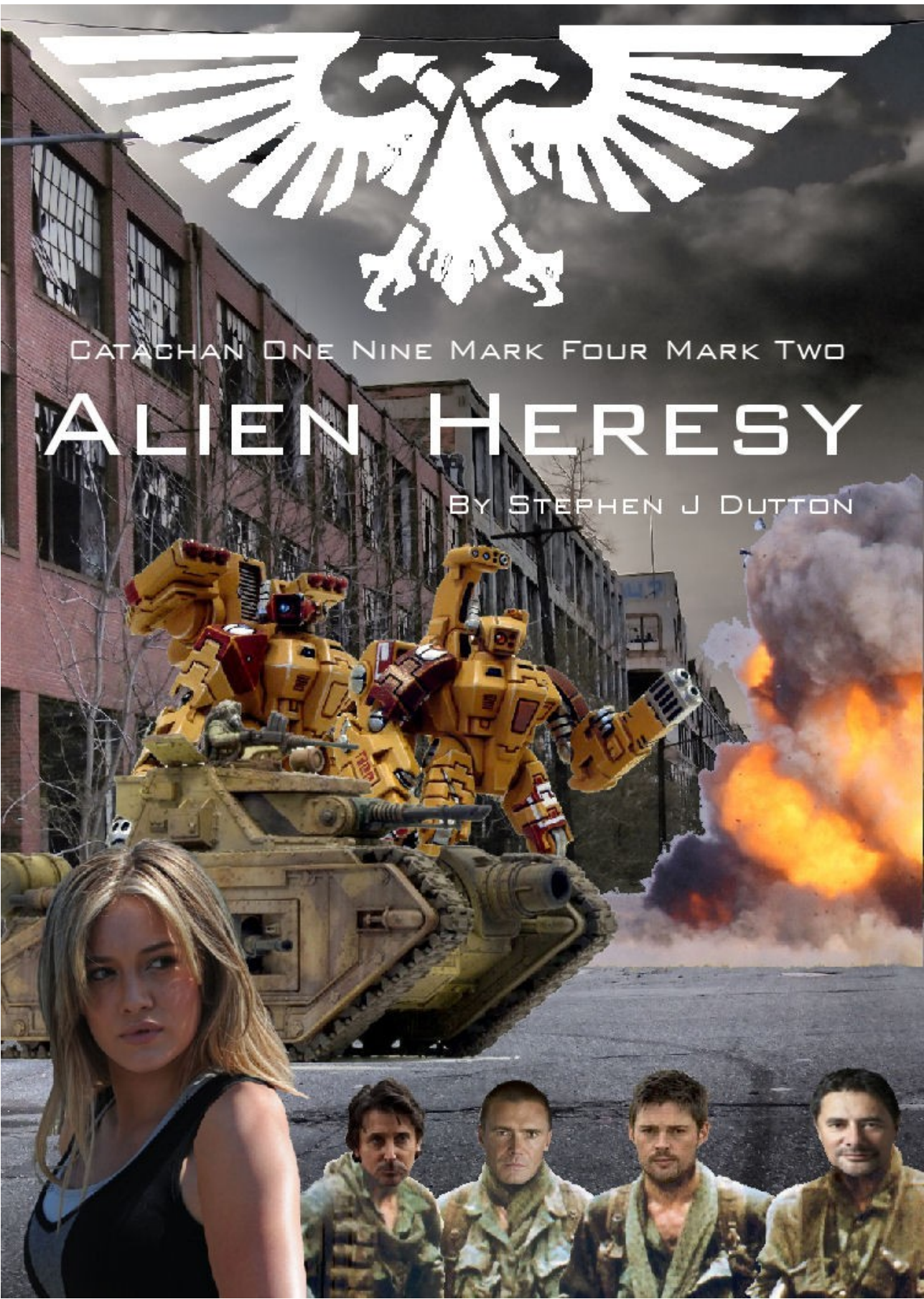




CATACHAN ONE NINE MARK FOUR MARK TWO

ALIEN HERESY

BY STEPHEN J DUTTON



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1.2: ALIEN HERESY

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

The world of Par Shallon is now in open revolt, with local and alien forces seeking to place it under the control of the Tau Empire. With the Imperial Guard facing an uphill struggle to regain control of the planet, Lieutenant Emilia Wolf of the 19th Catachan Regiment must lead troops still hostile to her presence among them into the heart of enemy territory.

Further Warhammer 40,000 fan fiction is available at:
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1.

The pair of rhino armoured personnel carriers emerged from the fortified tower that served as the base for the planetary contingent of Adeptus Arbites enforcers and raced through the streets of the capital city with sirens blaring. More than one civilian vehicle failed to move out of the way and was struck, the much heavier armoured vehicles simply smashing them aside as they continued on their way.

The destination of these vehicles was the palace of the Imperial governor of Par Shallon, a massive building that was covered in decorative features rather than possessing the simple functionality of the Arbites headquarters. At the gates of the building's courtyard a guard held up his hand for the vehicles to halt for inspection, but as soon as they halted a pair of Arbites in full armour leapt and rushed the guard post, their shotguns aimed at the startled security troops.

"Get this gate open!" one yelled and when the guard failed to act immediately he was struck down by the butt of one of the shotguns before the Arbites enforcer activated the mechanism himself. The way now clear the rhinos proceeded into the compound.

As it happened the target of the Arbites enforcers emerged from his palace to meet them in the courtyard, smiling pleasantly as the enforcers disembarked and formed a rough semicircle around him.

"Governor Brecht you are under arrest." The leader of the enforcers called out as he approached the man.

"On what charge?" Brecht demanded.

"Suspicion of treason against His Most Divine Imperial Majesty."

"Why that is ridiculous. Suspicion of treason. You need not suspect me of treason."

"You deny the charge?" the lead enforcer asked him, now standing face to face with the governor.

"Not at all. I admit it." Brecht replied with a grin and there was the sudden sound of jet engines from overhead. Tilting their heads back to look upwards the enforcers were just in time to see the trio of armoured figures, each twice the height of a man as they appeared from over the top of the palace and descended into the courtyard.

"Ready weapons!" the lead enforcer yelled as he turned, aiming his shotgun at the closest of the armoured giants. But as his men copied him the three figures all raised their right arms on which were mounted bulky multi-barrelled weapons and they opened fire. The rapid firing weapons filled the courtyard with energy blasts that proved quite capable of punching through the body armour of the Arbites while rockets launched from boxlike launchers mounted on the giants' shoulders turned the rhinos into burning wrecks.

While the Arbites screamed the governor turned around and looked back into his palace where an alien with blue-grey skin and a flat noseless face stood looking at him.

"Your warriors are most effective Por'Vre Lem." He said, "Too bad we lost so many when that cruiser blasted them from space."

"Have no fear governor." The tau diplomat replied, "The surviving warriors of the fire caste, when combined with your own forces will prove adequate to deal with the soldiers of your corpse-Emperor until reinforcements can arrive."

"They better had Por'Vre Lem." The governor said as he once again turned to face the carnage outside, "Because I'd hate to end up dead like that ethereal of yours."

The prefabricated building was filled with Fourth Company's vehicles. Most of these were lightweight wheeled trucks and utility vehicle, but a single squadron of four sentinel walkers was visible amongst them and it was towards these that Platoon Sergeant Vance walked. Stationary and powered down the four bipedal machines squatted low enough for a person to be able to climb into the cockpit without the need for a ladder. But right now the individual Vance was looking for was lying underneath one. Vance smiled as he stood beside the sentinel and then he crouched down, took hold of the legs sticking out from beneath it by the ankles and pulled them hard enough to drag the woman they belonged to out from underneath.

"Throne Vance!" she exclaimed as she looked up at him, "What are you playing at?"

"Really Gant? You have to ask?" Vance answered.

Gant frowned as she got to her feet to look Vance in his face.

"Yes. I have to ask."

Vance sighed.

"Did you really have to steal all her clothes Ursula?" Vance asked and a grin appeared on Gant's face.

"Oh that." She replied, "You know we didn't actually steal any of her clothes. I think you'll find that her uniform was still in her tent and she still had her underwear."

Vance frowned.

"Yes, but Lieutenant Wolf wasn't in the neatly folded uniform on her bed because you and Short-arse had taped her to the main support pole of the ogryn's tent. As for the underwear you left her with, it was stuffed

into her mouth that you also taped shut to keep her from calling out for help. She would probably still be there right now if we hadn't noticed that none of the ogryns showed up for breakfast this morning."

"So the ogryns didn't untie her then?" Gant asked.

"Of course they bloody well didn't." Vance replied, "They don't even have lace up boots because they'd never be able to tie them. Sergeant Khor recognised her despite the lack of rank badges and they were all stood at attention and waiting for her to return their salutes. So what exactly did she do to trigger that then? All I asked was for you and Lieutenant Selena to take her with you on your night out."

Gant's smile widened.

"Well Selena and I were being our usual charming selves and trying to be friendly to the little outsider and in return she started telling us how we could learn a lot from her on how to run a guard company efficiently. I did warn you that if she did anything like that then that was what we were going to do."

"You never mentioned anything about taking her clothes." Vance pointed out.

"That was Selena's idea. Of course I didn't say that we wouldn't take her clothes either."

Vance frowned.

"Is this at least settled now?" he asked, "You to aren't planning any more little surprises for her are you?"

"Of course not. What do you take us for? Unless she pulls another stunt like last night of course. Though she may want to be careful about going near Selena for a while unless it's to apologise."

"Good, I'll let her know." Vance said and then his expression changed to a smile, "Nice thinking by the way, choosing the ogryns' tent."

"Yeah it was a good idea wasn't it? Selena's actually. I wanted to sneak her into yours so that when you boys woke up you'd find her there waiting for you. But Selena pointed out that we'd never get past Molla and Quinn without waking them and we really wanted her to have all night to think about what she'd done. You could drive a banekblade past sleeping ogryns without waking them. So tell me, how grateful was she to be untied?"

"Probably not as happy as she'd have been if we hadn't all now seen her naked."

Returning to the tent he shared with the other sergeants of Second Platoon Vance found Sergeant Grey of second squad sat on the ground outside and he frowned.

"Problem Tyler?" he asked and Grey looked over his shoulder at the tent and also frowned before he looked back at Vance.

"She's still in there." He said, "The outsider. I don't know how Molla and Quinn can stomach the blubbing."

"Yeah well it seems that Gant and Selena are prepared to let things lie. Providing she apologises to Short-arse of course." And Grey's expression changed to a grin and he stood up.

"Oh please let me tell her." He said.

"Deal." Vance replied and he strode forwards, pulled back the tent flap and went inside.

Within the tent sergeants Molla and Quinn both sat at the lightweight table in the centre with components of their personal weapons laid out in front of them as they cleaned them. Meanwhile a young woman with blonde hair and far shorter than any of the Catachans sat on a nearby bed with her head in her hands.

"Lieutenant Wolf, great news." Grey said out loud, "Gant and Ass-wipe Anna have agreed to forgive you. You'll have to say you're sorry of course but-

"I'm sorry?" Wolf responded in surprise, looking up at Grey and Vance.

"Well don't tell me." Grey replied, "Go tell Lieutenant Selena."

"But why should I? They're the ones that-

"They're the ones you insulted lieutenant." Vance interrupted and Molla and Quinn paused in the cleaning of their weapons as all four sergeants looked at Wolf.

"All I did was tell that quartermaster how I'd spent time reconfiguring the Lyrelian Thirty-second's admin system and that-,"

"Told you." Molla said suddenly, looking at Quinn, "Pay up."

Quinn snorted.

"Last one as well." He said, heading to his bed and pulling out his kit locker from underneath. From inside he took a small tube that he tossed to Molla, the other sergeant catching it in one hand sliding out the cigar it contained. He ran it under his nose before returning it to the tube, "You know lieutenant," Quinn then said as he retook his seat and lifted up his shotgun, testing the action, "I actually thought that you'd be smart enough not to do that."

"Do what?" Wolf asked, "All I did was offer my help."

"Well in future don't." Vance said to her, "Not unless it's asked for. Remember you're not one of us. Our ways work just fine for us and when outsiders come in telling us to change them it gets annoying. Now are you going to apologise to Lieutenant Selena or not?"

"And don't let the fact that Short-arse controls all Fourth Company's supply cloud your judgement." Grey added.

"Or that Khor's ogryns practically worship her." Molla added, referring to the unit of abhumans that was also a part of Second Platoon.

"So I guess you guys all think that I should apologise then? Even after what they did to me?" and then she jumped as there was a succession of booming sounds from outside the tent.

"That's outgoing." Quinn said to her, "Bomber's teaching some of the newbies correct use of mortars. And yes you should apologise. Remember, what you do reflects on us as well."

Wolf sighed and put her head back in her hands.

"I suppose I do need to ask about the extra weapons." She said, "So if I can put her in a good mood it may make things easier."

"What's this about new weapons?" Vance asked, "Did I miss something?"

"Oh apparently she thinks we're lacking in support weapons." Grey said.

"Well we are." Wolf commented, "Besides Corporal Mayer's mortar squad we've got one heavy bolter, one missile launcher and a pair of flamers with Quinn's veterans. We should be entitled to much more than that. Just think how much easier it would have been to deal with those tau if we'd just had a couple of plasma guns."

"Plasma guns? Are you insane?" Vance exclaimed, "Do you know how rare those things are?"

"And unstable." Molla muttered.

"Yes I know that." Wolf replied, "But there are other options. Say melta guns or grenade launchers. Surely the company must have some launchers available."

"She does have a point." Quinn said and Wolf got to her feet.

"How do I look?" she asked.

"Like you've been crying all night." Grey said.

"Well here goes nothing then." Wolf said and she took a deep breath before walking out of the tent.

Watching her leave Molla held up the cigar case.

"So Quinn, how would you like the chance to win back this fine cigar? Wagered say against that tin of liquorice?"

"Can't." Quinn said.

"How come?" Molla asked.

"Because he lost that to me when that outsider got taped to a pole." Grey responded.

"Then how would you like to wager-"

"No bet." Grey interrupted.

Lieutenant Selena looked up and glared at Wolf as she entered the quartermaster's tent. This tent contained row after row of shelves on which various containers were stacked, while beside the entrance was the desk at which Selena herself sat. Short for a Catachan, she was similar in height to Wolf and this was the source of one of her nicknames amongst the company. Short-arse.

"What do you want?" she said.

Wolf paused and took another deep breath.

"Come on," Selena said, "I don't have all day."

"I'm sorry." Wolf said suddenly and Selena frowned briefly then a hint of a smile appeared on her face, "I know I shouldn't have said what I said." Wolf went on, "It's not my place to tell you how to do your job and I hope it won't prejudice your answer to my request."

"Take a seat." Selena replied, "Tell me what you want."

"I'd like some more support weapons for my platoon. The engagement with the tau showed me that we're could use some more firepower."

"Oh really? And what were you thinking of?"

"Ideally I'd like something with real killing power, so since plasma guns are hard to come by I was thinking about a melta gun for each of my squads."

"No chance."

"Then how about grenade launchers? Anna- May I call you Anna?"

"Stick with Selena for now."

"Sorry, Lieutenant Selena can you see what you can do?"

"Fine. I'll see what we have." Selena said and she got up and reached for a thick folder on a shelf. Wolf watched, waiting patiently as she flipped through it.

"You know I helped create a search system for data-slates with my old regiment." Wolf said, "Perhaps I could-"

"Actually," Selena said suddenly, lowering the folder and turning to Wolf, "there is something you could help me with while I'm checking my records."

"Really? What?" Wolf asked, smiling and Selena set down the folder.

"Wait right there." She said and she headed into the rows of shelves behind her.

"Can I help you find whatever you're looking for?" Wolf called out as she heard boxes being moved about.

"No I've got it now." Selena replied as she kicked a battered box back beneath a shelf, "Just sign the top sheet of that pad of requisition forms on my desk would you? I'll fill in the rest for you." The other boxes were all labelled with serial and tracking numbers to indicate their contents and origin, but the box Selena had just opened was marked only with a handwritten note.

SCRAP.

"What's that?" Wolf asked when she saw the bundle of fabric in Selena's grasp.

"Oh its stupid really." She said, "But Doc Altman got sent this and he says it's not up to code. But that Munitorum bitch at regimental HQ won't take it back untested. I need you to test it for me."

Wolf looked puzzled.

"But what is it?" she asked again and Selena held it up.

"Oh it's a straight jacket." She said.

Wolf frowned.

"Look, I'm doing you a favour." Selena then said, "Now it won't take five minutes. All you need to do is wear this and pull at the stitching. When it tears I can send it back."

"Well, err-"

"If I need to go and see Doc Altman without an answer then I won't have time to search for what you want."

Selena said and Wolf sighed.

"This better not be a trick." She muttered and she took off her equipment belt and held out her arms.

Wolf winced as Selena strapped her into the straight jacket and then tugged at it to make sure it was fastened.

"There you go." Selena said as she returned to her desk and sat down. Then she picked up the pad of forms and smiled when she saw that the signature in the box marked 'RANK AND NAME OF REQUISITIONING OFFICER' read 'Lieutenant Emilia Wolf' and she began to fill in the rest, "You need to try and get out of it." She said, glancing up at Wolf who obediently began to tug at the straight jacket.

"You know this thing feels pretty secure." Wolf said, "Are you sure it's faulty?" then she sniffed, "And what's that smell? It smells like – like-"

"Solvent?" Selena suggested.

"Yes solvent. What is it?"

"Oh its glue." Selena replied and she held up a small tube of adhesive.

"Glue?" Wolf exclaimed, "But why?"

"Why? Oh how about you come walking here expecting me to do you a favour and yet still start telling me how I should run things here? Now you wait there while I-" and at that point the intercom panel on Selena's desk buzzed, "Quartermaster." Selena said as she activated the panel.

"Selena is Doctor Altman. I need to see you."

"Can this wait a few minutes sir? I was just-"

"Now lieutenant."

"Okay I'm on my way." Selena said and the line went dead, "Oh well," she said to Wolf, "I guess our little chat is over with." And she rounded her desk and tucked the form she had been filling in under Wolf's arms and then fastened her belt back around her waist, "Bye now." She added as she left the tent.

Still trying to figure out what had just happened Wolf remained where she was.

"Oh feth." She said to herself.

2.

There were only a handful of occupied beds in the medical tent when Selena entered and she saw Doctor Altman standing beside one that had a man in a long black leather greatcoat and his leg in plaster sprawled across it.

"Captain, what happened to the commissar?" she asked.

"Oh he just came in and started quizzing me about my patients." Altman replied, "He was annoying me so I offered him a drink that had an extra ingredient in it. Then he unexpectedly came over all faint and-" and then Altman held up his arm and swung it downwards to represent someone falling over.

Selena snorted.

"Outsiders. I know the feeling."

"Oh yes, I heard about your creative use of adhesive tape."

"Thanks. Now why did you need to see me?"

"Its this damned refrigeration unit." Altman said and he led Selena into an adjacent room where there were several refrigeration units lined up, each one containing medicines that need to be stored at cold temperatures. One of them was producing an odd growling sound.

"Oh that doesn't sound good." Selena said, "I take it you asked the cogboy to take a look?"

"He says that no amount of chants and rituals will fix it. He even tried turning it off and back on again. The motor needs replacing. Can you-"

"Captain Altman!" a voice suddenly called out from back in the ward and both Altman and Selena stepped back into the other room where a sergeant waited for them.

"What is it Sergeant Stubbs?" Altman asked.

"Is he okay?" Stubbs asked, looking at the unconscious commissar.

"Oh he's fine." Selena said, "Now the captain asked you a question."

"Sorry sir, ma'am. The major wants the company assembling in thirty minutes. He's just got a vox call from the colonel and it sounds like something big's going down."

A slight smile appeared on Selena's face.

"Hey look, I've got loads to do that I could do with getting on with and not being interrupted. Any chance we can get this started right away?"

"I'll go find out." Stubbs replied, "I can't promise anything but I'll sound the whistle when its time."

"Thanks sergeant." Selena said with a smile.

Altman waited until the sergeant had left the tent and then stared at Selena.

"Lieutenant, what's going on?" he asked.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh yes you do. Why do you want the parade to happen now? What have you done?"

Selena's smile widened.

"You know that straight jacket we got sent by mistake and the Munitorum wouldn't take back?"

"What? That thing? It's useless, you're the only one it would fit and I doubt we'd ever need to use it on you. Any one of the rest of us could hold you down long enough to sedate you."

"Yeah well it fits that outsider who's got Second Platoon pretty well."

"Oh Selena, you didn't."

"Yes I did. I swear doc, if you hadn't brought me here I'd have tied her boot laces together and sent her hopping back across the parade ground in front of everyone. On the other hand having her standing on parade in it seems just as good."

Altman just shook his head.

"Just go get ready for the parade." He said, "And order me a new motor okay?"

The sergeants of Second Platoon looked up expectantly when the tent flap opened but instead of Lieutenant Wolf they found themselves looking at the corporal in charge of the platoon's mortar squad, Mayer.

"Oh its you Bomber." Molla said, "You've not seen Wolf out there have you?"

"No why?" Mayer replied.

"Because we're all betting on what Selena does to her now." Vance said from his bed where he lay reading.

"She's gone to see Short-arse?" Mayer exclaimed, "Can I bet that she gets painted a bright colour?"

"Actually I've got that." Grey said and then there was the sound of movement from behind the tent.

"Are you in there?" Wolf's voice said softly and the men in the tent looked at one another.

"Lieutenant is that you?" Vance replied.

"Of course its me. Look guys I need your help. Lift up the back of the tent so I can get in."

The squad leaders looked at one another again.

"She's naked." Molla said, "I win."

"Not unless Selena left her hog tied on the major's desk." Grey pointed out.

"Just let me in." Wolf hissed and Quinn got up and walked over to the back of the tent where he lifted up the side panel, "Thanks, now help me under." Wolf added and he reached through the gap to drag her into the tent.

"What the hell?" he exclaimed as she saw what she was wearing and then he lifted Wolf to her feet.

"Now that I didn't see coming." Vance said.

"So who wins?" Molla asked.

"We bet on what Anna Ass-wipe would do when you told her how to do her job." Grey added without looking up from the kit he was sorting through.

"Oh very funny." Wolf said, scowling and she looked at Quinn, "Just get me loose." She said to him.

Quinn plucked the sheet of paper from under Wolf's arms and tossed it aside before examining the straps of the straight jacket.

"What's wrong with this?" he said, "There's something on these."

"Selena glued them." Wolf said, "You'll have to cut me loose. Come on now, hurry up." And Quinn drew his knife. But just as he was about to slice open the straight jacket Vance spoke up.

"Hang on a minute." He said and Quinn and wolf both looked around to see him holding the discarded sheet of paper, reading what had been filled in on it, "You may not want to do that."

"Why not?" Wolf asked.

"Yeah Vance, why not?" Grey asked as the other Catachans began to gather around to look at the form, "Oh that's good. Short-arse really knew what she was doing."

"Lieutenant," Quinn said as he read the form himself, "I need you to confirm that cutting you out of that thing is a direct order."

"Why?" she asked in response.

"Because you signed for it." Molla told her.

"Rule of three." Mayer said.

"Rule of three? What's that?" Wolf asked.

"The Catachan Seventh Division operates a rule of three system concerning equipment that is lost or damaged." Vance explained, "You pay for the item damaged, the one taken from stores to replace it and the one bought to replace the one in stores. The general believes it promotes respect for the Emperor's property."

"And the value listed for that fashion statement is seven hundred." Grey said, "So you'd be liable for two thousand one hundred."

"Yes I can multiply by three." Wolf said, "But I've no money. I've not got my first pay yet. Even when I am paid I won't have that much. What am I going to do?"

"Oh look." Grey said, pointing to the form, "Short-arse did issue us a grenade launcher though. Dibs."

"You can't call dibs on a grenade launcher." Vance said, "The command squad's taking it. We need it more."

"Hey guys?" Wolf called out, "A little help here. How do I get out of this without getting a massive bill?"

"You could just go ask Cogboy for some solvent." Mayer suggested.

"That sounds like a good idea." Grey said, "We'll wait here for you lieutenant."

It was then that there was a shrill whistling in the air.

"Fall in!" Stubbs' voice called out from outside and then he blew the whistle again.

"Okay let's go." Vance said and the Catachans turned to leave the tent.

"Hey what about me?" Wolf asked, "I can't go out there like this."

"She does have a point." Molla said, "We'll look stupid as well if she does."

"Then we cut her out anyway." Vance said.

"No!" Wolf exclaimed, "Quick. Go get some solvent."

"No time." Mayer said.

"Throne!" Quinn exclaimed and he strode to his locker and opened it, "Am I the only one who can think?" and he produced a rain cape from inside the locker. Approaching Wolf he draped it around her and then undid her belt before placing it around the outside of the cape, "See?" he said, "Now no-one's any the wiser."

"Let's just hope the major doesn't ask for a show of hands." Molla said.

The three platoons of Fourth Company were already forming up in the parade area when the leaders of Second Platoon emerged from the tent. Amongst their own squads the massive abhuman ogryns were already stood in a single line and at attention as they waited to hear what Major Trent had to say.

"This isn't going to work." Wolf whispered as Vance helped guide her to their position, knowing if she fell then their ruse would be exposed.

"It will. Have faith." Vance replied, "Now we've three sick."

"Four." Quinn said, "Rull's off hunting."

The moment the platoons were lined up Stubbs marched up to the major and saluted him.

"All platoons ready for inspection." He said.

"Excellent." Trent responded, "Take the roll Colour sergeant."

"All platoons sound off." Stubbs shouted.

"First Platoon present. One sick, ten assigned guard duty." Captain Fear of the First Platoon announced.

"Second platoon present. Four sick." Wolf then called out and it was then that the squad leaders noticed that not one of the assembled soldiers seemed to have reacted to her currently wearing a rain cape despite the clear weather.

"Oh this isn't good." Quinn muttered to himself.

"Third Platoon present. One sick." Lieutenant Lore of the company's third and final platoon, the largest one of the three shouted.

"All platoons present." Stubbs said to Trent and then he took his place behind the company commander.

"Thank you sergeant." Trent said as he stepped forwards to address his troops, "Following Second Platoon's success against the tau I can confirm that at eight hundred hours this morning enforcers of the Adeptus Arbites moved to place Imperial Governor Brecht under arrest on suspicion of treason against His Most Divine Imperial Majesty. These men were ambushed at the palace by xenos troops that had managed to escape the orbital bombardment and the governor avoided arrest. Therefore as of that time the world of Par Shallon has been considered to be in revolt against the Emperor and the Catachan Seventh Division has the task of restoring order. All units are to prepare to move out, but I want to see all senior staff in my tent for formal briefing immediately." Then after a moment's pause he concluded with, "Company dismissed."

Wolf looked nervously at Vance.

"Don't worry I'll be right behind you." He said and they began to head for the command tent.

"Don't you have somewhere to be sergeant?" the question came from Captain Fear of First Platoon, the company's second in command.

"Oh, he was just accompanying me to the meeting." Wolf said.

"Well the major asked for senior personnel only." Fear replied and then he was joined by Lieutenant Lore.

"You can fill your sergeant in after the briefing." He said, "Until then if you have any questions you can just stick your hand up and ask." And Wolf glanced at Vance again.

"You're dismissed sergeant." Fear said, "See to your platoon."

"Yes sir." Vance replied and he turned and walked away, approaching the other sergeants of Second Platoon. Just as he reached them Stubbs came rushing up.

"Come on you lot, you'll miss it." He said.

"Miss what?" Quinn asked.

"Just move." Stubbs said and he waved them after him, leading them towards the command tent where they noticed that with the exception of the ogryn Sergeant Khor all of the other squad leaders were massing beside it.

"Where's that cogboy Nathin?" one hissed as Stubbs and the Second Platoon leaders approached.

"I don't know." Stubbs replied, "Look, I've got to get inside. When that cogboy gets here remember to get him to record it all okay?"

"Would someone mind telling us what's going on?" Molla asked.

"We all want to see how your lieutenant handles this meeting." Sergeant Gant, the only female sergeant and commander of the company's attached sentinel scout walker squadron replied. Vance frowned.

"What do you mean Gant?" he said, "What's Selena said to you?"

"Absolutely nothing guys. She thinks no-one knows about what that outsider's wearing under that cape."

"Then how did you-" Grey began before he was interrupted.

"Doc Altman." Gant said, "Selena told him what she'd done and he's told everyone else."

"He's here." Another of the sergeants hissed and a man in overalls rather than combat fatigues came rushing up clutching a bulky metal case that he set down beside the tent.

"Sorry I'm late, I couldn't find it." Nathin said, his accent betraying his Catachan origin despite the marking on his clothing suggesting that he was part of the Adeptus Mechanicus, the organisation that was responsible for the technology of the Imperium.

"What if Cornellius the Bastard notices this is missing?" one of the other sergeants asked.

"He won't." Nathin said as he opened up the case to reveal a display screen and what looked to be along hose, "He never uses it. He's got sensors attached to his mechandrite arms." Then he stood up and slid the hose through the gap between the tent side and roof and an image of Major Trent's office appeared on the screen.

"Now everyone keep quiet." Gant said as the image showed the first of the officers entered the room.

Trent led the way into his office and went straight to his chair while the other officers gathered around his desk. As well as the three platoon commanders Doctor Altman and Selena were present along with two individuals whose clothing was radically different to the Catachans'. The first of these was a tall and slender

man who was completely bald. His uniform was covered in purity seals and runes that marked him out as a sanctioned psyker while the second was covered in a bright red hooded robe from under which several mechanical tentacles could be seen protruding. This was Fourth Company's attached tech priest. Like Wolf both of these last two were considered outsiders by the Catachans but neither of them found it as much of a concern as she did. Psykers were outsiders practically everywhere they went while tech priests did not bother themselves with such social niceties as being liked, even amongst themselves.

"I'm sorry we're doing all this at such short notice." Trent announced, "But events have moved pretty rapidly."

"What are we facing?" Fear asked, "I thought Wolf's platoon took out the tau."

"Technically it was the cruiser *Fury of Man* that destroyed them by means of orbital bombardment captain." Cornelliuss' voice buzzed.

"Actually Wolf could you point out where that was?" Selena asked, indicating the map laid out on Trent's desk.

"Err." Wolf said.

"It was right here wasn't it?" Lore said, pointing to the map at the valley where Second Platoon had discovered a tau force in hiding.

"Yes that's right." Wolf said, inwardly breathing a sigh of relief.

"Well it seems that there were more of the xenos elsewhere at the time." Trent went on, "Though their numbers couldn't be determined at the time, they've got at least two of those lightweight dreadnoughts they're fond of using but there's not been any signs of their tanks yet."

"Have any other units reported engagements?" Lore asked.

"Fourteenth Armoured reported some probing strikes at the spaceport, but nothing serious." Trent said and then there was a sudden 'Snap!'

"Oops, sorry about that." Selena said, "Wolf, could you pass that pencil sharpener please? I've snapped my pencil."

"Allow me." Trent said and he reached out and picked up the pencil sharpener off his desk and handed it to Selena. She smiled briefly as she took it and began to sharpen her pencil, frowning.

"Anyway," Trent then said, "the Arbites have withdrawn their men from the streets of the capital to their headquarters and have issued a warning for all Imperial servants and their families to join them there. The building is well fortified so they should be safe enough against a handful of tau."

"What about the local defence forces?" Fear asked.

"We're not sure yet." Trent answered, "If they side with the governor rather than sticking to their barracks as they have apparently done so far then it could mean trouble. They've got three divisions including one armoured one to our single division with one armoured regiment."

"Suspicious that they've stayed in their barracks." Altman said.

"They could be receiving conflicting orders from different sources doctor." Cornelliuss pointed out.

"Or they could have been expecting the tau to have overrun us by now." Selena said, blowing on her now sharpened pencil, "Here you go you can put this back now." She added and she tossed the sharpener at Wolf, but Fear reached out with one hand and plucked it from the air as it passed by him.

"Oh what in the name of Him on Earth are you lot doing?" Selena suddenly snapped, "Every time I ask something of her you lot get in the way."

"Merely trying to keep up the Catachan reputation for good manners lieutenant." Fear replied as the other Catachan officers all smiled and Wolf frowned.

"Oh what crap." Selena said and then she gasped, looking at Altman, "You told them didn't you?" she said and he grinned.

"What? About this?" Fear said and he nodded at Lore who was stood on the opposite side of Wolf from him and the two officers grabbed hold of her.

"Hey!" she exclaimed as her equipment belt was released and the cape pulled over her head to expose the straight jacket. Then she looked around, "So you all knew?"

"The entire company knows by now." Trent said and he looked at Selena, "Oh and by the way lieutenant, if the adhesive you used turns out not to be one that will come off then the Munitorum will be billing you, not Wolf. Understood?"

"Yes sir." Selena said.

Looking around at the grinning officers Cornelliuss spoke again.

"May I enquire what is happening?" he said, "I fail to comprehend why the lieutenant is bound."

"Just accept that she is." Trent said, "Wolf can sort herself out when we're done here."

Back outside the tent the squad leaders continued to watch the image on screen when they heard a rumbling sound.

"What's that?" one said.

"Armour!" Quinn snapped and forgetting the image they all rushed towards the front of the tent and looked out across the parade ground where they saw a trio of chimera infantry fighting vehicles pulling.

"Oh this doesn't look good." Vance said as the ramps to the rear of the armoured vehicles dropped open and two squads of Catachan troops emerged. Then from the third vehicle, the one positioned in the centre a smaller group walked down the ramp, only one of who wore Catachan combat fatigues. The second wore a long black great coat while the third much smaller figure was covered by a green robe and was supported by both the Catachan officer and a long gold coloured staff.

"It's the colonel." Gant exclaimed, "Quick! We've got to watch what happens."

Stubbs leapt to his feet behind his desk and stood at attention as Colonel Shryke, commanding officer of the Catachan Nineteenth Regiment entered the tent accompanied by Regimental Commissar Garratt and the colonel's personal astropath, a small statured woman with dark skin.

"Good morning colonel." He said loudly, saluting, "The major is just giving a briefing. I'll let him know that-" "That's alright colour sergeant." Shryke replied as both he and Garratt returned Stubbs' salute, "We'll show ourselves in." and they walked right through into the major's office, "Good morning everyone." He announced as the surprised officers all stood at attention and with the exception of Wolf they saluted.

"Why is this officer in a straight jacket?" Garratt demanded, scowling at Wolf.

"Oh it's a punishment." Fear responded quickly, "For a minor infraction."

"I see." Garratt said, "And what sort of infraction leads to this exactly major?"

"Ah." Trent said as he thought and then he smiled, "Picking her nose and scratching her arse on parade." He said, "If it was an enlisted man I'd have them flogged, but flogging officers isn't the done thing."

"And your own company commissar approved of this?" Garratt asked and he looked around, "Where is he precisely?"

"Incapacitated." Altman told him, "A bad reaction to medication intended to prevent infection setting in in his leg. You can see him if you want."

Garratt frowned. He knew full well that commissars fared poorly in many Catachan units and as many were lost to 'accidents' as to enemy action. But he saw no need to press the matter.

"No, I don't think that that will be necessary." He said before turning back to Wolf, "Lieutenant you should be grateful that the major did not decide to flog you anyway. I would have."

"Yes sir." Wolf said.

"Anyway." Shryke then said loudly, "To the reason for my visit." And letting go of his astropath's arm he went to stand beside Trent and looked down at the map. At the same time the astropath stepped up to Wolf and whispered in her ear.

"Everyone knows that was all lies." She said softly and then stepped back.

"I'm afraid to say that the situation has deteriorated." The colonel said, "It seems that the rebellion here is more widespread than we had first hoped."

"Then the PDF has rebelled as well?" Fear asked.

"Most of it has, yes." Shryke answered, "The two divisions in the capital, including their armoured division have gone over to the enemy. The Fourteenth reported a large formation of tanks attempting to take the spaceport from them an hour ago. Fortunately they were able to drive off the attacking force with minimal losses."

"Excuse me sir." Wolf said, "But you said that two divisions had rebelled. What about the third?"

"The general of the PDF's Third Division is a devout man lieutenant." Shryke said, "Perhaps why his forces were deployed further from the capital just before the revolt began. Our own General Fortnam has been in contact with him and they are co-ordinating their plans for a counter attack on the capital. Not only do we believe that the governor is still there and we need to arrest him, but we also need to relieve the Arbites while they can still hold out." Then he began to point at the map on the desk, "General Fortnam is sticking with the Fourteenth here at the spaceport while the Twelfth moves in to support them. That leaves us and the Twenty-Fifth to take the capital. The loyalist PDF division will support us."

"Without tanks?" Lore asked.

"We're hoping that the Fourteenth will be able to draw the enemy armour to the spaceport. Even if they can't then our leman russes are faster than the old malcador heavy tanks the local planetary defence force uses. They should be able to redeploy to counter them. In the meantime you need to head"

"Colonel, why did you need to come all the way here to tell us this?" Trent then asked.

"Because we're still locked out of the planetary communications net." Shryke said, "Our voxes can't send or receive over long distances and the *Fury of Man* has had to withdraw to a higher orbit to avoid planetary defence fire. Besides which Par Shallon has a couple of planetary defence ships. They're no match in open space for the *Fury of Man*, but in low orbit they could ambush her from over the planetary horizon using ground based observers to provide intelligence on her location."

"So we've no orbital fire support then?" Wolf said.

"No but the *Fury of Man* was still able to offload the air wing that she carried and since we control the spaceport all of the local air units are out of action." Shryke said, "Basically we'll rule the sky so long as those defence ships don't dare fire on their own planet."

"So that is why you brought your astropath." The psyker Veneel said, "Telepathic communication still functions."

"Indeed." The astropath answered, "I can still hear the transmissions of my fellows in the other regiments and aboard the *Fury of Man*."

"But until Magos Serett can come up with a way of gaining access to the planetary communication net they're all we've got." Shryke then added, "Now I must be getting back. Major Trent, have your men ready to move as soon as possible. We need to be in the capital before nightfall."

"Of course sir." Trent replied and the pair saluted one another again before Shryke and his companions turned to leave.

When the members of Fourth Company were alone once more Selena looked at Wolf.

"Well you got off lightly." She said.

"Yes, thanks everyone." Wolf responded, looking around, "Its nice to know that not every practical joke will be entirely at my expense."

"No, but most will be." Trent said and he nodded at Fear. The captain reached into his pocket and produced a small plastic capsule. Holding it in front of Wolf's face he shook it and inside she saw the two large beetle-like creatures moving about inside.

"Grab her." Fear said and Lore took hold of Wolf's arms.

"No!" she exclaimed as Fear opened the capsule and then tipped its contents down the back of the straight jacket.

The three chimeras were rumbling towards the perimeter fence when Wolf burst out of the command tent.

"Get them out!" she screamed, "Get them out!" and she began to try and shake loose the beetles.

"What was in that capsule Ursula?" Vance said to Gant.

"Oh you remember that crate of rubber bugs we found about a year ago?" she replied, "Well there are still a few left."

Watched by the sergeants and the officers who had emerged from the tent behind her Wolf was completely oblivious to their laughter and also to the whistling sound from overhead.

"Incoming!" Mayer yelled as he looked up and saw three dark shapes falling from the sky.

The first mortar round exploded right in front of the three chimeras, while the second one went off beside the column. But the third one struck the vehicle bringing up the rear of the column and it burst into flames.

"Take cover!" Trent yelled while the occupants of the stricken vehicle bailed out.

Fourth Company's campsite had been well prepared with slit trenches and dugouts in case of bombardment and the Catachans scattered, each heading for the closest place of safety. Only the perimeter guards in their sandbagged emplacements held their positions as they searched for the source of the surprise assault.

Meanwhile the two remaining chimeras came to a sudden halt and there were a succession of dull 'Pop' sounds as they released smoke grenades to conceal their positions. Rapid bursts of laser fire then erupted from their turrets as they swept the jungle in the hope that it would at least keep their unseen attackers from firing again. But that hope was dashed when a second volley of mortar rounds landed beside the lead chimera and blew off one of its tracks. The rear ramps of both vehicles then dropped and the passengers rushed out and were waved towards the closest shelter.

Having just thrown herself to the ground when the first mortar exploded Wolf now found herself being dragged across the parade ground and she realised that Vance and Quinn were pulling her along.

"Where are we going?" she called out.

"A shelter. Where else?" Quinn snapped and then Wolf let out a yell as she was shoved into a trench.

"Lieutenant," an augmented voice said, "Perhaps it would be wise if you were released." And as Wolf looked around she saw the mechanical tentacles known as mechandriles that stuck out from beneath Cornellius' robes extend in her direction.

"Oh, I'm going to have to pay for this." Wolf said before she suddenly felt the jacket go slack and it was pulled up over her head, "Its still intact." She said, looking at the straight jacket.

"Of course lieutenant." Cornellius said, "The fastenings were extremely simple relying on simple friction to remain sealed. Additionally it was a simple matter to slice through the adhesive rather than the garment. I assumed that-

"Never mind now." Vance interrupted and he looked at Wolf, "Where's your weapon?"

"On the major's desk still I think." She replied, "What's going on anyway?"

"Well at a rough guess I'd say someone's dropping mortars on us." Quinn said and he peered over the top of the trench. As he did so there was a sudden heavy rattling sound from the distance, "Stubbers!" he snapped as he dropped back down.

"Very clever." Vance said, "Pin us down with automatic fire while they fire mortars at us."

"Who's they?" Wolf asked, "They aren't using tau weapons and I thought the rebel human troops were all in the capital."

"Well some of them must have been sent here." Quinn said as he took another look and close to the edge of

the cloud of smoke released by the chimeras he saw a squad of men from Third Platoon setting up autocannons. There was a brief heavy pounding as they fired, directing their attacks into the jungle where the heavy stubber fire seemed to be coming from, but there was another whistling and a mortar round landed amongst them.

"Those mortars will kill us all if we don't do something about them." Quinn said and then he yelled out, "Bomber!"

"Over here!" Mayer replied from a nearby trench.

"Where do you reckon those fething mortars are?" Quinn asked.

Mayer looked around as there was more whistling and he used his experience in using such weapons to determine the source of the attack.

"I'd say about four hundred metres north west." He shouted and Quinn looked at Wolf.

"Lieutenant Wolf!" Trent's voice suddenly called out, "Take your platoon and engage those mortars. First and Third will hold here and try to keep them occupied. Sergeant Gant, get your sentinels moving. Try to get around behind them and cut off their retreat. I want know who they are."

"I need my gun." Wolf said.

"We'll pick it up on the way." Vance said.

3.

Second Platoon formed up towards the south of the camp, keeping low even though they were using some of the camp's tents for cover. Given the nature of their mission and the need to move quickly the heavy weapons that the platoon was issued had been left behind. Even Mayer's six-man mortar squad were operating as riflemen for now. The only support weapons the Catachans carried were the two flamers of Quinn's veteran squad, the additional grenade launcher not having been issued yet.

"Is this it?" Wolf asked as she looked around. By her count there were more than half a dozen of her troops missing and although she knew that three were considered sick that still left some unaccounted for.

"I think we lost a couple from this shelling." Molla said.

"What about Rull?" Wolf asked.

"Rull's already out there." Vance said, "Don't worry, I'm sure Rull knows exactly what's going on."

All of a sudden there was a mechanical clanking noise and four lightweight bipedal walking machines came rushing up to them. All carried a single pilot in their open cockpits and were armed with a single heavy weapon; a bulky quad missile launcher in the case of one while the others mounted heavy flamers.

"Ready when you are lieutenant." Gant said from the cockpit of her sentinel.

"Okay then let's go." Wolf said and she looked at Quinn, "Wire cutters."

"Oh feth that." Gant said, "Allow us." And she moved her sentinel up to the wire fence. Each of the ungainly walking machines also mounted a large chainblade beneath its cockpit intended to help cut through particularly dense undergrowth, but they were just as effective at slicing through the razor wire fence that surrounded the camp. Cutting a gap large enough to allow the sentinels to pass through Gant led her unit into the jungle and Second Platoon then moved through the gap after them.

The Catachans moved swiftly through the jungle, such terrain covered their own homeworld, but unlike Catachan itself Par Shallon's jungle was not filled with flora and fauna practically all of which was deadly to human life in one way or another so to them it was fairly easy going. The ogyrns had little trouble either, their massive bulk allowed them to smash through the undergrowth and they were not much slower than the Catachans. To Wolf on the other hand it was hard work just following behind her squad even though she was able to see exactly where they trod and did her best to tread in the same places.

"Okay four hundred metres." She said, gasping for breath as she checked the map on her data-slate and compared where she estimated Second Platoon to be compared with where Mayer had pin pointed the enemy mortars, "Everyone get ready. Quinn, your squad is on point."

"You heard the officer." Quinn said, "Lock and load. Then follow me."

The veteran squad began to move ahead and Khor also moved after them, waving his ogyrns on.

"Sergeant wait." Wolf ordered, "I want your squad to wait with us."

"Ogyrns wait." Khor replied simply and his squad halted. His mind enhanced by surgical and chemical treatments Khor was known as a BONEHead and it meant that he had more intelligence than any of the other members of his squad, though by normal human standards most eight year olds would be his intellectual equal.

"Okay," Wolf then said after giving Quinn's squad chance to move on ahead, "First Squad, Second Squad, take flanking positions, keep an eye out for any signs of an ambush. Everyone else with me. Khor that means you as well, follow us."

"Ogyrns follow." The BONEHead replied.

Closer to their target now the Catachans slowed down so as not to alert their foe. Leading the force Quinn's veterans kept their shotguns braced against their shoulders. At the short ranges that combat in the jungle took place at the relatively primitive weapons could be devastating even compared to the more advanced lasguns carried by most of the rest of the platoon.

A sudden chattering sound let Quinn know that his squad was close to the enemy position now, in particular the location of the heavy stubbers being used to pin down the Catachans in the camp. Signalling with his fist for the squad to halt Quinn rested himself against a nearby tree and peered through the jungle ahead. At first he saw nothing, but then he noticed a patch of undergrowth that was a different colour to the rest and he took out a set of magnoculars and aimed them towards the discolouration. Sure enough he saw that that particular area of vegetation was false, a synthetic camouflage net being used to conceal one of the belt fed automatic weapons. Panning the magnoculars round he spotted more such nets concealing more heavy weapons teams. Then further back he noticed another net that had a tall whip antenna protruding through it and heading up into the jungle canopy overhead.

"Reese." He hissed and he reached out a hand as the veteran trooper carrying his squad's vox unit passed the handset to him, "Lieutenant can you hear me?" he asked and there was a pause.

"Copy Quinn." Wolf's voice responded, "Report."

"Enemy located." Quinn told her, "I estimate platoon strength. They're dug in and camouflaged."

"Understood Quinn. We're on our way." Wolf said and then the channel went dead.

While Quinn's men continued to observe the enemy position the rest of Second Platoon moved up to meet them.

"Okay show me." Wolf said softly as she crept up to Quinn with her command squad.

"The stubbers are down there at the front." He replied, pointing to the first few camouflaged positions he had noticed, "And I think that's their command section over there." He then added.

"Looks like the heavy weapons can't be angled this way." Vance noted.

"That's what I thought as well." Quinn replied, "But it looks like they've got a squad dug in over there to keep them from being outflanked."

"Then your squad needs to take them out." Wolf said, "Get in as close as you can and signal us."

"What about the stubbers?" Grey asked from further back.

"The ogryns can deal with them." Wolf replied and she looked at Khor, "Do you understand? When I tell you to you take your squad down that way and smash everything in your path."

"Ogryns smash." Khor said and he snarled.

"And the rest of us?" Vance asked.

"We need to find those mortars." Wolf said and she looked for Mayer, "Corporal, where would you site them?"

"At the rear. Close to the command section." He replied.

"Okay then here's the full plan." Wolf said, "Quinn takes his veterans to deal with the unit protecting their flank. As soon as that's dealt with Khor's squad take out the stubbers and First Squad takes up their positions to prevent any other units from moving back into them. Sergeant Grey I want you to take over the position of the flanking unit while Quinn takes his men to engage the command section. In the mean time Corporal Mayer and his men will join up with my squad to locate and take out those mortars. Everyone understand?" and there were nods of agreement, "Okay then, get into position. The signal for this to start is when their vox operator gets taken out so they can't call for help."

"And how are you going to do that?" Grey asked.

Wolf just smiled and reached for her personal microbead communicator.

"Hello Rull?" she said.

The command section was located on high ground so that it overlooked Fourth Company's campsite and through a set of magnoculars mounted on a fixed tripod the rebel officer studied the effectiveness of the mortar bombardment.

"This isn't happening quick enough." He said, "Have the mortars shift their target to that larger building. Let's see what happens if we hit that instead of trying to pick off the guardsmen." And then he looked around at his vox operator. The vox unit was a bulky device that had been set down in the middle of the dugout and the operator was sat beside it. The man was just lifting the handset to his mouth when the officer noticed a tiny red dot appear on his chest, "Oh feth." He said a moment before there was a 'Pop!' and the red dot turned into a hole surrounded by a growing bloodstain. A second shot sounded as the other rebels ducked, this one striking the vox set itself and there was a sudden shower of sparks.

"Okay that's it." Quinn said as he heard the panic set in from the enemy command section, their officer was yelling orders and there were several sharp cracks as the rebels opened fire with their projectile weapons. Clutching their shotguns Quinn and his men began to crawl forwards on their stomachs, heading towards the unit guarding the rebel flank while they were distracted by the search for Rull.

They approached close enough for Quinn to be able to make out the movement behind the camouflage nets and hear the unit's sergeant barking orders at his men and Quinn looked back around at his own squad.

"Flamers." He said softly.

Two of the veterans crawled further forwards, positioning themselves either side of Quinn at the front of the squad. Both carried flame-throwing weapons that mounted bulky fuel tanks beneath them. So far they had kept the ignition systems at the weapons' muzzles inactive to avoid accidentally setting fire to the undergrowth they were crawling through, but now they both activated them and two tiny blue flames appeared.

"Now." Quinn said and in an instant both men got up to their knees and pointed their weapons at the camouflage net in front of them.

"Over there!" one of the rebels called out as he saw the two Catachans appear, but before his squad could react there was a sudden screeching sound as the flamers were fired and burning promethium was sent arcing at the rebel position. Men screamed as the flames washed over the dugout, neither the camouflage net nor the sandbags behind it providing any protection from the burning liquid.

"Move!" Quinn snapped and of his squad got to their feet and charged forwards, firing their shotguns as rapidly as they could into the still burning net.

"Quinn's done it." Wolf said as soon as she heard the discharge of the flamers, "Everybody go."

"Ogryns charge!" Khor bellowed and he held his oversized and belt fed shotgun over his head, waving it as he ran forwards roaring. The effect of this on the rebel heavy stubber teams was dramatic. Immediately they ceased firing on the camp and tried to turn their weapons towards the charging ogryns only to find that the design of their dugouts limited how far they would turn. Too late they instead reached for their personal defence weapons only to find that the ogryns were already ripping their way through the camouflage nets. More gunshots sounded as the ogryns opened fire. Their weapons were fitted with burst limiters to prevent them from firing off the entire supply of ammunition in one go, but even so they still managed to fire enough rounds to shred the occupants of the first dugout they landed in.

The rebels in the next one managed to get off a few rounds from their autoguns before the ogryns reached them, but the tiny projectiles did little to the massive abhumans and as Khor continued to lead his men forwards he swung his ripper gun like a club and the closest rebel was sent flying backwards from the impact.

Behind the ogryns the remainder of Second Platoon advanced, firing their lasguns when they saw movement between the concealed dugouts as the various rebel squad leaders tried to react to what was happening. As ordered Molla took his squad in the same direction as the ogryns, jumping down into the dugouts that still held the heavy stubbers and deploying along the rear of them so that they were facing towards the other enemy positions. From this angle these other positions were still camouflaged, but Molla had enough experience to pick out the genuine undergrowth from the nets and directed his squads fire towards them. Even though Quinn had taken his men on to engage the rebel command section bodies and equipment were still burning in the dug out assaulted by the veteran squad when Grey's reached it. Therefore rather than attempt to occupy the dugout itself he and his men used the low sandbag wall as cover and aimed their weapons over it, just as another rebel unit advanced towards them. Grey saw their sergeant waving his men on and aimed his laspistol carefully, putting a single blast between the man's eyes that sent the rest of his squad diving for whatever cover they could find.

Once again Wolf struggled to keep up as her command squad and Mayer's mortar crew darted between the trees. Spread out amongst these the Catachans spotted numerous camouflaged dugouts. There was the rattle of automatic weapons from some of these, but the fire was directed away from Wolf's group and towards the dugouts that had been occupied by their own heavy stubber teams.

Vance came to a sudden halt and dropped to his knees, raising his fist as an indication that the rest of the group should do likewise.

"What is it?" Wolf gasped, bending over as she tried to catch her breath.

"Over there." He replied softly and he pointed through the trees.

Wolf looked and saw nothing so she took out her magnoculars for a better look. Making use of the device's optics she saw that several camouflage nets had been strung up between some of the trees. Unlike the squad dugouts encountered so far these formed a vertical curtain rather than a roof over a dugout.

"The mortars?" Wolf asked.

"Can't have a roof when you're firing in an arc." Mayer said and he smiled.

"That'll be a problem though." Vance said and he indicated another squad bunker located nearby.

"If we can just keep them from seeing us then rushing the mortars shouldn't be a problem." Mayer said, "The gunners will be expecting the other squads to cover them."

"We'll need cover then." Vance said.

"Smoke?" Wolf asked, "And a couple of men left here to provide suppressing fire?"

"Should do." Vance replied.

"Okay then Orthan and Jenno stay here and cover us." Wolf ordered her command squad's vox operator and medic, "Try and get them to think we're all still here while we slip past. Got it?"

"Understood ma'am." Jenno replied as the medic switched his lasgun to fully automatic.

"Good. Then let's get a move on." Vance said and he pulled a smoke grenade from his webbing and tossed it towards the dugout blocking their path to the mortar position. Another three grenades followed and soon after they burst open producing a 'whoosh' as a cloud of thick white smoke began to billow out.

"Move!" Wolf hissed and the Catachans darted forwards. At the same time the two troopers being left behind opened up, firing short bursts at the dugout. Unable to see any of its occupants they inflicted no casualties but the interaction of the las beams with the cloud of smoke gave away the direction of the attack and the rebels returned fire in that direction, sending a volley of bullets into the cloud unaware of the group even now sneaking past them.

Mayer and Vance led the others towards the rear of the mortar emplacement. From here the pounding of the weapons as they continued to fire shells into Fourth Company's camp was clearly audible and Wolf flinched as another volley was fired.

"Keep low." Vance whispered and moving his las pistol to his left hand he drew his blade with the right so it was in his stronger arm. Like all Catachans his blade was long and heavy, capable of hacking through undergrowth as easily as flesh. A number of the other Catachans also drew their blades, but given that they were armed with rifle sized lasguns rather than pistols they attached them as bayonets. On the other hand, although Wolf also carried the blade that had belonged to Second Platoon's previous Catachan-born officer she left it in its scabbard, preferring to use her pistol where possible.

Vance looked at Mayer.

"I think you should lead Bomber." He said and the corporal grinned, "With the lieutenant's permission of course."

"Lead the way corporal." She said.

Mayer braced his lasgun against his shoulder and moved forwards, peering through the camouflage net. Even from close range he could not make out the individual gunners inside the dugout, but as he got closer there was another volley of mortar fire and Mayer saw the flashes from their muzzles. He dropped to his knees, picked the nearest flash of light before firing a sustained burst through the net.

There was a sudden shrill scream as the rebel gunner was struck and the effect on the other mortar crewmen was immediate with all of them suddenly forgetting about their mortars and instead reached for their personal arms. During this time however the imperial guard team advanced towards them, firing.

Vance swung his blade and there was a tearing sound as he sliced through the camouflage net and opened up a gap that he and the other Catachans leapt through. Behind him one of Mayer's own mortar crewmen fell as a bullet hit him in the shoulder. Instinctively Vance turned and levelled his laspistol before putting a single shot into the rebel who had just shot the Catachan. Then he spun around once more and brought up his heavy blade, using it to parry a blow aimed at him with the butt of a rifle. He looked into the rebel's eyes just as they widened when he felt Mayer's bayonet piercing his side.

"Cheers Bomber." He said.

Wolf stumbled through the gap in the camouflage net and looked around. There were three mortars spread out and crates of ammunition for them that the three remaining rebels were using for cover. Instinctively she aimed and fired her pistol at the nearest one and although the closest of her shots struck only the crate he was covering behind, punching a smoking hole through the side facing her, it did convince the man to duck down behind his barrier long enough for a pair of Catachans to rush up to it and in unison they delivered strong kicks that knocked the stack over onto him. As he then attempted to crawl out from under the crates the two Catachans shot him repeatedly.

With only two of their numbers now remaining and facing a much greater number of Catachans, the final rebel gunners turned and fled. They scabbled underneath the camouflage net and ran through the trees. Seeing this Wolf reached for her microbead.

"Gant. Two rebels heading your way."

"Copy that lieutenant." Gant replied, "We're on our way."

The two fleeing rebels paused as they heard a clanking sound from ahead that was joined by a crashing as the four sentinels of Gant's squadron smashed through the undergrowth. One of them raised his rifle defiantly and opened fire, but the lightweight bullets did nothing but bounce off the forwards plating of Gant's walker. Swinging the cockpit around Gant fired the heavy flamethrower mounted beside her and there was a roar as the powerful jet of flame enveloped both rebels. Waved on by Wolf as they strode past the mortar dugout the sentinel squadron then headed further into the rebel position in search of more prey.

The rebel officer knew that he had lost control of the situation. There were imperial guardsmen within the perimeter and now there was a squadron of sentinels bearing down on his troops as well. Even if he could call for reinforcements he knew that there were none nearby and his own unit was pinned down by an Imperial sniper who had already killed two of his men. It was then that amongst the noise of battle he heard a soft 'Thud' from close by and looking at the ground inside the dugout he saw a fragmentation grenade near his feet.

"Grenade!" he yelled and forgetting the sniper who was waiting for his men to show themselves he dived out of the dugout barely a second before the grenade went off. He was just picking himself up when a booted foot came out of nowhere to kick him in the face and he tasted blood as he fell back down and rolled over onto his back. He was just about to try and get up once more when the boot came down on his chest and knocked the breath from him. Looking up he then found himself staring down the barrel of a shotgun.

"Who's a pretty boy then?" Quinn said as he stared into the traitor's eyes. Though the temptation to simply shoot him here and now, Quinn resisted the urge to dispense summary judgement knowing not only that the man was a potential source of intelligence but also that by keeping him alive he would undoubtedly suffer a far worse fate than a shotgun blast to the head, "Get up!" he yelled and he reached down to drag the officer back to his feet and then shoved him face first against a nearby tree, "Howser! Brint! Search this miserable fool and secure him."

"Sergeant report." Wolf's voice suddenly called out and Quinn turned to see Second Platoon's command squad approaching. Their pace seemed leisurely now and Wolf was not struggling to keep up.

"My men and Rull have taken out their command unit lieutenant." Quinn replied and he looked at the captive officer, "We even got hold of laughing boy here."

"Bomber's lads are looking after the mortars." Vance told Quinn, "And Gant's lot are dealing with the other dugouts. We should have this lot wrapped up pretty soon I think."

"Excellent work all round I think." Wolf said, a smile on her face and she reached out for the handset of the command squad's vox unit, "Catachan one nine mark four delta this is Catachan one nine mark four mark two. Do you read me? Over."

There was a brief pause followed by a crackle and then Major Trent's voice responded.

"Reading you loud and clear. Go ahead lieutenant. Over."

"Sir the enemy heavy weapons out of action and the remaining forces are being dealt with. In addition Sergeant Quinn's squad has secured a prisoner for interrogation. Over."

"Great work lieutenant. Get him back here as quickly as you can. I'll send out Third Platoon to help with the mopping up. Over and out."

Wolf smiled again as she gave the handset back to Orthan but before she could speak one of Quinn's men gave a shout.

"Over here!" he called out, "Take a look at this." And he waved the other Catachans closer. Moving in they saw the veteran guardsman take out his knife and slash at the sleeve of a corpse lying at his feet. The jacket had already been damaged and the knife stroke enlarged this hole to expose more of the arm beneath, but more importantly it exposed the tattoo that had been only partially visible before.

"Oh what the feth?" Quinn exclaimed as he saw the marking and saw that it was the insignia of the planetary defence force's Third Division, "These creeps are supposed to be on our side." He said, snarling.

Vance's head spun around to glare the prisoner and he rushed up to the man and snatched the identity tags from around his neck.

"Lieutenant Aubray Darr." He read from the tag, "Third Division."

4.

The Catachans of Fourth Company glared at Lieutenant Darr as he was dragged through the camp with only Wolf's command squad and Quinn's veterans to stop them from ripping him apart. They took him to an empty tent where several senior officers were waiting for him. Major Trent had brought in Doctor Altman and the now conscious Commissar Layne to see the prisoner for themselves as Wolf's men brought him in. Additionally one of Quinn's men carried the tattooed corpse over his shoulder and once inside the tent he dumped it on the floor in front of the officers.

"Well?" Trent asked, looking at Altman as he knelt down to inspect the corpse.

"It's definitely not fresh." He said as he examined the tattoo closely, "I'm not particularly familiar with the local methods of tattooing, but I'd say this was done months ago."

"So its not just something put on to deceive us then?" Layne asked and he stared at Darr.

"The lieutenant had these on him sir." Vance said and he handed the identity tags to Layne.

"You may refer to him simply as the prisoner sergeant." Layne replied as he looked at them, "He lost all right to his rank when he committed treason." Then he turned his attention back to Darr, "On your knees." He said but Darr simply stood motionless and glared back at Layne, the commissar's appearance not being quite as intimidating as was normal while his leg was in plaster and he need a crutch to support himself.

Wolf looked at Quinn and nodded.

"Kneel!" Quinn snapped and he kicked Darr in the back of his knee, knocking his leg out from under him.

With his hands bound behind his back Darr could not stop himself as he fell and he ended up sprawled on floor.

It was then that the tent flap opened again and Colonel Shryke entered in the company of Regimental Commissar Garratt and four of the soldiers who had accompanied him here.

"So this is him then is it?" Shryke asked as Darr was dragged back to his feet.

"It is." Trent replied, "Doc Altman's confirmed that the enemy are from the Third Division."

"Colonel does this mean that the entire PDF is against us?" Trent asked.

"No." Garratt answered simply, "But it seems that the governor's forces anticipated that Third Division's commanding officer would remain true to his oath of loyalty and have seeded his force with men who's loyalty is not with the Emperor. My astropath has made contact with General Fortnam and he's had reports of so called friendly fire incidents from all over, some aimed at us and others at loyal elements of Third Division."

"Which presents us with a serious problem." Shryke added, still glaring down at Darr, "The Third Division was supposed to be supplying us with men familiar with the layout of the capital. There's only so much information you can glean from a map. But now we'll have no way of being certain that our guides aren't reporting to the enemy."

"Excuse me." Wolf said suddenly and the other officers looked at her.

"Yes lieutenant?" Garratt asked, "You have something to add?"

"Well it's just that I know my way around the capital." She said and the Catachans glanced at one another,

"When the Lyrerian Thirty-second was first deployed here I spent six months stationed just outside it. My sister and I went into the capital for R and R all the time."

Shryke smiled and he looked at Major Trent.

"Major, I want Fourth Company to led the way into the capital. Make sure that the way is clear for the rest of the Nineteenth Regiment. I'll be on standby with the sixth and seventh companies if you need backup fast. You'll still have local guides of course, but Lieutenant Wolf here can confirm anything they tell you about the city."

"Yes sir." Trent said with a grin and Shryke looked down at Darr again.

"Pick that up." He ordered his troops and a pair of them pulled Darr back to his feet, turning him to face the colonel. Shryke stepped forwards to stand immediately in front of him and stared at him, eye-to-eye. Then without warning he head butted Darr and sent him falling back so that the troopers who had just picked him up had to catch him to keep him from falling back to the floor again, "Now get him in the chimera." Shryke said, "Intelligence will want to question him."

"Do you know what you're doing?" Fear asked Wolf. The captain approached her just after she had given the officers and sergeants of Fourth Company's other platoons a quick briefing on what she knew about Par Shallon's capital city, the idea being that they would be able to recognise any obviously false information that any rebels amongst Third Division's advisors. Given her superior knowledge it had been decided that Second Platoon would be leading the advance. The city itself was just about visible from Fourth Company's staging area at the edge of the jungle that surrounded it on three sides while on the fourth there was only

ocean. Further along the coast beyond the capital lay the spaceport where two regiments of Catachans were apparently still holding out against a force of local troops several times their size while the Twenty-Fifth Regiment was positioning itself to cut off the capital on its inland side.

"Of course I do." She answered, "I'm to take my platoon into the city and head towards the Arbites precinct. If it looks like we won't make it there by dark then I'm to locate somewhere for the company to spend the night."

"And if you come across any enemy formations?" Fear enquired.

"Avoid engaging them but report their location." Wolf said, "Unless I have clear tactical superiority in which case I'm free to engage as I see fit. If the unit is too strong for me to engage but appears strategically important I'm to check in and follow them."

Fear smiled.

"And the rest of us will move up so we can attack en masse." He said, "Looks like you do know what you're doing."

"Hey I'm not just a pretty face." She said and Fear frowned briefly.

"Really?" he commented, "So on your world you're considered attractive then?" and he turned and walked away leaving Wolf frowning.

"What's that supposed to mean?" she called out after him. Then she saw Molla heading towards her, "You think I'm attractive don't you?" she said and he ground to a sudden halt.

"Err." He said.

"Oh just say yes please."

"Then yes, you're very attractive. Even if you are so short."

Wolf sighed.

"I suppose that'll do." She said, "Now what is it sergeant?"

"The local boys are here." He told her, pointing a thumb back over his shoulder, "Well when I say boys I mean a man and woman in our case."

"Then I suppose I should come and meet them." Wolf said and she and Molla began to walk back in the direction he had come from. Then she stopped suddenly, "Hang on." She said, "Is everyone going to pull all that 'outsider' crap on them?"

"Depends if they try giving us orders." Molla replied, "So long as they remember that they're advisors and stick to just giving advice they should be fine."

"I suppose it's too much to hope for that my orders won't be resented isn't it?" Wolf then said, but Molla did not reply, instead continuing to walk, "Thought so." She added to herself and she went after him.

As Molla had said there were two advisors from Third Division assigned to Second Platoon, a man and a woman both of who bore lieutenant's markings on their uniforms.

"Aren't you a little sort for a Catachan?" the man asked when he saw Wolf.

"Oh she's not one of us." Grey commented and Wolf glared at him briefly.

"No but I am their commanding officer." She said before looking back at the PDF officers, "My name's Wolf. Who are you?"

"Kane." The man said.

"Moss." The woman then added, "We've been ordered to show you the best routes through the capital."

It was at that point that there was the sound of aircraft engines far off, followed by the subdued sounds of distant explosions as the naval air wing operating out of the spaceport began striking at the units defending the city.

"Excellent." Wolf said, "That's our cue so I suggest we get a move on. I'd like to make it to the adeptus Arbites building by nightfall."

The jungle gave way to areas of grassland that in turn became land covered by concrete and steel. Second Platoon's approach brought them into the city right on the coast, passing by manufacturums and warehouses that seemed deserted before reaching the dense urban sprawl.

Catachans were typically deployed where they could make the best use of their talents for jungle warfare and survival. But now that they had left the jungle behind for what could easily become building-to-building fighting Wolf noticed that her troops seemed to have lost none of their skill. Treating the buildings as just terrain features they deployed themselves along each side of the street with each group covering the rooftop opposite. On the other hand the ogyrns just followed along behind the Catachans, striding right down the middle of the empty street and waiting for the order to attack. Of course Wolf could see no sign of Rull anywhere, the sniper having gone on ahead as usual and was most likely already picking out the best places to set up for the best field of fire.

"Where is everyone?" Wolf said as she looked around at the silent streets. The platoon was just entering one of the city's commercial districts and the last time Wolf had been here the streets had been packed with people.

"The governor's people probably warned the population to stay at home." Kane said, "So since the residential areas are closer to the spaceport inland we'll have bypassed them all."

"The Twenty-Fifth could have their hands full though." Grey commented, "If the enemy puts troops amongst the houses—"

"It'll be a massacre." Vance interrupted, "No way will our boys tolerate being fired at, even if the people doing it are using civilians as human shields."

"Your people would really shoot with civilians in the way?" Kane asked.

"Why not?" Wolf responded, "If it was a choice between getting shot myself either by the enemy during the battle or a commissar after it and firing at someone using a civilian as a shield I'd take the option that offers me the best chance of survival."

Kane leant closer to Moss and whispered in her ear.

"Think maybe that's why the governor rebelled?" he said to her.

As the platoon continued to advance Wolf suddenly paused and turned to look in through a shop window.

"Problem lieutenant?" Vance asked her. Looking through the window himself he saw that she had chosen to stop outside a tailor's shop and that the window contained several dresses either hung from the ceiling or mounted on mannequins.

"What? Oh no." Wolf replied and she looked around to check that the two advisors from the PDF were not close by, "I've been here before." She said, "My sister and I looked in through this very window."

"Planning on spending your pay here were you?" he asked, "Because I don't see anything terribly practical."

"You also won't see any prices." Wolf said, "Anyone who has to ask a price can't afford to buy anything from a place like this. I wanted that one." And she pointed to one of the dresses hung up.

"I hope you're not planning on smashing this window lieutenant." He said, "Because that would be looting. That's a shooting offence."

Wolf sighed.

"If I could be wearing that dress in front of the firing squad it would almost be worth it." She said and then both she and Vance turned suddenly as Quinn gave a shout from further down the street.

"Armour!" he yelled and sure enough there was the low rumbled of a powerful engine accompanied by the rattling and squealing of a heavy tracked vehicle approaching.

"That's not one of ours." Wolf said and then she gave a shout, "Take cover! Heavy weapon teams get set up."

The street itself offered few opportunities for concealment and so the Catachans instead turned to the buildings either side of it. Swung lasgun butts may not have been enough to smash the toughened glass storefronts or break down the securely locked doors of the businesses but a few well placed shots were enough to take off locks and allow them access to the building's interiors.

"Imperial guard!" Vance yelled as he stormed into the closest building ahead of the rest of the command squad, which happened to be the tailors, "We are occupying this building."

The two advisors followed the command squad into the store and crouched down behind them, peering back out into the street. From this position the command squad watched as Molla's squad broke through a security barrier into the adjoining store and set up their heavy bolter in the doorway. Meanwhile on the opposite side of the street Grey and Quinn's squads had forced an entry into another store. Quinn's veterans remained in the store itself while Grey's men, well aware of the danger of firing a missile launcher from inside quickly located a stairwell and used it to make their way up to the roof.

This left only Mayer's mortar section and Khor's ogryns. Though breaking into a store would be no problem for the massive muscular abhumans, they were notoriously unhappy in confined spaces and so they instead fell back to a side street and since they carried the extra ammunition for Mayer's mortars the corporal and his men fell back with them.

"Is it even heading this way?" Wolf said and Vance activated his microbead.

"Anyone got eyes on that tank yet?" he signalled to the rest of the platoon, "Is it alone?"

"This is Grey, we're on the roof now. No visual yet – Wait hang on I see it now." Then there was a pause as Grey took out his magnoculars and directed them at the approaching tank. Much larger than the leman russes that he was used to the tank lacked a true turret. Instead it featured a pair of linked lascannons in a limited traverse mounting on top of its elongated hull while a large bore cannon was fixed to the front. Finally a pair of heavy stubbers was mounted in sponsons at the side of the tank to keep infantry away, "Yeah, it's a maldador. An annihilator by the looks of it."

"What about support?" Wolf asked, "Nobody sends a tank out alone in an urban area. Even I know that."

"I can't see anything. Wait, check that." Grey replied, "Infantry. Looks like a single squad moving behind the tank, using it for cover. Looks like they're heading right for us."

Vance leant closer to Wolf.

"Almost like they know we're here." He whispered and he glanced briefly at the two observers from the PDF.

"Is there a problem?" Kane asked, frowning.

"Hell yes, there's a super heavy tank and a squad of infantry coming right for us." Vance replied.

"No there isn't." Wolf said, glaring at Vance, "Sergeant Grey's squad will take care of that tank and the rest of us can deal with the infantry." Then she glanced back at the observers herself, "You two should get back."

The tank continued to dive through the city streets, its immense weight ripping up the tarmac from the roads. From a cupola on the roof just behind the lascannon mounting the vehicle's commander emerged, his face masked to protect him against fumes and noise inside his vehicle. The intelligence he had been supplied with suggested that the Imperial Guard had sent a small advance force along this route and it was his job to destroy it. Thus far there had been no signs of the guardsmen and the tank commander was just starting to wonder if the information had been wrong. However it was then that he noticed some of the storefronts ahead had been damaged. It was of course possible that civilian looters were responsible for this, but he doubted it. The most heavily damaged building was a tailors that had lost most its front window and the commander decided that was a good place to start.

"Vehicle halt!" he ordered and the malcador lurched as it stopped, then he pointed in the direction of the tailors, "Demolisher. One round on my-" then his words were cut off suddenly as his head jerked to the side, a single precisely placed bullet punching straight through and his body slumped back down inside the tank.

"Baum now!" Grey snapped and the trooper armed with the long tubular missile launcher leapt to his feet and leant over the side of the roof, aiming it almost straight down at the tank below. There was a sudden 'whoosh!' and a flash from behind the weapon as he fired and the krak missile slammed into the vulnerable thin armour on top of the malcador. The shaped charge warhead functioned exactly as it was supposed to and it blew a hole through the armour plating that protected the engine at the rear of the tank. There was a massive explosion and the infantry squad escorting the tank scattered, its leader yelling orders. Before he could restore order to his men Baum ducked back, only just in time to avoid the sudden barrage of autogun fire that came back in his direction.

"Looks like we've got their attention." Grey said, using his microbead to broadcast to the rest of the platoon. Though its engine was destroyed and burning furiously the malcador tank was not yet destroyed and most of its crew remained active.

"Over there!" the driver snapped, pointing out the tailors to the demolisher cannon gunner, "That's where the commander wanted a shot."

"Got it." The gunner replied and he turned the demolisher cannon as far as its mounting would allow.

Inside the store Vance saw the cannon turn in their direction.

"Everyone out!" he yelled and he dived through the broken window and rolled into the road.

Wolf and the other Catachans followed him and they were just stumbling out as the air was filled with the sound of the demolisher cannon firing. The heavy shell flew past the command squad and into the tailors where it detonated. Designed specifically for use against strong points the demolisher shell was more than enough to bring down the entire store, filling the air with dust and shrapnel.

Meanwhile the squad of rebel infantry was making their way forwards, using the immobile tank for cover against Grey's squad on the roof. However, this meant they were coming down the same side of the street as Molla's squad was set up on and there was a sudden rattling as they lifted the security barrier to reveal their heavy bolter.

"Get back!" the rebel sergeant yelled at his men as he saw the belt fed weapon pointing in his direction, but before he could take a single step backwards the Catachans opened fire. A single mass reactive round pierced his flak armour before detonating inside his chest cavity and the blast reduced his organs to nothing. Taken by surprise once more the rebel soldiers fell back under sustained fire from not only the heavy bolter but also the lasguns of Molla's squad. One of Molla's men stepped out into the street and aimed his lasgun at the retreating rebels, but in doing so he exposed himself to the sponson mounted stubber facing them and before he could fire a burst of heavy bullets ripped through him.

"Stay low!" Molla ordered, "Keep under that gun."

It was then that the malcador's main guns fired, twin beams of energy raking through the air above the heads of the command squad. The trooper armed with their newly acquired grenade launcher rolled over and fired a krak round at the tank, aiming for the lascannons. However the grenade was not as powerful as the larger warheads of Second Squad's missile launcher and added to that the round was aimed for one of the most heavily armoured parts of the tank so it did no damage at all.

"They need help!" Quinn snapped, "Grenades!" and stepping from the building he and his men were concealed inside he hurled a krak grenade of his own at the malcador. From this angle he was faced with the tank's vertical side armour that offered less protection than the thicker sloped plating to the front of the vehicle and the grenade detonated against the sponson on Quinn's side. The blast not only destroyed the heavy stubber mounted there but also triggered a secondary explosion as the stored ammunition for the weapon cooked off, sending bullets and cases flying about the inside of the tank.

One of Quinn's men crouched down beside the tank, pressing himself up against its hull and then another pair of the veterans rushed up and used him as a step, vaulting up onto the roof of the tank and then

reaching down to pull up their comrade. There was a brief burst of fire from behind the tank as one of the rebel soldiers spotted the Catachans on top of the tank and took advantage of their being exposed. One of them was hit and toppled forwards, falling back to the ground but before the rebel could fire again there was a volley of lasgun blasts from above as Grey's men began to fire down from the roof and the rebel was hit several times.

Now though there were two Catachans on top of the immobilised malcador and armed with both fragmentation and krak grenades they sought out the weak points of the heavy tank's armour. One obvious spot was the lascannon mounting and one of them wedged a krak grenade against the spot where the mounting met the armoured hull and scrambled away just before it detonated. The blast did not destroy the lascannons, but it did deform the mounting enough that the weapons were locked in their current facing. Meanwhile the second Catachan headed for the open cupola where Rull had taken out the tank's commander. Pulling a fragmentation grenade from his webbing he pulled out the pin and dropped it through the hatch. From inside he heard the sound of the grenade bouncing down to the tank's floor and also the cries of alarm from the crew as they realised what was about to happen. The two Catachans leapt down off the tank a moment before the grenade went off inside. Immediately after this the surviving tank crew made to abandon their vehicle, using whatever exits they could find. A hatch burst open beside Quinn and a coughing rebel came crawling out, but before he even became aware of the Catachan Quinn aimed his shotgun and shot the man at point blank range. Then stepping in front of the hatch he shoved the muzzle of the weapon inside the tank and fired repeatedly, screams letting him know that he had hit something.

The story was the same elsewhere, with the rebel tank crew emerging to find themselves under fire from the Catachans who were on three sides of the wrecked tank. Only one was able to escape successfully, climbing out of the cupola and then leaping through the cloud of thick smoke behind it, landing right on top of one of the remaining infantry troopers.

"Fall back!" one of the surviving rebels yelled and now facing Second Platoon without any armoured support they began to pull back, spraying bursts of bullets about to try and dissuade the Catachans from pursuing them.

With Grey's men still firing on them from above the rebels knew that they had to get off the main street and they ran down the first side street they came to that would get them out of the field of fire. However, even here they found their escape blocked.

While the rest of Second Platoon had been engaging the rebels Mayer had led both his section and Khor and his ogryns around the back of the row of stores and right then were emerging onto the side street. The startled rebels now found themselves facing these troops.

"Ogryns!" Khor yelled when he saw them, raising his ripper gun above his head, "Kill!" and with no need for any further prompting the ogryns surged forwards their ripper guns firing at the rebels. The powerful shotguns ripped apart the rebels when they were hit; giving them little chance of survival and when the massive abhumans reached their opponents they swung the ripper guns as clubs to finish off the survivors. Wolf looked around, counting the members of her own squad and then looking towards the others.

"The command squad is all here." She said, "How many did we lose from the others?"

"Quinn's lost one and so has Molla." Vance replied, "Another of Molla's is hurt but Jenno's with her now."

"Okay, that's not so bad." Wolf said and then she stopped suddenly, "Wait, where are those two from the PDF?"

Vance and Wolf both looked around, searching for any signs of Kane and Moss.

"Oh no." Wolf said, "I think they're still in there." And she looked at the ruins of the tailors.

"Quick!" Vance yelled out, "They may still be alive under that lot. Khor we need your squad over here now."

"Ogryns get digging!" Khor shouted and the abhumans dashed to the rubble and set about picking up chunks of masonry and hurling them aside.

"Whoa!" Wolf exclaimed, leaping backwards as a large piece of wall landed close to her and shattered, sending fragments flying, "Efficient aren't they?" she then said as she saw several of the Catachans looking at her and smiling.

"Halt!" a voice called out with the Catachan accent now familiar to Wolf and the platoon turned their attention to its source. There a pair of troopers from Molla's squad were aiming their lasguns at a dust-covered figure that had just emerged from a narrow side street, "Get those hands up."

"It's me." Moss called out as she raised her hands anyway.

"Moss." Wolf said, "Are you okay?"

"Fine I think, but someone needs to take a look at Kane. I think he could be dead."

5.

Moss was right about Kane, he was dead and lying face down in the alleyway behind the row of stores. The back of the man's skull had apparently been broken open where a piece of debris from the destroyed building had struck it.

"We went out the back when you warned us about the tank." She said to Vance as he inspected the body with Jenno, the rest of the command squad stood behind them, "Then there was an explosion and when I came to he was dead. A bit of the wall must have struck him."

"Certainly looks that way sergeant." Jenno said, looking at Vance.

Vance stood up and turned to Wolf.

"We need to go over those dead traitors." He said, "Grey's still up on the roof with Second Squad keeping watch. I suggest Moss heads up there and joins him, she can take a look around while we finish up here."

"Uh, right." Wolf replied and in turn she looked at Moss, "Go on." She said, "We need a route to the Arbites precinct that avoids likely enemy positions." Moss nodded and began to walk away, "Oh and you may want to think about cleaning yourself up." Wolf called out after her. Then she turned back to Vance, "Okay, so why are you really getting rid of her sergeant?" she asked.

"I'm not so certain that our boy Kane here was killed by a piece of falling rubble." He said.

"Why not?"

"Well because he seems to have been hit by only one piece, there isn't a single sign of any other impacts. Plus there's the location of the strike."

"What about it?" Wolf asked.

"The base of his skull." Vance said, "I'd have expected the point of impact to have been higher."

Wolf glanced back in the direction Moss had gone.

"So you think she killed him? That mean's she's a traitor, she probably gave away our location to the rebels."

"Maybe." Vance said, "But there are other possibilities. An enemy spotter could be trailing us. They could have killed him while Moss was unconscious."

"If she really was unconscious." Wolf pointed out and Vance nodded.

"Yes I realise that we've only her word to go on but I think we should be cautious about stringing her up from a lamp post before we know for certain."

The lightweight sleeping bags carried by the Catachans now served as body bags for those killed in the recent skirmish. Their spare ammunition and other useful equipment was distributed between the other Catachans while Khor's ogyrns picked up the bodies themselves. The corpses of the traitors on the other hand were simply piled up after each had been thoroughly searched before a flamer from Quinn's squad was used to incinerate them. Unwilling to either leave their weapons behind for other rebel units to recover or carry them all the Catachans opened up each of them and removed the bolts, effectively putting them beyond use. These were then loaded into a single bag that another of the ogyrns could carry.

"Personally I'd string them up for the birds to peck at." Grey commented as he watched the corpses burn.

"And if there wasn't the issue of public health to worry about I'd be right with you." Wolf replied, "But its bad enough we have to clear out these traitors without worrying about an epidemic afterwards." Then she looked at Moss, "So which way?" she asked.

"Down there." Moss told her and she pointed straight ahead, "We can cut through the tunnels under the highway and be at the precinct by dusk."

"Okay then," Wolf said with a smile, "I want to be ready for any trouble so I want Khor's squad up front with Quinn's. First and Second squads on the flanks and Corporal Mayer's with my command squad." Then she turned specifically to Moss, "You go with Sergeant Quinn." She told her, "Let him know if you see anything suspicious. Understood?"

Moss just nodded and wandered over towards Quinn.

"Well I don't." Vance whispered, "You've just separated Bomber's section from most of their spare ammo. What's the idea?"

"You can't get under the highway down there." Wolf replied, "My sister and I went to a club down there a few times and the bridge the highway runs over crosses a river that's almost a hundred metres wide. There isn't even a footpath under it. I'd say she's leading us into an ambush and I want Quinn and Khor ready to deal with it."

Vance stared at her for a moment.

"I'll pass the word." He said, "Nice and quiet like."

"Good, you do that. Oh and get Rull to scout ahead. I'd like as much notice of the enemy strength as possible."

It was then that Grey and Molla approached, having broken away from their respective squads.

"What the hell is going on with your fetted up orders outsider?" Grey hissed, "Ogryns at the head of the column? Why not just have us all wave flags to let the enemy know we're coming?"

"They already know." Vance told him, glancing to where he could see Moss talking with Quinn as they both studied a map of the capital, "Now get back to your squads both of you. Make sure the men know to watch out for trouble and not to let Moss go wandering off by herself."

Now expecting an attack Second Platoon advanced as Moss had suggested, but now they not only watched the surrounding buildings for any signs of an ambush but also made sure that Moss herself was always in sight. Though it now seemed certain that she was a spy for the rebellious governor's forces there was no indication that she regarded her assignment as a suicide mission. Therefore any attempt to slip away could be seen as a sign that an attack was imminent.

"Lieutenant did this city have a gang problem when you were here?" Vance asked as he studied his surroundings.

"No why?" Wolf replied.

"There." He said and he pointed to a spot on a nearby wall where small holes had been blasted in it, "And there and there." He then added, pointing to similar damage elsewhere. Then he finished off by indicating a small crater in a nearby street, "And that looks more like a grenade detonation than a pot hole." He said.

"Fighting?" Wolf said and Vance nodded, "I'd say that the capital isn't quite secure. The governor must have had to use force against some loyalist elements around here."

As the highway came into view ahead Wolf noticed Vance reach to his microbead. Her earpiece had not sounded at all so he was obviously receiving a private transmission and she smiled, knowing who it would be.

"So what's Rull found?" she asked quietly.

"A platoon strength force by the bridge with automatic weapons set up on top of it." Vance responded, "Just waiting for us to walk right up to them."

Wolf looked ahead to where Moss was still with Quinn's veterans. The presence of Khor's squad between them obscured her somewhat and Wolf smiled knowing that it would be equally difficult for her to get a clear look at the command squad if she turned around.

"Mayer, you and your section are to drop back." She said quietly without even looking around at him or his men, "Get those mortars set up and aimed at the bridge. Let's see if their heavy weapon teams can swim shall we?"

"Got it lieutenant." Mayer replied, grinning and he and unnoticed by Moss his men cautiously peeled off down the first side street they came to.

"So that's why you kept them back here and sent her up there." Vance said, "I'm impressed."

"It's an old trick that some of the Lyreirian Thirty-Second used to slip away without getting noticed by their superiors. Of course we didn't have any ogryns so it was harder to pull off."

"But it worked?" Vance responded.

"Not always." Wolf explained, "I was in admin remember, it was in the reports the commissar wrote after they flogged the men who tried it and got caught."

"Then let's hope your commissars had better eyesight than this PDF bitch." Vance said.

All of a sudden Moss began to peel away from Quinn's squad at the front of the platoon.

"Where do you think you're going?" he called out after her.

"I just need to take a leak okay?" she replied, "I'll catch up."

"Actually I could do with going as well." Wolf said and she broke away from her squad and walked forwards.

Briefly she glanced at Grey who in turn nodded to one of the female members of his squad.

"Oh, if it's alright I wouldn't mind going as well." She said.

"Okay then Higgs you're with us." Wolf said, "Vance, you've got the platoon. We'll catch up."

Moss paused as Higgs also broke ranks with her squad.

"Well?" Wolf said to her, "Shouldn't we get a move on. Trust me, wet yourself in front of this lot and they'll never let you forget it."

"You wish you'd only wet yourself." Vance muttered.

"Err, sure. There's a quiet spot down here." Moss replied.

"I'm sure there is." Wolf replied.

The trio of women headed down an alleyway with Moss in the lead.

"Isn't this far enough?" Wolf asked as she looked at how far away from the rest of Second Platoon they were getting.

"You know Kane was right about you Lieutenant Wolf." She said, "You are short for a Catachan and you don't sound like one either. That Sergeant Grey even said you weren't one of them, so who are you?"

"What little old me?" Wolf asked in response, "I'm just someone who got stuck with them I suppose. Before this was with the Lyrelian Thirty-Second right here in the capital. That's how come I know you're not leading us to the Arbites precinct."

A stunned Moss halted and whirled around, reaching for the autopistol holstered at her side.

"Don't!" Higgs snapped, raising her lasgun and aiming for Moss' head. Moss ceased her attempt to draw her weapon and raised her hands instead. Then she smiled.

"I wouldn't be smiling if I were you." Wolf said, "Treason is a serious offence. The minimum penalty is death by firing squad."

"Actually I was smiling at them." Moss said, lowering her hands again and from behind Higgs and Wolf there was the sound of movement as a five strong squad of rebel troops appeared. From the looks of their equipment Wolf guessed that they were a command squad similar to her own. Most held the autoguns that were common to the local troops while the officer instead carried a pistol and sword and one of his men was armed with a plasma gun. All of the weapons were aimed at Higgs and Wolf.

"Now how about you ladies get your hands up?" the officer said, scowling.

Higgs looked at Wolf, still gripping her lasgun tightly. Then she suddenly raised the weapon and took aim at the officer. Wolf flinched as there was a sudden 'crack!' from behind and Moss shot Higgs in the back.

"Higgs!" Wolf exclaimed and she dropped down beside the injured woman. The tiny pistol bullet had struck her just above the collar of her lightweight flak jacket and passed right through her throat, now she was desperately gasping for breath as blood pumped out of the wound, "Higgs hold on." Wolf said as she pressed her hands against the wound. Looking around at the rebel officer she then added, "You've got a medicae, help her."

"Oh let's just get this over with." Moss said and she strode forwards and kicked Wolf away from Higgs before then stamping down on the Catachan woman's head until it cracked open as Wolf looked on horrified.

Moss then looked at the rebel officer who nodded slowly. Smiling Moss then aimed her pistol directly at Wolf's face.

"You're just a lackey for some corpse aren't you?" she said, snarling and her finger began to tighten on the trigger. However, before she could apply enough pressure to discharge the weapon her wrist was sudden shattered as a fragmenting bullet slammed into it. Screaming she clutched at the stump with her remaining hand and dropped to her knees.

"Sniper!" the officer yelled and his men looked around, searching for the source of the attack. However, Rull remained unseen even here out of his usual environment and the officer looked at his plasma gunner, "Finish her." He said, pointing at Wolf.

The rebel turned towards Wolf, bringing his powerful weapon up to his shoulder but Rull beat him to the shot, firing not at the rebel but at his weapon. Plasma based weapons were the products of ancient technology no longer fully understood by the Imperium and while they may once have formed the standard armament of humanity's forces they were now a rare holdover from a lost age. Rare and unstable. Rull's bullet punched through the thick armoured cabling that carried the high-energy plasma into the acceleration chamber and it ruptured, the result of which was the uncontrolled leaking of the plasma held inside the weapon. The gunner screeched as he was consumed in flames as the air around him caught fire then the officer also screamed briefly as his efforts to dive out of the way of the escaping plasma proved unsuccessful and he was almost entirely incinerated by the intense heat.

Seeing her chance Wolf dived for Higgs' discarded weapon and scooped it up. The safety was not on and it was set to fully automatic so when Wolf fired it she just kept her finger held down on the trigger and it fired one blast after another in quick succession at the remaining rebel soldiers.

One fell dead right away, his armoured vest failing to stop the burst of lasgun fire while a second was just clipped by the burst and dragged himself behind cover. Meanwhile the third had simply dived out of sight.

There was the sound of movement and then of a bullet striking a hard surface and Wolf saw the injured rebel topple out from behind a garbage container with a bullet hole in the side of his head.

"Thanks Rull." Wolf muttered, knowing that the sniper could not hear her.

"How about we just both go our separate ways?" the final rebel called out as Wolf plucked a grenade from her webbing. Using her teeth she removed the pin and then tossed the explosive towards the sound of the rebel's voice, "Oh feth!" she heard him cry out as she ducked for cover from the grenade and then she heard him leap up to try and escape it. Spinning around Wolf fired the lasgun on automatic again and she peppered the panicked rebel with energy blasts and he landed in a heap just moments before the grenade went off behind him.

Standing up Wolf advanced, examining the remains of the rebels for signs of life. Then she remembered Moss and she turned to see the woman staggering away, her ruined arm held against her chest. Wolf took aim with the lasgun again but then lowered it and instead activated her microbead.

"Rull, stop her." She transmitted.

She did not hear the shot, Rull obviously still making use of his suppressor but she did see one of Moss' knees suddenly burst and the woman screamed again as she fell sideways.

“Lieutenant Moss of the Par Shallon Planetary Defence Force.” Wolf called out as she advanced, “You are guilty of treason against His Most Divine Majesty and Master of Mankind the Emperor.”

“Just get on with it.” Moss snapped, “Put a round through my head and go back to worshipping your corpse. This world belongs to the tau now, it’s for the greater good.”

“Actually I was about to order you to remain here while I go back to my men.” Wolf said and she looked back in the direction of Second Platoon as there was the sound of distant gunfire, “It sounds like they’ve run into your friends.” She added, looking back at Moss, “But since you asked so nicely-“ and then she shot Moss through the chest.

6.

"Did any of you hear that?" Vance said as he halted suddenly and looked in the direction Wolf and Higgs had gone with Moss, "It sounded like a shot." Then as he turned back he spotted movement on a nearby roof, "Ambush!" he yelled and he fired his pistol towards the source of the movement.

As the Catachans spread out in search of cover the air was filled with the chattering sound of autoguns and this was joined by the lower pitched sound of heavy stubbers from up on the bridge.

There was a screeching sound as the flamers of Quinn's squad were fired at one of the buildings occupied by rebels. Inside the rebels pulled back but the flames flowed through the windows and the building itself caught fire. Meanwhile a blast from Quinn's shotgun blew open a door to the building next door that was also held by the enemy and he rushed inside.

"Move it!" he yelled at his men as he burst through the doorway. Immediately inside the doorway was a flight of stairs and as Quinn reached the bottom he saw movement on the floor above and fired twice in rapid succession, blasting chunks out of the banister rail as well as the next floor up.

As the veterans stormed one of the rebel held buildings the other squads opted for direct engagement. Molla's squad set up their heavy bolter and began spraying explosive rounds at a rooftop being used by several rebel riflemen further down the street. The heavy rounds tore up the low wall running around the roof and deprived the rebels up there of cover from the lasguns of the rest of the squad. Meanwhile Vance directed the command squad's grenade launcher to be fired on the burning building, capitalising on the damage already inflicted by the flamers. The rest of the command squad then fired those rebels who attempted to escape into the street.

A roar of engines heralded the arrival of more rebels as a pair of trucks drove out of side streets to form a barrier across the road ahead of second platoon. Rebel soldiers began to disembark, taking up positions behind the trucks.

"Ogryns! Charge!" Khor bellowed and his squad of abhumans rushed forwards.

"Grey! Cover them!" Vance signalled and Grey's squad turned their attention from another rooftop position to the trucks, using their lasguns to keep the rebels pinned down while the missile launcher was lined up.

"Clear behind!" the gunner yelled before he fired and a heavy missile shot towards the nearest truck. Fitted with a fragmentation warhead rather than an anti-armour one the missile detonated as soon as it struck the stationary vehicle, flipping it over in the air.

"That's how to do it lads!" Khor yelled as he ran up to the other truck, bullets and laser blasts whizzing past him and he pressed his shoulder up against the truck, "Ogryns push!" he then ordered.

The combined strength of seven ogryns was enough to lift up the side of the truck and the squad simply pushed it over onto its side, crushing several rebels beneath it and driving the others back in panic. One ogryn then jumped up onto the overturned vehicle and fired his ripper gun down at the rebels on the other side. But this exposed him to fire from above and the heavy stubbers on the bridge turned towards him. Three of the powerful rounds hit him and the ogryn roared as he toppled backwards. Seeing this Vance activated his microbead.

"Bomber! Now!" he ordered.

"Copy that." Mayer responded, "Firing now." At first there was nothing, but then there was a whistling as mortar rounds passed overhead and Vance grinned.

Positioned in dead ground Mayer's mortar section had been unable to pinpoint the enemy positions on the bridge precisely so instead they had simply lined up on the bridge itself, using a map held on Mayer's data slate for reference. Then they simply fired as many rounds as they could, adjusting the trajectory of their shots slightly each time.

Up on the bridge the rebel heard the sound of the incoming mortar rounds and instinctively they looked up to see where the sound was coming from.

"Down!" their leader yelled as they saw the slow moving projectiles heading straight for them. But much to their surprise the shells passed over them and detonated in the middle of the bridge. Being wide enough for several lanes of traffic this first volley was too far away to harm any of the rebels positioned at the side of the bridge, while the next volley landed even further away with one round passing right over the bridge only to land in the water below.

But although the shrapnel produced by the explosions did nothing to the rebels it did slice through several of the cables holding to support the bridge and combined with the damage inflicted by the exploding rounds themselves the bridge began to groan. The third volley of mortar rounds then hit and a large hole was blasted right through the bridge and the groaning sound grew louder.

"Move!" the rebel leader yelled at his men, "Let's get out of-" but before he could get any further the bridge finally gave way under its own weight.

Pressed up against a wall Vance peered round the corner into the street where fighting still raged. For the most part rebels held the upper floors of several buildings while Catachans remained either in the street or on the ground floors of other buildings and returning fire. Only Quinn's veterans were currently attempting to storm an enemy-held building while the other squads kept up the pressure from outside. Hearing movement behind them the command squad turned.

"Don't shoot its me!" Wolf exclaimed as she came running up to them.

"Where's Higgs?" Vance asked, noticing that Wolf carried the Catachan woman's weapon.

"Dead. Moss led us into an ambush. Fortunately Rull was able to give them a demonstration of the dangers of poorly maintained plasma weaponry. What's the situation here?"

"Bomber's section have taken care of the support weapons on the bridge, in fact they've taken care of the bridge and Quinn's got his men storming that building over there. They had a couple of squads in reserve as well but the ogryns seem to have those in hand. There are still plenty of them left though. When Rull told us this was a platoon-sized force he was meaning a full sized platoon. They had us outnumbered by about two to one to start with. No sign of their officer yet though."

"Oh don't worry about him." Wolf said, "He was standing next to the plasma gunner when it blew up. All we need now is a way of dealing with the rest of his men."

Working quickly Mayer and the men of his section packed up their mortars, abandoning the now empty tubes used to transport the shells. But before they could finish there was a rifle shot as a rebel soldier appeared around a corner.

"Cover!" Mayer yelled, dropping the mortar tube he was fixing to a transport harness and instead reaching for his rifle. By the time he reached a nearby alcove he already had the weapon in his shoulder and was firing back at the rebel who fell backwards with several smoking holes through his armour.

The next rebel to reveal himself leant around the corner just long enough to aim his bulky weapon down the street and fire it. There was a brief 'Pop' and then the rebel vanished once more.

"Grenade!" Mayer shouted to warn his men, but it seemed that they had already realised what sort of weapon was being used against them and had taken cover.

The grenade exploded in the middle of the street where most of the mortar section's gear was piled up and the blast ripped through it, sending pieces of it flying in all directions. The rebel appeared again, this time with a second soldier also equipped with a grenade launcher and each fired a single round before ducking back behind the corner again. This time the grenades were both aimed towards a parked vehicle that one of Mayer's men was hiding behind and although he was not right beside either of them when they exploded Mayer heard the man cry out. Looking around he addressed the trooper behind him.

"Akama, go see to Bryn." He said, "I'm going to try and get a bit closer to those guys." Then he activated his microbead, "Fire at the corner, I need cover." He said and there was a sudden volley of lasgun fire from the other two squad members. Some of this clipped one of the rebel grenadiers as he emerged to take another shot and as he fell both Catachans fired short bursts to finish him off before he could be dragged back around the corner. Nearing the corner Mayer pulled a grenade of his own from his webbing and after removing the pin he rolled it towards the corner and ducked into a doorway.

The grenade went off just as the enemy trooper with the grenade launcher stepped out again and he had just enough time to look down and see what had hit his boot before he was blasted off his feet. Hearing more screams from around the corner Mayer looked to his men across the street.

"Move!" he yelled, waving them to the corner and he rushed there himself.

A short burst of fire from an autogun made him pull back, but a return volley of lasgun blasts from his advancing men cut this short and Mayer then leapt around the corner. Two more rebels lay dead at his feet while a second swung the butt of his autogun like a club, aiming for Mayer's face. But the Catachan ducked this and brought his lasgun up to knock the rebel soldier's weapon out of the way. Then as he stood up straight he looked his foe right in the eyes.

"Greetings from Catachan mate." He said and then he promptly head butted the rebel, breaking the man's nose. The stunned rebel staggered backwards with blood pouring from his face and before he could recover Mayer brought his lasgun back to his shoulder and fired a single shot into his chest.

As the other two Catachans arrived Mayer looked around, counting the bodies of the rebel soldiers. There were five corpses nearby, three of whom were armed with grenade launchers. Given that the local PDF had adopted a similar organisational structure to the Imperial Guard this meant that there ought to have been a sixth trooper as part of the squad. It was of course possible that this other squad member had not been present at all during this small skirmish, but there was also the chance that there was another rebel soldier hiding close by.

"Okay spread out." Mayer ordered, "We're looking for another rebel. If you see him don't mess about, just shoot him."

"Got it." One of the other Catachans said and they began to move away, searching for anywhere that the soldier could be hiding.

The sound of a rubbish bin being knocked over attracted Mayer's attention and he waved his men towards an alleyway. Together they advanced down it.

"Imperial Guard." Mayer called out as he saw movement, "Come on out with your hands up."

"Hey don't shoot." A man's voice replied and slowly a figure stood up from behind a cluster of several bins. The man's hair was messed up and his baggy clothing looked as if it had been scavenged from what someone else had thrown out.

"What are you doing back here?" Mayer demanded.

"I live here." The man replied, "You couldn't spare a ration bar could you?"

Mayer took a ration bar from his belt and tossed to the beggar.

"So have you seen anyone run past here ahead of us?" he asked as the man bent down to pick up the bar.

"What? Oh, yeah. There was some guy ran past that way." The beggar said, and he pointed back the way the Catachans had come. But as he did so Mayer noticed that through a large tear in the man's jacket he could see more fabric beneath and this was printed with the PDF's standard camouflage pattern. Looking closer he also saw that the man wore relatively new boots and was clean-shaven despite the dirt smeared across his face.

"So how about we check you over?" Mayer asked as he advanced and slowly brought up his lasgun, "My men are trained in first aid. Living rough must be difficult."

"Oh yeah, but I don't need any more help and the ration bar is just fine." The man said and he stepped back.

"Oh I couldn't just leave you here after you've been so helpful." Mayer said and then he saw the man reach behind the bins, "Don't do it!" he yelled as he saw the muzzle of an autogun appear, but the disguised rebel continued to lift his weapon and Mayer and the other Catachans fired. The rebel collapsed, falling into the bins and toppling them over. Advancing down the alleyway to confirm their kill the Catachans found not one but two corpses. In addition to the rebel soldier they also discovered the naked corpse of the genuine homeless man, the grip of a combat blade still sticking out from under his jaw.

"Just in the wrong place at the wrong time I guess." One of Mayer's men said and Mayer looked round.

"We need to get back to the platoon." He said, "Gather up those grenade launchers, we'll take them with us."

The internal walls of the building were only lightly constructed and so the use of grenades was ruled out as Quinn and his men pushed on, clearing one room at a time and moving ever upwards. In the confines of room to room fighting the shotguns they carried allowed them to react quickly, sending devastating blasts at rebels who showed themselves before they had the opportunity to bring their longer and more cumbersome autoguns to bear. Coupled with the greater experience of Quinn's men over the rebels who had never faced combat before, the Catachans were easily superior in this fight. However, they were not immune to harm and one of Quinn's men fell as a rebel on the floor above fired straight down through the floor at random, emptying his magazine as he heard the Catachans moving about beneath him. As the veteran trooper fell Quinn pointed his shotgun upwards, aiming for the holes in the ceiling and he fired repeatedly until there was a sudden 'clump' as something heavy hit the floor above.

He burst back out onto the landing and looked upwards just in time to see a rebel lean over the banister with a bulky weapon his hand and point it down.

"Get back" Quinn shouted to warn his men just before the weapon was fired. As Quinn stepped back there was an intense blast of heat and a large part of the landing and stairs was vaporised. It was only luck that none of the Catachans were taken with it. In return the Catachans opened fire with their shotguns. The lighter weapons were no match for the sheer hitting power of the melta gun but the quantity of them as well as their rate of fire forced the rebel to step back to avoid being hit. Seeing his chance Quinn burst back onto the landing and charged up the stairs, keeping his shotgun trained on where the heavily armed rebel had been standing. See movement he fired, but the shot missed and as he attempted to chamber another round he found that his shotgun was empty.

Seeing his chance the rebel emerged and took aim at Quinn, but he was too slow and before he could fire the shot that would have killed the veteran sergeant outright Quinn dropped his shotgun and dived forwards to tackle him. The rebel fell backwards under the force of the impact and both men crashed through one of the lightweight internal walls into a room where two more rebel soldiers were firing from windows. Startled by this sudden intrusion both rebels ceased fire and turned around, but with one of their own wrestling with Quinn they did not open fire. Taking hold of his opponent's melta gun Quinn rammed the weapon up into its owner's face and while he was momentarily dazed Quinn used the opportunity to draw his knife. He used this not against the rebel he was wrestling with but instead against one of the riflemen who had made the mistake of dashing forwards to try and help his comrade and as Quinn slashed the blade across his throat there as a jet of blood. Then he drove the fist holding his knife into the face of the melta gun-armed rebel's eye and the man's head jerked backwards.

Another Catachan burst into the room and the third rebel swung his autogun around, but before he could use it two loud booms echoed around the room as the Catachan fired his shotgun and the man staggered back before falling from a window to the street below.

Meanwhile Quinn continued to beat the rebel he was locked in combat with, delivering one punch after another to the man's face before he went slack and dropped his weapon. Looking around Quinn addressed the Catachan in the doorway.

"Out of my way." He said and as the Catachan stepped out of his way Quinn dragged the dazed rebel out onto the landing and hurled him over the banister, "Congratulations." He then said to the other Catachan and he pointed to the rebel's melta gun on the floor, "You've just been promoted to melta gunner."

There was fire coming from only one building now and both Vance and Wolf studied it through their magnoculars. The rebels were firing either single shots or limited bursts whenever they saw movement while the Catachans were responding in kind with their lasguns. For now both Grey and Molla had their squad support weapons holding their fire while Quinn's veterans found it impossible to get close enough to use their flamers without drawing fire from above.

"I'd say one full squad plus the survivors of the one that was on the roof until Molla's heavy bolter took them apart." Vance said.

"That's enough to cause a lot of trouble if we try storming it." Wolf replied.

"Too right." Vance said, "I'm sure First Squad could take down the building with a few well-placed missiles but that's ammunition we're not certain of being able to replace any time soon. Same goes with that melta gun Quinn's got hold of."

"Vance! Lieutenant!" Mayer's voice suddenly called out from behind them and both turned to see the mortar squad returning, one of its members being helped along by another. Though they seemed to have lost a lot of their own equipment they still carried their three mortars and also the grenade launchers they had taken from the rebel squad sent after them.

"Where did you get those?" Wolf asked as she looked at the launchers and the ammunition carriers.

"What these?" Mayer asked with a grin, "The rebels delivered them right to us."

"I'll bet." Vance said and he looked at Wolf. "Lieutenant these could be the answer to our problem."

"You mean we distribute them to Grey and Molla's squads and then along with our own we just fire grenades into the building from back here?" Wolf asked in reply.

"Precisely." Vance said and he turned back to Mayer, "Bomber, distribute them if you don't mind. For now keep one for your own section as well, we're too close to use your mortars."

The grenades were fired in volleys ordered by Wolf, each volley focusing on a particular floor. Steadily the Catachans worked their way down the building, blasting it apart one floor at a time. This left the rebels with no choice but to abandon their position and because of the heavy bolter still covering the front of the building they could only try fleeing out of the back entrance. This opened out into an alleyway that had been kept covered like the front of the building. Attempts at sneaking around the back had proven futile. Now though the same lack of cover in the alleyway proved to be the rebels' undoing as they found it covered by Quinn's veterans. Though they were eager to try out their newly acquired melta gun the task of taking out the rebel soldiers was better suited to their flamers and the jets of burning promethium filled the alleyway, enveloping the last few remaining rebels.

"Get back!" Quinn shouted as he heard the distinctive 'Crack!' of the first bullet cooking off. With their enemy defeated it would be poor fortune to lose more men now.

7.

Looking up into the sky above the capital Wolf noticed that it was starting to darken. This was not an issue with the weather but of time. The path that Moss had led them on had taken them away from the Arbiters precinct and now it seemed unlikely that they would reach it in time. Hearing footsteps she lowered her gaze to look at Vance.

"How many more?" she asked.

"Only two dead." He said, "But we've another four wounded, two of whom are serious. Five if you include Gortha, but ogryns are pretty tough so I think he recover."

"So we've lost the best part of a squad." Wolf commented, "And we're not going to make it to the precinct by dark." She added as she took out her data slate and activated its map function, "Here." She said, passing the device to Vance, "There's a hotel here we can use to set up camp in for the night."

"Will it be occupied?" Vance asked.

"I doubt it. The place is real top class. The sorts of people who could afford to stay there are the sort who could bribe their way out of a war zone and I doubt the staff would stay put when everyone else seems to have got as far away from here as they can."

Vance smiled.

"What is it?" Wolf asked.

"Real beds." He said, giving the data slate back to Wolf, "Probably hot and cold running water as well. Our boys may not want to leave in the morning. Its better than home."

Wolf looked Vance in the face.

"Didn't they tell you when you joined up?" she asked, "None of us is ever going home."

"Imperial Guard!" Wolf yelled as Second Platoon rushed into the hotel lobby, "We are requisitioning the use of this building."

When there was no reply Vance looked around.

"Okay First squad go check out the kitchens. Second look for housekeeping. We may as well top up our supplies while we're here."

"We'll need a command post." Wolf said, "Somewhere we can get a good vox signal."

"Penthouse suites it is then." Quinn said, walking over to the reception desk. Behind this there was a board covered in keys to the rooms that he began to remove en masse. Then he stopped and turned around, "What about them?" he asked, looking at the ogryns.

"Oh I doubt they have ogryn sized beds." Wolf said, "We'll just have to gather a load of mattresses together in one of the function rooms I suppose." Then she looked at Khor, "Will that do?" she asked him.

"Ogryns sleep here?" he asked reply.

"Yes, we're all sleeping here tonight." Wolf told him and the BONEHead smiled.

"Ogryns rest." He called out and the entire squad promptly put down what they were carrying and sat on the floor.

"Looks like they're sorted for the night." Vance said.

Leaving the ogryns in the lobby the rest of the platoon occupied the topmost floor of the hotel after plundering its stores of everything that looked useable. Technically this could have been considered looting, but so long as the items taken were limited to foodstuffs then it was unlikely that anyone in the chain of command would worry. If it came down to it the platoon could argue that by taking the food they were denying it to the enemy.

Wolf's first action on securing herself a room was to take a shower. Imperial guard showers were typically basic systems that allowed for only a limited amount of lukewarm water before cutting out automatically and the Catachan ones at Fourth Company's camp were even worse, being nothing but a plastic can with holes in it suspended over a small cubicle in a tent. So the opportunity to take a real hot shower without time limits was too good for her to miss. Dressing in a hotel robe afterwards she headed to see what the rest of the platoon was up to.

The first members of the platoon she encountered were two of the female troopers, one from First Squad and the other from second. As soon as they saw Wolf they snapped to attention and saluted. Wolf returned the salute.

"Where are you going?" she asked them and they looked at one another.

"The troopers are getting together for a – well, uh a bit of a get together ma'am." One answered.

"A party?" Wolf replied.

"Don't worry ma'am." The other added, "We'll keep the lights and noise down so we don't give away our position."

"Oh and it's just us not on duty." The first said, "All the sentries are still in place if that's worrying you." Then Wolf smiled.

"How about I come along?" she asked, "I could do with getting to know everyone better. Giving orders in battle doesn't really cut it."

The two Catachan women glanced at one another.

"Ah." One said as they turned back to Wolf, "Well its just that its for the regular troops only. I doubt you'd like it anyway, not a refined officer like yourself."

Wolf's face fell.

"Sure." She said, guessing that there was more to it than her rank, "Well you just enjoy yourself."

Without another word the other two women moved past Wolf and continued down the hotel corridor.

"That was close." One whispered not quite quiet enough for Wolf not to hear, "The last thing we need is that Emperor-damned outsider butting in." and Wolf frowned. Then as the women disappeared around a corner she turned and headed for the suites that the squad leaders had taken for themselves.

All of these had their doors wide open and Wolf could hear voices coming from inside one. She headed for it and tapped on the open door.

"Mind if I come in?" she asked.

"Sure why not?" Vance said.

"Where do you want me to start?" Grey commented.

In the room only a single small lamp had been lit and blankets hung across the windows in addition to the curtains to avoid giving away the Catachans' presence in the hotel. Three of Second Platoon's sergeants along with Corporal Mayer were sat around a table playing a card game of some sort and each of them had a large cigar in his mouth, obviously taken from the hotel's supply. Only Quinn was missing but there was a fifth seat at the table that was vacant and another cigar was resting on a small plate there, still smouldering. As Wolf entered the room there was the sound of running water from the bathroom and then Quinn emerged.

"I tell you what that fancy food is going right through me." He announced, "I'd give a few minutes and a blast from the melta gun if I were you." Then he halted as he saw Wolf, "Oh hello ma'am. I didn't notice you there."

"That's cause she's so short." Grey said as Quinn then took his seat and relit his cigar.

"So can I join in?" Wolf asked, looking at the cards on the table and the Catachans around it looked at one another.

"We're half way through a set." Molla said.

"And you don't know the rules." Vance added as he threw a card down on the table.

"Yes!" Mayer snapped, grabbing the card and adding it to his own hand and Vance groaned.

"Can I wait till you're done then? Maybe we can play something we all know afterwards." Wolf said and again the Catachans paused their game to look at one another.

"Sure." Quinn said, "If we've got time."

Wolf smiled and went to sit on the nearby bed as the Catachans got on with their game. In silence she watched as they continued to throw down cards and pick them up, but without being able to see them any attempt to comprehend the game was futile.

"You know I'm a good person." She said suddenly and the game came to a halt as the Catachans looked up from their cards. Then they looked at Wolf as she went on, "And I've lost everything as well. My sister was in the Thirty-Second, we joined up together. I had a boyfriend too and now they may not even know if I'm alive. All my stuff as well, that's probably been divided up between all my old friends already since I'll never get to see it again. Now I'm stuck here and everyone hates me. Why?"

The Catachans said nothing, instead just looking at one another as they hoped someone else would think of something to say.

"Come on, I'm waiting for an answer." Wolf said, "Why does everyone hate me? What have I done to deserve it?"

"Throne!" Grey exclaimed as he threw down his cards and got up. Then he strode towards Wolf and looked her in the eyes, "You say you've got a sister right?" he asked and Wolf nodded, "Any other siblings?"

"No." Wolf replied, "Its just us."

"Well my parents had six kids." Grey said, "And when I shipped out from Catachan there were only two of us left."

"They died in the guard?" Wolf asked.

"No they died on Catachan!" Grey yelled and Wolf jumped, "That's what Catachan does lady, it kills people. Lots of people. Just ask Molla over there how many rich folks from fancy worlds like this one his father took into the jungle while he was seducing their daughters and then ask him how many of those rich men never came back from the jungle because all their money and power couldn't stop them getting eaten by something Molla's father warned them not to go near. Ask any of us how many times we went out looking for those

idiots from off world that went into the jungle without a guide and never came back. Ask how many we even found enough of to ship back to their families.

"Now sooner or later this regiment is going to get deployed to an honest to the Emperor death world. Some place where every plant and every animal on the planet is out to get you and what will you do then? Will you be relying on Vance to hold your hand while you try and figure out where you can even stand without getting killed? And what about the rest of us? How many of us will die trying to keep you alive long enough to learn what we've known since we were kids? Nobody hates you outsider, but nobody wants to be the one that dies because of you." Then he paused as he stood up straight again, "You can take my place in the game." He then told her, "I'm sure the others will explain the rules to you, though what you're going to use as stake money is something you'll have to figure out. I'm off to check on the sentries." And then he marched towards the door as Wolf just looked on, her mouth hanging open. However, when Grey reached the door he found his way blocked by Jenno.

"I think you all should come with me." The medic said, "Orthan's got through to the major."

Orthan's vox set was set up in another of the suites and when Wolf and the squad leaders entered they found him sending a list of their casualties and equipment status. As soon as he saw Wolf he passed her the handset.

"Major Trent." He told her.

"Major." She said, "I'm afraid we've not been able to reach the precinct. We've established a camp for the night and—"

"I know you've not reached you objective lieutenant." Trent's voice interrupted her. There was considerable distortion of the signal due to the attempts at jamming by the enemy but his voice was still recognisable, "Colonel Shryke managed to get word from the precinct himself. Over."

"But how?" Wolf asked, "I thought communications were being jammed. Over."

"They are. But there's more than just enforcers there now. Pretty much every Imperial employee and their families headed for the precinct when the governor and his cronies announced their little revolution. It's the safest place in the capital for them right now. There's about a hundred enforcers of various ranks, fifty members of the Administration and about a dozen tech adepts. But one of the planetary astropaths managed to make it there as well and he got a message through to General Fortnam. Over."

"Understood major. What are your orders? Over." Wolf said.

"First thing tomorrow you're to head on to the Arbites precinct and conduct a full evaluation how to evacuate them. We'd do it by air, but the rebels have set up interceptor guns. Our only other plan was for sixth company to make a dash for the precinct and we'd get them out in chimeras. Problem is that the enemy must have foreseen that because the primary bridge across the river has been blown and there aren't any suitable points for the chimeras to just swim across." At this point Wolf glanced at Vance who had his face in his hands, "We're trying to get to you as fast as we can but there's a lot of enemy activity. It seems that not all of the enemy tanks were sent to the spaceport. Over."

"Understood major." Wolf responded, "We'll move out at first light, I make that oh-five thirty. Over."

"Copy that lieutenant. Over and out." Trent said and then the channel went dead.

Wolf turned to the sergeants.

"Make sure everyone knows we move out at first light." She said and then she turned specifically to Grey, "I assume you can follow that order sergeant." She added.

"Yes ma'am." He replied, snapping to attention.

"Good." Wolf said, "Then I'm going to get some sleep. I suggest everyone else does the same." And she marched out of the room with Grey glaring at her from behind as she went.

"Should have left her to the kroot." He said to the others.

8.

It was still dark when the platoon gathered in the hotel lobby. Khor's ogryn squad were of course all stood up as straight as possible in the presence of an officer while the Catachans themselves had more of a relaxed posture. Surprisingly to Wolf none of them appeared to be in away intoxicated or hung over after their get together.

"We're not big drinkers." Vance explained when she raised the point with him, "Getting drunk on Catachan is a quick way to get killed."

"Yeah I get it." Wolf replied, "Catachan is dangerous and I'm not from there. Now can we get on with this?"

"That wasn't actually what I meant." Vance said and then he stepped into line with the rest of the command squad, "Platoon ready for inspection ma'am." He then called out.

Wolf looked at the troops lined up by squads. Most of them were now below full strength with the casualties temporarily stored in the hotel's food storage chambers. Though it seemed disrespectful to leave the corpses of loyal Imperial soldiers in such a place the low temperatures would at least preserve the bodies until they could be recovered for cremation and their weight would not slow down the platoon unnecessarily.

"For those of you who haven't already heard," Wolf began, guessing that the entire platoon would know about the conversation she had had with Major Trent the previous night as well as her run in with Grey, "we've received word that there are a significant number of loyal Imperial citizens holed up in the Adeptus Arbites precinct. Our orders are to link up with them and co-ordinate their evacuation. Now that could well mean staying put until the rest of the regiment can secure the city, but we may end up having to escort them back to our own lines on foot if it comes down to it. Are there any questions?"

The Catachans looked back at Wolf in silence.

"Then we move out in half an hour." She said, "We'll start by moving in the usual order, Sergeant Quinn will take the lead, first and second squads on the flanks and the rest in the centre with my command squad.

When we get to a thousand metres from the precinct we'll switch to bounding overwatch by squad numbers. Platoon dismissed."

A signal from Rull confirmed that there were no signs of enemy activity near the hotel when Quinn's squad emerged. They rushed across the street and paused as the rest of the platoon emerged. Without saying a word Quinn then waved his men on and they continued on their way.

In accordance with Wolf's orders the veteran squad remained at the head of the platoon until they reached a point about a thousand metres from their destination, at which point they halted and took cover. Behind them the rest of the platoon did the same but after a few moments Molla signalled First Squad to advance and they moved forwards quickly until the veterans were only just within sight. At this point they then took cover and Molla activated his microbead.

"In position." He said simply and on this signal Wolf's command squad along with Mayer's mortar section and the ogryns rushed forwards and took up a position just behind First Squad.

"In position." Vance transmitted via his microbead and finally it was Second Squad's turn to advance.

The platoon repeated this pattern over and over again, with the rearmost squad advanced under the watchful eyes of the others and the command squad being kept surrounded at all times. This went on until Molla spotted a cluster of PDF soldiers beside a building. The group had a single support weapon, an autocannon by the looks of it, set up on a fixed mount at the corner of the building and aimed down the street to where the imposing structure of the Adeptus Arbites precinct could be seen. The dark grey structure was in contrast to the lighter coloured materials used for most of the buildings in the capital and all around it was an open space that meant it was impossible to approach it unseen either from within or from the surrounding PDF positions.

"Lieutenant," Molla transmitted quietly, "I have the precinct in sight, but it looks like the locals have established a line around it."

"That's not surprising." Vance added when Wolf glanced at him, "Not much point in chasing everyone into the place if they're just free to walk out again."

"We'll need covering fire to get in there." Wolf replied.

"The Arbites should be able to provide that." Vance said, "You know what those precincts are like. They're built for just this sort of thing happening, there's probably heavy bolter turrets all over it."

"Which is most likely why the PDF haven't rushed the place." Mayer commented from close by.

Wolf reached out and unhooked the handset of the vox set Orthan carried.

"Arbites precinct this is Catachan one nine mark four mark two." She said and she waited for a reply. When none came she began to repeat the message, "Arbites precinct this is Catachan one nine mark four-"

"Catachan one nine mark four mark two this is Adeptus precinct." A male voice suddenly interrupted, the transmission clear at this range, "We're reading you loud and clear. What's your position? Over."

"About three hundred metres west of you." Wolf replied, "There's an enemy force cutting us off from reaching you. Over."

"Copy that. As far as we can tell they haven't left any gaps in their line. Do you have respirators? Over."

Wolf looked at Vance.

"I've got mine." She said.

"Don't worry." Vance told her, "We've all got them. Or least everyone better had have them." And then he looked around at Mayer who nodded as he rummaged through his pack and produced the bag that held his gas mask. At the same time the rest of the platoon began to search through their equipment for their own masks. The Par Shallon PDF was not known to use chemical or biological agents and the Catachan Seventh Division had none of their own, but Imperial Guard regulations required that all troops carry their gas masks into battle just in case. Even the ogyrns were equipped with their own oversized masks that instead of the face masks used by the human troops were simple rubber hoods that they pulled over their heads in a single action without the need to strap them in place. As the platoon donned their masks Wolf held the vox handset to her mouth again.

"Confirmed Arbites precinct, we have respirators. Over." She signalled.

"Stand by Catachan one nine mark four mark two. Laying down gas in five minutes. Over and out."

Inside the Adeptus Arbites precinct building enforcers lined up at the armoury to be issued with grenade launchers and ammunition containing riot-suppressing agents. From here they made their way to some of the many firing points built into the design of the precinct and they poked their weapons out. Right on cue there was a succession of 'Pops' as the launchers were fired and before they even hit the ground they burst open, spreading their chemical contents all around. Firing again the enforcers delivered a second volley of grenades containing the same chemical agents and the clouds released began to merge together, forming one massive cloud of gas that surrounded the entire precinct.

"Okay move!" Wolf snapped, her voice muffled slightly by her gas mask. The platoon understood her well enough to carry out her order though and they rushed forwards through the thick cloud of gas towards the Arbites precinct. The PDF troops surrounding the building had been caught off guard by the sudden chemical attack and as the Catachans charged through their lines without stopping to engage them the rebel soldiers struggled against the choking gas to try and locate their own gas masks amongst their equipment. However, even those who were able to find and put on their masks were unable to see Second Platoon through the thick cloud surrounding them.

The cloud thinned out closer to the precinct and the Catachans saw the main door rolling open. A squad of troops appeared in the doorway to cover the platoon's approach, but somewhat unexpectedly these were not Arbites enforcers, though they did wear Arbites-issue helmets with their built in respirators, instead they were quite clearly Catachan guardsmen armed with lasguns of the type used by Catachan troops.

"Who are you?" Vance asked as he pulled his mask from his face the moment the doors slammed shut behind them.

"Private Jexter." One of the guardsmen replied, his voice having the distinctive Catachan accent, "Its good to see you."

"What are you doing here?" Wolf then asked, removing her own mask and then spitting in an attempt to get rid of the taste that the filtered air had left in her mouth, "Are you from the Nineteenth?"

A puzzled look appeared on Jexter's face and he looked at Vance again.

"No she's not from Catachan." He told Jexter, "But she is our officer so answer the question because I'm somewhat curious about it myself."

"We're from the Fourteenth." Jexter replied, "Third Company."

"The Fourteenth?" Molla said as he put his gas mask back in its bag, "So how come you're not at the spaceport?"

"We were in the capital off duty when the uprising began." Jexter said, "We couldn't get back to the spaceport so we came here instead and we've been helping with the defence."

It was then that a group of Arbites enforcers appeared, all wearing the traditional black carapace armour of their organisation though for now they wore no helmets.

"I am Marshal Prost." Their leader announced to the Catachans, "Which of you is in charge?"

"I am." Wolf replied, stepping in front of the man. Marshal Prost was huge, taller even than any of the Catachans and only the ogyrns looked down on him, "My name is Lieutenant Wolf. Nineteenth Catachan Regiment, Fourth Company. What is your status?"

"This facility is secure." The marshal told her, "And we are adequately supplied. However, owing the large number of heretic infantry laying siege to us we are unable to dispense justice as is required."

"Well we're here to try and help arrange your evacuation." Wolf replied, "So if you could fill us in on—"

"Evacuate?" Prost snapped, "Nonsense. This precinct is secure lieutenant. We are going nowhere I can assure you. On the other hand I think you should come with me. There is someone here who wants to speak with you."

Wolf looked around at Vance.

"Come with me." She said and then in a louder voice she addressed the rest of the platoon, "Everyone else take a break while you can. But remember the Arbites are in charge here."

Marshal Prost led Wolf and Vance through the passageways of the precinct building. Along the way they passed all manner of individuals who had sought shelter here when the rebellion had begun, most were low-level functionaries for various branches of the Imperial Administration or the families of Imperial servants, but here and there were people in the uniforms of other groups such as the Adeptus Mechanicus or Ministorum priesthood. The chamber that Marshal Prost was leading Wolf and Vance to was filled with communications equipment and display screens. Under normal circumstances from this room the Adeptus Arbites could monitor any communication on the planet, but given the current situation much of it was useless and there were only a handful of enforcers present. However, there was also another figure, one cloaked in the distinctive red robe of an Adeptus Mechanicus tech priest.

"I asked not to be disturbed marshal." The tech priest said, his voice an artificial one created by a device attached to his chest. Though possibly it was a she given the extent to which his or her body parts had been replaced by machinery.

"A detachment of Imperial Guard has arrived." Prost said and the tech priest stopped his fiddling with the panel he was stood beside and turned towards the new arrivals, his mechandrites tentacles spreading out behind him in an imposing manner.

"That is fortuitous." The tech priest said and there was a whirring from beneath his hood as his optics focused on Vance and Wolf, "You are below the expected height deviation for troopers from Catachan regiments." He said to Wolf.

"He's saying you're short." Vance whispered to her.

"Yeah, I got that sergeant." She replied before looking back at the tech priest, "Can you just tell us why you wanted to see us?" she asked him.

"Certainly, please come and see this." The tech priest said and he stepped back from the panel beside him. Vance and Wolf both stepped forwards to look at the display set into the panel, but to them it just appeared as a meaningless set of columns of numbers scrolling vertically across the screen.

"What is it?" Vance asked.

"Why communications data of course." The tech priest replied, "What else would it be?"

"Assume for a moment that neither of us understands any of this." Wolf said, "Explain it in plain Gothic."

"Low Gothic please." Vance added.

"Oh very well, if I must." The tech priest said and then he explained what was shown on the display, "This is a visual representation of every enemy communication in the capital right now." He said, "It is encrypted using an unfamiliar method that I suspect uses heretical xenos methods, though I am in the course of creating a virtual rite that will decode it. However, the source and destination is not encrypted in such a manner. To do so would render their equipment unable to correctly determine where messages were to be sent or verify a source."

"I still don't understand." Wolf said, "Can you make it simpler?"

The tech priest paused.

"I will attempt to do so." He said and then he added, "Thanks to a cross correlation of over six thousand messages in the last hour I have been able to determine the location of the enemy's primary communications hub here in the capital."

Vance and Wolf looked at one another.

"Lieutenant, we take that out and the jamming goes away." Vance said.

"Better yet we cut the rebel units off from one another." Wolf responded and they both smiled at one another before looking back at the tech priest, "Tell us more." She said to him.

Rull was the only one missing when Wolf looked around the room Marshal Prost had provided her to brief not only Second Platoon but also the troopers from the Fourteenth Regiment who were trapped here with them.

"The location of the enemy's main communications centre has been determined by the Adeptus Mechanicus." She announced simply, "Therefore, given the strategic advantage offered by the chance to destroy this facility we are going to attack it. Unfortunately Marshal Prost's men are needed here to protect the precinct so we'll be on our own."

There were murmurs amongst the Catachans.

"How heavily guarded is it?" Quinn asked.

"We don't know." Wolf said, "All that the tech priest could give us was a location. We'll check out the area first but this is too good an opportunity to miss."

"So what if we get there and there's an entire regiment waiting for us?" Grey asked.

"Then we hope we can get a signal through to Major Trent and call in an air strike." Wolf replied.

"I take it you expect us to join you on this little outing?" Jexter said.

"We most certainly do." Vance told him, "Do you have a problem with that?"

"Oh no sergeant. I've no problem with you at all. None of us do." Jexter said and he threw a glance at Wolf. On the other side of the room Grey smiled briefly while Wolf frowned.

"Check in with the Arbites armoury all of you." She said, "Marshal Prost has offered us the use of any of its contents. Bear in mind that we're attacking what is likely to be a fortified position and going off what happened when the Arbites tried to arrest the governor it could be defended by armoured xenos troops."

"How are you planning on getting us there?" Mayer asked, "We're still surrounded by rebel troops."

"That's where the boys from the Fourteenth Armoured come in." Vance said and he looked at Jexter, "I take it you and your mates can drive rhinos right?"

"If it's got wheels or tracks we can drive it." He replied.

"Good." Wolf said, "Because Marshal Prost has also offered us the use of his remaining vehicles. The Arbites will lay down another curtain of gas for cover and you are to deploy a smoke screen as soon as we get out of the building. That should give us cover against all but the closest enemy troops."

"Who may have anti-armour weapons." Another of the Catachans from the Fourteenth Regiment pointed out, "An autocannon or missile launcher will stop a rhino dead with a clean hit and Emperor forbid they've got lascannons."

"Don't worry about that." Vance said to the man, "By the time they see us, none of them will dare lay a hand on a heavy weapon."

9.

Sealed against chemical attack, there was no need for any of the Catachans to wear their gas masks inside the rhinos. However, for the ogryns it was a different matter. While Imperial Guard chimeras were designed to take the bulky abhumans the Adeptus Arbites rhinos were not. Therefore, the only option was for them to ride on top of the armoured personnel carriers while wearing their gas masks. Only six of the ogryns would be taking part in the attack, Gortha, along with the wounded Catachans would be remaining behind so as not to slow down the platoon. Their places would be taken by Jexter and the others from the Fourteenth Regiment instead. This still left Second Platoon short handed but it was the best that could be managed in the time available.

Outside the rebel soldiers were better prepared than last time for the barrage of gas grenades and it was only seconds before they had their masks on and were searching for a target to present itself. Through the cloud they heard the rumbling of powerful engines, a sound that became a roaring as the rhinos sped out of the Arbites precinct building. But despite the noise few of the rebel troops could see more than a brief silhouette through the gas and smoke launched by the rhinos themselves. Those that did see the rhinos as they headed away from the precinct were of course those that the armoured vehicles were racing towards. Located just outside the cloud of gas, these troops nevertheless still wore their gas masks just in case it spread or drifted towards them.

"Stand to!" the officer in charge of them yelled and then he directed his attention specifically to the heavy lascannon and its crew, "Don't wait for an order from me," he told them, "open fire as soon as you have a target."

The two crewmen readied their weapon, one of them taking hold of the trigger grips while the second crouched beside the bulky power cell to monitor it. But as the gunner swung the muzzle of the weapon to face the source of the engine noise there was a muffled gunshot and he fell forwards across the lascannon. "Sniper!" the loader yelled as he dragged the body of his comrade off the weapon and reached for the controls himself. But before he could get in position to use the lascannon a second shot shattered the visor of his gas mask as it punched through his skull.

"Some body get on that lascannon!" the officer yelled. However, having just witnessed the demise of the last two troopers who attempted to make use of the weapon they hesitated, "I said get on that gun!" the officer yelled again and he grabbed hold of a nearby trooper, intending to shove him towards the lascannon but before he could there was a third shot that took the officer off his feet.

Searching in vain for Rull, the remaining rebels looked around while ignoring the lascannon entirely. At that moment the lead rhino burst out of the cloud. Hanging onto the top of this vehicle one handed were Khor and one of his squad, both of them clutching their ripper guns in their free hands.

"Fire!" Khor yelled through his gas mask and the heavy calibre automatic shotguns roared. Taken by surprise most of the rebels tried to take aim at the ogryns while another dived for the lascannon out of desperation. Both actions came to nothing though, a second rhino emerged just behind the first and two more ogryns joined in the barrage against the rebel infantry, along with the storm bolter mounted to the vehicle itself while Rull made sure that the rebel heading for the lascannon did not make it there.

Driving the lead rhino Jexter swerved suddenly, driving over the lascannon with the armoured vehicle and putting it out of action permanently. The vehicle then sped onwards with the other three following. Behind them they left a wrecked lascannon and numerous dead bodies, a handful of rebel troopers remaining to watch as they disappeared between the buildings.

Jexter emerged from under the rhino with a wrench in one hand and a component that Wolf could not identify in the other. After getting through the rebel blockade of the Arbites precinct the Catachans had headed towards the closest structure that looked as if it could contain the four armoured vehicles discretely.

"There you go lieutenant." He said as he got to his feet, "That's all four rhinos out of commission."

"Good." She replied, "The last thing I want is for the rebels to be able to make use of them while we're gone."

"You know we could just drive these things right up to the communications post." Jexter suggested, "It'd be quicker than continuing by foot."

Wolf shook her head.

"Right now every rebel in the city will have been warned to look out for us." She said, "And they'll be looking for those rhinos. We'll continue on foot and try to stay out of sight, cutting through buildings where possible."

"Besides," Molla added, "I doubt even Rull could keep up with rhinos doing thirty and we need him to give us advance notice of enemy positions."

"And what does Rull have to say so far?" Wolf asked, looking at Vance.

"Closest rebel unit is six blocks away and heading in the opposite direction from where we need to go." He replied.

"Then I suggest we get moving." Wolf said and she looked back at Jexter, "Do you and your men know what your doing?"

"Yes. Do you?" Jexter replied and as he strode towards Second Squad to help make up their losses Wolf frowned at him.

"Don't worry." Vance said to her, "They'll do their job."

"They better had." Wolf added as she reached down and picked up her pack from the floor. Then as Vance noticed that she was struggling to get it onto her back he reached out to hold it steady for her, "Thanks." She said.

"You're welcome." He replied. Then he added, "What do you have in here anyway? It looks bigger than when we started out from camp."

"Can you keep a secret?" she asked, looking directly at him and he frowned.

"Go on." He said.

"I stole a robe and some towels from the hotel." She told him and as he stared at her she added.

"Looting lieutenant?" He replied.

"Everybody does it." Wolf told him.

"Well I wouldn't know. I've never been in a hotel before."

The building identified by the tech priest as the rebels' communications hub looked almost identical to those around it. Obviously the rebels had gone to great lengths to make it difficult to detect from above. However, from ground level there were several differences that were easy to detect through the magnoculars Wolf and her platoon used to survey it. Affixed to the walls at several points were modules that had been painted to blend in with the stonework but were clearly made of a different material.

"What are they?" Wolf said as she zoomed in on one of them. Then she held out the magnoculars to Orthan, "Can you make anything of them?" she asked the vox operator as he took the device and held it to his own eyes. But before he could say anything it was Grey that spoke up.

"I've seen something like them before." He said, "We all have, take a look at the antenna sticking out from the pod on the east wall."

Wolf took back the magnoculars and focused on the module pointed out by Grey. There she saw antenna in the same camouflaged colour pattern as the rest of the modifications sticking out at a steep angle.

"That does look familiar." She said.

"It looks like the antennae on those tau tanks." Molla added as he too studied the module, "I think that more than just a few light dreadnoughts got out of that valley alive."

"You thinking that the xenos were able to move their command and control set up here before the *Fury of Man* flattened the rest of their forces?" Quinn asked.

"Seems like a good theory to me." Vance added and then as he swept his magnoculars over the rest of the building he suddenly focused in on part of it, "Second floor window." He said simply and as the others turned to look at the second floor they saw that one of the windows on the side facing them was open and by adjusting their magnoculars they were able to pick out a figure within. From what they could see the figure wore a fully enclosed helmet that featured a set of built in optics mounted centrally. A tau warrior.

"Looks like they've set a lookout." Mayer commented.

"No matter." Grey added, "Rull can take him out no problem."

"We need to be certain that there aren't any more of them." Quinn pointed out.

"Or we could just look for a way in that doesn't involve going in through the doors at all." Wolf said as she tilted her magnoculars downwards.

"What are you thinking of lieutenant?" Vance asked.

"I'm wondering if that building has a basement and if so how close to the sewers it gets." She said.

10.

With a hand covering her nose and mouth Wolf stood back and watched as two troopers from Quinn's veteran squad taped grenades to the sewer wall. By pacing out the distance they had moved underground and comparing that to measurements taken using magnoculars above it the Catachans had deduced that they were now positioned as close to the tau occupied building as possible and it was hoped that the explosives would be enough to blast through into its basement. Of course if the building turned out not to have any levels below ground then all of this would be for nothing but for now this was their best hope of making it into the building unseen.

"Problem lieutenant?" Quinn asked as he saw Wolf covering her own nose and mouth.

"Oh no," she replied, glancing up at him, "this place smells so great."

"Oh come on it not much worse than you smelt when we first met you." Quinn responded and Wolf frowned.

"That's not true." Grey said and Wolf looked at him.

"Thank you." She told him.

"No," Grey went on, "she smelt far worse."

"All done." One of the veterans said and the pair both stepped back. On the sewer wall they had attached Krak grenades in a large ring and then placed a pair of fragmentation grenades in the centre of this. All of them had their pins bent so that they could be removed with very little pressure and all of them had been attached together using a long length of string. One pull on this would release all the pins at once.

"Okay let's get back." Vance ordered and the platoon retreated back down the sewer until they reached a junction where they could take cover, the string trailing behind them.

"Here you go lieutenant." Quinn said as he took the string from his men and passed it to her, "This is your idea so you should get the honour."

"Just wait for Bomber okay?" Vance added and he took hold of the handset to the vox carried by Orthan, "Bomber, Rull, we're all set down here. You can fire at will." He transmitted.

Despite the jamming and the intervening sewer roof the vox transmission was powerful enough to reach Mayer and his to remaining mortars and also Rull and both reacted immediately.

The tau sentry spotted inside the window spun as Rull's first shot was deflected by his chest armour, but the second a moment later struck him in the throat where he had no such armour and fell before being able to raise the alarm. Meanwhile the mortars made raising the alarm a moot point as they began to fire a sustained barrage at the building and its surroundings.

Below ground the detonation of these mortar rounds was just a dull pounding accompanied by a slight shaking of the sewer walls that dislodged grime from where it had built up over the years.

"Now lieutenant!" Molla snapped and Wolf pulled the string as hard as she could and then let it drop. As she did this all of the Catachans in the sewer clamped their hands firmly over their ears and opened their mouths. Seconds later the grenades fixed to the wall detonated in unison. The ring of Krak grenades punched fist sized holes in the stonework while the fragmentation grenades in the centre shook this weakened section out of place and the booming of the detonation was joined by the crash of debris as the wall gave way.

"Charge!" Vance yelled.

"Ogryns charge!" Khor added and his squad barged past the smaller humans and rushed towards the gap opened up into the basement on the other side of the wall. The room beyond had been used to house several small generators and the human technicians monitoring these were now slumped on the ground, dazed by the explosion and trying to overcome the intense ringing in their ears. None of them even noticed as Khor led his ogryns through the hole blown in the wall until they opened fire with their ripper guns and by that time it was too late for them to do anything about it.

Behind the ogryns the Catachans burst into the basement and spread out.

"Lieutenant not all of this stuff is our tech." Quinn called out as he inspected the numerous compact power generators that had been installed in the subsurface level.

"Then that tau sentry probably isn't the only one of his kind in the building." Vance added.

"Never thought he was." Grey added.

"Well at least we know which way to go now." Wolf commented and she pointed out the bundles of cables that ran from the generators, "Those have got to lead somewhere."

"Perhaps we should shut these things down." Orthan suggested and the vox operator took a step towards the closest generator.

"Hold that thought guardsman." Vance said and he looked at Wolf, "if we turn them off then the enemy will know immediately that something's wrong down here."

"Okay we leave the generators running for now and we keep moving." Wolf said and she looked upwards as there was the tremor of another pair of mortar rounds landing within the building's grounds, "So we need to get Mayer to stop that shelling."

The platoon prepared to move further into the building and it was then that they encountered their first serious obstacle.

"Doors small." Khor announced as his squad squeezed their way through the door of the chamber they had broken into.

"He's got a point." Molla said. His squad was behind the ogryns and it was clear to them that the building had not been designed with abhumans in mind.

"Sergeant Khor," Wolf said just as the BONEHead made it through the door and he snapped to attention and saluted her. Wolf returned the salute, "I need your squad to bring up the rear." She added, "Don't worry if you fall behind, just keep moving."

Khor grinned.

"Ogryns follow." He said loudly.

"And keep your voice down as well." Wolf said to him.

Whether the rebels controlling the building and their alien allies had remained unaware of the presence of the Catachans in the basement or had deliberately chosen not to send any forces against them just yet, the platoon found themselves unchallenged as they advanced. Located at the core of the building they found a cluster of lift shafts and also an emergency staircase.

"Quinn, go." Wolf ordered.

Nodding, Quinn stepped up to the door and a single swift kick he broke it open, not even bothering to check whether or not it was unlocked. Then he dived through, followed immediately by one of his men. Both veterans aimed their shotguns upwards, hunting for any signs of movement on the floors above.

"Clear." Quinn hissed and he began to scale the stairs. Just as he neared the door to the floor above it opened and a tau warrior stepped into the stairwell, his helmet under one arm and long pulse rifle under the other. The alien gasped as he suddenly found himself face to face with Quinn, but before he could call out a warning the Catachan sergeant reached out and dragged him fully into the stairwell, the door slamming shut behind him. He swung the butt of his shotgun like a club, striking the tau at the base of his skull and as he fell the next veteran in line slid his large knife from its scabbard and plunged it into the tau, aiming for the large hole in his armour for his right arm. Without a sound the tau died, but he and his equipment clattered as it slid down the stairs before being caught. Picking up the alien pulse rifle Molla tossed it over the safety rail.

"Khor catch." He said, "Keep hold of it and remember it's mine."

"You know xenos technology is forbidden sergeant." Wolf pointed out.

"Well if Cornelius the Bastard has an issue with it he can rip the guts out of it." Molla replied, "I just want to hang it above my bunk. I don't care if it still works."

"Keep it quiet." Quinn hissed from beside the door and he opened it just far enough to be able to peer out. He could see that the door led to a wide corridor and that the building's main lobby seemed to be at the end of this. At first he saw nothing, but then he caught sight of another tau warrior keeping low as he scurried past Quinn's field of view. Clearly the aliens were taking precautions against the building coming under further attack from the outside, "More tau." He said as he let the door close gently.

"How many?" Wolf asked.

"Can't tell. I only saw one." Quinn said.

"I doubt he's alone." Vance commented.

"Fortunately they don't seem to realise that we're here." Quinn said, "I'd say they're expecting us to storm the building from the outside."

"So that little trick with the mortar barrage worked then." Molla commented, grinning.

"And I think that Rull and Corporal Mayer's squad can still give us a hand." Wolf said and she held out her hand to Orthan who passed her the vox handset, "Corporal Mayer." Wolf said, "Get your men together and move around to face the main entrance of the building. Try and keep out of sight if you can and engage the enemy with lasguns only. Take Rull with you as well. Confirm."

"Got that lieutenant." Mayer's heavily distorted voice replied.

"We really need to do something about that jamming." Quinn noted, shaking his head and then he opened the door again and slipped out into the corridor.

Sporadic lasgun fire from outside the building was keeping the tau fire warriors occupied as the Catachans exited the stairwell and the multiple sounds of pulse rifles responding to this confirmed that the single tau seen by Quinn had not been alone.

"Keep the ogryns back." Vance whispered to Molla just before he stepped out into the corridor himself. Molla nodded and stepped back from the door, holding both his squad and Khor's in the stairwell.

Leaving the others behind Quinn crept along the corridor to the large open area near the front of the building and peered out into it. Just as he did so a stray shot from one of the Catachans outside struck wall close to

him and he drew back quickly. The tau ignored this shot and remained focused on the threat from outside and Quinn took another look just in time to see a bullet from Rull's rifle take a fire warrior off his feet. Most of the tau troops were positioned close to the transparent front wall using upturned furniture as cover. However, one of them was located further back from the front wall. This fire warrior wore armour that was decorated differently from the others, indicating that he was their leader and beside him a pair of mechanical disks hovered in the air. Each of these mounted a pair of weapons that were shorter versions of the standard tau pulse rifle and as Quinn watched both fired short bursts of energy blasts out of the building. Quinn withdrew, making his way back to where Wolf waited.

"Looks like a dozen or so of them." He said, "Plus a couple of those floating machines they love so much." Wolf glanced round.

"Then even without Molla and Khor's troops we've still got them outnumbered." She said and then she turned to Vance, "Tell Mayer and Rull to cease fire and fall back to their previous position. I'd hate to get shot by our own side."

"Yeah, wouldn't that be a pity." Grey commented and Vance scowled at him.

When the weapons fire from outside ceased the tau remained in place, searching for their vanished assailants. They had caught only glimpses of Mayer's section and had no idea exactly how many had been firing at them. Now without any idea of why the Catachans had ceased fire they were alert for the attack to restart. What they did not expect however was for the attack to come from within the building they occupied. Quinn fired first, a shotgun round striking the back of the closest fire warrior. The shot failed to penetrate the alien's armour and he spun around to face Quinn. But before he could fire Quinn got off another two rounds, the first spoiling the tau's aim and the second finally finding a weakness in the armour and sending the alien sprawling across the floor.

Surprised by this sudden and unexpected attack the other tau turned to face the Catachans just as they burst from the corridor, lasguns firing. It was the floating drones that reacted first and each fired streams of energy pulses towards the Catachans, striking down one of the troopers from the Fourteenth Regiment before he could take cover.

Wolf dived behind an upturned desk as the air was filled with the sounds of gunfire, both human and tau. All of a sudden she realised that the desk was also being used by one of the alien soldiers for cover and she raised her laspistol. She got off a single shot that was deflected by the curvature of the tau's helmet and before she could get off a second shot the fire warrior knocked the pistol from her hand. Fortunately for Wolf the pulse rifles that the tau were equipped with were particularly long and cumbersome and she was too close for her opponent to bring his to bear at her. Taking advantage of this she drew her blade and lunged forwards, hoping to keep the alien off balance. But she found the alien much slower to react than she expected and she succeeded in driving the tip of the knife under the tau's helmet and into his throat. The tau shook briefly and then went limp.

"You're getting the hang of this lieutenant." Vance said as he suddenly appeared crouching beside her and he handed her the laspistol that had been knocked from her hand, "Lose this?" he asked.

"Thanks." She said and she looked around. Human and tau troops were now engaged at point blank range, with the bodies of both on the floor. But despite the Catachans' superior skills at such close range the excellent protection offered by the alien's armour was making it harder for them to take advantage of this. In addition the pair of drones moved quicker than the aliens themselves and so far had been able to keep out of reach of any of the humans. Fortunately Wolf had more troops available in reserve and she activated her microbead, "Molla! Khor!" she snapped, "Now!"

"Ogryns charge!" Khor yelled, his booming voice audible from where Vance and Wolf were crouched. This was followed by a brief burst of fire from a ripper gun as the BONEhead made use of his weapon to enlarge the doorway enough for his troops to pass through more easily.

The ogryns came charging down the corridor and threw themselves into the fight, leaving the Catachans only slightly less startled than the tau. Not naturally given to close quarters fighting the aliens were hopelessly outmatched against the ogryns and even their superior armour protection did nothing to prevent them from being literally picked up and hurled against the walls. One was thrown through the already ruined glass front wall and as he tried to pick himself up an opportunistic shot from Rull finished him off.

"I wonder where he's off to?" Vance commented and Wolf turned to look in the same direction as him. There she saw the tau leader falling back while the two drones retreated with him, firing short bursts to dissuade the Catachans from following them. However their fire was not directed towards Vance or Wolf.

"The others can handle this lot." Wolf said softly, "Let's get after him." then she turned to where one of Quinn's veterans had just wrestled a tau to the floor and snapped his neck, "Collen, with us." She ordered. Collen was one of the two veterans equipped with a flamer, but in the confines of the building interior this weapon was slung over his shoulder and nodding once the veteran instead drew an autopistol he had taken from a dead rebel and the trio then set off after the tau leader.

As soon as the tau had got clear of the fighting he slung his rifle and began to run, his drones spinning to face in the direction of travel as they stuck beside him. Rounding a corner ahead of his pursuers the tau

suddenly called out and the Catachans were surprised to hear him speaking in Gothic, the language of the Imperium.

"Get back!" the alien shouted, "The Imperial Guard are here, send for-" and then his was cut off as the Catachans rounded the corner and Vance shot him in the back of his head. Instantly the two drones halted and turned around to return fire at the Catachans while on the far side of them a soldier in a PDF uniform leapt through a doorway and slammed the door shut behind him. The Catachans threw themselves back around the corner just as the drones opened fire. Vance and Collen held their pistols around the corner and fired randomly without exposing themselves, but if any of their shots even hit the drones they did nothing to stop them firing.

"We need more firepower." Vance said, looking at Wolf.

"What about grenades?" she responded.

"Not unless you want to risk bringing the ceiling down." Vance said, "I suggest Quinn's new toy." And Wolf smiled, activating her microbead.

"Sergeant Quinn can you read me?" she signalled and a moment later there was a static filled reply.

"Copy lieutenant. Where are you?" Quinn's distorted voice asked.

"I was about to ask you the same." Wolf answered.

"Still in the lobby. There's a couple of the tau that were just injured. Do you want them securing?"

"No. Just finish them off, I need you here. We may have located the communications centre but there are a pair of drones in the way. We'll need your squad's melta gun to deal with them."

Quinn arrived soon after with the rest of his squad.

"I left the others in the lobby." He said quietly and he glanced towards the corner just as another burst of pulse fire came from around it and punched more holes in the wall beyond, "Two you say?" he asked and Wolf nodded.

"The two that were guarding that tau sergeant in the lobby." Vance said.

"And the sergeant?" Quinn asked.

"Dealt with." Vance replied.

Quinn turned to his squad, looking directly at the trooper with the newly acquired melta gun.

"Tavo, you're up." He said, "Make it count."

"Yes sir." The guardsman replied, smiling and he stepped up to the corner. He took a quick glance around and pulled back before the drones could react and fire at him. Then he checked his weapon and took a deep breath. Lifting the melta gun to his shoulder Tavo swung around and pointed the powerful energy weapon down the corridor at the closest drone. Squeezing the trigger there was a hiss that grew into a roar even as the drones turned to take aim. Even from around the corner the other Catachans saw the brilliant burst of light that was emitted from the melta gun as its beam slammed into the drone. The armour plating designed to protect the internal workings of the drone proved useless against the melta blast and what was not vaporised by the intense heat tumbled to the floor as the suspensor field that supported the drone gave out.

"One down." Tavo said as he ducked out of the way of the second drone's return fire.

"One to go." Wolf commented.

Tavo repeated his attack, spinning around and firing at the drone. This time however he was not concerned about the alien machine shooting back and he relaxed as the charred wreckage fell to the floor.

"Go!" Vance snapped and the Catachans charged along the corridor, leaping over what remained of the drones and taking up positions outside the door that the human had vanished through. On the ceiling above the bundles of cables all ran through a hole in the wall into the room beyond.

"I don't hear anything." Quinn said softly.

"So what?" Wolf asked as she pushed her way closer to the door.

"So if they were smashing their gear to prevent us from getting hold of it we'd hear." Vance pointed out, "If we're quick enough we may be able to capture it."

"Then get to it." Wolf said and she took a step backwards.

Quinn promptly stepped forwards and with his shotgun he blew the hinges from the door and then kicked it down, diving aside as a volley of bullets came through the open doorway in response.

"Now!" Quinn then bellowed and he rolled through the doorway and fired a single shot that took the rebel trooper just inside the room off his feet.

Vance was the next one in, holding his laspistol at shoulder height and firing it repeatedly as he ran. The weapon was held above the level of the communications equipment spread out across the room so his fire would not damage any of it, but it did compel the rebels and the handful of tau in the room to duck for cover behind it.

After Vance came the other veterans, those with shotguns leading the way. Splitting up they followed Quinn and Vance around the edge of the room, surrounding their enemy and firing at them without offering them the chance to surrender. These rebels and tau were not frontline combat troops, instead they were support personnel trained to operate the equipment that filled the room and all they had to defend themselves with

were a handful of sidearms. Even given the hitting power of the tau's pulse pistols they were totally outgunned as well as outnumbered by the Catachans. Suddenly one rebel jumped to his feet, his hands raised in surrender.

"I give up!" he yelled, "Don't shoot!"

Quinn was the closest to the man and he reached out and dragged him away from his vox station. At the same time a tau emerged to take aim at Quinn while he was distracted, but a laspistol shot from by the door took the side of the alien's head off and the rest of the corpse slumped forwards.

"Thanks lieutenant." Quinn said as he dragged his prisoner away.

"Lay down your arms and surrender!" Wolf called out in the direction of the remaining rebels. There were only a handful of them left, the Catachans having cut through the others with relative ease and no losses. For a moment there was silence as the Catachans held their positions and waited. Then there was a 'thud' as a weapon was tossed out from behind a desk and slowly another rebel appeared with his hands in the air. Then there was another 'thud' and another as more of the rebels gave up.

"For the greater good!" the last of the tau screamed in gothic as he leapt out of his hiding place and shot at one of Quinn's veterans, the trooper named Brint. The other guardsmen whirled around and fired en masse, the volley tearing into the alien and he was dead before he hit the floor.

"Are there any more?" Wolf demanded, looking at the nearest prisoner to her.

"N- No." the man stammered, "We're all there is."

"Good." Wolf said and she looked at Quinn, "Sergeant secure these traitors for—"

"Lieutenant." Vance called out, interrupting her, "I think you should come take a look at this." And he held up a dataslate he had taken from the desk in front of him.

"What is it?" Wolf asked, making her way to him as the prisoners were led from the room and he handed her the dataslate to see, "Names." She said as she looked at the display.

"And vox codes for each." Vance said. Then he peered at the display again and pointed to one of the names, "Recognise that?" he asked.

"Moss." Wolf said.

"Exactly." Vance responded, "Lieutenant I think that's a list of all the traitors in Third Division."

Wolf smiled.

"So we can use this to identify them all." She said, waving the dataslate in front of her. Then she looked around, "And we can use this gear to shut down the jamming and get access to the planetary communications net again."

"Looks that way." Vance said.

"Then do it." Wolf ordered.

Vance walked along the vox stations, pulling the cables from each one that connected them to the generators in the basement and the antennas on the outside walls. Wolf walked over to the veteran Reese while he did this and took the handset from his vox unit. As the last of the rebel vox units was shut down and the jamming cleared she raised the handset and was about to activate it when another transmission interrupted her.

"-Mayer. I repeat this is Mayer. We're under heavy fire. Can anyone read me?"

"Mayer this is Wolf I read you."

"Lieutenant there's a major rebel force closing on your position. Company strength plus at least two malcadore pattern tanks. There also seem to be a number of tau dreadnoughts with them. Akama's down and we're cut off from you."

Wolf looked at Vance, concerned.

"Lieutenant we can't let them get their hands on this stuff again." He said.

"I know that." Wolf replied and she took a deep breath, "Get back to the lobby. Tell Molla to set up there and Grey to get his squad up to the roof with their missile launcher. I'll try and get in touch with the major. Maybe they're close enough to lend a hand."

"Got it." Vance replied and he dashed from the room as Wolf activated the vox again.

"Mayer fall back." She said, "Don't worry about us for now but see if you can circle around and hook up with us."

"Understood lieutenant, we'll do what we can." Mayer replied and then the channel went silent. Wolf adjusted the vox setting to the company communication channel and activated the vox once more.

"Catachan one-nine mark four delta this is Catachan one-nine mark four mark two. Do you read me? Over."

"Loud and clear." Trent's voice replied after a brief pause, "The jamming's stopped. Over."

"Confirmed major. We have secured the enemy communications hub. Jamming should have ceased and we should have access to the planetary net once more. Over."

"Excellent work lieutenant. Hold that position. Over."

"Yes major, but we have a large enemy force approaching including armoured units. We need urgent assistance. Over."

"What's your location? Over."

“Six four by eight three. Over.”

“Got that lieutenant. Look, sixth company is across the river, I’m going to relay this to them and they should be with you in ten minutes. Can you hold out that long? Over.”

“Copy that sir. Expect reinforcements in one zero minutes. We’ll hold out till then. Over and out.” And then she shut off the vox, “Okay you heard the major.” She then said, addressing the veterans who had remained in the room while Quinn and the others secured their prisoners, “We’ve got to keep hold of this place for fifteen minutes.”

Rebel infantry advanced ahead of their heavy tanks, moving forwards cautiously as they prepared to storm the building that held the vital communications equipment.

"Now?" the Catachan manning first squad's heavy bolter asked. The powerful belt fed weapon had been set up as low as was possible and the two crewmen were both lay on their stomachs on the floor of the lobby. Only Molla and Khor's squads were still in the lobby. Grey's had been deployed to the roof where they could make full use of their missile launcher while the remainder of the platoon was positioned on the floor above the lobby so that they could fire down into the grounds of the building.

"Lieutenant, enemy sighted can we fire?" Molla asked over his microbead.

"Not yet." Wolf said as she watched the approaching force move from building to building, keeping out of sight as much as possible, "Wait until they're out in the open. I'd like to see where those dreadnoughts are as well."

"Wouldn't we all?" Molla replied.

"Armour." Vance said suddenly from beside Wolf and he pointed along the street to where the familiar and imposing shape of a malcadore pattern tank came rumbling around a building. Unlike the lascannon-armed variant the platoon had encountered earlier, this one was armed with a heavy battle cannon. The tank turned to face the building and raised its main gun as far as the limited mounting would allow.

"Open fire!" Wolf ordered, broadcasting to the entire platoon, "Grey take out that damn tank!"

Simultaneously the squads positioned on the roof and in the lobby opened fire, a krak missile was aimed at the tank while the heavy bolter and grenade launchers fired at the accompanying infantry that scattered as they came under fire. The missile narrowly missed the malcadore's battle cannon, instead detonating harmlessly against a thick armour plate. In return the battle cannon boomed once and a heavy shell slammed into the building close to the roof. Fortunately it struck a floor unoccupied by the Catachans, but the effect was still considerable.

"We can't take many of those lieutenant." Vance said.

"They can't fire many of them at us anyway." Quinn pointed out, "If they destroy the building they lose all the equipment they need to get back."

At that moment there was the sound of jet engines from above.

"Have they got air support?" Wolf asked out loud, but before anyone could offer an answer half a dozen large humanoid forms descended from the sky into the courtyard outside, the tau battlesuits entering the fray now that they had determined the Catachan positions. Or so they thought.

"Now!" Quinn barked and he fired his shotgun out of the window. The rest of his squad joined him and one shotgun blast after another bounced off the battlesuits below, none finding weak points in their thick protective armour. The two flamers joined them, jets of fire engulfing the nearest battlesuit. But as the flames died down the machine remained standing in spite of the patches of burning liquid still stuck to it. Tavo's strike had no more luck either, he targeted what seemed to be the battlesuit unit's commander with his melta gun and the beam of energy was on target. But before it could connect with the battlesuit's plating the beam struck an energy field that surrounded it and was absorbed.

"Back!" Quinn snapped as two of the battlesuits raised arms on which a multi-barrelled cannon was mounted. The weapons fired, unleashing a storm of pulse blasts at the floor occupied by the veterans and command squad, forcing them back away from the windows.

"Khor now!" Wolf snapped into her microbead.

"Ogryns charge!" the BONEHead bellowed, his voice audible even from the floor above as the tau continued to fire. The ogryn squad surged forwards, barging past Molla's troops and rushing out of building. They fired their ripper guns at the tau battlesuits as they charged, but like all the other ranged attacks so far they did nothing to them. But then, before they could do more than get off a handful of pulse blasts that did nothing to the massive abhumans the tau found themselves in arms reach of the ogryns. Khor roared as he swung the butt of his ripper gun at the neck of the battlesuit and caused it head to jerk backwards suddenly. Had his target been an organic trooper then he would most likely have decapitated them, but as it was the battlesuit's head was nothing more than a sensor cluster on a moveable mounting while the pilot remained safely within the suit's heavily armoured torso. Nevertheless the blow was strong enough to shock the pilot into inaction long enough for Khor to deliver a second blow that also failed to do any serious damage to the battlesuit or its occupant.

While he did this the other ogryns also struck, some using their ripper guns like the BONEHead while others simply used their bare hands. There was the sound of jets again as one of the tau battlesuit pilots sought to withdraw. But as he lifted off his ogryn opponent caught hold of his suit by its ankle.

"No!" the ogryn bellowed and he gave a strong pull, swinging the battlesuit around like a toy. The machine's arms flailed as the pilot sought in vain to regain control, alarms sounded inside the suit. But the built in jet pack was designed to do much more than allow the suit to leap over obstacles or be air dropped without the need for a grav-chute or other means of controlling its descent and so the ogryn was able to hold onto it long enough for him to swing the suit around far enough that it struck a second battlesuit with an almighty 'Crash!' as they became entangled and the other suit was pushed forwards into its own ogryn opponent. The two suits landed in a heap and as their pilots struggled to get them upright again the two ogryns struck. One placed a massive foot on top of one suit and grabbed its wrist. Then he heaved with all his might and ripped the limb free of its mounting at the shoulder, taking the rotary burst cannon with it. As he stepped backwards and held his prize aloft the second ogryn then stuck the muzzle of his ripper gun into the exposed mechanism of the shoulder and fired until the weapon's burst limiter kicked in. Bypassing the thick body armour the gun tore into the pilot's compartment and unable to dodge out of the way he was killed instantly as the heavy shotgun rounds blasted him in the side of his head.

The other prone battlesuit was then able to push the first off and raise itself up into a kneeling position. But the two ogryns grabbed hold of the machine by its arms and pushed it forwards, slamming its head repeatedly against the ground. However, like the other blows being landed all around these did nothing and the fight remained a stalemate. Even with the boost to their strength provided by their battlesuits the tau were too slow and weak to strike the ogryns properly, while in turn the muscular abhumans were still not strong enough to smash through the suits' armour.

The overall effect of this melee was that it prevented the Catachans located in the lobby found themselves unable to draw a clear line of sight to the advancing rebels and First Squad was forced to cease fire entirely. "Molla to Wolf. We can't see a damn thing down here."

"Wolf here. Hold your position. We've got to keep the rebels out of the building. We'll do what we can from up here."

Wolf looked out of the window again, cautiously in case she was seen and drew more fire. Below her the ogryns and the tau battlesuits were still locked in battle while beyond the human rebels continued their advance. There was a sudden 'Whoosh!' as a missile streaked from the roof and struck the lead tank again, but the massive vehicle continued to lumber forwards apparently unharmed. Through her magnoculars Wolf studied the advancing infantry, trying to determine what her troops were facing. Amongst the rebels she spotted a small unit led by a man who seemed to be waving the others on, presumably their company command section. As she watched Wolf noticed a red dot appear on the man's chest briefly and then he shook and fell backwards as Rull placed a shot through his heart.

"Thank you Rull." Wolf muttered and then she ducked back from the window, "Well Rull's engaging them." She then said to the Catachans around her.

"Lieutenant that's an infantry company out there." Quinn said, "Rull doesn't have that much ammunition. Let my squad get down there and help deal with those dreadnoughts. Trust me, we can do it. Then Molla's lot can get their heavy bolter back into the fight."

Wolf sighed.

"Do it." She said reluctantly, preferring to have the veterans inside the building for when the rebels reached it. "You heard the officer." Quinn said loudly to his men, "Out the window."

Only one storey above the ground the veterans jumped from the window, rolling as they landed to break their falls. Then they picked themselves up and rushed towards the combat just in front of them. Quinn led the way, pulling a krak grenade from his webbing as he ran. Pulling out the pin he rammed the explosive into the hip joint of the nearest battlesuit.

"Get back!" he shouted at the ogryn wrestling with the battlesuit and as both Quinn and the abhuman stepped back the grenade detonated. Designed specifically to punch through armour the powerful charge cut the battlesuit in half at the waist and sent shrapnel upwards into the pilot before the two halves of the battlesuit fell to the ground with a 'Crash.'

Elsewhere the other veterans were already swarming over the remaining battlesuits, forcing grenades and weapon muzzles into vulnerable joints. Spotting the battlesuit that had survived his earlier attack Tavo raced up to it and pressed his melta gun against its chest, feeling the tingling sensation of its energy shield on his skin.

"Can your shield stop this?" he asked despite the pilot being unable to hear him and he pulled the trigger of his weapon. There was a brilliant flash as the suit exploded from within and he was thrown back by the blast, landing heavily on his back.

"Get up!" he heard Quinn yelling and as Tavo opened his eyes he found the sergeant pulling him back to his feet.

"What happened?" Tavo asked.

"We did it." Quinn responded, "Now we've just got that lot to deal with." And he pointed to the advancing rebel company.

All of a sudden a missile impacted the side of the lead malcadore and blew off its track on that side. But the missile had not come from the roof above; instead it had come from somewhere else at ground level. A moment later the air was lit up by heavy laser fire and there was the pounding of heavy bolters that cut through the rebel ranks.

"Its sixth company!" Wolf exclaimed from inside the building, "Look!" and she pointed to where the lead vehicles of the Catachans' mechanised infantry company had just come into view. The street was wide enough for three of the armoured chimera infantry fighting vehicles to advance in a side-by-side formation. Each of them mounted a rapid firing multilaser in a low profiles turret, supplemented by hull mounted heavy bolters while one was also equipped with a launching rail for a single use anti-armour missile that was now empty. The second malcadore came to a halt behind its disabled comrade and began to turn on the spot, a slow manoeuvre for the heavy and underpowered vehicle that would bring its main gun to bear on the newly arrived vehicles of Sixth Company. But in doing this the malcadore presented its side armour to Second Squad.

"Baum now!" Grey snapped and the gunner sent a krak missile into the heavy tank. The shaped charge punched straight through the malcadore into the ammunition store for its main gun and promptly detonated the stored battlecannon shells. The malcadore exploded, a massive ball of flame engulfing not only the nearby infantry but also the immobilised tank beside it.

With their commander dead and suddenly stripped of their armoured support the remaining rebels now found themselves facing a force of Catachans that was not only larger than their own but included armoured vehicles. While they had been quite happy to fight with such odds on their own side, fighting against them was another matter entirely. Initially the advancing rebel company just came to a halt as the surviving platoon commanders attempted to restore order and determine who was in command now. But then as they continued to take fire from not only the chimeras and the troops now disembarking from them but also from Second Platoon in the building their will to fight left them and they began to fall back.

As the vehicles of Sixth Company formed a perimeter around the building the vehicle bearing the commander of Sixth Company drove right up to the building and its rear ramp dropped open to allow him to disembark.

"Captain Lokk sir." Quinn said, saluting.

The captain returned the salute to Quinn and then to the ogryns who were also stood in a line saluting the officer.

"Where's your officer?" he asked.

"I'm here sir." Wolf said as she walked out of the building.

"Oh yes, the outsider." Captain Lokk said as he looked her up and down, "Well lieutenant you've actually done well here. We've got full comms again whereas the enemy seem to be on the back foot."

"Actually sir there's more." Wolf said with a smile.

"Oh really? And what's that?" Lokk asked.

Wolf held out the dataslate that held the names of the rebels embedded in the PDF's Third Division.

"My platoon sergeant found this." She said, "We believe that it contains the names of all the traitors in the PDF's Third Division."

Taken aback Lokk took the dataslate and examined it.

"I don't believe it." He said.

"Its true sir." Vance said from behind Wolf, "The name of one of our guiders is on there and we know she was working for the rebels."

"Excellent work." Lokk said and then he turned to look at his own command staff and held up the dataslate for them to see, "Go find that bastard who's been feeding us false information and slit his throat." He said.

"What's happening?" Governor Brecht demanded of his tau ally.

"What's happening governor is that we have lost control of the capital. Your troops are being routed as we speak and we've lost contact with the division assaulting the spaceport." Por'Vre Lem answered.

"Then we're dead." Brecht said, slumping down into a nearby chair, "They'll shoot us. Well you'll they'll shoot, but me – me they'll find something else to do to."

At that moment a group of tau fire warriors entered the room.

"Por'Vre, we are ready." The squad leader announced, "A transport stands by."

"Excellent Shas'Ui." The diplomat replied and he looked at Brecht, "Well governor it seems that we are not dead yet. There is still hope that the greater good will prevail on this world."

EPILOGUE.

Back at Fourth Company's camp Wolf sat alone her tent. With nothing else to occupy her and reluctant to attempt to socialise with the Catachans given her recent experiences of them she passed the time by cleaning her equipment.

"Lieutenant are you in there?" Vance's voice called out from outside the tent.

"I'm here, come in." Wolf replied and she turned to see all of her squad leaders aside from Khor entering her tent, "What's wrong?" she asked, expecting some sort of trouble.

Vance looked at Molla and nodded.

"We brought you a present." Molla said and he stepped forwards and handed Wolf a standard issue backpack.

"I have one of these already." She said, "I was issued it."

"The present's inside it grox brain." Grey said and Wolf looked inside the pack.

"You're kidding me." She said as she removed the dress that she had been admired in the store window in the capital. Then she paused and looked up at her men, "But I can't keep this." She said, "It's looting."

"You mean like your new robe and towels?" Vance asked. Then he added, "Anyway, its only looting if we stole it from the store and we didn't."

"Well you certainly didn't buy it." Wolf said, "I know how much this costs."

"We found it." Mayer said.

"Found it?" Wolf replied.

"Well after that tank blasted the store that ended up just lying in the street." Quinn explained, "And since it seemed a shame to just leave it there we secured it to stop it from being stolen."

"As far as anyone's concerned it got destroyed along with everything else in the store." Vance said.

"Aww, thanks you guys." Wolf said and she got up and hugged each of them in turn.

"There's more." Quinn said as Wolf sat down again.

"More?" she asked, "You didn't happen to find any jewellery lying about as well did you?"

"We think we've found a way for you get accepted by the platoon." Molla said.

"How?" Wolf asked.

"Do you trust us?" Vance asked and Wolf stared at Grey.

"Do you trust the rest of them?" Grey then asked.

"Kind of." She said, "I think so."

"Good." Quinn said, "Do you sill have that straight jacket?"

Wolf frowned.

"Of course. I'd have to pay for it if I didn't. But how is that going to help me fit in?"

"Where is it?" Vance asked.

"Under my bed." Wolf said and Vance nodded at Mayer who walked over the bed and reached underneath for the jacket.

"Now let's put this on you." Vance said.

"I'm not so sure about this guys." Wolf said.

"Trust us, we know what we're doing." Molla told her.

"Yeah but the problem is I don't." Wolf replied.

"Do you want the troops to keep avoiding you?" Mayer asked and Wolf sighed, turned her back and spread her arms.

"Go on." She said, "But this better not be a trick."

The Catachans strapped Wolf into the straight jacket and she winced as the final straps were tightened.

"Ow! Hey I don't think Selena fastened it this tight." She said.

"Oh quit complaining." Vance said and he looked at Grey, "Pass me the pack." He added and Grey handed him the pack that they had delivered the dress in.

"Hey what are you doing?" Wolf asked as the pack was pulled over her head as a hood.

"Just making sure you can't peek." Quinn said, "Now let's go."

"Go? Go where? You're not going to dump me somewhere are you?"

"No." Grey replied, "Though that was my first idea."

"Then where-"

"You'll find out when we get there." Vance said and Wolf suddenly felt herself being pulled along.

The Catachans led Wolf to another tent and inside she could hear whispering voices as she was led to a seat and sat down in it. Then the hood was pulled from her head and Wolf saw that she was in the mess tent, surrounded by the troops of Second Platoon. In front of her on the table were numerous plates of food

of varying descriptions.

"What's this all about?" she asked.

"Easy lieutenant." Quinn replied and he slide several plates closer to her, "All you have to do is tuck into your dinner."

"But I can't move my arms."

"That's' the point." Mayer told her.

"Bets have been placed." Molla added.

"Bets?" Wolf asked.

"On what you eat, how much and in what order." Vance said, "So how about you eat up and make some of us richer and happier?"

Wolf looked down at the food and then at the Catachans.

"This has got to be the stupidest thing I've heard of." She said and then to a cheer from the troops of Second Platoon she leant forwards and too her first bite.

Attracted by the noise from inside the mess tent Gant and Selena found Grey standing just inside the doorway.

"So you finally found a use for the outsider." Selena said as she watched Wolf.

"Kind of." Grey replied, "This wasn't my idea."

"So what did the others offer you to get you to go along with it?" Gant asked.

"Easy." Grey said and he held up a slip of paper with his bet written on it, "I'm the one who gets to decide when she's released and she better hope I win big."