors also failed to work when the Catachans tried to open them but there were also many that were stuck open, some of which appeared to have already been forced.

“We'll follow these.” Quinn told his squad, “My guess is that someone already came in this way so they should lead to the outside.”

The path of forced and open doors took Second Platoon further down the arena tower into an area that was littered with rubbish. The lighting here was non-existent and the Catachans resorted to using compact flash lights clipped to their weapons to illuminate the way ahead. Often these devices would be avoided since they

gave away the position of the user more easily than they revealed anything in thick jungle during the night, but inside the Dark Eldar tower the humans needed the light to be able to see anything.

"Sarge." one of the veterans whispered as he saw something in the path of his flash light beam, "Take a look at this."

"What is it Moss?" Quinn asked quietly as he moved towards the other Catachan.

"Bones." Moss answered and Quinn saw several bones scattered along one wall of the passageway they were exploring.

Placing a hand up to his ear, Quinn activated the microbead communication headset he wore.

"Lieutenant can we have you and Torrent up here?" he said.

"Is someone hurt?" Wolf responded, "I didn't hear any firing."

"No, we've found something that could be a problem." Quinn told her.

"Hold on sergeant, we're on our way." Wolf told him and then she shut off her microbead.

Less than a minute later her command squad and the remaining stormtroopers arrived along with Lhurara and Quinn pointed out the bones to Torrent.

"Do those look human to you?" he asked.

"Get me closer." Torrent told the guardsman who was assisting her, a man named Kline who also carried the command section's heavy vox set and he helped her forwards.

Picking up one of the bones she examined it closely.

"It's not human." she said, "But I think it's a thigh bone that came from a humanoid creature very similar."

"Probably another escaped captive." Lhurara commented.

"So did he or she just die down here and their body rotted away?" Wolf asked and Torrent shook her head.

"Not unless being eaten is considered natural decomposition." she said and she held out the bone towards Wolf, "See the teeth marks? I'd say those came from something human or humanoid."

"It's recent as well." Vance said and he pointed to one end of the bone, "There's still a bit of meat left there that didn't get eaten."

"Cannibals?" Wolf said, her eyes widening.

"The Drukhari do not feed escapees." Lhurara said, "They must provide for their own nourishment."

"Well if it comes down to that I say we Catachans stick together." Torrent said and Wolf frowned, knowing what was coming next, "I say we eat the outsiders first."

"Platoon stand to." Wolf called out, "Watch for hostiles coming from any direction. If you see anything then fire a warning shot and call it out. Now move. I don't want to hang around here long enough to become dessert."

The platoon began to move again, with Quinn's squad still taking the lead. Now that this part of the tower was believed to be inhabited by hostile lifeforms every possible hiding place had to be cleared before the platoon could pass to avoid them being suddenly ambushed from a direction thought secure. Encountering another passageway that had a downward slope to it, Quinn waved his men along it. Like the others in this part of the tower it was unlit and strewn with debris but there were no junctions or chambers leading off it and so the veterans were able to increase their pace until all of a sudden the passageway came to an abrupt end where it exited the tower entirely.

"Lieutenant we're out." Quinn transmitted using his microbead while he looked around. The ground around the base of the arena tower looked like a wasteland to the veteran sergeant, an area of uneven ground that was devoid of significant vegetation and littered with the debris of a failed society where violence and death was an everyday occurrence. Quinn could make out the remains of bodies scattered here and there, along with random wreckage that came from a variety of different sources from individual pieces of armour or equipment all the way up to the smashed remains of anti-gravity transports that had crashed down here. All of a sudden there was the sound of a shotgun blast.

"Contact!" one of the veterans yelled as the rest of the squad turned around and raised their weapons. A screeching sound from just beyond a rise in the ground suggested that the veteran guardsman had hit something with his shot and then several figures began to move. Each of these was covered by a crude dark cloak that concealed their appearance enough to prevent their species from being identified but the cry that the injured one had just produced suggested that they were not human. The darkness of the cloaks also helped them blend in against the ground, making them difficult to see other than when they moved but from what Quinn could tell there was a significant number of them and his squad was outnumbered.

Then a crossbow bolt flew through the air and narrowly missed Quinn. This was then followed by several more of the primitive projectiles and the veterans dived for cover before they could be struck.

"Looks like we've annoyed them." Quinn said before he let loose two rapid blasts from his shotgun and he saw one of the figures collapse.

Now that the squad was outside it was safer to use the special weapons they carried and a veteran unleashed a jet of liquid fire from his flamer. Moving the weapon from side to side the Catachan sprayed flames over a wide area and there were more shrieks as the burning chemical set light to the cloaks worn by

several of the squad's attackers. Naturally enough these individuals panicked as they burned, some of them threw themselves to the ground and rolled around in a vain attempt to extinguish the flames while others tore their burning cloaks away from themselves before they could be completely engulfed in flames.

The demonstration of such firepower was enough to put the cloaked figures to flight and there was a strange chattering sound as they called out to one another while they fled. Some of the Catachan veterans began to give chase, advancing and shooting some of the fleeing figures in the back.

"Hold fire!" Quinn ordered, "We've only the ammo we're carrying with us. Don't waste it."

"Sergeant!" Wolf's voice called out from behind Quinn and as he turned he saw the rest of the platoon emerging from the tower. Having heard the shooting they emerged expecting trouble and as Wolf's command section advanced straight ahead with Mayer's squad and Khor's ogryns, Molla and Grey led their troops to either side to cover all approaches, "What's happening?"

"Lieutenant." Quinn responded, "There were a number of targets waiting out here when we emerged. In accordance with your orders we opened fire and then they returned fire with those." and he pointed back towards the base of the arena tower where some of the crossbow bolts had embedded themselves in the wall.

"Arrows?" Wolf said.

"Crossbow bolts actually." Quinn replied, "I guess there aren't many munitions factories around here to produce more modern weapons."

"Who were they?" Wolf asked.

"I don't know. We didn't get a good look at them. But there are some bodies over there that might tell us something." Quinn said and he turned towards the direction that the cloaked figures had approached from.

"Okay let's go and take a look. Torrent, we may need your expertise for this. Everyone else spread out. We need to secure this entire area for when Captain Franz arrives with his troops."

"Is he on his way then?" Quinn asked.

"He will be soon." Vance answered, frowning. Then he added, "He's inspecting his company first."

"Him on Earth." Quinn exclaimed, "If they don't get a move on the Eldar will figure out where they are and overwhelm them. Just one grenade going off in that armoury could take out the entire lot."

The Catachans began to spread out from the tower, using the uneven nature of the ground to position themselves where it offered them cover from attack. Ordinarily this would have been a point where they would have deployed the heavy weapons they usually carried but given that these had not been recovered they made do with their lasguns and grenade launchers. Meanwhile Quinn's veterans led the way towards the remains of their attackers. Most of the casualties the veterans had inflicted had been with the flamer and these bodies were badly burned, rendering them little use in identifying who it was that the Catachans had shot at. However, the first of the figures to have been killed was hit by a shotgun blast that left enough of the body intact to inspect it.

"What the feth is that thing?" Vance said when its cloak was removed to expose the corpse that was clad only in a loin cloth underneath. Humanoid in physical arrangement, the creature had pale skin and was devoid of body hair. The proportions were of human form but the facial features had the narrower look of an Eldar, as did the pointed ears either side of its head. Significantly it had rows of sharp teeth in its mouth that looked like they matched the marks found on the bones inside the tower.

"I don't know." Torrent replied as she was lowered down to get a better look at the corpse, "Some parts look human whereas others are more like an Eldar."

"I believe that you are looking at a hybrid of our two species." Lhurara said.

"No." Torrent said, "That's not possible."

"I've heard of these things as well." Voss commented, nodding her head, "The inquisition has come across them every so often. Not that I ever thought I'd see one myself."

"It's obscene." Wolf commented.

"Indeed it is. No normal Aeldari would debase themselves enough to lie with one of your species." Lhurara said, "But biologically it is possible. There are tales of such individuals going back thousands of years, though those were only isolated cases. For there to be an entire tribe of them living here is unprecedented."

"What, you think that you're the only one of your people to have been made available as a prize at the arena?" Quinn replied, "My guess would be that these creatures are the result of that."

"That's a lot of hybrids." Mayer commented.

"I don't see how that can be." Torrent added, shaking her head, "Even if humans and Eldar can interbreed it can't be that easy. These things must have been engineered."

"Either that or they are breeding among themselves." Lhurara said, "The offspring of our two species are known to be viable themselves. Plus it seems likely that such creatures would band together. The Drukhari would reject them for their Mon'keigh blood."

"Yeah and humans wouldn't trust them for being half Eldar." Wolf added.

"Lieutenant are you there?" Grey's voice asked in Wolf's ear and she reached for her microbead.

"Go ahead sergeant." she said.

"Lieutenant Rull just made contact." Grey told her, "He says he's tracked the marines."

"Excellent. Where?" Wolf asked and she looked at Vance and added, "Rull's found the marines."

"He says that they were taken to another tower. They were too heavily guarded for him to attempt a rescue though. He's heading back there now to see if he can get us any more intelligence."

"Very well sergeant." Wolf replied, "I'll pass the information onto Captain Franz. Wolf out."

"Here comes the quill pusher now." Quinn said, looking past Wolf towards the tower behind them as the larger force of freed Imperial Guard troops emerged.

"Lieutenant Wolf!" Captain Franz called out when he noticed a burning corpse nearby, "Report. What happened here."

"A minor engagement captain. Some of the inhabitants of this area. Probably cannibals but what is unusual is that they appear to be part Eldar and-"

"I am not interested in aliens lieutenant." Franz interrupted, "Has your platoon surveyed the surrounding area for a defensible position? The Dark Eldar were starting to bring in additional troops just as we withdrew."

"Not yet sir. I wanted to-"

"What you want is irrelevant lieutenant. Now I ordered you to scout ahead with your platoon and I suggest you do just that." Franz snapped.

"Lieutenant I'd advise we try and track these hybrid things." Quinn suggested quietly, doing his best to prevent Captain Franz of Commissar Thorne from overhearing him, "They must have a lair around here somewhere that the Dark Eldar haven't already raided."

Wolf nodded.

"Thank you sergeant." she said as she lifted her hand back to her microbead to address her entire platoon, "Second Platoon, we're moving out. Sergeant Quinn has the point again."

7.

From their cell the Deathwatch marines had watched four battles in rapid succession. Since none of them involved Imperial troops they cared nothing for the results of any of the matches but they watched to gain information on the challenges they could expect to meet. The first bout had begun with one of the cells holding large Orks being opened and the aliens rushed out into the arena excitedly, screaming their usual war cry. Then while they were rushing to arm themselves from the racks positioned around the arena another cell door opened and a pair of minotaurs emerged. These mutant beasts did not even bother to arm themselves before charging headlong at the Orks who responded with a charge of their own and despite some initial losses, the Orks cut down their opponents by first surrounding them and then chopping their legs out from under them.

Before the Orks could have time to recover from this fight another cell door opened and a single ambull charged out into the arena. The massive insect-like creature immediately dived at the dirt covered floor of the arena and vanished in cloud of dirt as it began to burrow. The structure of the arena prevented the beast from escaping and instead it burrowed towards its intended prey, surfacing in the midst of the Orks. The Orks were alert for the ambull surfacing though and as soon as it broke the surface they set upon it and the creature was slain before it could seriously hurt any of them. The Orks' third set of opponents were strange gelatinous creatures that the marines were not familiar with beyond vague descriptions in the records of the Deathwatch. Four of these creatures slid across the arena towards them and lashed out with tentacles that they extended from their bodies when the Orks came within reach. Initially the Orks were limited to using their weapons purely defensively and they sliced several of the tentacles off at the cost of another of their number who was pulled back towards the alien creatures' bodies and absorbed into one of them. The fight ended when the creatures got so close to the Orks that they were able to stab directly at their bodies furiously and whatever organs they possessed were destroyed.

It was then that the Dark Eldar released a group of pure strain Genestealers into the arena. The four-armed aliens moved quickly across the distance between their cell door and the Orks and although one of the first of the Genestealers to reach them was impaled on an axe the rest responded by dismembering the Orks in under a minute.

As the Genestealers turned around in search of more prey there was a sudden blinding light and high-pitched screeching sound that stunned the aliens and while they lay unconscious in the arena, several Dark Eldar slaves entered it to drag them back to their cell. The crowd that had cheered throughout these fights then began to disperse as announcements were made in the Dark Eldar language informing them of the nature and timing of the next fights in this arena. To the marines in their cell the words were meaningless, however.

"Listen. Someone approaches." Trethor said softly and he looked through the barred wall and down the passageway outside their cell in the direction he had heard the noise of footsteps. As they came closer it became apparent that there was something wrong with the individual coming towards their cell, their footsteps dragged with each step they took as they could not lift their feet off the floor properly and their breathing was laboured as if every breath caused pain. The marines expected to see one of the Dark Eldar's twisted slave creatures come staggering into view and so were somewhat surprised when it turned out to be a Dark Eldar warrior instead. A female, she had obviously been attacked by someone who had either failed to kill her before she could escape, or had intended her to survive long enough to stagger away.

"Look at its back." Trethor added as the Dark Eldar staggered past, supporting herself on the bars of their cage. Whoever had attacked the Dark Eldar warrior had torn open her bodysuit to expose her back and then used something sharp to carve a message in her flesh written in Gothic.

THREE FLOORS DOWN

"An interesting method of delivering a message." Trethor said.

"One that appears specifically targeted at us given the language it is written in." Aman added.

"But the question remains, what is it pointing us towards?" Einhart said and behind Onund grinned.

"Maybe the Eldar knew." he said.

"Brother Arkio, find out." Einhart said.

Onund walked right up to the bars of their cell. There was just enough of a gap between the bars for him to be able to reach through and drag the body of the Dark Eldar guard right up to them. Then it became a matter of brute strength to crush her skull between his hands and scoop out the contents. As Onund removed the remains of the Dark Eldar's brain from the body he tilted his head back, opened his mouth and dropped the pieces of raw and bloody flesh into it.

"How does it taste?" one of the other marines asked and there were laughs from some of his more broad minded comrades.

The purpose of eating the brain was not for nutrition or enjoyment though. Another of the modifications that recruits to space marine chapters were subjected to was the omophagea, also known as the remembrancer. Implanted in the subject's spinal column this allowed a marine to absorb RNA and DNA strands related to memory. In effect a marine could access the memories of someone by eating their brain as Onund was doing with the Dark Eldar now.

However, before Onund had totally finished his meal there was a cry from outside the cell and two more Dark Eldar guards armed with brutal looking shock prods came rushing towards the marines. Thinking rapidly Onund reached through the bars again to tear the skin off the back of the dead Dark Eldar and then began to devour this as well as he stood up and stepped back from the cage.

"What? Is it not dinner time?" he said, grinning at the two guards.

One of the guards thrust his shock prod into the cage and there was a crackling sound as it struck Onund.

The Space Wolf marine fell backwards, shuddering as even his enhanced nervous system was over come.

The Dark Eldar shouted something at the marines as his comrade dragged the body of the dead guard away from the bars. Onund recovered rapidly and the marines watched as some of the Dark Eldars' slave creatures were summoned to clear away what remained of the dead guard."

Well sergeant?" Einhart asked when the marines were alone, "Has the remembrancer revealed the Dark Eldars' secrets? What lies three levels down from us?"

"A storeroom." Onund replied.

"And what is contained inside this storeroom?" Einhart said and Onund smiled at him.

"Our weapons and armour captain." he said.

"Interesting." Wolf commented as she looked through her magnoculars at the clusters of crude buildings ahead of her. The settlement of the hybrids had obviously been constructed out of whatever materials they could scavenge. Given that Commorrhagh's location within the webway meant that it had no weather the construction of these dwellings could afford to be lightweight without risking it being destroyed in a sudden storm and from what Wolf could tell that was the best way to describe most of what she was looking at.

"Looks like they display some of their leavings." Vance added when he caught sight of several spikes rising up from the ground that had skulls impaled on them.

"I'd say that there are about two hundred inhabitants." Wolf said and Quinn nodded in agreement.

"Here, yes." he said, "But my men spotted something more over there and over there." and he pointed to two sets of distant lights at ground level.

"More hybrids?" Wolf asked.

"Unknown. But who knows how many different groups of runaway slaves there are out here?" Quinn replied.

"This terrain looks pretty defensible." Vance said as he studied the area around the hybrids' settlement, "Put up a few barriers and place heavy weapons and you'd have a good place to hold out. Not that we've got any heavy weapons right now."

"Now, but Captain Franz made sure that the others do." Wolf pointed out, "I'm sure that as soon as he finds out about this place he'll want to take it. I can see the benefit of having a base camp to operate out of but-

"But you think that the captain will get too comfortable and want to stay put?" Quinn interrupted.

"Exactly." Wolf replied.

"And what if he does?" Vance asked and Wolf hesitated.

"My responsibility is to get my platoon back to THX one-one-three-eight." she said, "If the captain doesn't see it that way then we just won't ask him."

The aftermath of the fighting in the arena, especially the tunnelling by the captive ambull had left it in need of repair and so there were numerous slaves working on this. In addition several Dark Eldar inspected the weapons stored around the perimeter and made sure that they were ready for use in the next bout of fighting. With some of the cells newly empty, the slaves also had the opportunity to clean these and so they were unlocked by one of the Dark Eldar guards who then went back to the task of maintaining the weapons meant for combat in the arena.

The marines watched as one of the Dark Eldar came closer to their cell, checking each stored weapon in turn and marking those in need of repair. The Dark Eldar saw the marines looking out through the bars of their cell door. He bared his teeth as he paused to smile at the marines and said something in his own language before he threw his head back as he laughed, but all of a sudden there was a spray of blood and the Dark Eldar's head jerked forwards to expose the exit wound in his forehead before he fell face down on the dirt floor of the arena.

"Quickly!" Einhart exclaimed, "His key."

Standing right by the door, Onund and Trethor both reached through the bars to pull the body of the Dark Eldar towards the door. The bullet that had killed the Dark Eldar had been silenced and so the other Dark Eldar and slaves in the arena did not immediately notice that their comrade near the marines' cell had been

killed. It was just as Onund was reaching for the key hooked to the Dark Eldar's belt that another glanced around and saw what was happening.

"Quickly!" Einhart exclaimed as the Dark Eldar on the other side of the arena pointed towards them and called out a warning.

"Almost got it." Onund replied and then he managed to grab hold of the key and he unlocked the cell door. Without needing to be ordered to, the marines rushed out into the arena and armed themselves with weapons taken from the racks either side of their cell door. These were only basic close combat weapons but they were still better than nothing. However, as the marines were arming themselves a pair of Dark Eldar warriors armed with splinter rifles came charging into the arena. With an axe in his hand, Captain Einhart was about to order his men to charge the armed guards anyway, knowing that it was their only hope of escape when he noticed a tiny red dot on the chest of one moments before Rull put a bullet through the Dark Eldar's heart. This prompted the second Dark Eldar guard to turn and search for the source of the shot and in that moment of distraction Einhart hurled his axe at the alien. The blade embedded itself in the alien's head and he dropped his rifle as he staggered and then fell to the ground.

"Purge the alien!" Onund bellowed and with an axe in each hand he charged towards the nearest of the Dark Eldar.

"No!" Einhart called out, "We recover our armour and find Lieutenant Wolf's platoon."

The marines then ran towards the doorway that the Dark Eldar and their slaves had used to gain access to the arena, cutting down anyone unfortunate enough to get in their way. Once out of the arena itself they searched for any way of descending to the levels below. They found this in the form of a ramp that had a trio of Dark Eldar rushing up towards them in response to the alarm that had been raised in the arena about their escape.

Onund was the first into the fray, decapitating one of the Dark Eldar without a thought and then he threw himself at the next, baring his fangs at the alien. While Onund tore the second Dark Eldar apart Aman reached out and pressed the palm of his hand against the final alien's chest.

"Burn!" he hissed, his eyes glowing bright orange as he spoke and then the Dark Eldar let out a shriek as he caught fire. His cries were short lived however, as the psychic flames consumed his body from the inside out.

"More Eldar will be on their way." Einhart said, "We should hurry."

The marines headed down the ramp, counting the number of levels they passed until Onund called out.

"This one." he said, "The Dark Eldar remembered the storeroom being on this floor."

"Lead the way sergeant." Einhart ordered and Onund ran down the passageway ahead of them.

The rest of the Deathwatch marines followed the Space Wolf until he rounded a corner and then there was the sound of splinter rifle fire that struck Onund in his shoulder and he howled as the toxins entered his system. Trethor was next around the corner and the Dark Angel did not stop to help his sergeant, instead he leapt over Onund and charged at the sole Dark Eldar standing several metres further along the passageway. Startled by the sudden appearance of a second marine, the alien hesitated and in this time Trethor swung his sword and knocked the splinter rifle out of the Dark Eldar's hands. Then with a second swing of his weapon Trethor opened up the Dark Eldar from his neck to his groin and internal organs spilled out onto the floor.

"Sergeant." Einhart said as he crouched beside Onund.

"In Russ's name this hurts." Onund replied through gritted teeth.

"It is the Eldar poison." Aman said,

"Well it will take more than some alien poison to-" Onund began before he suddenly gasped and lost consciousness.

"He still lives." Einhart said to the other marines, "His oolitic kidney may yet save him but we will have to carry him."

"How will we find the storeroom without the knowledge he took from the Eldar?" Matros asked.

"This doorway was guarded." Trethor responded, turning to look at the large door the Dark Eldar had been standing outside, "There must be something worth protecting inside."

"Open it." Einhart ordered.

Without a proper key and armed only with hand weapons it took the marines almost a minute to force open the door by hacking at the point where the two halves met until they formed a chip that they could force a sword into to act as a lever that in turn created enough room for them to get their fingers between the doors and drag them apart.

As soon as the doors were opened the marines saw that they had found what they were looking for and their suits of powered armour were stored in individual cages right in front of them while there were racks of weapons that included their own all along the far wall.

"Bolters." Einhart ordered, "We arm ourselves first."

The marines rushed across the storeroom and each of them grabbed a bolter from the rack of such weapons as well as a magazine of ammunition from the container beneath it. From the number of bolters in the rack it was obvious that the Dark Eldar had held other marines captive here at some point in the past, though the

Deathwatch squad had seen no sign of them themselves. Once armed, half of the squad returned to the doorway and took up positions there while the others, including Aman donned their armour. This was not a rapid process and before they had finished there were already Dark Eldar troops heading down the passageway towards them.

“Die alien!” Einhart snapped as he leant through the doorway long enough to fire two rapid shots at the alien warriors. One of the mass reactive rounds struck a Dark Eldar at the base of his neck and detonated within this throat, decapitating him and sending his severed head straight up. Meanwhile the second round struck a different Dark Eldar in the shoulder and blew off her arm before Einhart retreated back into safety.

There followed a storm of splinter fire from several rifles and also a larger support weapon that forced all of the marines at the door to stay back while the Dark Eldar advanced slowly.

“Back.” Einhart told his men, “When the aliens show themselves at the door we will kill them all.” and the marines pulled back into the storeroom, using the numerous storage containers as cover. Then as soon as the first Dark Eldar appeared in the doorway the marines opened fire in unison and half a dozen bolt rounds exploding inside the alien tore him apart.

Then the Dark Eldar armed with the heavier splinter cannon fired it through the doorway without aiming, instead using its high rate of fire to spray toxin coated rounds in all directions and again the marines were forced to take cover. Or at least they were until there was the sound of an armoured footfall and Einhart looked around to see one of the other Deathwatch marines had not only completed putting on his power armour but also retrieved the squad's heavy bolter from the weapon racks.

“Brother Vallis,” Einhart said, “secure the doorway.”

“Yes captain.” Vallis responded, his voice distorted slightly by his helmet and then he opened fire.

The heavy bolter Vallis carried roared as it fired one high calibre bolt round after another towards the doorway and two Dark Eldar were killed instantly, including the one armed with the splinter cannon. Vallis then advanced to stand in the doorway and he fired down the passageway as the Dark Eldar outside were falling back. Caught with nowhere to take cover and with Vallis firing a sustained burst from his belt fed heavy weapon the entire squad was cut down before the marine ceased fire.

“Doorway secured captain.” he announced.

“Good. Now guard the door while we get into our armour.” Einhart said as another two marines armed with bolters joined Vallis.

The Dark Eldar attempted two more attacks on the storeroom while Einhart and the rest of his marines put on their armour and gathered more weapons from the racks but neither of these accomplished anything. The armed and armoured marines at the doorway proved impervious to the Dark Eldars' splinter weapons while the marines' bolters were easily capable of punching through the aliens' lightweight body armour and it was not long before Einhart and his men were ready to move out. Still unconscious while the implant designed to purge his system of toxins did its work, Onund had been placed in his armour by the other marines and it would be the task of two of them to carry the Space Wolf between them.

“Your orders captain?” Aman asked as the fully armoured squad stood before him.

“We continue to head down.” Einhart said, “We will find a way out this tower even if we have to use grenades to blast one ourselves. Then we will be guided to wherever Lieutenant Wolf and her platoon are.”

“You are certain of that captain?” Aman said.

“Yes codicier.” Einhart answered, “I suspect that the sniper who helped us escape the arena is none other than the Catachan Rull and I believe that it was he who carved the message into the back of the alien guard. He must have followed us here through the webway and if what Wolf and her men have said about this Rull are true then he will already know exactly where they are.”

8.

With the Dark Eldar apparently not caring enough about the escape of several hundred human slaves from one of the arenas enough to mobilise a force to recover them, Captain Franz ordered his so-called 'company' to march against the hybrid settlement.

"We spotted sentries concealed around the perimeter." Wolf told him but Franz waved her away.

"A handful of xenos savages armed with crossbows do not concern me lieutenant." he said, "Now have your platoon join the rest of the company and prepare for the assault."

"But captain-" Wolf began.

"Lieutenant!" Franz snapped, "I will not tolerate this continued insubordination from you. Continue like this and I may have to rethink including you on my command staff."

"You heard the captain. Return to your unit." Thorne added.

"Yes sir." Wolf replied before she turned around and walked away, heading straight back to Second Platoon.

"We're ready to go lieutenant." Vance told her, "Each squad will take out a few of those sentries quietly and the captain will be able to march his entire force into the middle of the settlement before they can react."

"Well tell everyone to stand down. We're not moving ahead with our plan. The captain wants to carry out a frontal assault with the entire company. He's confident that we can just overrun the settlement." Wolf said.

"Yeah, but we'll lose three times as many men as we ought to." Vance replied.

"The captain doesn't see it that way. I think he just wants the credit for leading an attack." Wolf said.

"Yeah, I get it. If he leads the attack then segmentum command is more like to give him his infantry company." Vance said, nodding.

"Exactly. Now tell the men to relax while we wait for the others to get into position."

Franz had his force form up on a broad front just over a hundred metres from the perimeter of the settlement. The uneven nature of the terrain made it difficult to see what was happening in the settlement from here but it also meant that the Imperial force remained out of sight of the hybrids for the time being.

"Captain," the vox operator of Franz's command section said, "Lieutenant Teller indicates that his mortars are in position and ready to fire."

"Excellent." Franz replied, "Tell the lieutenant to fire two rounds from each tube before the company advances. There's no sense in wasting ammunition on these savages."

"Yes captain." the vox operator responded and several seconds later Captain Franz heard the sound of mortars firing.

The Imperial Guard troops had recovered seven mortars from the armoury before making their escape but the amount of ammunition they could carry had been limited. Firing just two rounds from each mortar was supposed to preserve ammunition but it also limited the amount of damage that would be inflicted. Firing rapidly, the second rounds had already left their tubes before the first even landed and the troops waiting to attack heard them whistling as they passed overhead.

"Down!" Mayer yelled as he recognised the sound of a mortar bomb coming in close to Second Platoon's location and a few seconds later one of them exploded close enough to shower Second platoon with dirt.

"Someone needs to work on their ranging." Vance muttered as there was a succession of dull 'crump' sounds from the direction of the settlement as the rest of the mortar bombs landed within the target area.

"Attack!" Franz's voice said, coming from every vox set and microbead in range.

Instantly the Imperial troops burst out of cover and charged towards the settlement. The problem was that the now ended mortar barrage had alerted the hybrids to the fact that they were under attack and more of their number had armed themselves and begun to move out to meet the oncoming attack. In addition to this the sentries had escaped the limited barrage largely unharmed and as the Imperial force advanced these struck, firing their crossbows at the guardsmen from their hidden positions. This caused immediate panic among some squad as they suffered casualties to the silent and flashless projectiles.

On the other hand the Catachans of Second Platoon knew where all of the sentries were and as the armed hybrids emerged from their hiding places they were in turn ambushed by the Catachans who either shot them where they stood or slit their throats.

A thrown rock let Wolf know that her platoon was closing in on the settlement itself as the inhabitants resorted to using whatever came to hand to resist and the Catachans returned fire with their lasguns.

"Sergeant Khor, take your squad forwards." Wolf ordered.

"Ogryns forwards!" Khor bellowed and the abhumans moved forwards, advancing ahead of the rest of Second Platoon. The hybrids responded to this by turning their primitive weapons on the ogryn but the abhuman soldiers had hides so tough that rocks thrown by human sized opponents and the occasional crossbow bolt did nothing to even slow them down. To begin with Khor roared and his squad opened fire with

their ripper guns. The powerful shotguns proved capable of not only dealing with the hybrids but also tearing apart what remained of their shelters and the hybrids began to flee. The ogyrns did not simply allow them to escape, however and as they gave chase they used their ripper guns to club the hybrids who were too slow to get away.

Behind the ogyrns came the rest of Second Platoon and the Catachans switched their lasguns to fully automatic to clear the structures they came across, firing bursts of las blasts through the walls of the structures before entering them to make sure that there were no cannibalistic hybrids lurking inside to attack them from behind after they had moved on. With Imperial troops within their settlement the panic now shifted to the hybrids who lacked the discipline and training of a military force and those sentries who had been shooting at any targets that presented themselves suddenly broke from cover and started to run.

"Forwards men!" Franz shouted when he saw this, "They can't stand against us!" and then as he started to run forwards he slipped on a rock that was not as sound as he thought it was and landed face down in the dirt before his men helped him back up.

With the hybrids now fleeing the rest of the Imperial force was able to push forwards into the remains of the settlement, smashing everything that remained. Here and there the advancing Imperial troops came across bodies. Some of these were of hybrids killed in the initial mortar bombardment but there were also other corpses among the ruined structures from other species including humans, Eldar, Tau and even Orks. These had not been killed in the bombardment and several of them had been partially eaten by the cannibalistic hybrids. Evidence of the hybrids' tendencies provoked rage and revulsion among the Imperial troops and they took this out on the few live hybrids they found, kicking and beating them to death with the butts of their weapons.

"You have no problem with this?" Lhurara's voice said and Wolf turned around to see the Eldar woman and the inquisitorial stormtroopers standing close by.

"And how would your people deal with these monsters?" Wolf replied.

"A quick extermination." Lhurara said.

"Well those soldiers are just doing what they can with the means at their disposal." Wolf said.

"Leash." Vance said suddenly and when she looked around Wolf saw Commissar Thorne approaching.

"Commissar Thorne." she said when he walked up to her.

"Lieutenant." he replied, "Captain Franz wants all of his junior officers to meet while he explains how he wants our new headquarters organising."

"Headquarters?" Vance commented, "That sounds kind of permanent."

"The meeting is for officers." Thorne added, still looking at Wolf and ignoring Vance, "In ten minutes. Have your casualty reports ready by then lieutenant." and then Thorne just marched away.

"Vance is right." Torrent said, "Calling this a headquarters rather than a camp suggests the captain's going to end up wanting to stay put. Still keen to disobey orders?"

"If I have to, yes." Wolf replied, "Assuming I get the chance of course."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Torrent asked but Wolf looked at Vance rather than answering her question directly.

"Platoon Sergeant Vance." she said, "In my absence I am leaving the platoon in your hands. I want it ready to move out in one hour. Our initial objective will be to meet up with Rull and rescue Captain Einhart and the other marines. Then we will proceed to the webway and return to THX one-one-three-eight." then she looked at Lhurara and the stormtroopers, "Are you in?" she asked.

"We serve the God Emperor of Mankind." one of the stormtroopers said, "Not some non-combatant quill pusher who thinks he's a warmaster."

"I have no desire to remain here either." Lhurara added.

"Good. Then hopefully I'll be back soon." Wolf said and then she started to walk towards where Captain Franz was gathering officers around him.

9.

An ordinary infantry company would have had up to six platoon commanders plus a handful of logistical officers but given the unconventional way in which this force had been put together there were more than a dozen other lieutenants gathered around Captain Franz as he addressed them. Each of the platoon commanders came from a different regiment and so all were strangers and Wolf knew that none would risk questioning Captain Franz without knowing exactly how the other officers would react. It would take only one sycophant seeking to become the captain's favourite to shout down any opposition without the captain having to answer it.

"Our losses appear to be thirty injured and twelve dead in total." Captain Franz said, "However, that must be measured against our now having a defensible location from which to operate. In order to properly secure this location I want fortifications constructed with a diameter of two hundred metres. No matter what direction we may be attacked from, we must be able to defend ourselves."

"Excuse me captain, but do we have time for that?" Wolf asked and Franz snarled.

"Damn you lieutenant, stop questioning my orders. I understand that you may be in command of a platoon of Catachan thugs but you are not one of them so that is no reason for you to forget proper etiquette when dealing with your betters." he said sternly. Then he looked around at the other officers again, "Now where was I before I as so rudely interrupted? Of course, securing our position. As well as building fortifications I want to know what else is in the local area. We need to secure sources of food and water if we are to avoid starvation. After that we can begin work on our longer term aim of leaving this cursed place."

"We already have a way out." Wolf said, "My platoon sniper can guide us to the webway passage that will lead us back to an Imperial world and the Eldar woman will show us how to operate the gateway itself. But first we need to rescue Captain Einhart and his men."

"That is it!" Franz yelled, "If you will not conduct yourself as an officer then you shall no longer be one. Lieutenant Wolf you are reduced to the ranks. If I had a penal squad then I would send you to it." then he looked at another of the officers present, "Lieutenant Collister, the Catachan platoon is yours. Make sure that you keep them in line."

"Yes captain." Collister replied, nodding.

"Second Platoon is mine." Wolf said, "They won't follow Collister and without me they won't follow you either captain."

"Commissar Thorne!" Franz snapped, "Do your duty."

"Of course." Thorne said and he drew the bolt pistol from his holster and pointed it at Wolf, "Guardswoman Wolf you have been found guilty of mutiny. The penalty is death." and Wolf closed her eyes.

The sound of the bolt shot boomed out and was followed by a loud scream, at which point the surprised Wolf opened her eyes to see Thorne on his knees with his one remaining hand clamped over the bloody stump where the other had been blown away.

"I have need of Lieutenant Wolf and her platoon." Captain Einhart called out from a patch of high ground where he and the other Deathwatch marines were gathered while Trethor lowered the bolter he had just used to save Wolf's life.

"What is the meaning of this? Who are you?" Franz demanded as the marines approached him and the other officers.

"I am Captain Einhart of the Deathwatch." Einhart replied, "Who are you?"

"Captain Franz of the Fourteenth Stanar Rangers. I am in command of this company and Guardswoman Wolf is a mutineer." Franz answered,

"Lieutenant Wolf and her platoon have been seconded to the forces of his Most Imperial Majesty's Holy Inquisition." Einhart said calmly, "Since the demise of Inquisitor Derren his mission falls to me to complete and so Second Platoon is under my command. Do you know what it is called when someone attempts to interfere with an inquisitorial operation Captain Franz?" Einhart asked but Franz simply stared at the marine towering over him dumbfounded, "It is called treason Captain Franz. Are you a traitor?"

Franz shook his head.

"No. No of course not." he replied.

"Then you acknowledge that Lieutenant Wolf was acting in accordance with proper procedure and there are no legal grounds for her to be executed." Einhart said.

"Of course not. But the lieutenant never-" Franz began before Einhart interrupted him.

"What did you do in the Fourteenth Stanar Rangers Captain Franz?" he asked.

"What? Oh, I was a Munitorum liaison officer." Franz answered.

"A quill pusher. Counting lasgun charge packs and ration bars." Einhart said. Then he looked at Wolf, "Lieutenant Wolf I am ordering you to take command of this company."

"But I outrank her." Franz protested.

"No longer captain." Einhart said and he looked to where the inquisitorial stormtroopers stood watching with the Catachans, "Stormtrooper Kreer." he called out.

"Yes Captain Einhart?" Kreer responded.

"Stormtrooper Kreer, take Captain Einhart and this commissar into custody. They will be handed over to the commissariat upon our return to THX one-one-three-eight."

"Yes Captain." Kreer said and he and the other stormtroopers rushed forwards, their hell guns aimed at Franz and Thorne. As the pair were disarmed and taken into custody Einhart turned to address the other startled officers gathered around him.

"In the name of The Emperor I am granting Lieutenant Emilia Wolf of the Catachan Nineteenth Regiment of the Imperial Guard the temporary field rank of captain and placing her in command of your force. For those who doubt my decision I suggest you look at the markings on her arm." Einhart said and he pointed to the skull tattoo that Wolf had on her arm, "This is how Catachan units denote recipients of the Honorifica Imperialis. She received this honour for returning to a fusion bomb planted in a Necron tomb to make sure that it went off as planned. If any of you think that you are better suited to command then feel free to tell me now."

Wolf smiled nervously as the other officers all stared at her in silence, none of them having suspected that the diminutive officer had received one of the Imperial Guard's highest honours. When none of them spoke up to challenge Captain Einhart's orders he looked down at Wolf.

"Your sniper enabled us to escape." he said, "He also warned us that there appear to be a growing numbers of Orks at large in the outskirts of the city. Something we have seen signs of ourselves."

"Ah." Wolf commented, "I may be responsible for that. I released some of them to act as a distraction when we were making our own escape from the arena."

"Very well, carry on Captain Wolf." Einhart told her and then he stepped back.

Wolf realised that the other officers were still staring at her and now that Captain Franz had been removed they were waiting for her to give them orders.

"Prepare to move out." Wolf ordered, "Once Rull let's us have the route back to the planet my platoon was taken from we'll be leaving. Dismissed."

As the officers dispersed Wolf returned to her own troops and smiled.

"I thought I was going to die." she said.

"Well we can't get everything we want now can we?" Torrent commented.

"Just remember that rank of yours is temporary captain." Vance pointed out, "When we make it back you'll be a plain lieutenant again."

The route back to the webway conduit that led back to THX-1138 was not a direct route. When he had guided the ogyrns through Commorragh to the arenas, Rull had steered them around the areas that were densely populated by either Dark Eldar or their slaves. As it was, such a large group moving between the towers could not help but attract the attention of the Dark Eldar gangs roving the skies on their skyboards and jetbikes. Fortunately the loud screaming sound that these vehicles produced, as well as the war cries of their riders gave the Imperial force advance warning of their approach and the resulting storm of small arms fire was enough to drive them away before they could launch their attack.

Unfortunately word of a large force of escaped prisoners making their way through the lower levels of the city, as well as a growing body of Orks now daring to strike out from the ruined regions of Commorragh where escaped slaves tended to gather soon spread to those with more resources than just a few lightweight skimmers.

"My lord the kabal can mobilise to stop the Mon'keigh." the dracon said, addressing her lord, "The Orks we can deal with later, they are not going anywhere."

"No." the archon replied as he plucked the eye from a nearby slave and then swallowed it.

"But my lord, so many souls ripe for the taking." the dracon said.

"Yes and they will be mine but think dracon, so many runaway slaves do not march together for no reason. In fact if they have any sense runaway slaves remain out of sight whereas these may be avoiding coming into contact with our people but they do not fear the gangs as they should. They are organised and this means that they have a purpose."

"But what can that be my lord?" the dracon asked.

"There have been two escapes from the arenas within the past cycle." the archon pointed out, "Both of them took place shortly after captives taken from one particular world arrived there. I suspect that these captives led the breakouts in both cases and I believe that they intend to try and return to the world that they were taken from."

"Those captives were Mon'keigh my lord. They cannot use the webway."

"Perhaps not. But it does offer us an opportunity. If they think that the webway gates will answer to them then

they attempt to return to the same passage that was used to bring them to Commorragh. That is where the kabal will deploy dracon. We will let them get within sight of the webway before their hopes are crushed and I will feed on their despair.”

“Yes my lord.” the dracon replied, bowing her head, “It shall be done.”

The final stretch of the journey to the webway passage leading back to THX-1138 required the escaped Imperial troops to cross an area of wasteland where whatever structures had once stood there had been totally razed to the ground. Wolf brought the force to a halt at the edge of this and took the handset to her unit’s vox set.

“Wolf to all units, Rull reports Eldar forces ahead blocking access to the webway. I want heavy weapons to target these while our assault forces move in to clear a path.” she broadcast before returning the handset to the vox operator. Then she looked at Captain Einhart who stood nearby, “It shouldn’t take long to deploy the heavy weapons captain.”

“Very good Captain Wolf.” Einhart replied, “We will lead your ogryns, the veteran squads and the remaining stormtroopers forwards as soon as the rest of your company signals its readiness.”

Wolf then looked at the vox operator, Kline. The guardsman was monitoring the transmissions from each of the unofficial platoon commanders while their troops set up their heavy weapons. With the webway so close and speed being of paramount importance, the plan now was to use these to lay down suppressing fire on the Dark Eldar perimeter guards before Captain Einhart could deal with them at close range. After that the heavy weapons would be disabled and abandoned and the remaining Imperial Guard forces would rush into the webway.

Kline gave a thumbs up when the last platoon commander reported his men ready and Wolf smiled as she took the handset again.

“Command to all units.” she signalled, “Commence attack.”

There was no verbal response to this order, instead every heavy weapon possessed by the informal Imperial Guard company opened fire at once. Every one of these was aimed at the small force of Dark Eldar positioned around the entrance to the webway passage. The Dark Eldar were not a species known for their defensive operations, typically engaging in battle only when they could strike fast and hard then withdrawing before powerful opposition could be organised against them. However, on this occasion the Dark Eldar had no choice but to stand their ground since withdrawing would be just the same as defeat in that it would permit the human troops to gain access to the webway passage they were guarding.

Captain Einhart waited a short time while this barrage continued, monitoring its effectiveness on the Dark Eldar. Lacking any physical fortifications, the initial effect of the attack was to wipe out one squad of warriors completely while the other three scattered and went to ground. There was some return fire from the Dark Eldar but the range was too great for the splinter rifles and cannons to be effective, however this did give Einhart some idea of their disposition before he raised his power sword above his head.

“For the Emperor!” he yelled, his voice amplified by his helmet and then he and his marines charged forwards.

“Ogryns charge!” Khor bellowed when he saw this and the abhumans joined the marines in launching their attack. In addition to this, three squads of veteran guardsmen armed primarily with shotguns, including Quinn’s joined in the charge and this force rushed across the wasteland towards the Dark Eldar. Of these troops only Vallis carrying the Deathwatch marines’ heavy bolter carried a long ranged support weapon. Unlike the heavy weapons of the Imperial Guard that were mainly mounted on tripods or wheeled carriages, the mounting of this weapon enabled it to be fired relatively easily on the move even if its accuracy was diminished somewhat. The autosenses built into the marine’s helmet gave him an excellent view of the Dark Eldar positions and he fired several rapid bursts from the belt fed weapon at places where he saw the alien warriors gathering to be able to make a stand against the closing assault.

All of a sudden a beam of darkness erupted from one of the Dark Eldar positions as the aliens succeeded in bringing one of their more powerful heavy weapons to bear. Roughly equivalent in purpose to an Imperial las cannon, the dark lance sliced through one of Khor’s ogryns and the abhuman died instantly, the unstable energy of the beam incinerating his flesh as it burned through him. But in firing their weapon the Dark Eldar had given away its position and all of the Imperial heavy weapon operators turned their attention towards that area, saturating it with their own las cannon blasts as well as auto-cannon shells, mortar rounds, heavy bolter fire and anti-personnel missiles.

By this point the advancing assault force was so close that they were able to add their own small arms to the weight of fire being directed at the Dark Eldar and the sound of bolters, shotguns and ripper guns joined in the cacophony. Wolf knew that the lessening gap between friend and foe left little room for error in the suppressing fire from her heavy weapons and she held the vox handset to her mouth again.

“Cease fire.” she ordered, “Stand by to disable heavy weapons.” and all around her the sound of heavy gunfire ceased.

With the assault force close enough to use their small arms against the Dark Eldar, the reverse was also true and there was a hail of fire from their rifles. The Deathwatch marines simply strode through this fire, the crystalline rounds shattering on impact with their powered armour but the ordinary human guardsmen were not as fortunate and several of the veterans fell, screaming in agony as the toxins coating the projectiles entered their bloodstreams. Quinn himself narrowly avoided being hit by a burst of fire from a splinter rifle and the poisoned rounds instead pierced the heart of another veteran running alongside him.

The genetically modified muscle structure of the space marines combined with the strength enhancing properties of their powered armour enabled the Deathwatch squad to smash into the Dark Eldar position just seconds after they began to exchange small arms fire. Using their own mass as a weapon, the marines barged straight into the Dark Eldar, using fists and elbows to strike blows against the aliens before they had drawn their combat blades. On the other hand Captain Einhart and Codicier Aman were armed with various swords, a power sword in the case of Captain Einhart and a force sword that channelled his psychic powers in the case of the librarian. Both of these weapons gave their wielders the ability to slice a Dark Eldar warrior in half with minimal effort and the two marine commanders cut through half a dozen of the aliens in under a minute.

There were still enough Dark Eldar warriors remaining that the marines were heavily outnumbered and being in the midst of their defensive position meant that the aliens could remain hidden from the other Imperial forces while they swarmed towards the marines. One alien leapt through the air with a drawn dagger and as he descended he plunged the blade into the neck joint of one of the marines, killing him instantly as his spinal column was severed. Aman turned on the spot when he saw this and fired his blot pistol, putting two rounds into the Dark Eldar just as he was pulling his blade from his victim but he saw that there were still plenty more Dark Eldar left.

It was then that a roaring sound heralded the arrival of Khor and his ogryns.

"Ogryns kill!" the BONEHead bellowed as the squad of abhumans kicked their way through the barricade that the Dark Eldar had erected and the joined the marines in engaging the Dark Eldar in hand to hand combat. The alien warriors were far faster than the ogryns were but the brute strength and resilience of the abhumans gave them the upper hand except where the Dark Eldar could gather a large enough number of their warriors to swamp a single ogryn with multiple opponents and even then they failed to bring any of the giant humanoids down. Instead they struck and retreated fast enough to prevent the ogryns from striking back at them with blows strong enough to easily smash their bones in the hope that one of the lighter blows they struck would strike something vital. The problem was that all of an ogryn's vital organs were protected by thick layers of body fat and muscle while their eyes were high up off the ground and almost impossible for a Dark Eldar to reach.

As the fighting between the ogryns and Dark Eldar rapidly became a stalemate, with the Dark Eldar quickly learning to stay just out of reach of the ogryns when they swung their ripper guns the marines continued to hack their way through the aliens, their squad member armed with a flamer using it to force them out of hiding to where they could be set upon by the rest of the squad. Seeing their numbers dwindling the leader of the Dark Eldar opted to withdraw and he yelled an order at her troops, waving them towards her as she backed away from the marines. However, it was then that two things happened simultaneously to prevent the orderly retreat that the Dark Eldar leader was attempting to organise. Firstly a tiny red dot appeared on the faceplate of her helmet and moments later a single bullet punched through her helmet and killed her instantly. Then at almost the exact same time the veteran squads arrived with their shotguns and other short ranged assault weapons, attacking the Dark Eldar before another officer could take command. Overwhelmed and with no-one to give orders, the surviving Dark Eldar broke and routed as individual warriors fled across the wasteland. Acting on instinct Khor's ogryns started to give chase to the fleeing Dark Eldar before Quinn called them back.

"Khor no!" he shouted, "Let them go, we have our way out of here."

"Ogryns stop!" Khor shouted and the ogryns promptly came to a halt, watching as the Dark Eldar fled.

10.

Seeing that the way into the webway was now clear Wolf waved the remaining Imperial forces forwards. "Advance!" she shouted before glancing over her shoulder at the guardsmen, who bore the armoured but unconscious form of Sergeant Onund on a large stretcher between them. This group included Captain Franz and Commissar Thorne, the task being considered a useful penance for their failure in leadership. The Space Wolf had not yet recovered from his injury but despite his significant weight, Wolf and Einhart agreed that he would not be abandoned.

"Pick him up. We need to get him into the webway." she told them.

The forward units of the Imperial force that had assaulted the Dark Eldar position held their position while the rest of the force advanced across the wasteland towards them.

"Take the lead Captain Wolf." Einhart told Wolf as her command section reached his marines. Then he looked at Lhurara who was accompanying her, "The alien can guide us."

"Rull knows the way back." Vance responded and Wolf just nodded.

"Perhaps." Einhart replied, "But I do not see your sniper around. Do you?"

"Trust me, he's here somewhere." Wolf said as she looked around for the elusive sniper.

Without waiting for an order one of the infantry squads from the improvised company rushed towards the entrance to the webway passage that the Dark Eldar had been defending, anxious to escape from the aliens' nightmarish home. However, just as they neared the passageway there were several rapid pulses of energy from within it that blasted through the entire squad and they died screaming. Then a force of the sated Dark Eldar skimmers, two of the troop carrying versions supporting three of the more heavily armed and protected attack craft slowly floated into view. At the same time there was a sudden screaming sound from above as a force of Dark Eldar on skyboards swooped down towards them.

"It's a trap!" Wolf yelled as one of these skyboard riders veered away from the others and raced towards her command section. In response Wolf raised her las pistol, hoping that she or one of her squad would be able to pick off the fast moving alien. It was not a member of Wolf's section that killed the alien though. As the Dark Eldar descending in a steep but straight dive it was suddenly struck by a bullet that knocked her off the skyboard and as the lightweight flying vehicle spun out of control it rider cried out in panic as she plummeted towards the ground below before being killed on impact.

"Thank you Rull, wherever you are." Wolf muttered.

The Imperial troops did not need to be ordered to open fire on the aliens now in front of and above them but the Dark Eldar had waited to spring their ambush until they were at their most vulnerable. Having abandoned most of their heavy weapons in favour of being able to move more quickly the Imperial Guard had nothing to match the heavy firepower of the trio of Ravager gunships while their location in the wasteland left them caught out in the open.

"Engage those Ravagers." Einhart ordered the Imperial Guard veteran accompanying his marines. Though like the other infantry squads behind them they had no heavy weapons some of them were armed with lighter support weapons such as grenade launchers and melta and plasma guns. These lacked both the range and vehicle killing firepower of missile launchers and las cannons but they would be sufficient to bring down one of the open topped ravagers if they could get close enough. This was an issue that did not seem to be much of a problem as the Dark Eldar vehicles continued to advance, spreading out into an arc that had Ravagers at each end and in the centre with troop carrying Raiders in between them. While the veterans turned their weapons on the Dark Eldar vehicles blocking their access to the webway Einhart pointed towards the Reavers on their skyboards, "Brother Vallis, bring them down." he ordered and the Deathwatch marine armed with the squad's heavy bolter lifted the muzzle of his weapon skywards before opening fire. "First, Third and Fifth Platoons move forwards." Wolf ordered, using her microbead to broadcast to the nearby command squads, "Second, Four and Sixth provide over watch."

The Dark Eldar archon watched from his Raider as the humans tried to defend themselves. Their weapons were not as powerful as those possessed by the Dark Eldar and they would be receiving no reinforcements but they were well led and the archon knew that victory would come at a price. That was unless the human leadership could be removed and the archon rapidly found where that leadership was located.

"Target those marines." he ordered the Raider's gunner and the warrior stood at the front of the vehicle turned his weapon towards Einhart and his men. The most prominent among them was Vallis as he fired his heavy bolter at the Reavers overhead and the Dark Eldar gunner targeted him first. The beam from the dark lance struck Vallis in his back, the beam of unnatural energy slicing through his armour's power supply before it also burned a hole through him and the beam erupted from his chest. As he fell the beam sliced upwards and cut through what remained of the stored ammunition for his heavy bolter and there was a

sudden explosion as the mass reactive rounds detonated inside the storage unit.

The resulting blast was insufficient to harm any of the other marines close by but it did distract them just long enough for the archon and a squad of elite warriors led by the dracon to leap down from the Raider and rush towards them.

"Captain! Behind us!" one of the marines called out when his autosenses detected the Dark Eldar and he turned around and fired a rapid burst from his bolter that felled one of the Dark Eldar. However, the dracon then leapt into the air and drew a sword with a blade of polished crystal and when she landed right in front of the marine she plunged this through his armoured chest plate and into his heart as easily as if it was made of foil. Knowing that a marine possessed a secondary heart in addition to the organ in the usual place for a human the dracon swept her blade sideways to cut this second organ in half as well and the marine fell dead on the spot. Hearing the approach of another marine, the dracon turned to face this new threat and she was just in time to use her sword to parry a blow from Aman's force sword that threatened to decapitate her. However, the sheer strength of the blow was still enough to drive the dracon back and the librarian struck again and again, forcing the dracon to retreat even further.

While the dracon was engaged with Aman, the archon sought out Einhart specifically, hacking down a pair of Imperial Guard troops unlucky enough to get between him and his target.

"Mon'keigh." he hissed as he approached Einhart as the space marine captain was reloading his bolt pistol.

"Alien." he replied and as the pair faced one another they both raised their swords.

The archon acted first, charging forwards but Einhart had expected just this and rather than attempt to battle the alien in kind with his power sword, Einhart brought up his freshly loaded bolt pistol and fired the entire contents of the magazine at the archon. Agile enough to avoid the rapidly delivered burst, one of the rounds still clipped the alien leader's leg and caused the archon to stumble as injectors built into his armour automatically pumped a series of elixirs into his blood stream to counteract the pain and increase the speed at which his blood clotted to seal the wound as Einhart finally charged at the archon with his power sword raised.

While the elite Dark Eldar troops engaged the Deathwatch marines the Imperial Guard forces advanced towards them, continually harassed by the Dark Eldar Reavers. Few of the flying aliens continued to try and charge towards the main body of Imperial troops and instead they circled overhead, swooping down on any group that got too far from the rest. It was clear that this was not a battle winning tactic however, Wolf had her force advancing in two large groups that were easily able to defend themselves from the flying aliens whose numbers were dwindling as the sheer volume of fire from las guns as well as the occasional sniper round brought them down one by one. The only real advantage that the Dark Eldar possessed were their vehicles and even these were not invulnerable as a loud explosion demonstrated when a krak grenade was fired by one of the veteran squads battling alongside the marines and the shaped charged struck the engine of a Raider transport and the vehicle was consumed in a ball of smoke and flames.

"We need to take down the rest of those vehicles if we're going to get out of here." Wolf said and Vance nodded in agreement.

"The marines and veterans aren't far ahead now." he replied, "One last push and I think we can hook up with them."

Wolf reached for her microbead.

"Wolf to all platoons, stand by to advance on my order. We're going to make a rush forwards to hook up with the marines. When we get there I want all special weapons targeting at those vehicles blocking our path. If we can take them down then we'll be able to get into the webway." she signalled. Then she waited a few seconds to give the platoon commanders the chance to pass on her instructions to their troops. Once she was satisfied this would have been done she activated her microbead again, "Now!" she snapped and the company began to run.

Although they started out running together, some of the Imperial Guard troops inevitably became separated from the main body and whenever the circling Reavers saw this they swooped down, decapitating and impaling guardsmen or alternatively plucking them up into the air before dropping them from high enough to injure or kill them. They could not stop the vast majority of the force from reaching the position formerly occupied by the webway's guards, however and the Imperial troops began to conceal themselves among the former Dark Eldar fortifications.

"Over there." Wolf said, pointing towards where Captain Einhart continued to duel against the Dark Eldar archon.

"Think the captain and librarian would appreciate some help?" Vance asked and Wolf shrugged.

"Let's go ask." she said and as the Imperial guardsmen dug in around them Wolf's command section made their way towards the marines and it was then that they noticed Aman duelling the dracon and pushing the alien ever closer to another squad of Dark Eldar warriors that was disembarking from the second Raider.

"You help the captain." Lhurara said to Wolf, "I have this." and before Wolf could reply the Eldar woman set

off towards Aman in bounding leaps. These took her to Aman in a very short time and she ground to a halt right beside the dracon, pressing her pistol to the Dark Eldar's head.

"Drukhari filth." she hissed in her own language before she pulled the trigger and a tiny razor sharp spinning disc of metal tore through the dracon's head.

As the dracon fell dead Aman looked at Lhurara but said nothing.

"You're welcome Mon'keigh." she said before the psyker suddenly lunged at her.

For an instant Lhurara suspected that Aman had turned on her, something she had been expecting from the humans ever since they had released her, but Aman's true motivation became apparent when a volley of energy blasts from one of the Ravager gunships flew overhead.

"We're even." Aman said and then he raised a hand towards the Ravager, "Burn alien!" he yelled as he channelled his power towards the vehicle's pilot. In an instant the Dark Eldar perched towards the rear of the vehicle burst into flames and screamed. It's heading and thrust no longer controlled by the pilot, the Ravager listed violently and the muzzle of one of the side mounted weapons scraped along the ground. In turn this extra drag pulled the rest of the vehicle down and before the crew could abandon the Ravager it ploughed prow first into the ground and exploded.

A burst of plasma fire from one of the veteran squads blasted the prow off a Dark Eldar Raiders and its burning wreckage came crashing down to the ground.

"Your force dwindles alien." Einhart said when he saw this, guessing that the archon would have some means of understanding what was said to him.

"No Mon'keigh. My force grows." and then all of a sudden he leapt into the air and performed a back flip that brought him back to the ground further away from Einhart, enabling the alien to turn and run.

"Captain Einhart!" Wolf called out as she and her command section arrived just as the archon was making his escape.

"Captain Wolf." Einhart replied, "What is the status of your company?"

"We've lost about thirty men." Wolf replied and turning towards the sound of grenade launchers being fired towards the remaining Dark Eldar vehicles she added, "But we've still got plenty of firepower left."

"And I think we will need it." Einhart said and he pointed back towards the city. Turning around Wolf saw a large number of Raider transports appearing from between Commorragh's towers. The troop carriers came to just within the wasteland before descending to an altitude low enough for their occupants to disembark before rising up into the air again. Until now each group of Dark Eldar that the Catachans had faced had worn armour of a single colour scheme but this time there were several different colours visible between the different squads.

"Feth." Torrent said when she saw this, "How many of them are there?"

"These Eldar are not all from a single kabal." Einhart said, "Obviously our escape has proven too much for them to tolerate and they have banded together against us."

"Captain!" Aman shouted as he and Lhurara rushed towards Einhart and Wolf's command section, "What are your orders?"

"If the Dark Eldar are going to come at us on foot then we could fall back towards the webway." Wolf suggested, "There are only a handful of them left between us and it."

"In which case we would have them following us all the way back to THX one-one-three-eight." Einhart replied, "Plus whatever additional forces they sent after us."

"I can help you lose them but we need to have a head start to get us out of their sight." Lhurara said.

"And we won't get one with them right there." Wolf replied right as the newly arrived Dark Eldar force began to advance across the wasteland towards them, "Throne. I shouldn't have ordered our heavy weapons to be abandoned."

"They were weighing us down." Vance pointed out, "We'd still have half our men out there in the open if they had to drag everything that idiot Franz made them bring from the arena."

"I will lead my men against what remains of the Dark Eldar between us and the webway." Einhart said,

"Captain Wolf I need you to hold back these new arrivals. If we can open a path to the webway then we will fall back into it. If the Dark Eldar follow then so be it. We will fight them as long as we are able."

"Yes captain." Wolf responded, knowing that it was unlikely that the remaining marines would be able to overcome the Dark Eldar blocking their path to the webway and that Einhart's plan was most likely going to become a last stand.

Einhart started to turn away from Wolf when all of a sudden there was shout from beyond the advancing Dark Eldar.

"Waaargh!"

"Orks!" Wolf exclaimed, "Hundreds of them."

From between Commorragh's towers a horde of hundreds of screaming greenskins charged into the wasteland. The majority of these were Orks but there were also a number of the smaller Gretchin among

them. Some of the Orks carried crude firearms that they had been able to craft from whatever they had found here in the Dark Eldar's home city though most of them instead carried more primitive weapons such as bows and crossbows. However, all of the greenskins carried some form of close combat weapon that they were eager to put to use against the Dark Eldar and the entire horde swarmed forwards.

The Dark Eldar ceased their advance and turned to face this new threat. At the same time the empty Raiders that had delivered these warriors as well as the Reavers who had been harassing Wolf's troops also moved to meet the larger threat of the Orks.

This left only the group led by the archon himself located between the Imperial troops and the entrance to the webway passage blocking their escape and their fighting strength was suddenly reduced as a much smaller force of Orks numbering perhaps twenty came charging around a hill from their flank. Unlike the huge mass of Orks that was charging directly at the Dark Eldar infantry as greenskins were infamous for doing, these Orks had moved quietly around the battlefield having smeared themselves with dirt from the ground to help them blend in. These Orks rushed towards the closest Dark Eldar vehicle, one of the surviving Ravager gunships and hurled an improvised incendiary device onto its deck. The firebomb burst open on impact and the vehicle was instantly set ablaze. Not wanting to be burned to death the Dark Eldar crew abandoned their vehicle, climbing out of their seats and leaping to the ground, but as they landed they found themselves surrounded by the camouflaged Orks and the greenskins set upon them brutally with an assortment of crude hand to hand weapons.

"The Blood Axe." Wolf said, staring at the leader of this group of Orks and she realised that it was the same creature that she had released from its cage.

"Those creatures have given us an opportunity." Einhart said, "Quickly, we must head for the webway now while they cannot pursue us."

Wolf nodded and activated her microbead.

"All units head for the webway now. Ignore the Orks unless they attack you first." she said.

The archon looked around him furiously. Even after the humans' leaders had escaped him the arrival of so many warriors from other kabals who had been drawn to the fighting in search of a share of the spoils ought to have been enough to overwhelm them but the subsequent arrival of the escaped Ork slaves had not only prevented any of the Dark Eldar reinforcements from engaging the humans but now his own forces had lost another Ravager to a group of the alien savages, thus reducing them to just one Raider and one Ravager. An alien shout alerted the archon to a charging Ork and he turned and fired his pistol between the Ork's eyes as it ran towards him. Then as the Ork dropped dead with a startled look on its face he looked back towards the humans and saw that they had broken from cover and their entire force was now rushing towards him and with such overwhelming numbers he had only one option left to him.

"Retreat!" he called out to what remained of his forces and he jumped up onto the deck of the one remaining Raider.

"They're pulling out." Vance exclaimed as the two Dark Eldar skimmers rose into the air, firing their weapons at both the Imperial troops and the Orks.

"Keep firing." Wolf ordered, "They could be trying to link up with the Eldar behind us."

There was now nothing to keep the Imperial troops from reaching the webway but Wolf and her command section still came to a sudden halt as the large Blood Axe Ork stepped out in front of them. Instinctively the Catachans raised their weapons but in accordance with Wolf's orders they held their fire as they waited for the Orks to attack first.

"Told ya." the large Blood Axe said, "I didn't forget wotcha did. Now 'ow about ya takes me and dese lads out of 'ere?" and he gestured to the other Blood Axe commandos behind him.

"What about them?" Wolf asked, looking back at the bulk of the Ork force.

"Wot about 'em? Dey ain't Blood Axes. Dey'll be just as 'appy fightin' da pansies right 'ere as anywhere else. Me and me lads just wants to get out of 'ere."

"I've told my troops not to fire on you." Wolf said, lowering her las pistol, "Unless you attack us first. Aside from that you can do what you want." and the Blood Axe grinned at her.

The Orks then waited as Wolf and her command section made their way past them before following the humans into the webway.