



CATACHAN ONE NINE MARK FOUR MARK TWO

BELLY OF THE BEAST

BY STEPHEN J DUTTON



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4.3: BELLY OF THE BEAST

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The Ork Gargant is advancing towards the Imperial lines and the change in the climate of Valus make the orbital strike necessary to destroy it impossible. Only by sending a small force to guide the strike precisely can the massive war machine be destroyed before the Orks can put it to use.

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1.

The head of the massive walking machine served as its command centre and several Ork mekboys were present to control the movement of the Gargant. In addition to being a powerful weapon of war, to the Orks the Gargant was an effigy of their gods Gork and Mork, idols to be worshipped as well as weapons. This was just as they believed humans saw they own battle titans and it was said that the first Gargants had been inspired by the sight of the first titan ever to be seen striding into battle by Orks many thousands of years previously. Of course such details as the history of Gargants meant nothing to the Ork aboard this particular example, all they cared about was the destruction that they could cause to the humans of this world when they were finally able to get the machine into battle. Unfortunately they had not been able to deploy the Gargant exactly where they had planned to and now the machine had to walk under its own power the rest of the way, a long process that would take several days.

Standing on an observation platform mounted on the Gargant's head with pintle mounted weapons fixed to the spiked battlements the Gargant's commander, a larger Ork mekboy with numerous cybernetic components protruding from his skull looked ahead at what lay in its path. The once lush jungle was dying off and green had been replaced by dark brown and grey but in the distance the light from the Gargant's target spilled over the horizon.

It was a human city and the Ork mekboy grinned as he thought of the destruction that his Gargant alone could cause to it.

The column of rapidly moving utility vehicles sped into the camp site of Fourth Company, Catachan XIX Regiment. The camp site was a hive of activity now as the company prepared to respond to the advancing Ork force.

"Major Trent!" Captain Hal Fear, the commanding officer of First Platoon and the company's overall second in command called out while he strode towards the vehicles as they came to a halt, "I can't tell you how good it is to see you alive."

"What's the matter captain? Worried you were going to end up having to answer to an outsider?" Trent responded as he climbed out of his vehicle and he looked around to where two women of similar facial appearance were also disembarking from the vehicle he had rode in. Both women were much shorter than the generally tall statured Catachans and one of them wore a different uniform, though like the one Trent wore it was covered in a significant amount of dust from having to dig their way out of an underground command centre. The second woman wore a Catachan uniform, however and her arm was tattooed to mark her out as having been awarded the Catachan equivalent of the Honorifica Imperialis. This was one of the Imperial Guard's highest honours and in most regiments it was denoted by the presentation of a medal to be worn on the recipient's uniform. However, Catachans did not award medals and instead marked their skins to inform others of their achievements and it was this second woman that Trent focused on when he made his statement.

Lieutenant Emilia Wolf had once been an administrative officer in the Lyreian XXXII Regiment until she became separated from them and was transferred to the Catachan XIX as the commander of Fourth Company's Second Platoon. Notoriously independent, the Catachans referred to anyone who was not either born on the notorious death world of Catachan itself or at least raised by Catachan parents as an outsider and even after she had demonstrated her ability to command men in battle she was still not regarded as a true Catachan jungle fighter. But when Major Trent had been believed dead and the traditional vote of the members of Fourth Company had been called to choose his successor this had not stopped so many of them from voting for her that she finished a narrow second and garnered enough votes that Fear, the logical successor to Trent, did not receive an overall majority and a second round of voting would have been called that involved only him and Wolf to decide the question. Now though, Trent's return made this irrelevant.

"So you heard we held the vote then?" Fear asked.

"Oh yes, Second Platoon filled me in on everything that happened while I was gone. Now I need to go and clean up and then I'll address the company." Trent said. Then he glanced at the dust covered woman, "And I think this other Lieutenant Wolf could do with doing the same. Have you met our Lieutenant Wolf's sister by the way? Lieutenant Elisa Wolf."

"No I don't think I -" Fear began. Then he frowned and added, "Wait a moment. She does look familiar."

"The lieutenant was my guest for the night when we first landed captain." one of Second Platoon's sergeants said as he and the other squad leaders walked up to the gathering of officers and Elisa winced.

"And that Elisa," Wolf whispered to her sister, "is why we don't sleep with Sergeant Molla."

"Anyway, have Lieutenant Selena dig out something that will fit her would you? She's about the same size as Short Arse and our own Wolf." Trent added.

"Actually sir I've been ordered to tell you to head straight to regimental command. When your messenger arrived ahead of you with the news about the Ork Gargant we voxed Colonel Shryke right away. He passed it on to General Fortnam and he's called a meeting at regimental HQ along with a bunch of local commanders." Fear said and Trent sighed.

"Just when I was looking forwards to a hot shower." he said, "Okay, so who from here is on the guest list for this little get together?"

"Yourself and Lieutenant Wolf of course. Plus any other squad leader or officer who was present. Sergeant Khor included. They may want to pull footage from his implants."

Khor was an ogryn, muscular abhumans from harsh worlds that had been isolated from the rest of humanity for millennia and during this isolation the inhabitants had adapted to their environment by becoming much larger and stronger at the cost of significantly reduced intelligence. Ogryns were considered exceptional assault troops by the Imperial Guard, strong, tough and most importantly of all unquestioningly loyal to the Emperor. The problem was that it could be difficult to issue orders to them and so to help with this any of them that displayed superior intelligence by their standards were modified by means of bionic implants in their brains. Known as Biochemical Ogryn Neural Enhancement those so modified were known as BONEheads and were given command of squads of up to ten ogryns.

"Okay everyone," Trent said, "you heard Captain Fear. Back in the vehicles, we're heading off to see the colonel."

The XIX Regiment's regimental command camp was more heavily fortified than Fourth Company's was, with a battery of anti-air guns and self propelled mortars dug in around it. But there were more armoured vehicles parked around the actual command centre than there normally would be when Fourth Company's utility vehicles arrived. There were Chimera infantry fighting vehicles with the markings of not only two other Catachan regiments from the VII Division but also some that were obviously from regiments drawn from other worlds and well as Valus's own planetary defence forces. Added to these was a Leman Russ battle tank that obviously belonged to Colonel Vorris of the Catachan XIV Armoured Regiment and most imposing of all the three hundred and sixteen tonne bulk of the Banekblade super heavy battle tank that served as the personal vehicle of General Fortnam himself.

Parking outside the command centre the arrivals from Fourth Company were allowed to enter and inside it was every bit as busy as it appeared it would be from the outside. Gathered around the main tactical display were not only senior officers from the Imperial Guard and local planetary defence forces but also a group of officers from the Imperial Navy and several tech priests from the Adeptus Mechanicus.

"Major Trent, Lieutenant Wolf." Colonel Shryke said when he spotted the new arrivals, "Glad you could join us."

"Not a problem." Trent replied, "I wasn't expecting it to be quite this busy though."

"We are moving to attack the Gargant major." General Fortnam said.

"Already?" Wolf said in surprise, "But I thought all our heavy forces were already committed fighting the Orks' primary thrust."

"And so they are lieutenant." General Fortnam answered, "Fortunately Commander Cairn here may be able to help us out." and he looked at the detachment of naval officers, "Commander, be so good as to explain."

"Of course general." Cairn responded, snapping to attention briefly in a manner that brought smiles to the faces of many of the Catachans present. Then he turned to the tactical display and continued to speak, "Low level aerial surveillance has located the Ork Gargant here." and he pointed to the map, "Ordinarily with a major target like this we'd use an orbital lance strike to eliminate it but the current atmospheric conditions do not allow for this. The same goes for any high level bombing, there's too much cloud cover. Fortunately we've been able to gather up a large force of Valkyrie, Vendetta and Vulture aircraft that we can use to carry out a lower level attack from beneath the clouds."

When the Orks had first attacked Valus they had launched raiding craft from a space hulk, a gigantic amalgamation of starships cast adrift in warp space. It had been their intention to land this vessel on the surface but when the tractor beam intended to bring it down safely had been destroyed the hulk had instead crashed into the planet and the massive amounts of debris thrown up into the atmosphere was blocking out the sun enough to cause massive climatic change as well as disrupting long range communications and making orbital fire support from the Imperial Navy vessels around the planet impossible.

"Excuse me commander," Sergeant Quinn, the leader of Second Platoon's veteran squad said, "but I got a real good look at that Gargant. Are troop transports and support gunships really supposed to be able to stop it?"

Cairn scowled.

"The navy knows what it is doing sergeant." he hissed before one of his subordinates leant closer to him and said something in his ear. Then he nodded and looked at General Fortnam, "They're in position now general," he said, "starting their run."

2.

The Valkyrie troop transports being used to attack the Ork Gargant were heavily armed with multi-lasers or las cannons mounted in their noses and multiple rocket pods or heavy hellstrike missiles under their wings. Many also carried heavy bolters mounted in their side troop hatches but for now these were sealed and the weapons retracted. Backing up the Valkyries were a smaller number of Vendettas, almost identical aircraft that instead mounted arrays of twin linked las cannons that could pose a threat to any vehicle in the galaxy and finally there were several flights of Vulture gunships. These were dedicated ground support aircraft that mounted heavy bolters in their noses and could carry a wide variety of weapons on the hard points under their wings. All three types of aircraft were intended for operation at low level and they hovered just above treetop level as they waited for their target to come into view.

When it did so the Ork Gargant was unmistakable. Standing more than eighty metres tall the massive walking machine advanced with a waddling gait. It carried three primary weapons, the largest of which was the massive gun protruding out of its bulbous belly while another massive gun was mounted in place of one arm and the other arm had the appearance of a gigantic chainsword that was powerful enough to cut a Warlord battle titan in half. Supporting these weapons were numerous others mounted all over the war machine's superstructure so that there were no blind spots from where an enemy could attack safely knowing that the Orks could not return fire.

"All units," the commander of the navy's air wing broadcast, "attack."

In unison the Imperial aircraft accelerated forwards, heading directly towards their target and as they did so they saw that it was not alone. The sheer size and power of the Gargant as it battered its way through the jungle that barely reached up to its ankles allowed it to advance through the jungle unimpeded, simply crushing the trees in its path and leaving behind it a wide area of ground that was marked only by the crushed remains of the trees that the Orks were using as a highway and following in the wake of the Gargant came a swarm of other crude Ork vehicles. Much smaller than the Gargant itself these ran on a mix of wheels and tracks or often a combination of the two and like the Gargant these vehicle bristled with weapons.

The Imperial aircraft could not conceal their approach and it did not take long for the Orks to notice them. As was their way of war, the moment that the Orks realised that there were enemies close by they immediately began to turn to attack. Fortunately it took a lot of effort to steer something the size of a Gargant and before the massive walking machine could turn to present its thickest armour towards the aircraft they opened fire with a volley of long range hunter killer and hellstrike missiles.

The Gargant presented an easy target and all of the missiles found their mark. However, before they could slam into the arm that mounted the massive chain blade there was a flash of green light in mid air as the missiles instead struck an invisible barrier of energy that detonated them early.

"Target is shielded!" the commander exclaimed, "I say again, target is shielded. Don't waste your missiles. Vendettas use your las cannons, I want that shield brought down."

The Vendettas moved to the forefront of the Imperial formation and brilliant beams of white light leapt from their weapons, especially visible in the perpetual twilight caused by the overhead cloud. These too were stopped by the Gargant's shields before striking the machine underneath itself but the human gunners continued to fire, hoping to batter the shield until it failed. But the Orks did not just sit idly by as they came under fire and all of a sudden a furious barrage of cannon shells, rockets and energy beams leapt up out of the jungle as the horde of vehicles supporting the Gargant returned fire, ignoring the risk of crashing into trees as they swarmed around the Gargant and joined also by many of the secondary weapons carried by the massive war machine itself. These tore through the squadrons of Vendettas, turning many of them into balls of flaming wreckage that plummeted into the jungle.

"Break! Break! Break!" the navy commander ordered, "Take evasive action." and his attack wing split apart. Many of the aircraft armed with more rapid firing weapons such as multi lasers and auto cannons returned fire on the lighter Ork vehicles while the door gunners of the Valkyries and surviving handful of Vendettas readied their heavy bolters for action. Those aircraft armed with rocket pods used them now. Against the heavily armoured Gargant they were of little use but against the largely open topped and ramshackle trucks, buggies and half tracks their large area of effect was devastating and fire blossomed from the swarm as one vehicle after another exploded.

All of a sudden the Gargant came to a halt and the massive gun mounted in its belly was raised skywards. Ordinarily a weapon of such size and bulk posed no threat to aircraft, it could not be aimed accurately enough to fire a shell at a fast moving airborne target. But the Orks had more than just explosive filled shells available for the weapon and from the moment they had seen the aircraft approaching they had been furiously working to fill the chamber with every piece of scrap metal they could before sliding an enormous propellant charge in behind it.

The firing of the gun produced a boom so loud it burst the eardrums of the dozens of loaders inside the Gargant and produced a shock wave close to the muzzle that flattened trees in front of it as well as hurling

several nearby vehicles out of the way. But the primary effect was to propel an expanding cloud of shrapnel into the air ahead of the Gargant, right through the squadrons of Imperial aircraft. Even the smallest of the fragments loaded into the belly gun were the size of a man's forearm and many were much larger, with some the size of a small ground vehicle and now all of these ripped through the attacking squadrons. The ground support aircraft taking part in the assault were considered well armoured for aircraft but this was far from sufficient to prevent them from being torn apart in mid air. Some of the crews attempted to eject but they just found themselves in the midst of the cloud of fragments and even those that managed to land safely did so only to be run down by the Ork vehicles now swarming all around the Gargant.

In the XIX Regiment's command post the gathered officers watched the feed from the naval strike force with horror. A force of almost sixty heavily armed aircraft had already been reduced to less than twenty and the power fields that surrounded the Gargant had yet to be penetrated.

"The odds of successful mission outcome are now negligible." Lazas KBL-814, the regiment's senior tech priest announced, "Further engagement represents a waste of materiel."

"My people know what they are doing." Commander Cairn replied.

"I do not doubt it. But the aircraft they are piloting represent a valuable asset that could be better deployed elsewhere." the tech priest said.

"Huh." Molla muttered, leaning close to his fellow sergeant, Grey, "Just like a cogboy. It's just the machinery he cares about."

"Always more men to throw into the fire." Grey pointed out. With trillions of humans on around a million worlds to recruit from, both the Imperial Guard and the Imperial Navy had little need to worry about replacing losses of manpower. But replacing equipment, especially complicated machines such as aircraft was more serious.

"Pull them back." General Fortnam ordered, "We may need those aircraft against the Orks' main thrust."

"You can't!" one of the local officers protested, "That Gargant is heading right for the city of Terna."

"And those aircraft aren't going to stop that." General Fortnam said, "Commander Cairn, call off the attack."

"Yes General." the naval officer responded.

"So how do we stop that thing now?" another Imperial Guard general asked, looking around the room.

"What about our armour?" another Imperial Guard officer suggested but Colonel Vorris shook his head.

"Even if we could deploy them all in time they couldn't hit that thing before it started knocking out entire companies at once with that belly gun." he said.

"Artillery?" another suggested, "An earthshaker has a range of fifteen thousand metres."

"Maybe so. But my guns would need accurate targeting data to keep up a barrage," an artillery officer replied, "and with the vox screwed up like it is we can't get that. We could move in closer and level the guns but then we'd be just as vulnerable to the Gargant's weapons as our tanks are. More so in fact. A Basilisk can't take anywhere near the punishment that a Leman Russ can."

"How many super heavies do we have?" someone else asked.

"About a dozen in all." he was told.

"Irrelevant anyway." General Fortnam said, "My Baneblade squadron is the only one close enough to reach Terna before the Orks do and they aren't designed for attacking a target like that. We need Shadowswords and we don't have any."

"Maybe not general," Commander Cairn said, "but there may be a way to mimic them. It is possible to dismount weapons from a starship and erect them on a ground mount. We'd need the entire power output of Terna to run a single lance battery but it should be possible."

"Possible but impractical." one of the red robed tech priests said in a buzzing tone, "The time taken to bless a the lance array before removing it from its mounting aboard a starship, transporting it to the surface and installing it in a properly blessed mounting is seventy six point four hours. Plus or minus two point one hours depending on conditions."

"And that Gargant will reach Terna in under sixty hours." one of the local defence force officers said forlornly.

It was then that another of the red robed tech priests stepped forwards and Wolf recognised him as Enginseer Cornelliis, the tech priest who maintained the vehicles and equipment of Fourth Company.

"All of the solutions discussed so far depend on an external assault on the Gargant." he said, "I propose that we look at this from an alternate perspective and consider infiltrating a kill team to neutralise it from the inside by disabling its critical systems. Even if it cannot be destroyed outright, if it could be immobilised and a beacon planted then an orbital bombardment may become practical."

"A Gargant carries hundreds of greenskins." an Imperial Guard officer pointed out, "That's just the crew. In addition to them we know that they are used to carry troops into battle as well. Any team large enough to take them on would be too large to get inside unseen."

"If all of the Orks are to be engaged together yes, but precautions could be taken to allow the kill team to engage just those that present an immediate threat without alerting the others." Cornelliis said.

"How's that supposed to be managed?" one of the few female regimental commanders present asked. This

was Colonel Bess Hatch who commanded the Catachan XXV Regiment.

"Sergeant, may I have your sidearm?" Cornellius said and he unexpectedly looked at Second Platoon's veteran sergeant.

"Sure." Quinn replied and he drew his pistol. Unlike the other sergeants or Wolf the sidearm he carried was a projectile firing stub pistol rather than a standard Imperial Guard issue las pistol. Second Platoon had come across a large supply of the weapons during an earlier campaign and taken them. Now every member of the platoon had at least one put aside as a reserve weapon and those who like Quinn did not normally have a pistol issued to them carried one as standard in addition to their normal weapons. Ejecting the magazine and double checking that the chamber was empty, Quinn then carried the pistol over to the tech priest and handed it to him.

"As you can see this is an ordinary stub pistol." Cornellius said, holding the weapon up so that it could be seen, "My servitors recently produced several thousand rounds of ammunition for it and a number of others that Fourth Company's Second Platoon have in their possession. By modifying these weapons only slightly we can produce silenced versions that would allow Second Platoon to engage the Orks without making noise that would be distinct enough for any others to be aware of what was happening."

"And if that's not good enough then they can still rely on good old fashioned Catachan steel." Colonel Shryke commented.

"Why your Second Platoon?" one of the local officers asked, "Surely there must be squads of specialist infiltrators available."

"There are." a figure in a long black coat said, "We have several squads of stormtroopers."

"Inefficient." Cornellius answered, "Though there are stormtroopers available they may not be as familiar with the weapons to be used as Second Platoon is. I have observed all of them practising their skills with these weapons on several occasions and their proficiency is greater than can be expected from troops unfamiliar with the weapons."

Wolf's platoon sergeant, Vance then raised his hand.

"That still leaves the issue of getting aboard the Gargant in the first place." he pointed out.

3.

Wolf looked around the sergeants' tent where she had gathered together the non-commissioned officers of Second Platoon to discuss their assignment. There were five of them in total, Platoon Sergeant Vance, Sergeants Grey, Molla and Quinn and finally Corporal Mayer who commanded the platoon's six-man mortar squad. Khor had not been included in this briefing since it was considered unlikely that the BONEHead would have anything to contribute. Laid out on the bunk she was temporarily sleeping in until enough heating units could be provided to adequately offset the extreme cold in her own tent that was a result of the climatic shift caused by the crash of the Ork space hulk were numerous images taken from their own magnoculars as well as the gun camera footage that had survived the failed aerial assault on the Gargant. Sadly this was limited. The ongoing communication disruption had prevented a live visual data feed from the attack force and only the footage from the handful of aircraft to make it safely back to Imperial lines had been recovered.

"Well Bomber, what do you think?" Molla asked, looking at Mayer, "How do we blow this thing up?"

"I can't tell from any of these." Mayer replied, "There are a lot of exhausts pumping out fumes but there's no way of telling what they're connected to."

"If this was one of our titans then there'd be a bunch of cogboys hurling incense at a plasma reactor in the middle." Quinn commented, "Do Orks have plasma reactors?"

"I don't know." Wolf replied, "Most of the notes Cornellius gave me just say that pieces of Ork equipment recovered and taken for study fail to function even when appearing undamaged. I asked if he had more but he just said something about it being classified."

"Fething cogboys." Grey hissed.

"Actually he indicated that this came from the Inquisition." Wolf said.

"Same difference. More outsiders that don't care about us." Grey responded, not worrying about using the term 'outsider' in front of Wolf.

"If those exhausts are connected to combustion engines then we could try disabling them with krak grenades." Mayer said, "That would bring it to a halt until the Orks can fix it."

"Then we set the beacon and get out of there before the Navy turns it and everything around it into molten lava." Molla added.

"The weapons on this thing cover all approaches." Vance said as he studied several of the images laid out on the bunk.

"Yeah," Quinn agreed, "even if we could avoid that horde of Orks swarming all around it and penetrate the shield I don't see how we can get close enough to get aboard it. They'll see us coming."

"Actually I don't think that the shield will be a problem." Wolf said as she consulted her dataslate, "Ah yes, here it is. The Adeptus Mechanicus has studied them and they're just basic power fields. They're designed to resist fast moving projectiles and energy beams but a slow moving object can still pass right through." then she frowned, "Then there's a whole load of equations about reactionary forces and deflection ratios that I don't understand."

"Okay so we can walk through the shield, but how do we get close enough?" Grey asked, "The Orks will see us, there's no question about that."

"Could we focus their attention in some other direction?" Mayer suggested.

"A diversionary attack you mean?" Vance replied, "Perhaps. But look at all these weapon mountings. It's only going to take one of them to spot us and it'll bring the entire horde down on us instead."

"Look at this one." Grey said as he picked up an image that had been taken by Quinn when the Ork Gargant had first come lumbering out of the space hulk it had been transported to Valus in.

"What about it?" Vance asked, "Half the thing is still obscured."

"I know, but it was taken from a lower angle and you can see that there's a massive gap under that armoured skirt. If we can get underneath then perhaps we can cut a hole in it and climb up that way." Grey said.

"That sounds promising." Wolf said and she took the image from him and inspected it herself.

"But how do we get underneath to begin with?" Vance asked.

"We could dig a trench in its path." Mayer suggested, "Not big enough for it to fall in to but big enough for us to hide in. Then when it passes over us we climb out and climb aboard."

"Wouldn't work." Quinn said, shaking his head, "We'd need to know exactly where it was going to within a hundred metres or so. If we're out more than that then it would just pass us by."

"Or worse yet one of its feet would come down directly on top of us and we'd all be a lot thinner." Grey added.

"Plus there's the time issue." Molla said, "The cogboys may not be able to get heavy earth moving equipment into position in time to complete the digging and carry away the waste."

"Aircraft are obviously out." Vance said, "We've seen what happens when you try getting close to it like that."

"So if we can't get to it from underground and we can't fly to it then we have to get there on the surface." Molla said, "But how? Ordinarily I'd say we could use the jungle to sneak up on a target like that and climb aboard unseen but with the jungle dying off we're sort of out of our area of expertise."

"Anything to add lieutenant?" Vance asked, looking at Wolf who in turn was still staring at the image she had taken from Grey.

"Hey don't disturb her." Grey said, "She's at her best like this."

"What?" Wolf said but Grey just smiled.

"Seen anything we should know about lieutenant?" Vance said and Wolf nodded.

"Look at this." she said, holding out the image.

"It's just the picture Quinn took when the Gargant appeared." Molla replied.

"Yes but think where he was when he took it." Wolf said.

"I was pretty close to the hulk and surrounded by Greenskins." Quinn responded.

"Yes, but they didn't know you weren't one of them because you were inside that Chimera they'd stolen. You were able to drive right through their camp unseen." Wolf said.

"I see where you're going with this but there's a problem. We left that thing behind." Quinn said.

"Plus we burned it to prevent the Orks from making use of it again." Vance added.

"Besides," Grey added, "we need a way to get the entire platoon aboard that Gargant, not just a squad of us."

"I know. But I bet that the Adeptus Mechanicus could modify a few of our own vehicles to look like they'd been captured by the Orks and we could use those to drive right up to the Gargant. Grey's right about the space underneath, we drive beneath the Gargant and match our speed with it before climbing up." Wolf explained.

"Don't you just love the way she uses the word 'we' when what she really means is someone who knows how to drive a Chimera." Grey said.

"I'm sure we can rustle up enough drivers." Wolf replied, "It's not like they'd be able to come aboard the Gargant with us anyway. The minute they take their hands off the controls the Chimeras would spin out of control."

"Sixth Company." Quinn commented and Wolf nodded.

"That's what I was thinking." she said. Sixth Company was the Catachan XIX Regiment's mechanised infantry company and its squads were carried into battle aboard Chimera fighting vehicles supported by Tauros strike vehicles and Hellhound flame throwing tanks.

Just then the tent flap opened and a man in the overalls of a lay member of the Adeptus Mechanicus entered carrying a crate.

"Close that damned flap cogboy!" Molla snapped.

"Sure." the new arrival replied in a Catachan accent as he pulled the flap closed behind him to try and keep in the limited heat.

"Nathin, are those our weapons?" Wolf asked, looking at the crate.

"That's right." Nathin replied. Nathin PL673 was one of the many Catachans who was orphaned at a young age when his parents succumbed to the natural dangers of their home world. He had shown some technical aptitude and so the Adeptus Mechanicus had taken over his education and now he served as assistant to Cornelliuss.

He set the crate down on top of the various images of the Gargant and released its seals and opening the crate he revealed the pistols laid out inside. Each of these looked almost the same as they had when Second Platoon had turned them over to Cornelliuss to be modified, the only obvious difference being that the barrel now extended slightly beyond the front of the slide and was threaded on the outside.

"The servitors built new barrels designed to take a silencer." Nathin explained as he picked one of the pistols out of the crate and then removed a stubby black cylinder from beside it, "It just screws on like this." and he demonstrated by screwing the cylindrical silencer around the outside of the extended barrel until it reached the end of the threading. Then he pulled back the slide and locked it in the open position before holding it out towards Wolf.

"So how much noise reduction are we talking about?" she asked as she took the weapon and studied it.

"It should completely eliminate the sound at distances of more than about fifty metres." Nathin answered, "Of course ambient noise will affect that."

"I don't see the inside of a Gargant being particularly quiet." Quinn said as he removed another pistol and silencer from the case and started to fit them together, "Making the shots sound less like gunfire will probably be more useful."

"I want each of you determine what other weapons we should take with us." Wolf said, looking around at her subordinates.

"We'll need Krak grenades for the sabotage work," Mayer said, "but a few smoke grenades could be useful as well."

"Good point." Molla added, "They're quiet and the Orks will just think that something's overheated or sprung

a leak rather than someone's using a grenade.”

“If we are discovered we'll want more firepower than just these.” Quinn said, holding up his pistol.

“Shotguns?” Vance suggested and Quinn nodded. His squad carried shotguns instead of more common las guns that the rest of the platoon's troops were armed with.

“The ogryns' ripper guns should come in handy as well.” he said, “Assuming of course we can get them aboard quietly.”

“One set of roars and grunts ought to sound like any other.” Grey said, “Just make sure they don't try anything more complicated than that and I doubt the Orks will notice.”

“So have you figured out how you're going to get aboard the Gargant yet?” Nathin asked as he looked at some of the images sitting next to where he had put the crate down on top the others and Wolf smiled.

“As a matter of fact technician we have.” she said.

“Yeah cogboy,” Quinn added, “we need to ask you and your bosses a favour.”

4.

"This is most irregular." Cornelliuss said as he and Wolf stood in Major Trent's office.

"It's the only way we could think of to get aboard the Ork Gargant sir." Wolf responded, "Chimeras will enable us to get close enough to the target for a boarding to take place and keep pace with it while we transfer ourselves and our equipment aboard it.

"But to deface the appearance of our Chimeras in a manner not sanctified by approved STC data risks angering the machine spirits of the vehicles in question." Cornelliuss protested, "I would remind you that the vehicles salvaged by Orks tend to operate in an unreliable manner."

"That's because they've been nailed back together after being hit by a shell the size of a man." Trent pointed out, "Now if I remember correctly it was you that volunteered Lieutenant Wolf and her platoon for this operation. Is that correct engineer?"

"You are correct major." Cornelliuss replied, "Their assignment was logical."

"And you were happy to modify our pistols." Wolf added.

"The modifications were carried out in accordance with patterns established by known STC data." Cornelliuss said, "What the lieutenant proposing now is not."

"It's a coat of paint and a few bits of scrap metal welded onto the vehicles' hulls for a few hours." Wolf said, "I'm not asking for them to be permanently damaged."

"I do not support this measure major," Cornelliuss said, "and my counterpart in Sixth Company will not either."

"Then it's a good job we don't work for you cogboys." Trent said, "You work for us. Now if you'd rather I just call up Captain Lokk myself and ask him to have his men modify their own vehicles I can. But I'd rather—"

"That will not be necessary Major Trent." Cornelliuss interrupted, "I will communicate your requirements to the engineers of Sixth Company and have them provide suitably modified Chimeras. However, I must caution you that the machine spirits will not be as understanding as I am."

"We'll take our chances." Wolf muttered.

"Then it's settled. Sixth Company will be requested to provide enough Chimeras to transport Second Platoon that will be modified to give them the appearance of vehicles that have been captured and defaced by the enemy." Trent said and then he looked at Wolf, "You are dismissed lieutenant."

"Yes sir." she said before turning around and leaving his office while Cornelliuss remained behind to help Trent make the arrangements to supply the needed Chimeras.

In the room immediately outside Trent's office his adjutant Company Sergeant Major Stubbs looked up from behind his desk.

"There was someone in here looking for you lieutenant." he told her.

"Who?" Wolf asked.

"I think it was your sister. She looked a bit like you and she said her name was Elise."

"That's her. But why isn't she here now?" Wolf asked.

"I didn't know how long it would take you and the major to convince Cornelliuss the Bastard to give you what you wanted so I suggested she head over and wait in the mess tent instead."

"Thanks sergeant." Wolf said and she headed for the exit from the command tent, not noticing the smile spreading across Stubbs's face as she turned away from him.

Wolf then made her way over to the mess tent where the smell of food drifted out into the cold air. Since the rapid drop in temperature following the crash of the Ork space hulk Fourth Company's mess tent had been operating more or less round the clock to provide warm food and the staff had become envied for being able to work next to the stoves. Given this fact it was not a surprise to Wolf that when she entered the tent there were already several groups of Catachan troops inside. Instead of all being from one platoon as would normally be the case however, she spotted faces from various platoons including her own. It actually took Wolf a few moments to recognise her sister and it was only the fact that she was sat alone, shunned by the Catachans as an outsider that allowed Wolf to realise who she was thanks to the clothing she wore.

"Elisa, what are you doing dressed like that?" Wolf asked as she walked over to her sister and looked at the uniform she now wore.

A Catachan uniform.

"New uniform. New assignment." Elisa replied and she held up a sheet of paper for Wolf to see. The heading of this clearly identified it as the form used on the handful of occasions where a member of the Imperial Guard was transferred from one regiment to another. Normally a member of the Imperial Guard would stay in the regiment they were recruited to until they were declared medically unfit to serve, old enough to retire or were killed in action. Sitting down opposite her sister, Wolf took the form and read the name of the regiment she was being transferred to.

The Catachan XIX Regiment.

"Elisa are you insane?" she exclaimed, "Did you ask for this?"

"Of course. Emilia, the Lyrerian Thirty-Second is gone. The survivors are being transferred to other units. Most are going to the Cadian One-Sixty-Fourth but I figured I ought to come and join you here. There was a vacancy for an administrative officer with the regimental command so I-

Wolf groaned and shook her head.

"Elisa you need to get this changed. Can you still go with the Cadians?"

"Why are you saying that?" Elisa asked, frowning, "I thought you'd be happy that we'd be in the same regiment again."

"Look around Elisa. These people don't want us here. They come from the most dangerous planet in the galaxy and anyone who doesn't is always going to be nothing more than an outsider."

"You seem to get along well enough with you troops. They gave you that." Elisa said and she prodded Wolf's arm where it had been tattooed.

"That's got nothing to do with it. I know you Elisa, you like things done properly and the moment you try and tell a Catachan that the way they're doing something is wrong they'll turn on you. Don't think your rank counts for anything either, if you're not Catachan then you're an outsider, that's all there is to it. I thought I told you all this. What made you think it was a good idea?" then Wolf winced, "Him on Earth. This doesn't have anything to do with Molla does it? Look, just because you slept with him-

"Throne no!" Elisa exclaimed, "That's something I wish I hadn't done. Wait, why would you think sleeping with Molla would make me want to transfer to the Nineteenth?" then she gasped, "Throne, have you slept with Molla?" she hissed and she winced.

"No I have not." Wolf replied, also lowering her voice, "I would never, not with him."

Elisa frowned.

"Not with him? But you have with someone else here haven't you?"

"We're talking about you transferring to the Nineteenth Elisa."

"Yes I am. Now it's been two years since you transferred to this regiment. Surely you've hooked up with someone since then. It's one of your platoon isn't it?"

Wolf got to her feet and put the transfer form back down on the table.

"You need to get that sorted Elisa. They'll eat you alive if you don't." she said and then she marched to the exit.

Leaving what remained of her meal Elisa got up and ran after her sister, catching up with her outside.

"What's got into you Emilia?" she asked, "You're acting really odd."

"Well I've been with these people for two years and being around Catachans changes you. Even if you're not one of them. Their regiments don't work the same way as others." Wolf told her.

"You mean because their officers sleep with troops under their command?" Elisa said, "Come on who was it? Are you going to make me guess?"

"Just let it go, okay?"

"No it's not okay. You used to tell me this sort of stuff. Was it Vance? He's you're number two and you spend a lot of time with him."

"Vance is married. Happily."

"Grey then. That's why he's so uppity with you isn't it? You gave him the brush off after-

"No! He's married too. You really think I'd sleep with married men whose wives would slit my throat in my sleep if they found out?"

Elisa smiled.

"Quinn's not married is he? I talked to his sister, remember. She never mentioned him having a wife."

Wolf scowled.

"Look, it was Rull." she hissed, "Happy now?"

"Rull? You mean that sniper?" Elisa exclaimed, gasping, "The one that always looks at people like he's trying to figure out the best way of killing them?"

"Yes. Rull. It was aboard the transport from Par Shallon. Nobody else would even talk to me if they didn't have to. He hated being cooped up aboard the ship as well and he doesn't care what anyone thinks of him and we kind of just hooked for for a couple of nights. But no-one else knows okay? So if-

"Your secret's safe with me." Elisa said, interrupting, "Last thing I need is that Rull coming after me."

"Thank you. Now are you going to do something about that transfer? I mean it when I say you'll be far better off in another regiment."

"I'll see what I can do." Elisa replied.

"Good, now I have an operation to prepare for. We'll catch up when I get back."

"That's fine. I'll see you then." Elisa said before she turned around and walked away.

Wolf watched her sister head towards the camp's main gate and sighed.

"I may have changed but you haven't." she muttered to herself, "I know you won't do anything about that transfer."

Second Platoon were preparing their equipment for the mission when Wolf pulled Molla aside.

"Problem lieutenant?" he asked.

"Probably. Maybe. I'm not sure." she replied and Molla frowned.

"So which is it?"

"Elise." Wolf told him.

"Your sister? What's wrong with her?"

"She's got a transfer to the Nineteenth. She'll be working at regimental command. I tried to talk her out of it but I know she won't listen."

Molla grunted.

"Just tell her to keep her mouth shut before someone tapes it shut." he said and Wolf winced, remembering two of the other women in Fourth Company stripping her naked and leaving her bound and gagged overnight in the tent used by Khor's ogryns until her other sergeants found her and untied her the next morning.

"Actually I was more concerned about you." she said, "Tari I-"

"Whoa, first names." Molla interrupted when Wolf did not use his rank or surname, "This is serious isn't it Emilia?"

"I want to know that there won't be a problem with you. You did sleep with her after all and I know she's not-"

"Hey hang on lieutenant." Molla exclaimed, "I'm more of a love them and leave them type. You know that. I wasn't looking for anything more than that one night and I knew she wasn't either." then he grinned and added, "Of course if this is because you've finally realised what you're missing then-"

"No." Wolf said sternly, scowling.

"Fair enough. No means no. Plenty more women for me to get a different answer from." Molla said and then he noticed Vance approaching them from behind Wolf, "Vance." he said out loud to alert Wolf before she said anything that she did not want the platoon sergeant to overhear and she turned around.

"Platoon sergeant." she said, "Is something wrong?"

"No, nothing. I just wanted to let you know that the cogboys have got our beacon ready for us. Nathin's got it in the maintenance shed."

"Okay I'm done here." Wolf said. Then she looked at Molla again, "Carry on sergeant. Oh and please remember what we've spoken about. All of it." and then she started to follow Vance towards the maintenance shed where Cornellius, Nathin and their servitors maintained Fourth Company's vehicles and equipment.

"Don't worry lieutenant I will." Molla called out after her. Then he smiled and in a louder voice to make certain that as many of the nearby Catachans would hear him as possible he added, "Oh and Emilia, just for the record I think you look way better naked than your sister does."

"This is your beacon." Nathin said as he put what looked to be an ordinary Imperial Guard issue vox set down on the table in front of Wolf and Vance.

"I thought voxes weren't working because of the dust in the atmosphere." Wolf said and Nathin smiled.

"Not on useful frequencies, no. But this unit has been modified to produce a repeating pulse on a frequency that can pierce the cloud layer and be picked up from orbit. It's no good for carrying data so you can't use it to send or receive any messages but as soon as you turn it on the Navy will be able to lock in on your position."

"Then how long do we have?" Vance asked.

"No time at all." Nathin said, "The Navy will fire a lance bombardment as soon as they get the signal and can get a ship into position. From the way they're positioned in orbit I'd say you'll have about two minutes before they hit the Gargant."

"Two minutes?" Wolf exclaimed, her eyes widening, "I don't like the sound of that."

"You know cogboy," Vance added, "thanks to the lieutenant here I've already had a front row seat for what happens when the Navy launches an orbital bombardment and the thought of being right where that artificial volcano is going to end up being created isn't top of my list of ways to die."

"That's okay, I thought of that." Nathin said and he turned the modified vox unit around so that its control panel could be seen by Wolf and Vance, "Here." he said, pointing to a numbered keypad and display, "Press these and you can set a timer in minutes from one to two hundred and fifty-five. That's the maximum for the eight-bit value I used."

"I'll take your word for it." Vance commented before the technician continued.

"Press the talk button three times and it will count down to zero before the transmitter actually activates." he said.

"What's it set to now?" Wolf asked.

"Zero. Just in case you get in a jam and want to call the bombardment down right away." Nathin explained and Wolf looked at Vance.

"Then I guess we're set." she said, "All we need to do now is get aboard that Gargant and find a way of stopping it long enough for the Navy to get a fix."

5.

A low rumbling heralded the arrival of the Chimeras as a column of the armoured fighting vehicles rolled into the main parade area of Fourth Company's camp. Normally the vehicles of Sixth Company sported a dark green colour scheme designed to blend into the jungle terrain they most often fought in, but now that had changed radically. Red paint of various shades had been crudely smeared over the top of the existing colour scheme without it having been first stripped back to the bare metal and properly primed. The surface of the vehicles' hulls had been further modified with the addition of randomly shaped plates of metal tack welded into place to give the impression of hastily improvised repairs. The distinctive shape of the turret mounted multi lasers had been disguised by the simple addition of lengths of metal pipe fitted around them to give the impression of a much cruder and bulkier weapon and as a final touch crude symbols such as grinning faces and images of simple hand to hand weaponry had been drawn on the vehicles. The Adeptus Mechanicus had been cautious in this respect, avoiding any of the catalogued glyphs that made up the Orks' written language just in case they used them in an incorrect manner that would cause any Ork that saw them to take a closer look rather than dismiss them and let them pass by unmolested.

Reinforced to compensate for the losses they had previously suffered, Second Platoon was waiting by the parade area when the Chimeras arrived and Wolf noticed that in addition to the transport vehicles she had requested there were also three other similar vehicles with them, each of which mounted a larger turret and a collection of fuel tanks to the rear of their hulls.

"Hellhounds." she said out loud.

"What?" the woman that was Second Platoon's medic said as she looked up from checking her equipment.

"Sixth Company have sent Hellhounds as well Torrent." Wolf said and she pointed to the additional vehicles.

"What the feth have they done to them?" Torrent commented, getting to her feet and staring at the front of one of the Hellhounds where it appeared that someone had been crucified. The unfortunate individual wore the long black coat of a commissar, one of the Imperial Guard's political officers. Almost universally feared and despised amongst the Imperial Guard they were especially hated by Catachans who saw them as interfering outsiders and it was common for them to suffer sometimes fatal 'accidents' that prevented them from taking to the field.

"Do you like it ladies?" the Hellhound's commander asked when he climbed out of the turret hatch, followed by the rest of the crew.

"What is the meaning of this?" Wolf said sternly, "I asked for the vehicles to be disguised but I didn't ask for this."

"You must be Lieutenant Wolf." the vehicle's commander said, "I'm Lieutenant Oswald."

"Lieutenant Oswald, I am well aware that no-one likes Commissars but to display the body of one—"

"Hey now, that's not a genuine leash." Oswald interrupted. Then he smiled as he added, "As much as I'd love to do that. But we just, err, borrowed the uniform from a leash and stuck it on a body the local Arbites had to hand. Some looter they shot I think. Check it out, it's got the shotgun wounds to the chest so we tore up the shirt to match."

"What are you doing here anyway lieutenant?" Wolf asked.

"You don't expect us to simply hand over half a dozen Chimeras for you to take into the middle of the Ork horde do you? My squadron will provide you with some serious cover if the greenskins figure out we're not who we're pretending to be. Trust me, that incinerator cannon and a Hellhound's armour coupled with a turbocharged engine makes these beauties more than a match for most of what the Orks can throw at us. Anything we can't out fight we can easily out run." then he looked around at the members of Second Platoon who were already starting to load their equipment aboard the Chimeras. In a typical Imperial Guard infantry platoon most of the troops would have been armed with las guns but given the nature of the mission only two men each from First and Second Squads still carried theirs as a precautionary measure and even these were slung on their backs to prevent from getting in the way. Every heavy weapon was being left behind as were all of the platoon's grenade launchers. All of these were bulky weapons designed for use at long range and like the las guns were not best suited to the planned assault on the Gargant. Uniquely Quinn's veteran squad was going into action armed with their standard equipment, the only variation being the addition of the silencers to their pistols. The veteran squad carried two flamers and a melta gun for support and these weapons, despite their weight and bulk, were ideal for fighting at close quarters. However, like the few las guns being taken along these would remain carried on their bearers' backs until they were actually needed, "So is this everyone?" Oswald asked.

"Pretty much." Wolf answered, "Our sniper Rull took a bike and has gone on ahead. He'll guide us towards the Orks using flares so your crews need to be alert for them. A green flare indicates that he's located the main horde and Gargant while a red one indicates any other Ork force."

"Got it. I'll pass the word." Oswald replied with a nod.

"Come on Torrent, we better get aboard that Chimera ourselves." Wolf said and the Catachan woman nodded and gestured for her to lead the way. Then as wolf walked away Torrent leant closer to Oswald. "Don't worry," she whispered, "the outsider won't cause you any trouble. Our platoon sergeant's got her on a short rope." then she smiled and followed Wolf.

Although only a minority of Imperial Guard squads rode into battle in Chimeras they were common enough that it was a part of every new recruit's training to learn the correct way to operate from the vehicles. However, this applied only to combat troops and since Wolf had been an administrative officer before joining the Catachan XIX Regiment she instead had to rely on copying what the rest of her squad were doing as she stowed her equipment and fastened herself into one of the seats, choosing the one closest to the vehicle's commander in the turret.

"How soon do you want us to run covert?" the commander asked, looking down from his seat in the turret.

"I'm sorry? What does that mean?" Wolf asked.

"He means how long does he get to keep his head sticking out of the hatch before the Orks shoot it off?"

Vance said before looking at the vehicle commander and adding, "Right?"

"Right." the commander replied, "Visibility is going to be far better if we don't need to rely on the observation ports." and he tapped one of the small glass blocks that were scattered around the inside of the Chimera to provide the occupants with a means of seeing out of the vehicle without needing to open a hatch and expose themselves to enemy fire.

"You'll be warned about an enemy presence by flares fired into the air." Wolf told him, "Lieutenant Oswald has been briefed."

This seemed to satisfy the Chimera's commander and he just nodded before looking forwards at his controls again.

It was then that Mayer appeared on the main ramp at the rear of the Chimera, leaning on the hull of the vehicle.

"Lieutenant we've got a problem with the ogryns." he said and Wolf sighed.

"They're refusing to get in the Chimeras aren't they?" she asked and he grinned.

"They say they're too small." he said.

Sighing again Wolf released her harness and disembarked from the Chimera. Getting Ogryns into enclosed transports intended to be used by ordinary human troops was often an issue, with the bulky abhumans often demonstrating symptoms of claustrophobia. However, their innate loyalty could be used to override this and so Wolf marched right up to the assembled squad of ogryns. There were seven of the abhumans in total and this meant that there was not quite enough room inside a Chimera for them all and the squad would have to be split between two of the vehicles instead.

"Sergeant Khor!" Wolf shouted as the ogryns all snapped to attention and saluted her, "Why has your squad not embarked aboard these transports?"

"Chimeras are small and ogryns are big." Khor responded. BONEHeads were not affected by the same dislike of enclosed spaces as their unmodified brethren were but an order from a BONEHead was not enough to get the others into a Chimera. On the other hand ogryns saw Imperial Guard officers, any officers, as representing the Emperor himself.

"The Emperor requires you to get aboard these Chimeras now." Wolf said sternly and she noticed the reaction of the ogryns to the mention of the Emperor's name.

"Emperor wants." Khor repeated and he snarled at the members of his squad, "Ogryns in!"

Now rather than steadfastly remaining outside the Chimeras the ogryns of Khor's squad charged to get aboard one. Despite their bulk the ogryns were still able to sit in the seats intended for human troops, though they did occupy two of them each and they looked bizarre in the hunched over position they were forced to adopt. Wolf considered herself fortunate in this respect, Chimeras were not particularly inconspicuous vehicles but most typical Imperial Guardsmen had to stoop to avoid banging their heads. On the other hand Wolf's small stature worked in her favour here and she could stand up inside one of the vehicles without worrying about this.

Wolf stood back and watched as the last of the ogryns boarded the Chimeras and the heavy rear ramps were raised and sealed. Then she looked at Mayer.

"Okay corporal, get to your own transport. It's high time we were on our way."

Travelling by Chimera meant that Second Platoon had to sit for a long period of time in a cramped and noisy environment. The one saving grace from their point of view as that the heat produced by the power engines required to propel the vehicles ensured that the interiors were much warmer than it was outside. The ride remained uncomfortable though as every turn to avoid an obstacle visible only to the vehicle's crew pressed the passengers into their safety harnesses.

"Are there any dips or bumps your driver isn't planning on crashing right through?" Vance asked from his seat.

"Just giving you the full experience." the vehicle commander replied.

"There's no need honestly." Torrent commented, "In fact not having to worry about my spine would be a plus." All of a sudden the driver banged his fist on the inside of the Chimera's hull to attract the attention of the other occupants.

"We've got a red flare. A red flare." he said but with the noise of the engine to fight against only the commander and secondary gunner were able to make out the words over it.

"What did he just say?" Wolf asked the commander.

"He said we've got company." he replied.

"The Gargant so far?"

"No." the vehicle commander answered, shaking his head, "Red flare. Looks like we've got a scouting party."

"Probably hunting for the best route." Vance said, "Taking them out could slow down that Gargant." and Wolf nodded.

"Copy lieutenant." the vehicle commander said and for a moment wolf thought he had been talking to her.

But then he looked down at her and added, "Lieutenant Oswald wants to try engaging these Orks." he told her, "It would prevent us facing the possibility of a force that could threaten our rear."

Wolf nodded.

"Agreed." she said, "But remind him that the mission must take precedence."

6.

The Ork column consisted of several crude open topped trucks carrying squads of Ork troops, escorted by a unit of bizarre half-tracked bikes while a trio of similarly lightweight and open topped tracked vehicles fitted with dozer blades and flame throwers to clear what remained of the jungle ahead. The open topped nature of all the vehicles gave the Orks an excellent view of the terrain around them and so when a red flare was ignited in the gloomy sky they spotted it easily. The whole purpose behind the Ork column having split off from the main horde travelling with the Gargant was so that they could evaluate alternative targets and ensure that no opportunities for battle and plunder were lost and the sighting of the flare was confirmation that they were not alone in this region of the jungle.

Aboard one of the trucks the largest of the Orks in the warband climbed up into the vehicle's roll cage and let out a roar, bellowing in the Orks' crude language and waving a large axe in the direction of the flare that still burned brightly in the sky. Immediately the column started to adjust its course, heading towards this potential target and the Orks aboard the other vehicles started to roar with excitement.

"Waaargh!"

Now that there was a definitive target to be hunted down the bikers sped on ahead, using the manoeuvrability and cross country performance of their mounts to weave between the dying trees towards the flare. In their eagerness to engage the humans they knew must be in the area they paid more attention to how far they were away from the flare than they did on what was directly ahead of them and as a result failed to notice that there was a line secured across their path at neck level and two of the riders were torn from their bikes as they collided with this before the line snapped under the force of the impact. A third rider was thrown as his own bike smashed into one of the other two riderless bikes but the remainder just carried on regardless, seemingly unconcerned by the loss of three of their comrades. They did however, adjust their tactics to avoid losing many more of their number to any further traps and rather than riding in a column formation they spread out to ride side by side.

There were no further traps in the path of the Orks but as one of them rode into a clearing beneath the flare that was slowly falling back down to the ground beneath its parachute he suddenly came across something that made him grind to a halt and look around, waving his pistol as he did so. There in the centre of the clearing was a human built motorcycle lay on its side on the ground.

The Ork rider climbed off his own bike and strode towards the abandoned bike as more Orks arrived in the clearing and also came to investigate. The motorbike appeared to be intact and the first Ork to reach it stood it up as he inspected it, considering what the parts would be worth. Then when the next Ork came close he looked at him and roared, warning him off. The first Ork had no intention of sharing this prize with anyone else and he repeated this as more of his fellow riders approached.

The Orks continued to argue, stopping short of exchanging blows for now until one of them realised that a glowing red spot had appeared on the chest of the first Ork still holding onto the bike. But before he could comment on this the spot suddenly became a hole as a projectile pierced the Ork's chest where the dot was before exiting on the opposite side of his torso.

Knowing they were under attack drove the Orks into a rage and they looked around for the source of the shot. But even though he was not in his favoured terrain, Rull was too well hidden for them to detect before he fired two more rapid shots that struck another pair of Orks in their heads. Knowing an approximate direction from where the shots had been fired the Orks charged headlong towards it and fired their pistols randomly ahead of themselves partly in the hope that they may happen to hit their attacker and partly out of their anger at not knowing where their target was.

Rull was far too professional to remain in one place for too long however, even when dealing with opponents as limited in their ability to employ good tactical thinking as Orks and when one of the Orks came across his hiding place Rull was already gone. Thinking that the sniper could still be close by the Ork stopped and looked around but this was exactly what Rull had been counting on and the Ork blinked as the light of a targeting laser shone directly into his eye a moment before it was followed by a bullet.

Another Ork ran to investigate and another shot struck him in the back of his head just as he looked down at the body of the other Ork. All of remaining the Orks now came to a halt as they looked in all directions for the source of the lethal shots, arguing over how many humans they could be facing and yelling out demands in their own language for their opponents to show themselves and put up a proper fight. Rull picked one of these as his next target and the bullet entered through the Ork's mouth to blow off the back of his skull.

All of a sudden one of the Orks bellowed that he had seen something and charged through the trees to where a bullet casing had been suspended from a branch so that it would reflect what little light there was available and before the Ork knew what it was that he was chasing after he caught his foot on a trip wire that pulled a fragmentation grenade from inside a branch and there was the sound of the lever flying off and

hitting a nearby tree. Looking down at the ground the Ork had just enough time to realise his mistake before the grenade exploded and his body was hurled backwards by the explosion. However, this trap gave one of the Orks an idea of his own and he pulled a stick-like grenade of his own from his belt and as he pulled out the pin he explained to the others that if they could not find the annoying human precisely so they could shoot or stab him then they could simply hurl enough grenades into what remained of the undergrowth to destroy every potential hiding place and hopefully the human along with them. Even without understanding any of what the Ork was saying it was clear what their intention was and the moment that the pin was pulled from the stick grenade Rull fired again, this time aiming for the Ork's hand and the alien squealed as he dropped the primed explosive, instinctively clutching at his injured hand before remembering the grenade now at his feet. The grenade went off among the clustered Orks and the explosion sent fragments through another four, including the individual who had dropped it. This left only two more Ork bikers and the loss of so many of their comrades without even seeing the human responsible for their deaths was too much for them to take. Without bothering to stop long enough to search the remains of their fallen comrades for anything valuable they started to run back towards where they had abandoned their bikes. Moving in a straight line made it easy for Rull to line up his next shot and one of them fell dead almost right away. But Rull then held his fire, placing the red dot of his rifle's sight right between the Ork's shoulder blades without pulling the trigger. The Ork made it back to his bike and picked the machine up off the ground before mounting it. With a kick he tried to start the engine, still unaware of the dot on his back. At first nothing happened, the unreliability or Ork technology making itself felt but on the third attempt the engine roared into life and the Ork grinned as he considered himself safe. Then Rull fired and the Ork slumped forwards over his handlebars.

The Catachan vehicles sped through the jungle. Their drivers were used to operating in dense jungle terrain and could pick out safe paths through vegetation so with the jungle dying off rapidly they found the going easy. Lieutenant Oswald had got an accurate fix on the location of the flare and the column moved directly towards it, sealing hatches so that they would hopefully appear to the Orks to be a friendly force until it was too late. There was no guarantee that this would prevent the Orks from attacking altogether since Orks were well known for turning on one another whenever they felt like it but it would at least buy the Catachans some time. However, as the mechanised column burst into the clearing where the flare had come back down to the ground the Catachans discovered a scene of destruction already waiting for them. The corpses of the Ork bikers and their crude machines had been arranged in an arrow pattern, pointing into the jungle before being set alight using the fuel from the bikes to set them on fire. Seeing this through the vision blocks built into his turret, Lieutenant Oswald opened his hatch and raised himself up for a better look. "Throne." he said to himself as he looked around the clearing. It was clear that the Orks had been laid out on purpose but the purpose of this escaped Oswald entirely, so to try and get some answers he activated his vox, "I need to speak to Lieutenant Wolf." he transmitted and moments later the upper hatch of the Chimera Wolf's command section was riding in was opened and she appeared out of it, "Wolf!" Oswald shouted, "What do you make of this?" "I'd say that Rull's been busy." Wolf replied. "But the flare led us here." Oswald said. "Yes and it probably led the Orks here as well." Wolf pointed out, "Rull will have known that would happen and set a trap for them. You're looking at the result of that trap." "So what do we do now?" Oswald asked. "Well I'd say we get ready to engage the rest of the Ork force. Rull's left us a message Lieutenant Oswald. That arrow's pointing in the direction that the rest of them will be coming from. Rull's taken care of their outriders and left the rest for us to deal with." Wolf told him. "He couldn't just have waited to tell us in person?" Oswald said and Wolf shrugged. "It's Rull." she said, "He moves in mysterious ways."

7.

The Orks knew that there was fire ahead. They could see the orange glow in the sky as they neared the source of the flames and they fully expected to find the remains of a human settlement or convoy that their bikers had set alight were now in the process of pillaging. The thought of being left out of the looting infuriated the Orks and only encouraged them to move faster, smashing and burning their own way through the trees until the tracked flame throwing vehicles burst into the clearing where they found the burning Ork bikes and their riders.

Behind them the trucks transporting the bulk of the force started to enter the clearing and ground to a halt before disgorging the troops they carried. Some of them ran towards the flames to confirm that they were looking at their own outriders rather than some rival group who had fought against them and also to see whether there was anything in or around the fire that could be stolen.

This was exactly what Oswald had been waiting for. He had pulled his vehicles back into the jungle and deployed them in three groups each consisting of a Hellhound and two or three Chimeras to give him the choice of several different directions of attack. As it happened the best route was the one his own Hellhound was deployed to exploit most effectively, backed up by the Chimeras carrying Wolf's command section and Molla's infantry squad.

"Move!" he barked into the vox net he had set up for his group and the three vehicles moved towards the clearing. The powerful engine that drove the Hellhound sent it racing ahead of the supporting Chimeras and it was the first of the vehicles to burst into the clearing, its sudden appearance taking the Orks totally by surprise thanks to the noise of its approach being masked by the noise being made by their own vehicles. Oswald had already aligned his turret so that it faced the startled Orks who initially took the Hellhound to be one of their own thanks to its unconventional appearance. This impression changed however, when Oswald squeezed the control for the inferno cannon and there was a loud roaring sound as a torrent of burning promethium was propelled from the weapon under enough pressure to send it right the way across the clearing and into the midst of the Orks. The fiercely burning liquid flowed over and around everything it encountered, engulfing both Orks and their machines in flames hot enough to melt through armour plating and the roar of the flames was joined by the brief screams of dying Orks before they were completely consumed by them. As soon as he had seen them, Oswald had considered the Orks own flame throwing vehicles to be priority targets and he made sure to direct some of his fire at them. The inferno cannon was just as effective against them as it was against the dismounted Ork troops and the flames were hot enough to burn through the tanks being used to store the fuel supplying their own mounted flame throwers. Suddenly ignited while still under pressure, these fuel tanks exploded to create expanding balls of flame that consumed even more of the Ork force while they were still trying to come to terms with the fact that they were under attack.

When the Orks did finally respond they did so furiously, firing every weapon at their disposal at the fast moving armoured vehicle as it darted across the clearing. Fortunately Orks were notorious for their poor marksmanship and most of the shots went wide, including all of the rockets that actually presented a threat to the Hellhound. On the other hand those solid projectiles sprayed from automatic weapons that happened to hit the sides of the tank just bounced off. Focusing so entirely on the Hellhound was also a tactical error, one that Oswald had counted on as the Chimeras supporting him now burst into the clearing as well and opened fire. Both vehicles mounted two rapid firing weapons, heavy bolters in their hulls and multi lasers in their turrets. Both of these were powerful weapons, capable of ripping apart both infantry and the lightweight vehicles operated by the Orks. The Catachan gunners did not bother picking out specific targets to begin with, instead they simply aimed into the densest parts of the Ork force and opened fire.

Panic now broke out in the Ork ranks as they attempted to determine what was happening. Given that none of the Catachans had thrown open a hatch and made themselves visible they were still under the impression that they were under attack by other Orks and they hurled insults towards the vehicles, challenging the occupants to stop hiding and fight them face to face. Meanwhile inside their vehicles the Catachans continued to take full advantage of the weapons at their disposal.

In her Chimera, Wolf shuddered as something struck the outside of the hull and produced a loud 'Clang!' "The Orks don't have many anti-tank weapons do they?" she asked, looking around the interior of the vehicle.

"Some." the commander answered from above, "I wouldn't worry though. It's not like they can shoot straight with them anyway."

Wolf frowned.

"That's not exactly reassuring." she commented.

Desperate to get involved in the fight that had broken out ahead of them the rear elements of the Ork force

now rushed forwards, some of the Orks leaping down from their trucks to advance on foot. However, instead of allowing the Orks to rapidly get the reinforcements they so desperately needed into battle it instead exposed their troops to fire from the other two groups of Catachan vehicles and while the Hellhounds struck from either side of the front of the column the Chimeras drove along the length of it with their turrets angled forwards to allow them to engage the Ork vehicles with their main guns without worrying about accidentally firing on their own vehicles if they missed the Orks. In addition while the Chimera crews focused on the Ork vehicles their passengers were able to engage the dismounted Ork infantry. Each Chimera had three las guns built into each side specifically for use by its passengers for close defence. Operated entirely from within the vehicle, these gave the passengers the ability to attack the Orks while they remained hidden and protected by the vehicles' armour. Importantly, although the las guns were quite capable of bringing down Orks they could not harm armoured vehicles such as Chimeras, meaning that any shots that missed their intended targets could not accidentally damage the vehicles on the opposite side of the Ork column.

However, although the Imperial vehicles were well protected against small arms fire they were not totally impervious to damage, especially from the rocket launchers that some of the Orks carried and when one such explosive projectile slammed into the track of one of the Chimeras carrying Second Platoon's orgyns the vehicle rocked suddenly as the track came apart. Suddenly deprived of traction on one side, the Chimera spun and there was an almighty 'Crash!' as it slammed into the thick trunk of a tree that had existed for centuries before being killed by the sudden cold.

"Damage report!" the vehicle commander snapped.

"Forward gun obscured." the heavy bolter gunner replied from his position to the left of the driver.

"Mobility's out." the driver added, "We've definitely lost a track and I think the gearbox went in the crash."

Then the commander looked into the passenger compartment where four orgyns, including Khor were sat.

"BONEHead!" he snapped, "Report."

"Orgyns okay." Khor replied and he smiled and gave a thumbs up.

"We've got incoming." the forward gunner reported when through one of his vision blocks he saw a group of Orks now charging towards the disabled vehicle.

"Him on Earth." the commander hissed as he looked for himself. His multi laser was still operational but he doubted that he would be able to bring down all of the Orks before they reached the Chimera and the thought of being trapped inside while a squad of angry Orks hacked at the hull and tossed grenades inside filled him with dread.

But then he remembered what else he had at his disposal and he slid down from his position in the turret and dashed to the very back of the Chimera so that he could open the rear ramp.

"Deploy!" he snapped at the orgyns but most of the bulky abhumans just stared at him blankly. On the other hand Khor understood him perfectly and the BONEHead stood up, snarling as he bumped his head on the Chimera's roof before he gave a yell.

"Orgyns out!"

Without needing any further encouragement to leave the confines of the Chimera the orgyns it carried rushed down the ramp, bellowing loudly. The sudden appearance of the massive figures came as a shock to the advancing Orks who right up until that moment had assumed they were under attack from rival members of their own species and for members of a society who considered the saying 'bigger is better' to be a simple fact of life the orgyns' massive bulk was a considerable psychological blow and this caused a moment of hesitation that the orgyns were able to exploit easily.

"Orgyns shoot!" Khor commanded and in unison the four orgyns opened fire.

Though relatively short ranged, the ripper gun that each orgyn was armed with was a devastating weapon that combined a high rate of fire with tremendous stopping power and the blasts of shot tore through the first rank of Orks. But that was not the end of it as the orgyns continued to charge headlong at the Orks until they were close enough that they could instead swing their ruggedly built weapons like clubs and beat the surviving Orks to death.

By the time the still mobile Chimeras reached the rear of the Ork column they had left a trail of destruction behind them that allowed no avenue of retreat for the few surviving Orks. The Chimeras were at the rear of the column, there was a Hellhound to each side as well as the four orgyns while the initial group to have launched the Catachan ambush blocked the way ahead. The Ork survivors were now faced with two choices, they could remain where they were and be burned alive as the Hellhounds continued to blast flames from their turrets or they could make a break for it, charging from cover in the hope that they might actually reach the Imperial vehicles and somehow do enough damage to make the humans pay for their victory or perhaps find a gap in the human line that they could slip through and escape.

Most of the Orks chose the latter option and they roared defiantly as they charged.

"Waaargh!"

But their defiance alone could not save them and running directly for the Chimeras and Hellhounds the Orks made easy targets for the armoured vehicles' weapons that cut them to pieces.

Even with the last of the Orks dealt with the Catachans remained cautious and their vehicles circled the

burning remains of the column looking out for any trace of survivors until Oswald finally decided that their task was complete.

"Okay we're done." he broadcast to the other vehicles, "I want a full status report in ten minutes."

Looking at the Chimera that had thrown a track during the battle before crashing into a tree, the only Catachan loss of the battle, it was obvious even to Wolf that the vehicle was not going to move again without the assistance of a dedicated recovery vehicle.

"We could tow it free of the tree with our Hellhounds and patch up the track." Oswald said, "But there's mechanical damage we don't have the parts to fix."

"Time either." Vance added from beside Wolf, "Every minute we lose that Gargant gets closer to Terna."

"Tell Corporal Mayer to move his squad to our Chimera instead." Wolf told him, "Then Khor can move his ogryns to Mayer's vehicle. That still lets us transport everyone." then she looked at Oswald, "We're going to have to abandon this vehicle." she said and he nodded.

"I agree." he said, "We'll find room to squeeze the crew into some of the others and make sure there's nothing left usable in this one for the Orks."

Then there came a flash in the sky and looking up Wolf saw a green flare shining against the clouds as it hung beneath a tiny parachute."

"Quickly if you could." she said to Oswald, "It would appear that Rull has located the main Ork force and Gargant."

The Ork Gargant was capable of carrying vast reserves of fuel and ammunition and it had no need to stop to replenish its stores. On the other hand the smaller vehicles following along behind the massive war machine needed to stop to take on more fuel. Some of the crews opted to carry drums of extra fuel that could be carried to the fuel tanks, that were often located on the exterior of the vehicles, by Gretchin workers who would then pour it in while the vehicle was still moving. This was not without risk, however and it became a source of entertainment to the Orks to gamble on whether or not the Gretchin carrying out this task would fall and how badly injured they would be. Much safer was to bring the vehicles to a stop while dedicated fuel carriers transferred replacement fuel to them.

This requirement also offered an opportunity for enterprising Orks to make money and the crews of these dedicated fuel transports could demand good prices for the fuel that their comrades desperately needed if they were to keep up with the Gargant and join in the sacking of the human city that was their target. Understandably many of the other Orks resented having to pay for fuel and the crew of many vehicles that thought themselves stronger than a refuelling vehicle's crew would instead try to take it using threats or violence. Sometimes this resulted in the crew of a refuelling vehicle being wiped out and their vehicle left abandoned along with any fuel that could not be taken by their killers and because of this it was not only the Orks who saw the opportunity in the need for vehicles to stop and refuel.

Finding a vehicle with a dead crew meant not having to pay for fuel and so the Orks would gladly take advantage of such a situation, regardless of how the crew had died. Even finding a vehicle where every member of the crew had been killed by a single bullet between the eyes and left where they lay without even any effort made to remove their teeth was not enough to arouse the suspicions of the crew of a large battlewagon that pulled up alongside a refuelling vehicle that mounted two large tanks of volatile liquid on an articulated chassis. Seeing that the crew of the refuelling vehicle were all dead the battlewagon's occupants excitedly disembarked and began to connect up the hose leading from one of the tanks.

As soon as the flow of fuel began some of it began to leak out onto the ground thanks to the imperfect fit of the hose into the battlewagon's fuel tank and the nearby Orks immediately began to complain about this. However, given that they would not be charged even for the fuel that did make it into their vehicle let alone that which was pouring out around their feet they allowed the process to continue without noticing the red dot that appeared on the hull of their battlewagon right next to the access to their fuel tank.

The single silenced bullet was an ordinary jacketed anti-personnel round that was capable of easily piercing the lightweight body armour worn by most Orks but utterly unable to penetrate the thick plating of the battlewagon even from the rear where it was weakest. But Rull's intention was not to penetrate the vehicle, all he wanted was a spark and as the bullet ricocheted off the battlewagon right next to where the hose was connected the fumes being given off by the leaking fuel were ignited and the result was suitably impressive. The fireball produced by the initial spark was enough to incinerate the Orks stood within its area as well as burning through the hose that had not been built to withstand such an event. With the hose gone the flames easily travelled into both the refuelling vehicle and the battlewagon where the stored fuel ignited while confined to produce two massive simultaneous explosions that blew both vehicles apart and sent shrapnel flying in all directions.

Such a large explosion was of course impossible for the other Orks of the horde to fail to notice. But although many turned their attention towards the flames they saw nothing to indicate that it was anything other than one of the often serious accidents resulting from equipment failures that characterised their society. The few

that chose not to turn their attention right back to what they had been doing before the explosion paused only to laugh at the fate of the Orks killed in the blast and none attempted to get closer to investigate exactly what had happened.

8.

"Rull?" Oswald asked as he and the senior members of Second Platoon observed the Ork horde through magnoculars from a vantage point that allowed them to remain unseen.

"Possibly." Molla replied.

"It could just as easily have been an accident." Vance added, "The Orks are known for that sort of thing."

"I still can't believe there are so many." Wolf said as she tried to inspect every part of the horde. There were hundreds of vehicles laden with Orks and their weapons, "They must have gathered reinforcements since getting that Gargant off their hulk."

"Yeah and even without that Gargant they've got enough firepower down there to overrun Terna." Quinn commented.

"Maybe the Navy will get them." Mayer suggested and Grey snorted.

"Right Bomber. You think those greenskins will stay put while the Navy turns this place into a raging inferno?" he said.

"Sergeant Grey is right." Wolf said, "Unless we trigger the bombardment immediately the moment the Gargant comes to a halt the rest of the horde will just go around it and carry on unscathed."

"And we're not triggering it right away." Vance said, "We need to give ourselves time to escape."

"Any ideas on how you'll do that?" Oswald asked.

"We'll drop lines down from the underside of the Gargant." Wolf replied, "Then your vehicles can come in and pick us up in the same way you dropped us off."

"Well then," Oswald said, "if my people have got to hang around while you're running about inside that thing then we may as well make ourselves useful in the meantime."

"What were you thinking?" Wolf said.

"Notice how there are quite a few clusters of salvaged Imperial vehicles down there?" Oswald said as he looked through his magnoculars again and Wolf did the same.

The Hellhound squadron commander was correct. The Orks had brought with them a lot of vehicles that had been built in Imperial factories and Wolf saw numerous examples of vehicles that could have been Chimeras, Leman Russ battle tanks and even Rhino APCs before the Orks recovered their remains from the battlefield and modified them to suit their own bizarre ideas of what an armoured fighting vehicle ought to be. Some of these were scattered individually across the horde but as Oswald had said there were several larger clusters where warbands that had seized enough Imperial vehicles to transport their entire number had remained together now they were part of the larger horde.

"Yes, I see them." Wolf said sternly, "It's obscene the greenskins using our own vehicles against us like that."

"At least it's given your platoon a way in," Oswald pointed out, "and it also gives us an opportunity to try and thin out their numbers a little bit. Supposing that after we've delivered your platoon to the Gargant we stay with the horde? Which I suppose we need to do anyway if we're going to pick you up again later. But rather than just stick by the Gargant we'll drop back and spread out, getting as close as we can to some of those clusters of ex-Imperial vehicles. Then when it looks like nobody's looking we'll take a few pot shots at some of the other vehicles."

"And if the Orks figure out where the fire came from they'll think it was the group rather than just one individual vehicle." Molla commented.

"That's what I'm hoping for sergeant." Oswald replied, "Then I'm hoping that they'll return fire against the Ork vehicles rather than us and we can trigger a bit of disorder."

"Getting the Orks to kill one another for us. Nice." Quinn said, "Kind of evens out their using our own vehicles against us wouldn't you say lieutenant?"

The first challenge facing the Catachans when approaching the Gargant was how to infiltrate the Ork without making them suspicious of the sudden arrival of vehicles that had no visible crew. The choice was made to join the horde from the rear where the Ork stragglers were more spread out and preoccupied with trying to catch up with the rest so that they would not lose out when it came to fighting and looting. This did not prevent the crews of some of these vehicles calling out challenges as they tried to find out whether the new arrivals could be considered allies or rivals but it did mean that they could not pass on any suspicions they had to the rest of the horde. Though Orks possessed the technology for wireless communication and were known to use it in their aircraft and spacecraft it was much rarer for their ground vehicles or infantry to make use of it, instead seeing a good loud voice to be preferable. Moving up the horde was then just a matter of maintaining a higher speed than the Orks were currently travelling at, which given the low speed attainable by the Gargant itself was easy for the well maintained Imperial vehicles to manage and it was only the least reliable Ork vehicles that were being left behind, the rest of them simply travelling at less than their top speed

to avoid overtaking the Gargant.

The problem with getting closer to the Gargant was not with the Orks noticing that there was something amiss about the Catachan vehicles since as far as they were concerned they had always been a part of the horde, but with the sheer number of Ork vehicles in their path. The closer the Catachans got to the Gargant the denser the traffic around them became and the gaps between different vehicles reduced so far that Oswald had to order his driver to try and find a different route when they simply ran out of room. Unwilling to just sit and wait to be told that they had caught up with the Gargant, Wolf watched their progress through the vision block intended to be used when operating the hull mounted las gun behind her seat and when she saw that they were dropping back for a third time as Oswald tried to find an open route to the Gargant she turned to the Chimera's commander.

"Sergeant, isn't there any way of speeding this up?" she asked.

"Lieutenant Oswald's orders. We're to avoid all contact with the Orks until after you're deployed." he replied.

"He means no ramming." Torrent commented and Wolf paused.

"Sergeant," she said, addressing the Chimera's commander again, "would you please tell Lieutenant Oswald that he is to use whatever means are necessary to get us to that Gargant?"

"If you insist lieutenant." the Chimera's commander responded before activating the transport's vox to connect him with the squadron's commanding officer.

"Exploiting your tactical authority as mission commander over a Catachan." Vance said as Wolf sat back down, "Very brave. I thought you'd learned not to do that."

"You think it'll cause problems later on?" Wolf asked.

"Maybe." Vance replied, "You may want to rethink moving out of our tent even after we get more heaters or are transferred somewhere warmer. I'm sure Molla would be glad to-"

"Stop." Wolf said, holding up her hand to Vance as he smiled at her while talking about Molla, "Stop right there."

"Oh what's the problem sarge?" Torrent asked from opposite Vance, "I mean it's not like any of Sixth Company even know about that straitjacket the lieutenant gets stuffed in when she pisses people off." and Wolf winced at the mention of the restraining garment she had been tricked into signing for as part of a practical joke that she was hoping would not be repeated.

"Well they do now that you've just shouted it out across the Chimera." Mayer pointed out and as the vehicle's crew smiled at one another Torrent placed a hand over her mouth.

"Oops. Silly me." she said, lowering her hand to reveal the wide smile on her face directed at Wolf who just glared back at her.

In his Hellhound, Oswald frowned.

"Oh that outsider wants us to hurry up does she?" he said when he was given Wolf's message, "Well tell her to hang on to those fancy outsider panties I bet she wears because we're about to speed things up." then he looked through his vision blocks at the horde outside of the Hellhound again, only this time he was not studying the spacing between vehicles but how sturdy each of them was as well as how they were outfitted. Unlike the fully armoured Imperial vehicles, most of the Ork vehicles consisted of crude and open topped machines and this presented an opportunity that Oswald had been reluctant to pursue since it also increased the risk of discovery by the Orks. The well armoured Hellhounds with their dozer blades could simply smash the lighter Ork vehicles out of their way. He had witnessed examples of this happening elsewhere in the horde but until now had been reluctant to try it himself. The reason for this was that the Orks would be likely to retaliate for any attempt to ram them. Some small arms fire was unlikely to be a problem but some of the lighter vehicles and their passengers were still armed with more powerful weapons that could pose a threat to the Imperial Chimeras and Hellhounds. Of more concern however, were the boarding planks that many of the Ork troop transports were equipped with. These allowed the occupants of a vehicle to assault another while both were still in motion providing they were close enough and obviously ramming a vehicle meant getting very close to it indeed. Therefore, what Oswald needed to locate were lightweight vehicles that not only possessed no anti-armour weapons of their own but also lacked the capacity to stage a more direct assault.

He found this in a cluster of buggies that all appeared to be armed with linked belt fed stubbers, devastatingly effective against infantry but next to useless against an armoured target.

"Squadron," he broadcast over the vox, knowing that it was unlikely that there would be any Orks listening in, "Ork buggies at two o'clock. Hard contact, go, go, go." and as one the Imperial vehicles started to drift to the right as they lined themselves up on the buggies ahead of them. Then when the Ork buggies were directly ahead of the Hellhounds their drivers suddenly accelerated, pushing the armoured vehicles' engines as hard as they could to rapidly close the distance between them and their targets.

The Orks in the buggies heard the sound of the powerful engines closing behind them and roared, waving their arms as they yelled for the disguised Hellhounds to back away. The buggies were far too light to be able to force the vehicles directly ahead of them out of the way so they had no choice but to do everything they

could to dodge the oncoming Hellhounds but there was no room for them to be able to manoeuvre. Moving side by side, the Hellhound to the right of the squadron's formation was the first to collide with one of the buggies and its dozer blade first shredded one of the Ork vehicle's tyres, causing it to spin out of control before the dozer blade smashed the entire thing to pieces. When Oswald's own Hellhound struck the buggy directly ahead of it, it did so cleanly from behind and the two Ork crew bellowed and gestured from their buggy as their vehicle was pushed along in front of the Hellhound until it in turn struck another of the buggies and both vehicles tumbled out of the way, sending their crew flying from them in the process only for them to be dragged under the wheels and tracks of other Ork vehicles.

Realising the danger that they were in, the crews of the remaining Ork buggies became more desperate in their attempts to get out of the way of the much bigger and heavier Catachan vehicles that were still bearing down on them. Forced to scatter, the buggies slipped into the gaps that would allow single small vehicles through while being too small for the Ork squadron as a whole. This provided a space large enough for the Catachan vehicles to move up into as they continued to make their way towards the Gargant at the head of the horde.

Furious at the loss of his vehicles the leader of the Ork squadron watched as the Catachans moved forwards and snarled, unwilling to simply let the matter drop. Yelling at his driver he ordered the other Ork to get closer to one of the armoured vehicles and the buggy manoeuvred towards the nearest of the Chimeras which as it happened was the one occupied by Wolf's command section and Mayer's mortar squad. When the buggy got close enough the large Ork suddenly leapt across the gap between the two vehicles and grabbed hold of one of the additional metal plates that had been welded onto the outside of the hull to make it appear like an Ork vehicle. Then, using more of the welded on parts as handholds the Ork pulled himself up onto the roof of the Chimera and let out a loud roar.

"What's going on?" Wolf exclaimed when she heard the Ork roared and stamping on the roof.

"Looks like we've picked up an uninvited guest." the Chimera's commander said.

"If we open the hatches to shoot him he'll see us and all of this will be for nothing." Vance pointed out as the Ork began to tug at the handles of the rear section's rooftop hatch. As he attempted to get inside the Chimera.

"Don't worry yourself." the vehicle's commander said, "There's still something I can try." and he reached out and grabbed the lever that operated his turret.

Standing on top of the Chimera itself, the Ork was far too close for the Chimera's commander to be able to engage him with the turret mounted multi laser but the turret was able to spin around so fast that he was able to use the barrel and the section of metal pipe fixed to it as a weapon directly. Unprepared for the turret to turn so quickly the Ork was caught unaware as the barrel struck the backs of his legs and knocked him off his feet. Desperately he tried to grab hold of anything on the hull that protruded and he was able to take hold of another of the welded on pieces of metal. But this particular part was not as strong as it appeared to be and the Ork's eyes widened as he watched it start to bend under his weight as he hung from it over the side of the Chimera. Then there was a sudden 'Snap!' and both the Ork and the protruding piece of metal dropped to the ground. Landing in the wake of the Chimera the Ork looked up and roared before he heard the sound of another engine coming from behind him. Looking around he had just enough time to recognise the shape of the truck closing in on him before its laughing driver ran him down.

The other Ork vehicles in the vicinity of the Catachans now took notice of them. Not because they suspicious that there was something wrong with them but because they could not help but wonder whether they would be the next target of the squadron as they continued to press onwards and the result of this was that the crews of any vehicle lighter than the Hellhounds or Chimeras started to try and avoid them, finding ways to slip between larger vehicles to use them as a protective shield before they could be rammed by the Catachans.

"Nice." Oswald said as he watched the Orks ahead of his vehicles moving aside, "At this rate those greenskins will clear us a path right the way to that Emperor-damned Gargant." then after a moment's pause he looked down at his crew, "Just don't tell that outsider I said that. Okay?"

Just as Oswald had said the Orks ahead of them now did his job for him by clearing a path towards the Gargant as word spread about what had happened with the buggy squadron and they saw the armoured Catachan vehicles bearing down on them and within a few minutes Oswald found himself staring right at the rear of the gigantic walking war machine.

"Feth that's one big bastard." he muttered as he studied the Gargant carefully up close. It was immediately clear that the estimations of the Gargant's size had been correct and there was more than ample room under the machine's body for the entire force of Catachan vehicles to fit several times over. In fact, Oswald thought to himself, the Gargant could walk over even a Baneblade without so much as scratching the paintwork on the top of the super heavy battle tank, "Okay, here goes." he muttered before activating his vox, "All units advance. Chimera drivers, Second Platoon will guide you from here on in. Hellhounds drop back and stand by to provide cover."

9.

As the Catachan vehicles neared the Gargant the occupants felt a strange tingling sensation on their skin. "What's that?" Wolf asked.

"We're passing through the Gargant's power fields." the Chimera's commander replied, "Don't worry, it's harmless."

"Okay this is it." Vance announced as he released his safety harness and got to his feet and all around him the rest of the Chimera's passengers did the same while he reached up and threw open the vehicle's large upper hatch.

Above them the Catachans saw that the underside of the Gargant was covered with a latticework of metal pipes, cable clusters and the occasional metal or wooden walkway. Vance climbed up onto the top of the Chimera and looked around. Without a significant source of light it was difficult to pick out precise details but Vance did not dare use a flash light just in case it attracted the attention of any of the Orks following behind the Gargant. Behind him Wolf climbed up onto the Chimera's roof as well and looked around.

"I don't see any hatches." she said.

"Me either." Vance replied, shaking his head, "I guess that means we'll just have to make one of our own." Reaching to her ear, Wolf activated her microbead headset to allow her to talk to her entire platoon at once. "Wolf to all squads, we need to get up into these pipes and then we'll figure out the best way to get through the hull. Understood?"

"Molla here, First Squad ready."

"Grey, Second Squad ready."

"Quinn, Third Squad ready."

"Ogryns climb."

"Right then." Wolf said as she looked at Vance again, "We're on." and Vance smiled. Then he took a grappling hook from his belt and fixed it to the end of a rope that he hurled upwards, counting on it getting caught on something connected to the Gargant. Sure enough as the grappling hook disappeared into the darkness there was a 'clunk' that was barely audible over the considerable clanking and hissing sounds produced by the Gargant with every step that it took and the hook did not fall back down. To be certain that the line was secure Vance tugged on it in an attempt to pull it free but when it remained stuck fast he looked at Wolf and smiled.

"I think the saying is ladies first lieutenant." he said.

"Gee, thanks." Wolf replied as she stepped closer to him and put on a pair of gloves before she grabbed hold of the rope.

Using her hands and feet, Wolf pulled herself up the rope until she was within reach of the pipes beneath the Gargant and she swung herself onto one of them before looking back down at Vance.

"I'm up." she called out and then she settled down to wait for the rest of Second Platoon to join her.

The occupants of each Chimera did the same as Vance had done, deploying hooks and lines that could be used to climb up to the Gargant's hull. The only real variation in the plan was that the Ogryns needed to use much thicker ropes to support their weight.

Wolf reached down as other members of her command section and Mayer's mortar squad climbed up towards her, helping them from the rope to the pipes.

"I can do it myself." Torrent commented when Wolf offered her her hand and she waved it away before climbing from the rope herself.

Wolf then looked down to see her section's vox operator pulling himself up the rope with the beacon on his back and she prepared to help him up into the pipes. However, the weight of the Catachans on the pipes was starting to take its toll on a structure not designed for it and there was a groaning sound as the brackets holding the pipes in place started to weaken.

"Spread out." Vance said as he tried to locate the source of the sound so he could move to a stronger position and the members of the command section and mortar squad started to move from one pipe to another while Wolf remained in place to help the vox operator.

"Turner." she called out, "Take my hand." and she leant down and held out her hand. However, just as he was reaching up towards her the groaning sound became a sudden 'Snap!' and Wolf felt the pipe she was on lurch as something out of sight gave way and she reacted by grabbing hold of the pipe she was on with both hands.

Below her Turner also felt the sudden shift and he reached up and grabbed hold of the first thing he could grab hold of, a narrow pipe running parallel to the one Wolf was perched on. But unlike the larger pipe this one was red hot and as soon as he grabbed hold of it there was a hissing sound and Turner flinched and relaxed his grip as he drew his hand away right at the moment that the grapple came loose.

"Turner!" Wolf exclaimed as she watched the vox operator plummet downwards, landing heavily on top of the

Chimera below them before rolling off over the side to the ground below.

"Feth!" Vance hissed as he looked down, his eyes wide as the Gargant continued to move onwards with the Catachan vehicles keeping pace. It was not possible to tell whether Turner was alive or dead from up here and there was no way of getting down to check on him before the Gargant moved so far forwards that he was exposed to the Orks.

As the Gargant moved clear of where Turner lay motionless the Orks at the front of the horde saw him. However, the idea that there could be a force of humans clinging to the underside of the Gargant did not occur to them. Instead they assumed that he had been hiding ahead of the horde to spy on it and the laughing driver of a battlewagon equipped with a large roller on the front swerved towards Turner and flattened him in an instant.

"The beacon!" Wolf exclaimed, "Turner had the beacon. Now what do we do?"

"What we always do lieutenant," Vance replied, "we carry on and think of something along the way."

Using pipes and cables as handholds the members of Second Platoon spread out beneath the Gargant as they searched for a way in. This search confirmed that there were no hatchways that would provide an easy means of entering the walking machine and so the only option left open to them was to create one themselves and for this they turned to Quinn's veteran squad.

The armour-piercing Krak grenades that the Catachans carried were not designed to make holes large enough for a man to fit through, let alone an ogryn and may not have even been able to penetrate the thick exterior armour of the Gargant. However, the meltagun that Quinn's squad was equipped with could do just that so the Catachan who carried it, a guardsman called Jackson made his way to one of the walkways that did not seem to lead to anywhere in particular so that he could use his weapon from a steady platform while the rest of the platoon gathered around, giving him enough room that they would not be injured by any falling debris.

"Okay Jackson," Quinn said, standing beside the meltagun armed Catachan, "you see that plate that looks like it's been welded on as an afterthought up there? See what you can do about getting rid of that weld."

"Sure thing sergeant." Jackson responded as he raised the bulky weapon he carried.

The beam from the meltagun was a brilliant white light as it superheated the air between its muzzle and the target and from where she was carefully balanced several metres away Wolf could still feel the heat on her skin. Pieces of metal from the Gargant's hull began to drip down to the ground as they melted under the extreme temperature they were being subjected to and the Catachans took aim with their pistols as Jackson adjusted his aim to cut all the way around the plate.

All of a sudden the plate fell free, leaving a gaping hole in the underside of the Gargant and the Catachans stared at it. For a few moments there were only the mechanical sounds of the war machine's operation coming through the hole until all of a sudden there was a voice. What it said was unintelligible since it was spoken in the Ork language but moments later the head of an Ork appeared from within the Gargant, upside down as the Ork peered through the hole.

Quinn fired his pistol as soon as he saw the Ork's face, the usual sharp 'Crack!' of a stub pistol discharge being reduced to a mere 'Pop!' by the silencer now fitted to it. The bullet struck the Ork just above, or below from Quinn's perspective, one of the alien's eyes and he tumbled through the hole and fell to the ground below. There were no further shouts from within the Gargant, suggesting that the Ork had been alone and that Second Platoon remained undetected and Wolf looked towards Quinn.

"Sergeant Quinn, take your squad in first and signal when you have secured us a beachhead."

Quinn was first to climb over to the hole that had been created in the Gargant and he dragged himself inside.

As soon as he made it through the hole he wretched as he was almost overcome by the stench inside.

Though he had spent several hours in an Ork vehicle before the smell had been nothing like as bad as it was in the lower levels of the Gargant. However, there appeared to be no signs of life and so he found a suitable spot to wait while the rest of his squad followed him aboard.

While Second Platoon were entering the interior of the Gargant, Oswald and his vehicles were dropping back again to rejoin the main horde. To achieve this the vehicles split into three groups again, just as they had when they ambushed the Ork scouting column with one Hellhound and a small number of Chimeras in each group. Reducing their speed, the Catachan vehicles allowed the Orks to move around them as the commanders of each one studied the horde and searched for any other vehicles that appeared to be of Imperial manufacture.

"Smells like we're next to a sewage processing centre." Wolf commented as she cupped a hand over her nose and mouth.

"So what are your orders now lieutenant?" Grey asked and Wolf paused to think.

"Bringing this thing to a stop has to be our primary aim." she said, "Even if we can't call in the orbital strike maybe we can delay the Orks enough that the Adeptus Mechanicus will be able to set up a lance battery at Terna to take it out."

"What about the rest of the horde?" Vance said.

"We'll have to leave them to Oswald. Maybe he can create enough confusion to delay and weaken them." Wolf replied.

"Lieutenant, there may be another way to deal with this thing." Mayer commented and the other squad leaders turned to him.

"Got an idea there Bomber? Well spit it out." Molla said.

"There are weapons all over this thing right? Well they've got to have ammunition stashed away for them somewhere. Especially the two main guns we've seen. If we could get some explosives to them then there's a chance that we could trigger secondary explosions powerful enough to destroy the Gargant entirely. The same goes with fuel. Destroying that wouldn't just immobilise the Gargant, it could destroy it."

"What's the catch?" Quinn asked, "There's got to be a catch with a plan that simple or it would have been the plan to begin with."

"Fuel and ammunition will be in areas that contain a higher density of greenskins." Wolf said, "All we were really planning on doing was smashing a few gears to get this thing to stop. Actually attacking key areas wasn't part of the plan."

"It's you call lieutenant." Vance said and behind him Torrent frowned.

"Typical outsider landing us right in it." she muttered.

"We split up." Wolf said and she looked at Molla and Grey, "I want First Squad to try and locate the main magazine. Meanwhile Second Squad with search for the engine room and I'll take my section along with Corporal Mayer's squad up to the top of the Gargant. That's where the control centre is likely to be located, in the head."

"That still leaves my squad and Khor's lieutenant." Quinn pointed out.

"Yes I know it does." Wolf replied, nodding, "Your squads are more heavily armed and I want to take advantage of that. As soon as the Orks figure out that we're aboard they're likely to mobilise every soldier they've got stashed aboard the Gargant to hunt for us. I want you and Khor to hunt them first. Locate the barracks and do what you can to stop them coming after us."

A distraction?" Grey commented.

"If you like. But I'd rather look on it as being proactive about engaging the enemy." Wolf responded.

"My guess would be that the magazine would be in the chest, the engine room probably not far above us now towards the rear and the barracks sandwiched in between." Mayer said, "The Orks will want to get ammunition to the main guns as fast as they can and that location would give them the best access from the outside for reloading as well."

"Sounds good to me." Molla said, "So lieutenant, what do we do when we find our targets?"

"Hide." Wolf answered, "I don't want anyone alerting the Orks to our presence until we're all ready to strike. We'll keep an open microbead channel so we can co-ordinate our attacks and I want everyone who's got a dataslate to use it to make whatever notes about the layout they can. If you come across something that's the target for a different group then pass on the information about the location but don't hang around to do it, keep searching for your own target. Any questions?"

10.

Moving through the interior of the Gargant was a complicated matter. Not a species known for their logical planning, the Gargant had been put together under the watchful eyes of various mechaniaks all of whom had their own ideas about how it should be done and often a system built by one construction team would be radically altered later on by another led by a mekboy with a different opinion about whether or not it was even needed. The end result of this was a maze of passageways that ended in frequent dead ends or would suddenly double back on themselves. Greenskins were also not noted for being particularly tidy and where they either removed something from the Gargant's structure or ended up with excess parts they simply left whatever they had left over where they were, removing them only if they were either blocking an important route or if a mekboy considered them usable elsewhere. Not all of the passageways were suitable for human beings to use either, some of them were intended for use by the smaller Gretchin slave workers and were correspondingly narrow and low ceilinged in addition to being unlit which meant that the creatures would suddenly emerge out of the darkness. It took some time for the Catachans to realise what these even were and every group had passed several by before Grey's squad encountered a pair of Gretchin as they were exiting one and carrying a bulky bag of tools between them. The squad reacted by firing on the Gretchin before they noticed the Catachans and could escape back into the small passageway to raise the alarm. In the confines of the Gargant the pistol shots still echoed but just as Nathin had said they would the silencers fitted to their pistol meant that the sounds were not recognisable as gunfire and Grey could easily believe that they would be drowned out by the numerous other sources of noise inside the Gargant.

"Keep sharp." he broadcast when the Gretchin had been dealt with, "Those smaller openings we're seeing everywhere are being used by the Orks' slave caste, Don't take your eyes off them."

The chaotic design of the Gargant did offer some advantages, however. All of the small spaces positioned at random offered the Catachans places to hide when they heard large groups of greenskins approaching, which was frequently given the sheer number of them aboard and after individuals or smaller groups had been dealt with they provided places where the bodies could be concealed to prevent them from being discovered. This was not as much of an issue when the greenskins could be taken out with the Catachans' traditional knives since the injuries could be made to look as if they had been inflicted by another greenskin, but gunshot wounds would raise too many questions.

Grey's squad was also the first to reach their intended destination, an achievement made possible thanks to the amount of noise being made from the engine room in comparison to the rest of the interior of the Gargant. Given that the war machine was not currently in combat there was no need for any of the weapons to be operational but the engines still needed to be running to provide the power to move and this acted like a beacon that guided Second Squad in.

Peering through a small portal set into a closed hatch Grey saw that the engine room had a similar appearance to the underside of the Gargant, with numerous pipes and cable clusters twisted around one another and running in all directions. But although these appeared to carry power to all parts of the Gargant all of the pipes and cables led back to one central point, a massive internal combustion engine fed from two enormous tanks of fuel positioned against what Grey guessed was an outer wall through which the Gargant could be refuelled. The fuel tanks were positioned either side of the engine and numerous different pipes running in parallel were set up to carry their contents to the engine itself. Though Grey was no expert in matters such as this it seemed obvious that this could allow the flow of fuel to be controlled. The more pipes that were opened, the more fuel would be delivered and to manage this there were groups of Gretchin located by the valves in each set of pipes. At the same time there were dozens more Gretchin scurrying around in response to whatever the Ork overseers were telling them to do, climbing through the machinery to reach components that had come loose and threatened to fall off so that they could be fixed back in place before the engines failed.

Before Grey backed away from the portal there was one more thing he needed to find out and he placed both hands on the handlebar set into the hatch that looked as if turning it would open the hatch. Whatever mechanism was used to achieve this was on the other side of the door so Grey tried both directions. Trying to turn the bar clockwise did nothing, it was stuck fast. But when he turned it counter clockwise he felt the bar move. However, it also produced a screeching sound that risked attracting attention towards the hatchway from inside the engine room and so Grey stopped turning it and looked back down the passageway that had brought them here.

"Okay we'll hole up here until we get the signal to move in." he said, "Make sure you've got full magazines loaded and spares at the ready."

Quinn was also able to use noise to guide him and his men towards their assigned target. Though the

barracks possessed nothing like the massive machinery present in the engine room it had something else that produced a distinctive sound. It had Orks, hundreds of them. Wherever Orks gathered there was noise as they argued and fought or even just made competing claims about their fighting prowess. The Catachans understood none of it but that did not stop them from following the voices that were distinct from the mechanical sounds produced by the Gargant's engines.

Just as had been suspected there were hundreds of Orks carried aboard the Gargant that had nothing to do with its operation and were instead just using it as a means of being carried into battle where they would dismount and fight on foot. The problem was that such a force could also be used to counter just what the Catachans were trying to do right now, disabling or destroying the Gargant from within and even though the confines of the Gargant would make it impossible for them to bring their entire weight of numbers to bear in one place Second Platoon would inevitably be overwhelmed eventually.

It was immediately obvious that the Ork troops could not easily be trapped within this section of the Gargant either. Their barracks was not simply a single large compartment filled with Orks but was instead a network of smaller compartments and communal areas where they could gather together. This meant that there were numerous access points spread over several levels, all of which would have to be blocked if the Orks were to be fought here or they would simply outflank and surround the Catachans before assaulting them from all sides at once.

"Lieutenant, we may have a problem here." Quinn signalled using his microbead even as he was pulling his group back before they could be detected.

"What's wrong sergeant?" Wolf responded, her voice kept low as she tried to avoid giving away her position to the Orks as well.

"Our estimations of how many Orks there are aboard this thing with us weren't wrong." Quinn said, "There are hundreds of the beasts and I'm not sure how we'll keep them penned in. There are more ways in and out of the barracks than I've been able to count so far."

"Understood sergeant. Are you safe right now?"

"Right now, yes. But I'm not sure how long that state of affairs will last. I'd say that We need to find a good hiding place pretty fast. One where we can stash the ogyrns as well."

"Okay. But can you or some of your men try and map out all the access points? The more detailed picture we can put together the easier this is going to be."

"I'll see what I can do. But finding somewhere to hide these ogyrns isn't going to be easy." Quinn said before he shut off the microbead.

"Sarge." one of Quinn's men said suddenly, "Look at this." and Quinn turned to see the man holding a roughly rectangular sheet of metal that had a corroded appearance to it.

"What about it?" Quinn asked.

"There are about a dozen like this back here. Reckon they're big enough to block off one of these corridors?"

"Make our own hiding place?" Quinn said as he considered the practicalities of the idea, "We'd need to find something to brace them with but there doesn't seem to be any shortage of scrap around here."

Making use of the scrap metal left behind by the Ork construction crews, Quinn oversaw the ogyrns as they constructed a makeshift barrier across a passageway that terminated in a dead end. His hope was that there was nothing right at the end that any of the Gargant's crew would need to access while his squad and the ogyrns settled in behind the barrier before putting the last piece in place to make it appear that there was now a wall there. Only Quinn himself and one other member of his squad remained outside the improvised shelter, there to follow Wolf's order to map out as much of the Gargant as they could and leaving the others behind they headed off. Quinn's plan was to try circling around the barracks to determine not only how large they were but also if there was some way that the Orks inside could be bottled up in one particular section.

While Quinn was mapping the barracks Wolf was leading her team towards the Gargant's head. In attempting this the team had no sounds to guide them as Grey and Quinn had but they at least knew that their target lay at the very top of the Gargant and so took every chance to ascend through the machine's haphazard levels. This was easier done on the lower levels where travelling from one level to the next was done via ramps large enough to move bulky equipment around the Gargant. However, these ramps became fewer and narrower as the Catachans continued on their way up through the Gargant's body. The curved shape of the Gargant meant that the higher levels occupied significantly less area than the lower ones and thus there was less room for the ramps. In addition to this there was less need for large equipment higher up the Gargant. The weapons mounted this high up used smaller ammunition than the massive belly gun and arm mounted cannon and anything too big or heavy to be carried up a ladder could be hoisted up on the outside while the Gargant was not in combat.

But the problem with the ladders was how vulnerable they made the Catachans when compared to using the ramps. Going up or down a ramp was little different to walking along a supposedly level passageway, not that many Ork built passageways could be said to be truly level even without the Gargant's motion rocking its body back and forth with every step it took. But ladders could only be climbed by one person at a time and the

first one up any particular ladder would be especially vulnerable as they needed to balance keeping hold of the ladder whilst with holding a weapon to defend themselves with. Matters became worse at the top of the ladder when the human would have to try and check the area around them on the next level up without being noticed and the process of making sure that the way from each level to the next was clear was slow going. Wolf left the task of clearing each chamber at the top of a set of ladders to her men and it was the members of Mayer's mortar squad that undertook most of them while her command section followed behind them. However, it was not the ladders that proved to be the biggest problem to their ascent but the way in which communications within the Gargant were carried out.

Wolf was half way up a ladder that had Mayer's men at the top and the rest of her own section at the bottom when all of a sudden she heard a rapid succession of suppressed gunfire from above her and she came to a sudden halt half way up the ladder and raised her own pistol. Above her Mayer and his men fired repeatedly at the small group of Gretchin that had unexpectedly appeared out of one of the smaller passageways. There were six of the creatures in all and they obviously had not been expecting to find human waiting for them beside the ladder they had come here to make use of themselves. Although taken somewhat by surprise themselves, Mayer's men reacted quickly and took no chances, firing at targets until they specifically saw them fall. In response the unarmed Gretchin could do nothing but scream as they were cut down mercilessly but their cries were ones of pain and panic, not shouted warnings and so when the last one was dead Mayer's squad rapidly changed their magazines and waited to see whether anyone would come to investigate the noise rather than retreating back down the ladder.

"Corporal." Wolf hissed, "What's happening?"

"Gretchin." Mayer replied simply, "About half a dozen of them just came running out of one of those passages they use."

"Hang on, I'm my way up." Wolf said and she started to hurry up the ladder. Once at the top she looked at the bodies of the Gretchin that Mayer's men were now dragging somewhere where they would be out of sight. As with most of the smaller greenskins that Second Platoon encountered inside the Gargant these carried no weapons. But wolf noticed that all of them had wooden cylinders attached to their waists, "What are these?" she asked as she bent down and removed one. The cylinder was hollow and peering inside she saw what looked like a sheet of crudely made paper rolled up. Removing this and unrolling it Wolf saw that there were marks on it that looked as if they had been made with charcoal. The marks formed small pictographs and although she could not determine their meaning she recognised several as having also been marked on some of the Ork vehicles the Catachans had encountered, only those had been larger and painted on.

"Is that writing?" Mayer asked and Wolf nodded.

"I think so." she replied, "Sergeant Vance, take a look at this." she added as he appeared at the top of the ladder, "I think these are orders for the crew."

"Could be." he said as he looked at the paper for himself. Then he removed a cylinder from another of the bodies and removed a similar sheet of paper from it that also had Ork writing on it, "These are different." he commented as he held the sheet beside the one Wolf had in her hand.

"Must be intended for another part of the Gargant." Wolf said and then she looked at the passageway from which the Gretchin had emerged, "Corporal Mayer, is that where the creatures came from?" she asked.

"Yes lieutenant." he told her, "They just came rushing headlong out of it."

"What are you thinking lieutenant?" Vance asked.

"If these creatures were carrying orders for the others aboard this Gargant then maybe that passageway leads right to where these orders are coming from." Wolf answered.

"You mean the head?" Vance said and Wolf nodded.

"It makes sense." she said, "Maybe we could use them to get there more easily."

"Slight problem with that," Torrent said as she finished climbing the ladder, "Us Catachans aren't a bunch of short arses."

"I could fit." Wolf pointed out. Looking at the passageway meant for use by creatures barely a metre tall it was obvious that even Wolf would have to crouch down to fit inside.

"Torrent's right when she says we won't. Not easily anyway. I'm somewhat short for one of us but even I couldn't get in there comfortably." Vance said, "You'd be on your own."

"I know." Wolf said in agreement, "But the passage is too small for Orks to fit inside as well. At worst I'd be dealing with Gretchin and if these are anything to go by they won't even be armed. If it does lead all the way to the command centre then we can assault it from two different directions at once."

"It's your call lieutenant." Vance said, "But I'd be wary of going anywhere alone in this place."

"I know and I'd rather have someone else with me as well but this is too good an opportunity to miss. I want you to take command of the rest of the team and continue to make your way to the head along this route. I'll try using this. Who knows, maybe it'll open out later on and we'll be able to get more of us in it."

"As you wish lieutenant." Vance said, "But take care. If it gets too difficult then let us know and I'll send someone back here to show you the way we've gone."

Wolf just smiled back at Vance briefly before she approached the small passageway used by the Gretchin

with her pistol in one hand and a flash light in the other. Then she crouched down so that she would fit inside and started to make her way along it.

Searching for the Gargant's main magazine was the most challenging of the targets Wolf had assigned. There was no way of knowing exactly where it was from the start and it produced nothing that could be used to guide First Squad to it. Instead Molla considered what the requirements of the magazine would be and the most obvious feature was that it would have to allow the Orks to rapidly and conveniently move ammunition to the Gargant's weapons, especially the belly gun and arm mounted cannon, so if he could make his way to either of them then there would most likely be a clear route that his squad could follow to the magazine itself. Locating the arm mounted cannon would require travelling up to the Gargant's shoulder where the weapon was connected to the body before making their way back down again so Molla opted to locate the belly gun instead. Located fairly low down on the Gargant, the belly gun was positioned well forwards of where Second Platoon had come aboard the war machine and when First Squad located it they found themselves standing at the end of a narrow walkway lacking in any form of safety railings that overlooked the massive chamber required to house the gun.

Initially Molla thought that no ammunition for the enormous gun was being kept in the chamber with it. However, he had envisioned something much like the quake cannons or macro cannons mounted on some of the heaviest Imperial vehicles. But whereas these human weapons worked much like the stub pistols Second Platoon were currently carrying only scaled up by several hundred times the Gargant's belly gun was far more crude.

Rather than aerodynamic shaped shells set into brass cases containing the propellant, the ammunition for the belly gun stored in the chamber consisted of several massive spheres that from their surfaces looked to have been put together out of random pieces of metal bent and welded together. Four of these projectiles were lined up at the rear of the chamber while a curved indentation in the floor provided a track along which they could be rolled into the rear of the gun itself that currently sat open, allowing a limited amount of light from outside the Gargant to get inside down the barrel. Following this would come the propellant and this was stored in sacks of various sizes, none of which looked like they would require more than two Greenskins to carry between them. Firing the gun would obviously require a large number of Greenskins to carry hundreds of the explosive filled sacks into the breech and pack them in behind the projectile itself before the breech was sealed shut. From where he stood looking down on the weapon Molla could not tell exactly how the propellant charge would be ignited but he could easily envision it being as simple as one of the crew lighting a fuse that led into the tightly packed charges and standing well back.

"That looks like the way in for the ammo." Molla said and he pointed to a large cargo hoist big enough to take one of the cannon balls or a large number of the propellant sacks located at the back of the chamber. There was a circular doorway at the top of the hoist and a ledge connected this to the walkway in front of him but there was absolutely no cover against being seen by any of the gun crew below, "Problem is how to get there."

Then a thought occurred to him. Although there was some light coming in through the breech of the gun the rest of the light in the chamber was provided by the same flickering electrical lights that were scattered all over the interior of the Gargant. In this chamber most of these were located lower down so that the gun crew could see what they were doing. Only two lamps hung from the ceiling above the walkway and ledge and these were so far above the floor that it would be impossible to reach them without a ladder or some other means of elevation. Put together this meant that if these two simple filament bulbs failed or were smashed then the Greenskins below would not be able to see someone crawling across the walkway or ledge. With a smile on his face Molla took aim with his pistol.

"I'm going to take out these lights." he told his men, "Then we'll crawl one at a time across the walkway and along that ledge over there as far as the doorway."

Positioned so that the ejected bullet casing would hopefully land on his side of the hatchway rather than dropping all the way down to the chamber below where it could potentially give away his squad's presence he squeezed the trigger of his pistol and there was the usual 'Pop!' before one of the lights burst suddenly and went out. Molla then waited to see what the reaction of the gun crew would be. Though the bullet casing had not fallen down to them the fragments of the bulb had and he wanted to be certain that they had not become suspicious of why this had happened. But when there was no apparent reaction from them at all he turned towards the second light and fired again, smashing this bulb as well. As had happened when the first bulb was smashed the Greenskins below did not react in any way, considering it just another example of the erratic nature of Ork technology. Molla then holstered his pistol again and lay down on his stomach at the start of the walkway.

"Wait until I'm across then follow one at a time." he said before starting to crawl across the walkway.

Even with his weight spread as wide as possible Molla could feel the walkway wobbling beneath him and he was painfully aware of the lack of even the most basic safety barrier. When he finally reached the far side of the walkway he got up and stepped onto the ledge, pressing himself up against the wall and grabbing hold of

one of the many irregularities of its surface to steady himself. Looking back across the walkway he saw the dark shape of one of his men starting to follow him but in the poor light it was impossible to tell which of them it was. Without waiting for the man to finish crossing the walkway Molla began to move cautiously along the ledge with one hand still on the wall beside him and his pistol in the other. He stopped only when he reached the top of the hoist and he found himself looking down a short passageway that he could tell led to another large chamber. This one was at a higher level than the gun chamber was and was lit well enough that Molla could see some of the stacks of ammunition for weapons other than the belly gun that it contained.

"Molla to Wolf." he said, pressing his hand against his microbead, "First Squad is in position. What are your orders?"

"Err, can you just hold position for now?" Wolf asked in response, "I'm a little busy right now."

Contrary to Wolf's hope that the passageway used by the Gretchin would increase in size it actually became even smaller in some sections as it went along and Wolf found herself having to squeeze through the narrow confines of these places. However, the trend of the tunnel was upwards and she eventually reached a shaft that went straight up with handholds set into the wall. Holstering her pistol and putting her flash light away, Wolf felt her way up the shaft and as she neared the top it became noticeably lighter and she heard the sounds of Ork voices. Peering over the top of the shaft she saw that there was a short passageway in front of her that led to a chamber that she guessed had to be the Gargant's main control centre and carefully she climbed up out of the shaft for a better look.

Studying the parts of the chamber that she could see from inside the small passageway confirmed to Wolf that she had found what she was looking for. The passageway obviously came out at the side of the command centre and she could see the two large forward viewports that from the outside would appear as eyes and just inside these were a pair of seats with sets of large levers in front of them that looked to Wolf as if they were the controls that directed the massive war machine. Elsewhere in the chamber she could see more control stations with banks of dials that obviously gave the Orks stood in front of them important information about the state of the Gargant. But more significant than any of these was what was located in the very centre of the chamber.

It was a well known fact that Orks could continue to grow in size as they aged and that they saw the larger members of society as more important. No Ork would ever take an order from someone smaller than him as Second Platoon did with Wolf. But the Ork stood in the centre of the chamber was the largest of its kind that Wolf had seen so far on Valus. Standing as tall as Sergeant Khor the beast was clad in a suit of metal plate armour that had been painted bright yellow with details picked out in blue. Stood around this monster were other large Orks of a similar size to those Wolf had encountered acting as unit leaders. Unlike the larger specimen however, these wore the more basic padded armour that Wolf had come to associate with the majority of the species. Their armour and clothing also differed from the leader in colouration and Wolf saw black, blue and bright red among them. Interestingly there was also one of their number who wore clothing that looked as if it had been stitched together from fragments of human clothing, specifically from camouflaged uniforms taken from dead Imperial Guardsmen. Camouflage was almost unheard of among Orks who preferred to charge headlong at an enemy, yelling as loudly at them as they could. But here on Valus, Wolf and her platoon had encountered other Orks who would camouflage themselves to stage ambushes and like them this Ork bore a symbol of two crossed axes.

This gathering appeared to Wolf as a council of war made up of the leaders of various factions of Ork society and it occurred to her that if the Gargant was destroyed with them aboard then not only would the Orks on Valus lose their greatest weapon but they would also lose the most senior ranks of their leadership.

"Vance where are you?" Wolf whispered into her microbead, "I've found the command centre and it looks like the leader of the Ork army is here."

"I think we're not far from you now lieutenant." Vance responded, "I can hear a lot of Ork shouting coming from just up ahead at the top of a flight of stairs."

"Yes, I can see the stairs at the back of the command centre now. You must be very close."

"Well everyone else is in position. What do you want us to do now?" Vance asked.

"One minute sergeant. There's someone else I still need to check with. Lieutenant Oswald can you hear me?"

"Loud and clear Lieutenant Wolf." Oswald's voice replied, "All units are positioned close to groups of vehicles that the Orks have obviously stolen from us and have selected targets that would make it appear that it's the Orks firing on them. We'll use bolters only, no multi lasers or inferno cannons that would be a dead giveaway."

"Very good lieutenant." Wolf said, "I want you to-" but before Wolf could finish her sentence there was a sudden high pitched scream and the Orks in the command centre all looked directly towards the narrow passageway she was sat in. In her desire to study the command centre as closely as possible Wolf had taken her eyes off the shaft behind her for much too long and she had failed to notice as a Gretchin scaled it to bring a message to the Orks in command of the Gargant. Wolf's hand reached to her belt where her pistol was holstered and she was about to draw it when one of the larger Orks charged towards the passageway and reached inside it. With nowhere to retreat to Wolf could not avoid the Ork grabbing hold of her and with her pistol still in its holster she was promptly dragged out into the command centre itself where the large black clad Ork threw her to the floor and roared at her.

A second of the large Orks, this one not only wearing blue and white clothing but also with its face painted blue down one side and white on the other stepped forwards and the two Orks dragged the startled Wolf to

her feet and then pulled her arms out wide either side of her, holding her firmly between them as the armoured warboss strode right up to her and bent down as he studied Wolf so closely that she could feel his breath on her face and she tried to recoil away because of the stench.

"Lieutenant, we're coming in." Vance said, knowing that only Wolf would hear his message through her microbead.

"No." she shouted out so that he would be able to hear her from down the stairs and confident that the Orks would not know what she was saying, "The mission comes first."

The warboss then straightened up and barked out some orders in his own language that resulted in a pair of Gretchin suddenly darting forwards while Wolf remained held between the two large Orks and they began grabbing at her as they searched her and took her weapons and other equipment from her, first removing her belt and microbead headset before inserting their hands into her pockets and under clothing to discover whether she was hiding anything.

While Wolf was being searched she saw the warboss call over the camouflaged Ork and the pair spoke briefly. Then just as the Gretchin finished their search the camouflaged Ork stepped forwards and did something that shocked Wolf.

He spoke to her.

"So 'ow many more of ya is dare 'ere?" the Ork asked in a thickly accented but understandable Low Gothic and Wolf could not help but wonder how the beast had managed to learn the human language, "I said 'ow many?" the Ork repeated more loudly when she failed to respond.

"None. There's just me." Wolf replied and the Ork turned to the warboss and the pair spoke in their own language briefly before the camouflaged Ork took Wolf's microbead from one of the Gretchin and waved it towards her.

"We just 'eard ya speakin' with dis." he said, "Now tell us 'ow many more da is of ya unless ya aint so attached to dem stunty little arms and legs ya got." then he added a brief series of grunts in his own language that prompted the pair of Orks restraining Wolf to lift her off the floor by her arms and pull them in opposite directions so that she felt the strain on her shoulders and screamed.

All of a sudden a group of Catachans led by Vance and Mayer appeared at the bottom of the stairs and opened fire with their pistols having first removed the silencers. The result was a series of gunshots that echoed around the command centre as bullets flew all around. The Orks closest to the stairs were targeted first before the ones positioned at the various control stations and the entire Gargant rocked suddenly as one of the pilots was hit in the back of his head and slumped forwards over the levers in front of him.

In the sudden chaos that erupted the two Orks holding on to Wolf released their grip and she dropped to the floor, landing close by where her belt had landed and she scrambled towards and scooped it up before anyone could stop her.

"Fire in the hole!" Vance called out and a grenade came flying into the command centre before detonating in the middle of the room. The thick cloud of smoke that came from the grenade rapidly spread to fill most of the command centre and the Ork leader roared with anger as Wolf hurried for the exit. Behind her the Orks finally responded and there was the chatter of heavy gunfire as the Orks fired randomly through the smoke. Despite their lack of a clear line of sight the volume of fire was still such that two of Mayer's men were struck and both fell dead just as Wolf reached the bottom of the stairs.

"Quickly!" she snapped as the rest of the team fell back, "Give me your microbead." and she reached out to Vance who removed his headset and passed it to her, "This is Wolf to all units," she broadcast, "the Orks know we're here and their reserves should be heading up towards the head anytime soon. Quinn I want you to do whatever you can to slow them down while we get out of their way. Grey hit the engine room now. I want this thing brought to a halt. Molla figure out a way of triggering the main magazine after giving us chance to get out of here. Oswald you're on, see how much chaos you can cause out there. Wolf out."

Oswald smiled when he heard Wolf's orders and he activated his own vox.

"Okay you heard the outsider." he broadcast to his vehicles, "Let's make them bleed."

In front of Oswald, the heavy bolter gunner looked down the sight for his weapon to check its alignment. The weapon had only a limited traverse in its mounting but he was still able to line it up on the rear of a large Ork battlewagon that presented itself through a gap between a pair of ex-Imperial Guard Leman Russ battle tanks that now mounted massed clusters of rapid firing weapons and as the cross hairs lined up just how the gunner wanted he squeezed the trigger momentarily.

In the fraction of a second that the trigger held down the heavy bolter spat out a stream of rocket assisted projectiles, all of which slammed into the rear of the battlewagon. The armour on this facing was relatively thin and the mass reactive rounds were able to punch through in places. The actual damage done was minimal but the overall effect was out of all proportion. The Orks aboard the battlewagon knew that they had been attacked from behind and looking in that direction the first thing they saw were the old Leman Russes. One of the Orks aboard the battlewagon retaliated in kind by swinging a pintle mounted belt fed weapon around and returning fire. Under normal circumstances the anti-personnel rounds that the weapon fired

would have had no chance of inflicting any serious damage on a Lemman Russ, but the salvaged vehicle had originally been disabled by a serious hit to the front and the Orks had patched this with whatever came to hand. In this case the metal used for the patch was much lighter and thinner than the armour plate originally used to manufacture the tank and the burst of fire was able to penetrate this and sent rapid moving projectiles bouncing around the inside of the vehicle.

Oswald did not wait to find out what happened next, instead he ordered his driver to drop back with the Chimeras accompanying the Hellhound while the Orks continued exchanging fire with one another. Turning his turret around he looked towards the other groups of Catachan vehicles to see how well they were fairing and he saw that one other had already triggered fighting between a squadron of Ork self propelled artillery and a cluster of vehicles based on Chimera chassis like the Catachan vehicles themselves. On the other hand the third group of Catachan armour had failed to strike unnoticed. The stream of bolter shells they fired into a truck filled with Orks had blown the vehicle apart and killed all of its occupants in the process. But the shooting had been witnessed by the crew of a heavily refitted Chimera that promptly opened fire themselves on the Hellhound. Now the three vehicles in that group were dropping back through the horde in the hope that the Orks shooting at them would give up rather than risk their position near the front.

Then a rocket fired from what had once been a Rhino armoured personnel carrier struck a war buggy instead of its intended target and the fighting began to spread further afield.

"Lieutenant Wolf," Oswald signalled, "I think you have your chaos."

12.

Hidden in a chamber that had no obvious purpose, Quinn watched the Orks from the barracks charging past on their way towards the Gargant's head. In the distance he could hear the sound of bells and klaxons going off as the Gargant's command crew alerted the crew to the presence of intruders. When the last of the swarm of Orks appeared to have gone past Quinn stepped out of the room and aimed his pistol in the direction they had gone just in case one happened to look around. However, the Orks were already out of sight and so he reached for his microbead.

"This is Quinn, my squad, Khor, to me. Oh and bring some of those metal plates with you." he transmitted. He was soon joined by the rest of his squad and Khor's ogyrns carrying several of the metal plates they had used to construct their hiding place and Quinn pointed in the direction the Orks had gone.

"They went this way." he said, "We're going to follow them and engage them as soon as they are in sight. But when they try to fight back we'll use these plates to block the passageway and force them to go around. They know we're aboard so we'll use shotguns and flamers. Understood?"

"Ogyrns follow." Khor responded as Quinn's men just nodded.

"Okay, then let's move." Quinn said before he set off after the Orks.

Rounding a corner, Quinn saw the Orks now swarming up a ramp and he fired two blasts from his shotgun into them before he ducked back around the corner.

"Here." he said, "Set up the barrier right here but leave a small gap. Flamers, to the front."

"Ogyrns lift." Khor ordered and his troops held the metal plates vertically in front of them, overlapping them to completely block the passageway between them and the Orks, "Apart." Khor added and the ogyrns reacted by sliding the plates away from one another until Quinn raised his hand.

"Stop there." he said, the ogyrns understanding the meaning of 'stop'. Then Quinn waved the two veterans armed with flamers forwards and they darted to the gap where they pushed the muzzles of their weapons through it just as the first of the charging Ork appeared on the far side.

There was a sudden roaring sound as both flamers fired together and the passageway on the far side of the barrier was filled with burning liquid that engulfed the nearest of the Orks entirely.

"Okay close the gap!" Quinn snapped and the two veterans jumped away from the gap in the barrier.

"Ogyrns close." Khor added before the plates were pushed together again, leaving burning Orks pounding against them in futility on the opposite side.

"Keep those plates there." Quinn said, "Now's there's only one direction they can come at us from." and he turned to face back down the passageway and raised his shotgun, "Khor, give us another barrier we can shoot over."

Grey's men retained the silencers on their pistols as they entered the Gargant's engine room. Most of the greenskins visible in here were of the smaller Gretchin variety and they could be seen scurrying back and forth as they carried out repairs on the go. The advantage of fighting in the engine room was that there was plenty of cover ranging from the bizarre machines that were needed for the war machine to run to the same piles of scrap and unused parts that could be found throughout its passageways. Striking from behind these obstacles Grey's men picked off lone Gretchin while their attention was focused on their work. This continued until another Gretchin went to fetch a tool it needed from one that had been shot dead and when the creature saw the bullet hole in its comrade's head it let out a shrill scream.

Instantly the Ork overseers looked around, hunting for the source of the shot that the Gretchin was yelling about.

"Here goes." Grey said before he shot the screaming Gretchin in full view of the Orks and then pointed his pistol towards one of them before firing a second shot that struck the Ork between his eyes and produced a shower of sparks as it destroyed some of the cybernetic modification that the alien had had carried out on his skull. This was followed by a flame as what remained of the bionics caught fire and the Ork began to run around randomly as his head burned from the inside out. There were shouts from above and looking upwards Grey saw more greenskins on gantries near the top of the Gargant's fuel tanks. One of these was an Ork armed with a pistol tucked into his belt and he drew the weapon and started shooting. The Ork's accuracy was no better than was typical of his species and the bullets struck the Catachans' hiding places rather than the guardsmen themselves. Grey knew that to hit the Ork from his squad's position with a pistol was a demanding shot and so he decided to make use of weapons made for use at longer ranges.

"Las guns." he said, "I want suppressive fire up there. Bring that beast down."

Acting quickly, the two Catachans carrying las guns unslung them and braced them against their shoulders before unleashing short bursts of energy blasts that forced the Gretchin above them to take cover. The pistol armed Ork tried to stand his ground and continued shooting. But as well as having superior weapons, the

two Catachans were also better marksmen and several of the las shots hit the alien. The wounds were insufficient to kill the alien outright but one did strike the Ork's leg in such a way that it gave way beneath him and as he fell he overbalanced and plummeted over the side of the gantry.

Panic now filled the engine room as the Gretchin workers tried to flee from the Catachans and abandoned their posts to do so. But this infuriated their Ork overseers who lashed out at them with whips as they ordered them to get back to work. Another of the Orks ran to a nearby wall where a funnel was fixed at the end of a pipe and began to shout something in its native language into it. Realising that the Ork was raising the alarm Grey fired at him, putting four bullets into the alien before he collapsed in a heap.

"We're going to have company real soon." he said, "Michaels, Dean, watch our six. Everyone else with me." and then he drew his knife and charged from behind the machinery he was using for cover. He ran directly at where the majority of the Ork overseers were clustered and the aliens reacted by charging headlong towards him and the other Catachans. None of the aliens were armed with any sort of ranged weapon, instead having just whips and clubs that were normally used to beat the Gretchin workers to inspire them to work harder or sometimes just to entertain the Orks themselves. This meant that as the two sides closed with one another only the Catachans were shooting and by the time they came within striking range more than half of the Orks were already dead.

One of the surviving Orks lashed out at Grey with his whip but the Catachan sergeant was expecting this and as the Ork raised his weapon Grey did the same, placing his blade in the path of the whip. Like all Catachans, Grey kept his traditional weapon sharp and as the whip flew towards him its own momentum applied enough force against the edge of the blade to slice straight through it. The Ork stared at what remained of his weapon with a confused look on his face and in those few moments of distraction Grey shot him between the eyes.

Around him the rest of Grey's squad laid into the other Ork overseers just as furiously, shooting at them from a distance and then using their blades to finish them off at close quarters. The fighting did not go entirely their way however, with two of the Catachans being brought down. One reacted too slowly as an Ork swung a large club at his head and his skull was smashed wide open by the blow while a second was surprised when a pair of Gretchin leapt down on him from a concealed perch. The smaller creatures did little more than scratch at the Catachan, but while he was focused on dealing with them one of their overseers stepped forwards and wrapped his arms around the Catachan's neck before twisting it so hard that Grey heard it go 'Snap!' before the unfortunate Catachan fell to the floor.

Grey swung his arm around and held out his pistol so that the end of the silencer was pressed against the back of the Ork's head before pulling the trigger twice. The first shot just made the Ork stagger when the bullet flattened out against its armoured skull but the second pierced it and passed right through the alien's brain.

There were only Gretchin remaining in the engine room now and without their overseers to keep them in line the diminutive creatures fled, heading for whatever exit they could find to take them away from the armed humans.

"Let them go." Grey ordered as his men fired at the fleeing Gretchin. Then he looked at the Gargant's massive engine and up at the feeds from the fuel tanks, "Those levers," he said, "let's see what happens if we shut off the flow of fuel and then break them off shall we?"

There was no resistance at all in the magazine. Despite being such a critical area the Orks had left it entirely unmanned. If ammunition was needed anywhere in the Gargant then the gun crews would send Gretchin runners to fetch it or Orks in the case of heavier ammunition. This gave Molla and the men of First Squad ample opportunity to study the contents and what they found looked to be the solution to their problems.

"Are these what I think they are sergeant?" one of Molla's troops, a female guardsman named Collins asked when he opened a large crate that had been marked with an Imperial Aquila.

"If you're meaning earthshaker rounds Collins then yes, I think they are." Molla replied. The 132mm earthshaker cannon was the standard long range artillery piece of the Imperial Guard and could be found in fixed mounts or towed but was most often used by the Imperial Guard mounted on the Basilisk self-propelled gun. Obviously the Orks had come across a stockpile of shells and decided to put them to use aboard the Gargant, meaning that at least one of its weapons was capable of firing them. It was quite possible that the weapon could even be a genuine earthshaker cannon that had been captured and installed on the war machine. Lifting a hand to his ear, Molla activated his microbead, "Lieutenant, are you there?" he asked.

Not all of the Ork troops from the barracks had diverted to try and outflank Quinn's veterans and Khor's ogryn squad. A large number of them had continued to head upwards to try and engage Wolf's command section and Mayer's mortar squad and now the team was having to try and find an alternate route back down through the Gargant's superstructure after finding the way they came up to be cut off by the Orks.

Wolf had just shot another Ork warrior, injuring but not killing him when she received Molla's signal.

"Right here sergeant." she replied as she ducked out of sight of the Orks.

"Lieutenant the magazine contains a supply of earthshaker rounds complete with fuses. Can we get Bomber down here to take a look at them?" Molla asked.

"You're thinking that we set a time delay on one?" Wolf asked in reply.

"I am. Other than that we'd have to leave someone behind to stick a match to all of this if we were going to be sure that it'd go off at the right time."

"Where are you?"

"The magazine is connected to the big cannon mounted in the stomach by a short passageway at the back. It's raised up at the top of a hoist. Careful though, it's a bit dark since I shot out some of the lights."

"Understood. We'll be with you as soon as we can." Wolf said. Then she looked at Vance, "We need to get to the magazine. Quickly. Molla's found earthshaker rounds and timer fuses."

"Well I doubt the greenskins are going to just let us through lieutenant." Vance said as he reloaded his pistol.

"Then we need to find another route." Wolf said.

"What do you think we are doing?" Torrent snapped but Wolf ignored her and instead stamped her foot on the plating of the floor.

"How sturdy do you think this is?" she asked Vance.

"Krak grenades? It'll take three or four to get us a decent sized hole." he answered.

"Here." Wolf said as she took a pair of them from her belt.

Thanks." Vance said as he took the explosives from her and then darted along the passageway and placed both of them on the floor so that their blasts would be directed straight down. Then he quickly pulled out the pins and retreated, averting his eyes before the two grenades went off one after another and he looked at where they had been to check on their effectiveness.

The plating of the floor was significantly less durable than the outer armour of the hull and each grenade had punched a hole about twenty centimetres across through it. Too small for a person, but good enough for a starting point and Vance took two more krak grenades from his own webbing and set them so that they would complete a square with the first two.

These also created small holes through the floor that were too small for someone to fit through but the blasts had also weakened the plating around the holes and when Vance kicked between them with the heel of his boot he heard a 'Crack!' as the floor split and bent down. Kicking the collapsed section again, Vance bent it further down until there was enough room for someone to pass through.

"See you down there." he said, looking at Wolf before he jumped down through the hole. Landing on the floor below he looked around to check that there were no Orks present and then he looked up through the hole again and called out, "Clear!"

"Corporal,," Wolf said, looking at Mayer, "lay down some smoke and then get down that hole. You have to reach the magazine to set that fuse."

"What about you lieutenant?" he asked.

"Oh don't worry, I'll be right behind you." Wolf replied.

Mayer then produced a smoke grenade and tossed it down the passageway towards the Orks. Then the moment that it burst open and filled the passageway with thick grey smoke he ran for the hole in the floor and jumped through.

"Okay let's go." Wolf ordered before the rest of the team started to fall back towards the hole as well.

"Take cover." Molla ordered when he heard footfalls. But rather than greenskins come to fetch ammunition from the magazine it was Wolf and her team that arrived, "Lieutenant." he said when he recognised her.

"Sergeant Molla." Wolf replied, "You weren't kidding about it being dark. Though crossing the plank was worse if you ask me."

"Err, someone said something about about an earthshaker round?" Mayer commented.

"Sure Bomber, over here." Molla said and he waved Mayer towards the stacks of propellant for the belly gun, "I figured we'd be best off shoving a round or two into this lot so the Orks won't accidentally shoot it off before it can explode on them." and then he pointed to the case of artillery shells.

"These all look in good condition." Mayer said as he inspected them. Then he picked one of the fuses out of the crate, "So how long do you want this set for?"

"We need long enough to be able to get away but not so long that the Orks will find it and get rid of it." Wolf said, "How about half an hour?"

"Say ten minutes to get to the bottom of the Gargant and another five to get down to the Chimeras." Vance said, "That still leaves us fifteen to get clear."

"What's the blast radius likely to be?" Torrent asked.

"Your guess is as good as mine." Mayer replied, looking around at the explosives stored in the magazine,

"I've no idea what's in any of these. Plus there's all the fuel."

"Half an hour. Set it." Wolf said. Then she reached for her microbead, "Wolf to all units. Fall back. Fire in the hole in thirty. Lieutenant Oswald we need a pick up."

Oswald studied the situation outside his Hellhound when he received the signal from Wolf. The Gargant had come to a complete halt and the horde along with it. This meant that the Orks aboard the vehicles following it were now more able to focus on what was happening around them. Fights between various vehicles had been breaking out sporadically and Oswald had ordered his vehicles to move to the outer edge of the horde to try and keep as far from as many of the Ork vehicles as possible. For his group and one other this had worked perfectly and they were now stationary at the very rear of the horde with their engines idling. On the other hand the group that had been unable to avoid being seen attacking other Ork vehicles was continuing to come under fire as it retreated. Oswald had considered going to help them but that could mean having the entire horde move against his force rather than just a few of them shooting at one part of it. But now that Wolf had ordered a withdrawal and the aboard the Gargant knew that there were humans aboard he had no need to worry about his vehicles being detected.

"Oswald to all vehicles," he broadcast, "we'll loop around the Gargant and move in from the front to pick up Second Platoon. Weapons free. I say again weapons free."

As soon as he issued this order the two stationary groups accelerated, steering around the edge of the horde rather than trying to get through it. This was also the signal for the third group to make full use of the weapons at their disposal. So far neither the Hellhound nor the Chimeras in it had made use of their turrets because of the risk that the multi lasers would give them away and the significant risk that using the inferno cannon would result in a large number of Ork vehicles retaliating. Now though none of this mattered and the Hellhound suddenly unleashed a wave of flames from its inferno cannon while the Chimeras unleashed a hail of laser blasts that proved capable of tearing apart the lightweight Ork vehicles and even inflicting damage on the heavier battlewagons from the sides or rear. This unexpected level of firepower rapidly opened up a gap in the horde that allowed the Catachan vehicles to make a break for the edge of the horde and dash into the jungle beside it. However, they did not manage to get away completely unharmed as an Ork tank turned its somewhat oversized turret towards them and the entire vehicle shook as it fired its long barrelled main gun. The shell was well aimed by Ork standards and it slammed into the rear of the Hellhound right where the fuel tanks for its inferno cannon were located, turning the entire vehicle into a fireball in an instant.

"Oh feth." Oswald hissed as he witness the destruction of the Hellhound. But beyond the burning wreckage he noticed the shape of two Chimeras weaving their way between dying trees as they hurried to reach the Gargant.

The plating blocking the passageway behind Quinn's veterans and Khor's ogyrns prevented the Orks from reaching them from that direction but there was still the sound of hammering that told Quinn that the greenskins had not given up entirely on the idea. Meanwhile the hastily built barrier in front of them was doing its job of providing cover from behind which the Catachans could fire at the Orks who continued to swarm down the passageway towards them. The protection was not total and Quinn had lost one of his men to a lucky shot from an Ork but so far it was holding.

The problem was that as good a job as the barriers were doing at keeping the Orks back they had also trapped the Catachans inside them. The two flamers could in theory clear the passageway of Orks but unrestricted use of the weapons threatened to be just as dangerous to the Catachans as they would be to the enemy by consuming all of the available oxygen in the air. Taken together, these facts meant that getting to any of the ramps leading down to the hole in the bottom of the Gargant's hull was impossible.

Fortunately Quinn knew of another way to get down.

"Jackson," he said to the guardsman with the squad's melta gun, "we need some holes."

Second Squad reached the hole in the bottom of the Gargant first and were waiting when Wolf joined them with her team as well as First Squad.

"Does anyone know where Quinn and Khor are?" she asked.

"Frankly I'm more worried about the fact that our rides aren't here yet." Grey replied as he glanced down through the hole.

Wolf was just about to try contacting Quinn using her microbead when all of a sudden there was the sound of heavy footfalls echoing down the passageway and his squad as well as Khor's ogyrns came rushing towards the waiting Catachans.

"What took you so long?" Wolf asked.

"Well we couldn't go through the Orks so we had to come by a more direct route." Quinn replied, "Oh and by the way, I hope we don't need the melta any time soon because we've no ammo left for it."

Before Wolf could respond to this there was the sound of an engine from below them and looking down through the hole she saw a Chimera grind to a halt and its upper hatch open.

"Sergeant Khor," she said, "I order you and your ogyrns to board the Chimera."

"Ogyrns down." Khor ordered and then he simply leapt through the hole, landing inside the waiting Chimera.

The rest of his squad then followed him, just about able to squeeze into the vehicle before it moved off and

another took its place.

“Okay everyone, let's get out of here before this thing blows up and hopefully takes the rest of the horde with it.” Wolf said.

Using lines to slide down to the waiting Chimeras, the Catachans were able to evacuate from the Gargant much faster than they had been able to board it and as soon as the last of them was safely down the surviving Hellhounds and Chimeras sped away as fast as they could. There were no signs of Ork pursuit, the horde apparently unaware of where they had gone to but still the vehicle crews kept a close eye on their surroundings and the commanders aligned their turrets to cover every angle.

When Mayer had set the fuses of the two earthshaker rounds Wolf had set her watch to the same time, giving her an accurate countdown to the moment when the shells would detonate and she checked this periodically until the time was very close when she stared at the watch constantly. Then as the last few second ticked away she started to count them off.

“Stand by. Five. Four. Three. Two. One. Detona-” Wolf said, but before she could finish the sound of a massive explosion drowned out her words.

Both shells went off within a fraction of a second of one another and this was enough to ignite all of the stored propellant, many tonnes of it in total. In turn this triggered every last round of ammunition that was held within the magazine. The shock wave from this ripped through one wall after another and the expanding fireball triggered every other round of ammunition that it came into contact with. Eventually this reached the engine room where the fuel tanks were stored and every remaining drop ignited in an instant to produce an even bigger blast that ripped apart what remained of the Gargant and created a firestorm that swept over the entire horde that followed it.

The flames rose high into the sky, penetrating even the layer of thick cloud that now covered most of Valus and it was visible from space.

“Sir we have a disturbance on the planet below.” a crewman on the bridge of one of the orbiting Imperial warships announced when his auspex display highlighted the explosion.

“Show me.” the captain ordered from his pulpit and the display in front of him changed to show the flames.

“Captain, what is that?” his first officer asked.

“That flag lieutenant,” the captain replied, “is the damned Imperial Guard doing our job for us.”