



CATACHAN ONE NINE MARK FOUR MARK TWO

CAST ADRIFT

BY STEPHEN J DUTTON



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3.1 : CAST ADRIFT

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The transport ship carrying the XIX Catachan Regiment is thrown off course by a warp storm, leaving it stranded in an unexplored system. But when a mysterious signal is detected that suggests previous human visitation the Adeptus Mechanicus contingent aboard the transport insists that it is investigated.

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1 .

It took a lot of force to make a starship more than a thousand metres long shake and so when Lieutenant Emilia Wolf, commanding officer of the Second Platoon, Fourth Company of the Nineteenth Catachan Regiment of the Imperial Guard found herself having to reach out and hang on to something to stay upright in the corridor she knew that all was not well. The XIX Regiment had been hurriedly loaded aboard a requisitioned merchantman for transport to their next deployment zone while the other regiments of the Catachan VII Division were similarly loaded aboard other such vessels. Under normal circumstances Imperial Guard troops were supposed to surrender their weapons when moving between war zones. But given that the merchant ship's owner had strongly objected to his ship being pressed into service as a troop carrier it had been decided by the regiment's senior officers that the Catachans would retain their personal weapons for the duration of the trip to make sure that the owner did not get any ideas about having his vessel's security troops eject the Catachans into the warp.

Wolf was not a native of Catachan, instead having been transferred to the XIX Regiment only because she became separated from her own and the distrust that Catachans held for those they termed 'outsiders' meant that she often got left out as information was spread. However, at least on a ship as small as the requisitioned merchantman there was only just enough room for the regiment's personnel and she did not have far to go to find someone that may be able to tell her what was going on. The four Catachan sergeants of her platoon had all been assigned quarters nearby and Wolf staggered along the corridor, reaching out for whatever handholds were available as the ship continued to shake. She had not long ago suffered serious injuries that included several broken ribs that she had not yet fully recovered from and each time the ship rocked she winced. Reaching the hatch to the sergeants' quarters she banged on it before turning the wheel to open it without bothering to wait for a reply.

When the hatch swung open it revealed a room in chaos. Unsecured objects had been hurled across the floor and the occupants were also holding onto whatever they could. There were more than just the four sergeants in the compartment as well. Platoon Sergeant Vance and Sergeant Grey of second squad were both married and their wives and children had been billeted along with them and each time the ship rocked the younger children screamed. Additionally Sergeant Molla of First Squad had a daughter who served as a nurse with the XIX Regiment's headquarters and Sergeant Quinn of the platoon's veteran squad had a younger sister who was a courier and both of these individuals were in the compartment as well.

"What's going on?" Wolf asked.

"The ship is shaking lieutenant." Grey replied, scowling at her. Of her sergeants Grey remained most hostile to Wolf's presence as their commanding officer.

"Maybe it's the ogyrns going at it." Molla commented.

Ogyrns were abhumans, the descendants of inhabitants of penal colonists cut off from the rest of humanity for thousands of years and during that time they had adapted to the harsh conditions of their home worlds by becoming physically larger and stronger though with a corresponding decrease in their intelligence. Their strength and unquestioning loyalty to the Master of Mankind made them ideal assault troops for the Imperial Guard and Second Platoon included a seven strong squad of them. For most of Wolf's tenure as platoon commander all seven ogyrns had been male. But the most recent round of reinforcements had brought with it a female ogyrn as well and since then more than one Catachan had walked in on her and one of the males in a private moment.

"Dad, do you have to?" Molla's daughter Jenni responded.

"We must have hit a warp storm." Vance said, uttering what everyone aboard the vessel feared the most.

The strange alternative dimension known by such terms as the warp, warpspace, the immaterium, sea of souls or the realm of chaos was prone to violent disturbances that could throw a ship light years off course, tear it apart or break down the protective Gellar Field that surrounded it and allow the bizarre creatures that inhabited the warp to swarm through the vessel and devour its occupants.

"Get to your squads." Wolf ordered, "If the Gellar field fails we'll have to repel boarders."

Meanwhile on the merchant ship's bridge the owner, a portly built man with grey hair who asked to be called 'Trader Willan' as if he were one of the individuals known as Rogue Traders who were authorised to travel far and wide throughout the Imperium and even beyond its borders to deal with alien races glared at his officers. In fact he held a far more common hereditary commercial charter that allowed him to travel along a handful of very specific routes and the sudden requirement of his crew to take their vessel along a much different one was proving too much for them.

"Helm, try and turn us into at least one of these shockwaves." he ordered. Then he turned to a somewhat skinny man dressed in unmarked black robes. This was one of the personal servants of the ship's navigator,

the reclusive mutant able to plot a course through the warp. However, on this occasion it seemed that he had failed to spot the warp storm coming, "And you," he said, "get your master to find us a way around this."
"Yes Trader Willan." the young man replied, nodding before he started to scurry away, halting each time he needed to steady himself on something.

"What's going on Willan?" a voice called out from behind the owner and he instantly recognised the characteristic Catachan accent. Turning around he saw not one but three individuals who were not members of his crew standing on his bridge, two of whom were armed. The first of these was Colonel Shryke, the commanding officer of the XIX Regiment and of the three he was the only one who was a native Catachan. Of the others one Commissar Garratt, a political officer assigned to maintain order in the regiment and the third was an adept of the Adeptus Munitorum called Miriam Clay who was the individual who had issued the order to requisition Willan's ship in the first place. For a moment he wondered why the guards had allowed them in without demanding they surrender their weapons but then he noticed the entire platoon of well armed Catachans at the entrance to the bridge.

"Ah Colonel Shryke." Willan said to the colonel, "I am honoured to have you here." he added, lying.

"Just answer the damned question before I take control of your ship myself." Commissar Garratt hissed.

Technically the commissar had no right to take control of Willan's vessel, but Willan would not be in any position to lodge a complaint if he had just had his head blown off by an explosive round from a bolt pistol.

"We've run into a warp storm that our navigator missed." Willan explained and Shryke glared at Adept Clay.

"I told you merchant crews aren't up to navy standards." he said.

"Well we'd still be sat on Lyannus Prime waiting for a troop ship if I hadn't found us this one colonel." she replied.

"And what good will it do us if we're lost in the warp?" Shryke asked angrily.

"Now now colonel, we are not lost." Willan protested before the ship shuddered again.

"Gellar field fluctuating towards the prow Trader Willan." one of the bridge crew called out.

"Damn it tell the enginseer to get that field stabilised." Willan responded.

"Perhaps if our tech priests were to assist the issue would be resolved faster." Garratt suggested.

"Speed is of the essence when it comes to repairing Gellar fields." Clay added.

"Well captain?" Shryke asked, "I have a dozen tech priests plus lay members of the Adeptus Mechanicus among my regiment."

"Oh very well." Willan replied in frustration, clearly not happy about having passengers in yet more of his ship's most vital areas.

Shryke then staggered across the bridge to a vox station.

"Can this broadcast ship wide?" he asked and the crewman sat at the station nodded and activated the vox.

"This is Colonel Shryke." Shryke announced, "All Nineteenth Regiment Mechanicum personnel are to report to engineering immediately."

The cluster of red robed figures made their way towards the merchant ship's engine room, followed by a larger number of men and women in more mundane overalls that were still marked with the cog and skull emblem of the Adeptus Mechanicus that marked them out as lay members of the organisation and an even larger number of half human cyborg servitors. The tech priests needed no direction to reach the engine room, having uploaded copies of the ship's schematics into their enhanced minds the moment that they had come aboard.

In the engine room they were met by a single tech priest who commanded the engine room's complement of almost a thousand technicians and servitors. Like the tech priests of the XIX regiment this individual had a body that had been heavily modified over the years with organic components removed and replaced with far more useful if equally less human looking bionics.

<DL-44.> he identified himself as, broadcasting his identity into the noosphere where the Adeptus Mechanicus shared information.

<Magos UVR-997.> the highest ranking of the XIX Regiment's tech priests responded in the same wireless and voiceless fashion. To the Catachans he was known as Serett, but he omitted this more informal part of his identification when dealing with his own kind.

<Magos?> DL-44 asked, surprised to find such a high ranking tech priest attached to an Imperial Guard regiment. By all rights a magos ought to occupy a senior position on a forgeworld.

<Correct. Explain your difficulty DL-44.>

<The disturbances in the warp are placing more demands on the power grid than it was designed to handle.>

<Incorrect.> Serett replied, <The power grid can be made to provide more power than the field projectors themselves can handle.>

<But how magos?>

<The void shield generators require more power than the Gellar field but are similarly spread across the ship. Configure a path to carry the power from the void shields into the Gellar field.>

<Understood magos.> DL-44 said before issuing instruction directly to his own servitors.

<Disperse.> Serett ordered his fellow Imperial Guard tech priests, <Ensure that all modifications are carried out within the confines of acceptable practice. Report any deviation you discover immediately.>

The servitors and technicians of the merchant ship worked quickly to divert power from the void shields meant to protect the ship in combat to the Gellar field before DL-44 ordered the activation of the void shield generators themselves and the power flowed throughout the ship.

The sudden strengthening of the Gellar field not only stabilised the ship's protection against the energies of the warp it also acted to calm warp space in the immediate area around the vessel and this caused another shudder as it ceased pitching and rolling with the impact of each wave. But there was a klaxon that not only filled the engine room but also sounded throughout the vessel.

"Stand by for emergency translation!" Willan's voice announced over the intercom as the Gellar field tore at warp space sufficiently to rip a hole between it and realspace that sucked the merchant ship through before anything could be done to prevent it.

"What happened?" Clay asked as she picked herself up off the floor of the bridge.

"We've been forced out of the warp." Willan replied.

"Well at least we're not being thrown about any more." Shryke commented as he got to his feet and looked around.

"Maybe not, but we've no idea where we are." Willan pointed out, "Now we need to wait for the navigator to ascertain our position and plot a course back through the warp to our destination."

All of the merchantman's auspexes were turned to the task of establishing the vessel's position in space.

Optical devices took images of the star patterns and passed them to the logic engines that examined them to pick out identifiable stellar objects and attempt to build up a three dimensional model of the space around it.

On the off chance that they had emerged from the warp close to an inhabited system the vessel's communications systems also set to work scanning for signals of artificial origin. Finally the navigator, secure in his private chamber located above the bridge and guarded by members of his own retinue rather men on Willan's payroll, attempted to locate the psychic beacon known as the Astronomicon that guided human shipping across the galaxy. However, the warp storm that still persisted nearby clouded the Astronomicon completely and so it fell to the vessel's technological systems to determine where it had come out of the warp.

All of these systems were of course monitored closely by the tech priests on board, in particular by Magos Serett himself and amongst the random noise he found something of interest.

<We are not the first to visit this region of the galaxy.> he broadcast to the other techpriests.

<Fortunate.> DL-44 replied, <We will be able to obtain assistance in continuing on our way.>

<Is delivering cargo all you care about? No wonder you still serve in an insignificant role such as this.> Serett told him, the rebuke being just as public as Serett's previous statement.

<What have you discovered magos?> another of the techpriests assigned to the XIX Regiment asked.

<Study the forty mega cycle band of the tertiary vox bands.> Serett instructed, <It is there.> and on his instruction all of the techpriests immediately accessed that particular data stream. There they found something that while being so small and insignificant was also the most wondrous thing that any of them had ever witnessed.

Beep.

Beep.

Beep.

Somewhere close by there was a functioning vox beacon and importantly it was not of Imperial origin.

<I will bring news of this to the captain of this vessel personally.> Serett announced to the other tech priests.

<He will not look favourably on being further diverted.> DL-44 warned.

<We are Mechanicum. Without us his ship goes nowhere.> Serett responded, <And you will not disobey me.>

When Serett reached the bridge he discovered Willan berating his crew for having failed to determine their position. Thanks to his being sealed away the navigator had escaped this but the rest of the bridge crew were suffering regardless of their role.

"Colonel, commissar." Serett said as he walked up to the two Imperial Guard officers.

"You have news magos?" Garratt responded, "I think Trader Willan would be glad to get moving again."

"Not half as glad as his crew would be." Shryke commented as he saw Willan strike one of his junior officers with his cane.

"There is a repeating signal originating from a star system less than a light year from our location." Serett said.

"Have we really managed to arrive that close to our destination?" Shryke asked in reply.

"No colonel. The signal is not of Imperial origin. But it is of human origin." Serett answered.

"Human but not Imperial?" Garratt asked, "Are you saying that it is some sort of lost colony?"

In the millennia since mankind had first ventured away from Holy Terra and its system in multi generational

space arks that took centuries to reach even the nearest stars many thousands of colonies had been lost only to be rediscovered again and bringing them back into the fold of humanity was a serious business. "We may not be able to pacify an entire planet with just one regiment." Shryke said, "Perhaps it would be better to mark the system's position for a proper compliance force to be mustered."

"That will not be necessary Colonel Shryke. There is no indication that the planet where the signal is originating from is home to an advanced civilisation. The transmission is coming from a repeating beacon, most likely a distress signal sent when a vessel crashed." Serett told him.

"You're after the STC system." Garratt said sternly, glaring at the tech priest, "Out of the question."

"I agree." Clay added, breaking her silence when the subject was clearly one of logistics rather than military strategy, "The Nineteenth Regiment is needed elsewhere. We can't waste time hunting for a shipwreck on the off chance that there's some piece of lost technology aboard you can steal."

"It is not stealing. All knowledge belongs to the Omnissiah." Serett replied, "And I did not come here to request your permission to divert this vessel. I came here to order it to be done."

"Just who in the name of Him on Earth do you think you are?" Garratt demanded, raising his voice loudly enough that even Willan was silenced as he turned to stare in their direction.

"I am Magos UVR-997. Ranking member of the Adeptus Mechanicus aboard this vessel and by my order it will be diverted to investigate the signal or it will go nowhere at all."

"Signal?" Willan asked, walking towards the group, "Am I to understand that you have picked up a transmission?"

"Correct." Clay told him, "Problem is that Magos Serett wants us diverted to investigate what is probably a dead world and we don't have the time."

"The Mechanicum personnel aboard will not assist in abandoning this opportunity." Serett said.

"Of course not." Willan said, still smiling, "And why should we abandon it. Give my crew the co-ordinates and we'll head right there."

"You're going along with this?" Clay asked, "May I remind you that you have been contracted into Imperial service?"

"And the Adeptus Mechanicus is an official Imperial organisation dear lady." Willan replied, "Therefore I am bound to act according to their wishes."

"Don't waste your time." Shryke added softly, looking at Clay, "Our captain has already figured out that the cogboys will pay him a fortune for transporting anything of interest that they find down there."

2.

All that the Catachan troops billeted aboard the ship knew was that the vessel returned to the warp a short time later, undertaking a short but turbulent trip through the continuing warp storm before returning to realspace once again and it was then that they got the order to prepare to disembark. But this was not to be the expected deployment at a friendly port alongside the rest of their division, this was to be a combat drop. As the members of Fourth Company secured themselves in the lighter that would carry them to the planet's surface their commanding officer, Major Trent, walked along them referring to a dataslate that he had been given that detailed what they were to expect once they reached the planet below.

"This world orbits close to its star so its going to be pretty warm." he said out loud, "And auspex readings indicate that its landmasses are not only covered in jungle but that there are significant indications of animal life as well. So given that we'll be the first humans to set foot on this world for thousands of years we can expect it not to be afraid of us. If in doubt, open fire. Better to waste ammunition than men."

"Sounds just like home sir." one of the other Catachans called out and there were smiles from most of the rest.

"Nah." another responded, "Too safe."

"Keep it down!" the company colour sergeant, Stubbs, shouted as Trent was securing himself into his seat.

"And don't forget," the major added, "we're Catachan. The jungle is our home."

"Standby." a voice then called out over the intercom and the lighter began to vibrate as its engines were powered up, "Launch in five. Four. Three. Two. One. Mark." and the entire company were pressed back into the padding of their seats as the lighter hurtled out of the merchantman's hangar.

"Tell me," Wolf said softly, leaning towards Vance who was strapped in beside her, "how bad is this going to be?"

"If its anything like home then you've not seen anything like it." Vance replied, "Stick close to the rest of us. Don't go anywhere alone."

"That'll keep me safe then?"

"No. But at least we'll be more likely to be able to recover your body." Vance said and Wolf's face fell. Further along the row of seats however, other members of the platoon smiled instead.

Though not a warship, the merchantman was equipped with weapons for defence against pirates and these were now directed towards the planet below. Given the dense nature of the jungle terrain that covered almost all of the major landmasses and the landing zone in particular, action was to be taken to clear the way for the various craft carrying the XIX Regiment. Each shot from the Thunderstrike pattern macrocannon batteries mounted along each side of the hull launched a shell weighing several tonnes. The shells fired were a mix of conventional high explosives meant to tear apart starships and specially prepared oxy-phospor incendiary shells. The former uprooted the undergrowth and blasted inconvenient rock formation apart when they struck the ground and detonated before the incendiary shells burst open about a hundred metres above the ground and showered the debris with their highly flammable contents that was then ignited to produce a massive fireball that incinerated everything in a radius of several kilometres.

It was into the aftermath of this hell storm that the XIX Regiment dropped.

The Seventh and Ninth Companies landed first. Seventh Company consisted of several squadrons of Sentinel walking machines that quickly moved to clear any remaining obstructions in the landing zone using their built in heavy weapons and large chain blades that were intended to make it easier for them to move through densely wooded terrain. Meanwhile Ninth Company, the XIX Regiment's penal company spread out to secure the perimeter of the landing zone. This was the only company to have a significant number of non-Catachan troops, all of whom had been forcibly conscripted into it and they were regarded as the most expendable troops available. While the Ninth Company's squads spread out they were watched over by their commissar overseers and the squads of ogyrns also attached to the company to maintain order.

Next came the heavy weapons of Tenth Company and the gun crews rushed to join the penal troops of Ninth Company on the perimeter of the landing zone where they dug in and set up their support weapons to provide cover for the following companies, each of which landed in rapid succession, disembarking from their lighters as quickly as possible to allow them to take off again and clear the ground for the next ship in line. Equipment was hurled from cargo hatches to be recovered and dragged clear as the vessels rose back into the air and even before the entire XIX Regiment was on the ground tents and prefabricated structures were starting to be erected. At the same time some units began to move out from the perimeter, with squads from the Ninth Company being joined by rough riders mounted on vicious bipedal reptiles brought along with the regiment from Catachan itself in crossing the open ground between it and the jungle to begin surveying the area and this is when the first casualties were suffered.

A ten man squad from Ninth Company encountered an insect colony in a dense area of undergrowth and the actions of their commissar overseer in trying to hack his way through with a chainsword enraged the swarm of tiny creatures, prompting them to attack. Acting together the insects swarmed over most of the penal troops and their overseer, ripping the flesh from their bones in tiny chunks. Only three of the squad, all native Catachans, survived the attack by hurling themselves into a nearby patch of a type of moss that they noticed the insects avoided. They correctly determined that the moss produced some scent that was repellent to the insects, though they failed to realise that this scent was produced by a irritant fluid that the moss secreted and when they came staggering back out of the jungle all three required medical treatment. Soon after a squad of rough riders found themselves set upon by a pack of arboreal predators. The hairless creatures first dropped down from branches above the Catachans and their reptilian mounts, using their long tails to stop them from falling out of the trees altogether while they attempted to scratch and bite at both the Catachans and their mounts. Fortunately in this case the squad proved more than the creatures were prepared for and the vicious reptiles the Catachans rode bit several in half before one of the riders aimed a flamer upwards into the trees and a jet of flame scattered the rest. Some retreated back up into the trees and fled while others dropped to the ground where they were either shot with las guns or clawed to death by the Catachans' mounts.

What these and several other incidents like them rapidly confirmed was that the jungles were filled with life forms, both flora and fauna that could be considered dangerous and that the planet met the requirements to be labelled extremely hazardous to humans.

A death world.

Serett gathered his fellow techpriests together in one of the prefabricated structures that had been assembled by the servitors each of them commanded.

<The signal comes from here.> he announced, using his built in data storage and retrieval system to project a virtual image to each of the assembled tech priests. This image had been assembled from orbital pict-scans and identified the area of cleared ground that was now rapidly becoming a fortified camp as the Catachans dug and sited automated weapon emplacements to bolster the firepower offered by their man portable and vehicle mounted support weapons as well as a large area of jungle around it, extending as far as the coastline of one of the planet's numerous shallow seas in one direction and to a low mountain range in the other. A small flashing dot added to this image put the location of the vox beacon at the base of this mountain range.

<The terrain between here and there is dense.> another tech priest commented.

<Clearing a path will take time given the resources available to us.> a third added.

<And must be done carefully.> a fourth said, <A direct route may not be ideal.>

<I have already anticipated that the route will require surveying first.> Serett replied, <In the absence of suitable mechanicum forces Colonel Shryke shall be instructed to provide us with an advance force to determine the optimum path to the source of the beacon. I shall accompany this force personally.>

<That is risky.> one of the other tech priests warned, <The Imperial Guard are dissatisfied at being diverted from their course and it is the nature of Catachans to react to such situations by taking direct action. Even against allies.>

<They would not dare harm the magos.> another tech priest said, <Willan would not allow them back aboard his ship without us. It would condemn them to being abandoned here.>

<This world has many similarities to their own. If anything it is less harsh, they would find adapting to life here easy.> another added, <However, there is a solution.>

Serett turned his attention towards this tech priest, the engineeer assigned to Fourth Company. His formal designation was B5T-RD-3X, but to the Catachans he was known as Cornellius.

<Expand upon that statement.> Serett ordered, <What is your solution?>

<We require a force commanded by an individual who is unlikely to turn on us.> Cornellius replied.

<All Catachans are likely to turn on us. They do not accept the orders of those they call outsiders readily.> another tech priest pointed out.

<But there is an outsider among Fourth Company.> Cornellius pointed out.

The regimental command post was already complete as Serett and Cornellius entered it, the veteran guards standing aside for the two tech priests without otherwise acknowledging them.

"So you're certain you can't get through then?" Shryke was saying to a slender woman in a green hooded robe who was sat at the side of the command post. The woman's posture gave her the appearance of staring back at the Catachan colonel but even without seeing her milky white pupils the two tech priests already knew that she was blind. The woman was Kaitlin Shayal, another one of the limited number of non-Catachans attached to the regiment in a supporting role. In her case she was there to provide telepathic communication. Known as an astropath, her psychic powers had been magnified during a ritual known as the soul binding where her mind had been be briefly linked to that of the Emperor himself. In addition to

increasing her power the ritual guarded against possession by warp entities but it came at a cost of destroying her eyesight. Fortunately for Kaitlin, her mundane sight was replaced by a form of psychic sight that gave her almost perfect awareness of everything that was happening around her regardless of intervening objects.

“The warp storm is too close colonel.” she replied, “Any signals I try to send are being drawn straight into it. It is also the reason why I cannot detect any transmissions either, the storm drowns out everything.”

Clearly Colonel Shryke had been trying to get a message to his superiors about being diverted. That was something Serett would rather not see happen. At best it could result in the Adeptus Mechanicus sending a proper explorator force to investigate the world, meaning that they would take the credit for whatever was hidden on this planet while at worst Serett could be labelled a techno-heretic for overstepping his authority in having a regiment of the Imperial Guard diverted.

Noticing the entrance of the tech priests, Colonel Shryke turned towards them.

“Magos Serett.” he said calmly.

“Come to see the results of your actions?” Commissar Garratt added from the other side of the table that had been set up in the middle of the command centre, “After less than four hours on the planet and not a shot fired by an enemy force we already have thirty seven men dead. At that rate of loss we'll all be dead in just over ten days.”

“The losses are insignificant and will not continue.” Serett answered, “Only three of the dead are native Catachans who were raised on a death world. The rest were as the Catachans say, 'outsiders'.”

“I suppose you've come to ask for the use of some of my troops.” Shryke said, still looking directly at Serett.

“Ask implies that you have a choice colonel. I am here to tell you which of your forces you will be making available to me.” Serett responded.

3.

Wolf leant forwards until she reached a tipping point and simply fell face down onto her bed, groaning as she landed. Conditions on this world made the work involved in setting up a camp more arduous than she was used to. In her original regiment, the Lyrerian XXXII, officers simply directed construction while enlisted men and servitors carried out the physical labour. However, in all Catachan forces the commanders fought and worked alongside their troops. Wolf's small stature did not lend itself to the same level of physical exertion that the typically larger and more muscular Catachans could manage and she had rapidly found herself worn out. However, before she could fall asleep the flap to her tent was pulled back and one of her men leant his head inside.

"Lieutenant?" he asked.

"Go away Corporal Mayer." Wolf replied, her face still buried in her bedsheets. Mayer commanded Second Platoon's mortar squad and among the Catachans was commonly known as 'Bomber.'

"You're wanted lieutenant." Mayer said.

"I'm tired." Wolf said, "Come back in the morning. Whenever morning is on this giant ball of sweat and bugs."

"It's the major." Mayer told her before he was pushed aside.

"You're taking too long Bomber." Quinn said as he walked straight into the tent, "Stubbs told us to fetch her, not issue an invitation to tea." and then before Wolf could react Quinn leant down, picked her up off the bed and threw her over his shoulder.

"Put me down!" Wolf yelled as he carried her out of the tent to where the rest of the platoon's squad leaders with the exception of Sergeant Khor, the leader of the ogryn squad waited.

"No time lieutenant." Quinn responded, "Major Trent wants to see us all immediately."

"Sergeant this is ridiculous." Wolf said as he continued to carry her towards Fourth Company's command post.

"Why is that lieutenant?" Grey asked, "I thought you outsiders thought it was the place of us enlisted men to do all the lifting and carrying."

"You did say so yourself earlier." Vance pointed out.

"I just said I wasn't used to having to do so much in such a short space of time." Wolf protested, "Now put me down."

"We're there now. No point." Molla said as he reached out to open the door set into the side of the command tent and held it open for Quinn to enter.

"Throne!" Stubbs exclaimed when he saw Quinn carrying Wolf into the tent, "Is she dead?"

"No I'm not." Wolf responded.

"Don't believe her." Grey added as he entered the tent behind Quinn, "Better have her declared a casualty and replaced."

"Oh just get in there." Stubbs said, nodding towards the internal door that led to the command post itself.

"Cheers." Quinn said and he headed through the door, an action that prompted a squeal from Wolf as she banged her head on the frame of the internal door.

In the room beyond Major Trent looked up and frowned.

"Put her down sergeant." he said.

"Sure sir." Quinn replied and he let go of Wolf, letting her slip from his shoulder and drop uncontrolled to the floor while the other members of Second Platoon filed into the room.

"Well now that we're all here," Trent said as Wolf got to her feet, "we can begin." and he looked to the side of the room where both Cornellius and Serett waited along with a Catachan woman. The woman was Sergeant Gant and she was in charge of the sentinel squadron attached to Fourth Company. This consisted of four of the lightweight walking machines, three equipped with heavy flamers and chain blades for clearing undergrowth as well as providing close range fire support with a fourth machine armed with a missile launcher could provide heavier firepower.

"You have been selected to escort us to the source of the vox beacon." Serett said abruptly.

"Selected?" Grey asked.

"Apparently Second Platoon has the skill set that most closely matches – what was it?" Trent said and he turned to look at Cornellius.

"Optimum requirements for successful mission outcome." the tech priest answered.

"So we're to be bodyguards then are we sir?" Wolf asked.

"No you're not." Trent replied.

"In addition to providing protection you will also be determining the optimum route between here and the beacon so that it may be cleared to make way for heavier equipment." and Wolf noticed her squad leaders exchanging nervous glances.

"A scouting mission needs an experienced scout as leader major." Grey said and he glared at Wolf, "We've got her."

"I am aware of that." Trent said, "The order comes from Colonel Shryke himself supposedly." and he briefly glanced at the two tech priests to indicate where he believed the order to have genuinely originated.

"So we get sent into the jungle without a real officer." Grey replied, frowning.

"Sergeant Grey." Wolf said, "I'm sure that Colonel Shryke has his reasons for issuing the order. Obviously I know something."

"You don't know feth lieutenant!" Trent snapped, slamming his hand down on his desk and Wolf jumped at the sudden unexpected rebuke, "I don't know why Second Platoon got picked for this mission but in the name of Him on Earth it's got nothing to do with any specialist knowledge you picked up as a file clerk." then in a calmer tone he went on, "Sergeant Gant's sentinel squadron will be attached to Second Platoon for the duration of this mission. Gant, that means Lieutenant Wolf is in command of your unit. Understood?"

"Yes major." Gant replied, averting her gaze away from Wolf as she spoke.

"You'll also be joined by whatever Magos Serett and Enginseer Cornelius are bringing along with them." Trent added.

"I will be joined by my assistant." Cornelius said, referring to the Catachan born Nathin PL673 who was a lay member of the Adeptus Mechanicus.

"We will both be bringing as many servitors as we can configure for rough terrain duty before we leave." Serett added.

"Which is when?" Vance asked.

"First light tomorrow." Trent answered, "The colonel doesn't want anyone going outside the perimeter after dark until we've had a chance to see what sort of predators come out to hunt at night. So unless there are any questions I suggest you all go and get as much sleep as you can. Some of you look like you could do with it. Muster at oh-six hundred."

Despite her tiredness Wolf did not sleep the whole night through, in fact no-one in the regiment did. On several occasions some of the local life forms attempted to attack the perimeter. Of course as animals they could not understand the nature of the defences that the Catachans had put in place and they were invariably stopped by mines or barrages of automated gunfire from the Icarus and Tarantula weapon platforms. However, despite there being no alerts triggered by any of this the noise of the weapons firing was enough to wake everyone in the camp at one point or another. The result of this was that Wolf found herself awake well before she needed to get up and she decided to make use of the extra time to check her equipment one last time before she led Second Platoon out into the jungle.

She had confirmed that every item of equipment issued to her was in its proper place in her webbing when she turned to her flak jacket. The standard flak jacket issued to Catachan regiments was lighter than the armour issued to most others and was designed to preserve freedom of movement while still providing protection against fragments and lower energy gunfire. However, the jacket also included two large pockets, one in front and one behind as well as several clasps at the shoulders and waist that were intended to allow rigid ceramite plates to be added for enhanced protection. Known as carapace armour, this was used only by a handful of Catachan troops owing to the additional weight of the extra armour plates. Picking up the flak jacket she carried it out of the tent and headed for one of the others belonging to Fourth Company.

"Anna." she said from outside the tent, "It's Emilia." then when there was no reply she called out again, "Anna. It's-"

"I heard you the first time." the occupant of the tent replied as she opened it and peered back out at Wolf, "What do you want at this hour?"

"I need a favour." Wolf said and the woman frowned. Lieutenant Anna Selena was Fourth Company's supply officer, commanding the reserve platoon that took care of most of the functions of the company that did not involve combat. Unusually short for a Catachan she was known behind her back as 'Short-arse Selena' or sometimes 'Anna Ass-wipe' thanks to it being her responsibility to provide the company with items including toilet paper. The relationship between the two women had been poor at first though now Selena seemed to be able to at least tolerate Wolf so long as she made no attempt to tell her how she had carried out supply duties in her old regiment.

"A favour?" Selena repeated, "What sort of favour and why should I care?"

"I want the plates for this jacket. Just the chest and back ones will do." Wolf said and Anna frowned. "What for?"

"I just get the feeling I may need them." Wolf told her, an answer that did not satisfy her.

"You know there's nothing in the jungle that a couple of bits of ceramite will stop." she said. Then she smiled, "Unless of course you're worried about something that'll be going into the woods with you. Or someone."

"Look can I have the plates or not?" Wolf asked.

"Okay, okay. I've got a few sets lying around. Hang on." and Selena's head disappeared back into her tent while she quickly dressed before reappearing and leading Wolf to the supply tent where she began to search

the shelves, "Problem with every new deployment is figuring out where everything is the first time." she said as she searched, "Those damned servitors never get it the same way twice."

"Should I fill out the requisition while you're looking?" Wolf suggested.

"Oh never mind that. I'll handle it after you're gone." Selena replied. Then she suddenly exclaimed, "A-ha! Got them." and she walked over to Wolf carrying a pair of contoured plates, "Here you go. Female body armour plates, these will bring that vest up to standard flak armour levels of protection by themselves. We don't normally give these out to platoon command officers mind you, just some veteran squads and company command staff. They're proof against las gun and las pistol shots even at close range from behind. I take it that's what you're worried about right?"

"Thanks." Wolf replied, ignoring the question as she instead just took the plates from Selena and tucked them into the pockets of the flak jacket designed to take them.

4.

Nathin was sat on a charred log at the muster point, one of the few significant pieces of debris to have survived the orbital barrage used to clear the camp site, when he sudden felt a pair of large hands clamp down on his shoulders and even without looking up he could tell by the smell that it was Sergeant Khor. "Okay Cogboy, spill." Gant said as she promptly sat down beside him, the squad leaders of Second Platoon gathering around as well.

"What?" Nathin asked.

"Don't give us that." Molla replied sternly, his arms folded as he glared down at the technician.

"We want to know how come we got stuck with this duty." Grey added.

"Gant's sentinels are obvious. But why Second Platoon?" Vance asked and Nathin paused as he looked around at the gathered squad leaders.

"Second Platoon is the one that most closely fits the operational requirements determined by-" Nathin began before Quinn interrupted.

"Don't give us that fething crap. What are you cogboys up to?" he said, "You've dumped us out here in the middle of nowhere and now a platoon commanded by someone with zero experience of deathworlds is being sent out there? Tell us what makes us so damned special."

"Okay, but can he let go of me before he crushes my shoulder blades?" Nathin responded and Vance looked up at the ogryn.

"Let him go Khor." he said and Khor released his grip.

"Thanks." Nathin said, "It's Wolf. Cornelius recommended her to Magos Serett."

"Grox crap." Grey responded.

"No seriously." Nathin said, "Look, the magos and his engineers all know what happens to outsiders who try ordering Catachans around and Serett doesn't want to end up dead in the jungle before he can find out what's sending that vox beacon."

"Let me guess." Vance said, "Cornelius told him that Wolf wouldn't let us frag anyone, right?"

"Right." Nathin replied.

"Like she could stop us." Grey commented and looking around at the others he added, "Look guys, maybe the time has finally come to do something about her. If we go out there with her giving orders we could lose a lot of good people. Throne, she'll probably end up just getting killed by something in the jungle anyway. Putting her out of her misery quick would be kinder."

"So you're going to stick the knife in are you Tyler?" Quinn asked Grey.

"Nobody's sticking a knife in anyone." Vance said, "Wolf's our lieutenant and frankly she's done good by us so far. Providing she keeps on listening to what we tell her we'll be fine."

"What about her though?" Gant asked, "Grey's right you know. A deathworld is no place for someone like her. Look at what happened to those penal troopers. They were as tough as outsiders come and they didn't last two hours out in the green."

"We'll find someone to keep an eye on her." Vance answered, "Someone that doesn't need to get involved with actually running the platoon."

"Maybe I can get Bess assigned as a runner." Quinn suggested, "She can tolerate outsiders."

"We don't have time to start requisitioning extra personnel." Vance pointed out, "It needs to be one of us." and he looked back to where the rest of the platoon was gathered, performing final equipment checks and he caught sight of the platoon's medicae as she did her best to squeeze all the medical equipment she could into her webbing, "And I've the ideal candidate in mind."

Seeing who he was staring at, Grey winced.

"She's going to hate that." he said.

"Too bad." Vance replied and then he strode towards the medicae, "Torrent." he called out, prompting her to turn around.

"Yes sergeant?" she asked in response as he came to a halt in front of her.

"I need you to keep an eye on Wolf." Vance told her quietly.

"The lieutenant? Are we finally getting rid of her?" Torrent responded and Vance frowned.

"No we are not. In fact I expect you to prevent any little accidents that may befall her out there."

"Throne, you have got to be kidding me. Why me?"

"Because you're part of the command squad but you've still got the time to make sure she stays safe and because I outrank you so you'll do as you're damn well told." Vance told her, "Now you make sure you stick to her like glue. Close enough that anything that happens to her will happen to you as well, because in the name of Him on Earth that's what's going to happen if she does have any accidents. Understood?"

Torrent grunted and looked away.

"I didn't quite catch that guardswoman." Vance said, "Perhaps you'd prefer a transfer? I hear Ninth Company is short a few troops after yesterday. Now do you understand?"

"Yes." Torrent replied.

"What was that?" Vance asked.

"Yes sergeant." Torrent said.

"Good. Because here she comes now." Vance told Torrent and she turned to see Wolf approaching the rest of the platoon. Then Vance noticed the rigid shape of her armour and frowned, "Is she wearing fething carapace plates?" he added.

"Platoon Sergeant Vance." Wolf called out.

"Yes lieutenant?" he responded.

"What's our status?"

"The platoon is ready to move out." Vance told her, "We're just waiting on those cogboys. Nathin's already here though." and he pointed towards where Nathin and the other squad leaders were looking back at them.

"Fall in." Wolf called out to them and they gathered around her.

"BONEHead Khor reporting as ordered." Khor announced. BONEHead was an abbreviation for Biochemical Ogryn Neural Enhancement, the surgical procedure applied to ogryns such as Khor who had displayed more than the typical level of intelligence for an ogryn. This combination of chemical treatments and bionic implants boosted the subject's intelligence even further and allowed them to act as squad leaders, interpreting the orders of their superiors for the other ogryns.

"Okay, now that we're all here I'm going to explain how we'll be deploying." Wolf said.

"Lieutenant, I'd like to recommend-" Vance began.

"Thank you platoon sergeant, but I know what I'm doing." Wolf interrupted and her squad leaders exchanged nervous glances, "I want all three squads to deploy forwards in a side by side formation." Wolf went on, "We need to find the easiest way through the jungle and that will give us the best coverage. Then Sergeant Gant's Sentinels will follow to support them if needed." then she looked at Khor, "Sergeant Khor-" she began.

"Yes lieutenant!" he exclaimed, snapping to attention.

"Sergeant Khor your squad will be next, followed by my command squad. Then whatever the Adeptus Mechanicus is providing will follow after them with Corporal Mayer's mortar bringing up the rear."

"That separates us from a lot of our ammo." Mayer pointed out. Given the impressive physical strength of ogryns, the seven strong squad was used to carry additional equipment for the platoon and in particular extra ammunition for the mortars.

"Then I suggest you ask Magos Serett if you can make use of some of his servitors when he gets here." Wolf replied, "But don't waste any time. I want to get this over with as quickly as we can. Dismissed." and then she walked towards the edge of the mustering area where she could get a better view of the jungle they were about to head into.

"What the feth was that about?" Molla asked his fellow squad leaders.

"Full flak armour?" Grey added.

"At least she'll be easy to keep up with." Torrent commented.

"But what's with splitting my unit from most of our ammo?" Mayer said.

"Yeah, she's never done anything like that before." Quinn said.

"Something's bugging her." Vance said, "Don't you see what she's done with that deployment?"

"No, what?" Grey asked.

"Of course." Quinn said, "Apart from the members of her own squad there aren't any of us real Catachans near her. She's got ogryns in front and cogboys behind."

"She thinks we might decide to do something to get rid of her." Molla commented.

"And I wonder where she'd get an idea like that from?" Vance added, staring at Grey.

Cornellius and Serett arrived soon after, accompanied by a large group of servitors. Most of these cyborgs were configured for technical duties ranging from fine maintenance to heavy lifting but there were also several of them that had been retrofitted for fire support with belt fed heavy bolters or anti-armour multi-meltas.

"Why is your full platoon not here lieutenant?" Serett asked, marching up to Wolf's command squad, "None of your men are listed as unfit for duty and yet I see that one of them is missing. Where is Guardsman Rull?" Rull was Second Platoon's sniper, the sole survivor of a squad that had once consisted of three snipers and three spotters. Now there was just Rull left and he acted independently. Among the platoon, even the entire XIX Regiment as far as Wolf knew, his field craft was second to none and it was believed that pairing him up with anyone else would only slow him down.

"I expect he's gone on ahead." Wolf replied.

<Guardsman Rull frequently operates away from the platoon.> Cornellius explained to Serett silently.

"He left about half an hour ago." Vance added to what Wolf had said, "He made a sweep around the perimeter yesterday and wanted to check out the most promising routes. He'll mark them for us to follow."

"Acceptable." Serett replied. Then he looked at Wolf again, "Instruct your troops to move out lieutenant. The target is more than eight thousand metres from this position and I want to reach it by nightfall."

"Of course." Wolf replied, "If you'd like to follow my squad, Corporal Mayer will bring up the rear."

The small force then began to set off, marching out through the perimeter where the automated weapon systems were shut down to allow them free passage.

"Good luck out there." one of the perimeter sentries called out as the lead units passed by.

"Thanks." Grey replied, "We're going to need it." and he looked back at where Wolf and the tech priests were located.

Upon reaching the treeline the Catachans slowed down their pace. Wolf had seen them move through jungle terrain unhindered on many occasions and the fact that they chose to be more cautious this time told her that this really was no ordinary jungle. Every Catachan carried a long blade that they could wield to deadly effect in battle, but its primary purpose on Catachan itself was as a utility tool and that was how they employed them now, drawing the blades and using them to hack at the undergrowth around them. Even vegetation that was not an impediment to their movement was cut back so that it could not be used as shelter by any of the native lifeforms.

Two of Quinn's veteran squad were armed with portable flame throwers and combined with the larger variants mounted on three of Gant's sentinels these were used to blast nesting sites of insects before they could swarm around Second Platoon while lasguns and shotguns were used to deal with any larger lifeforms encountered before they could get too close.

"Lieutenant Wolf." Serett said from behind her as another volley of gunfire rang out, "This advance is not what I would describe as stealthy."

"I wasn't aware there was anyone out here for us to hide from." Wolf replied.

"Besides," Vance added, looking back at the servitors, "with the noise your lot is making if there was anyone around they'd hear you before us."

Meanwhile at the front of the platoon Molla halted temporarily while a signal came to him via his microbead headset and he nodded.

"Got it." he said and he held up a fist for the rest of the force to halt.

"What's going on?" Quinn called out.

"Just got a signal from Rull." Molla replied, "He says we should stand to and check out a stream about twenty metres that way." and he pointed ahead and to the side.

"Oh great." Grey commented as his squad crouched down and the two man missile launcher team began to set up their weapon, "Just when this was starting to look easy."

Taking three of his squad with him Molla headed in the direction suggested by Rull, all four of them hacking at the jungle as vines began to twitch in response to their proximity. Molla found the stream right where Rull had told him it would be and he and his men halted and looked around. The vegetation in this area looked little different to what they had already encountered, with only the expected variations due to the presence of a running surface water supply. The stream itself was narrow enough that a man could just about stride across it without getting his feet wet and it looked shallow enough that it would barely cover a foot clad in an Imperial Guard standard issue boot. But beside the stream, where the ground was softer than elsewhere it had clearly been recently disturbed and tracks had been left. But these tracks did not have the look of any of those left by any of the creatures that the Catachans had encountered so far on this planet, though they were familiar to any Imperial Guardsman whatever world they hailed from.

The tracks were human.

At some point recently a bare footed human had come out of the jungle and walked up to the stream before turning around and heading away. From the size and stride length they appeared to belong to an adult male, although Molla knew that this was not a hard and fast rule. In addition to the footprints there was another element to the tracks, a circular hole a few centimetres in diameter that appeared every so often beside the footprints that had the look of a staff being pressed into the ground as the mysterious individual walked.

"This is Molla." Molla broadcast to the other squad leaders as well as the tech priests, "I've got something here that you need to see."

Still waiting with her command squad, Wolf looked at Vance.

"Go and see what they've found sergeant." she told him and he frowned.

"You're not coming with me?" he asked, "You normally-"

"As everyone seems so fond of pointing out this is not a normal world sergeant." Wolf interrupted.

"Fine. Have it your way lieutenant." Vance replied.

"Nathin, you are to accompany the platoon sergeant." Cornellius added, looking at his assistant, "Report back everything that has been found."

"Yes adept." Nathin said and he and Vance headed towards Molla's position, joined by Grey and Quinn further ahead.

"Turner." Wolf then said quietly, looking at her squad's vox operator, "I need to take a leak. I'll be back soon." and as he nodded she left the squad and headed into the jungle beside the area cleared by the platoon.

By the stream the platoon's sergeants along with Nathin all looked down at the tracks while Molla's men kept watch around them.

"Where's the lieutenant?" Molla asked when he noticed that she was not with them, "She always comes to take a look."

"Probably thinks it's a trap to get her away from the ogryns and cogboys." Vance replied, "She's spooked."

"Oh great. Now we've not just got to deal with an outsider, we've got to deal with an outsider that thinks we're all cut throats." Grey commented.

"And we all know who'd be first in line to do it don't we?" Quinn added.

"Never mind that now." Vance said and he looked directly at Molla, "What about these tracks Tari?"

"I followed them a dozen or so metres back that way," Molla replied, pointing into the jungle on the opposite side of the stream from the platoon, "and they link up with more. Whoever this guy is, he's not alone."

"Any ideas?" Vance asked, turning to look at Nathin.

"None." he replied, "Magos Serett hasn't said anything about survivors from the ship."

"They wouldn't be survivors anyway." Quinn commented, "Their ancestors crashed here thousands of years ago if what I've heard is right. Just like the first colony ships to reach Catachan."

"And just like our ancestors, theirs will have learned how to make this place their home." Vance said, "We need to get back and tell the lieutenant about this. Hopefully a potential threat like this will snap her out of her sulk."

However, when they returned to the rest of the platoon and made their way to the command squad they found Wolf was not there.

"Torrent, what the feth?" Vance exclaimed, "You were supposed to be keeping close to the lieutenant."

"What?" Torrent replied as she looked around, searching for Wolf, "Oh Throne! Look sergeant, I only took my eyes off her for a few seconds."

"The lieutenant departed four minutes and thirty six seconds ago." Cornellius said, having observed Wolf's departure but seen it as nothing to do with him at the time.

"A few seconds huh?" Vance said, glaring at Torrent.

"She said she needed to take a leak." Turner said from close by.

"And when where you planning on sharing this with us?" Quinn asked.

"She's an officer. I couldn't stop her." Turner replied and Vance walked right up to him.

"Where did she go?" he asked sternly.

"That way." Turner replied and Vance looked at Torrent again.

"Okay, go find her." he said.

"While she's taking a piss?" Torrent replied.

"Yes. I don't care if you have to hold her hand and wipe her arse. Make sure she gets back here safely."

Vance ordered and he pointed into the jungle, "Now go."

"Fine." Torrent said and she began to walk towards the jungle. As she departed Vance looked back at Turner, still frowning.

"So you just let another member of the platoon go off into the jungle alone?" he said.

"She's an outsider. It's not my fault she doesn't know any better." Turner replied.

"But it is your fault you kept your mouth shut when you shouldn't have." Vance told him, "Now you're new so maybe you don't realise that Lieutenant Wolf isn't that bad as outsiders go. That's why I'm going to go easy on you."

"Yes sergeant." Turner responded and he turned away.

"Where are you going guardsman?" Vance asked.

"I thought we were done sergeant." Turner answered.

"I said I was going to go easy on you. Not let you off." Vance replied and then he head butted Turner hard enough to send the vox operator tumbling backwards.

5.

"Lieutenant?" Torrent called out as she made her way through the jungle. Years of living on the most dangerous world in the Imperium had given Torrent the same survival instinct that all adult Catachans possessed and being on her own she carried her las pistol in one hand and Catachan knife in the other, ready to protect herself. However, what she did not expect was that when she heard movement from behind her and she turned to see what was there the muzzle of a las pistol would be thrust into her face.

"Stay still." Wolf said.

"What the feth are you doing?" Torrent exclaimed.

"Not going down without a fight." Wolf replied, "Now drop the knife and pistol."

"Out here? No chance." Torrent said. Then she added, "Look, Vance sent me-"

"Vance? Really? He's in on this?"

"In on what? Look lieutenant-" Torrent began before she flinched suddenly as Wolf adjusted her aim so that her pistol was not quite pointed at Torrent's head any more and fired, sending a blast of energy past her close enough that she felt the heat against the side of her head, "Holy feth!" she snapped, dropping her weapons and raising her hands.

"Good." Wolf said as she kicked the knife and pistol further away, "Now stay still and stay quiet." and she began to circle around Torrent and opened up the medical kit she carried on her back.

"What are you doing?" Torrent asked.

"I said keep quiet." Wolf hissed as she found what she was looking for, a roll of bandages, "Now put your hands behind your back."

"Oh you have got to be kidding me." Torrent said, placing her hands behind her and then feeling Wolf start to bind her wrists with the bandages. Then as she felt them tighten she added, "Look this is ridiculous. Vance was just looking out for-" but she was cut off as Wolf sudden shoved another roll of bandages into her mouth.

"Okay," Wolf said as she then retrieved Torrent's knife and pistol, "get moving. I want to see what Platoon Sergeant Vance has to say for himself."

"That did sound like a las shot." Quinn said when the sharp 'crack' of Wolf's las pistol being fired reached them.

"But who fired it?" Grey asked.

"And at what?" Molla added.

"Okay that does it." Vance said, "We need to go take a look."

"I'll get my squad together." Quinn said.

"Best take Gant's sentinels with you as well." Vance commented and he reached to activate his microbead, "Gant, we need you back-" and then he suddenly stopped speaking as Torrent emerged from the jungle, still bound and gagged and with Wolf's las pistol pressed to the back of her head, "What the feth?" he exclaimed.

"Everyone stay back from me." Wolf called out.

"Lieutenant, what are you doing?" Molla asked.

"I caught Vance's assassin." she replied.

"Assassin?" Vance responded, confused.

"Explain yourself lieutenant." Serett said as more of the Catachans became aware of what was happening and began to turn their weapons towards Wolf, only the presence of the significantly taller Torrent in front of her preventing them from aiming directly at her or even opening fire. Meanwhile the ogryns just looked on in confusion.

"Hey what's going on?" Gant's voice then called out as she came walking back towards the cluster of squad leaders, "First Vance's signal gets cut off and now people up there are moving and pointing guns this – Oh throne!" and she reached for her own sidearm.

"Magos Serett, Adept Cornellius," Wolf said out loud, "Platoon Sergeant Vance sent Guardswoman Torrent to kill me while I was away from the platoon."

"Huh?" Vance responded, confused.

"Lieutenant Wolf your claim is incorrect." Cornellius said, "Both Magos Serett and I witnessed the orders given to Guardswoman Torrent. She was instructed to locate you and return you safely to the platoon."

"No." Wolf said, "She had her weapons drawn."

"Of course she did. She was wandering about in the jungle. Anyone with half a brain keeps their weapons ready." Molla responded. Then all of a sudden the Catachans began to raise their weapons, they were still kept pointed either side of Wolf but they were closer to her now.

"Lieutenant get down." Vance said.

"Oh no. I'm going back to camp." Wolf replied.

"No really lieutenant." Quinn said as he chambered a round in his shotgun, "Get down. Get down now."
"I don't think-" Wolf began before she heard the sound of something moving through the air from behind her and all of a sudden something struck the ceramic plate in the back pocket of her flak vest and she fell forwards, knocking Torrent to the ground as well.
"Contact right!" Vance yelled and the air was filled with the sound of las and shot gun fire that passed over Torrent and Wolf. Moments later this was almost drowned out as the heavy bolter armed gun servitors were given the order to fire by their tech priest masters and the mass reactive explosive rounds they fired began to tear through the undergrowth. Not waiting for an order from either Wolf or any of the other squad leaders Khor also raised his ripper gun, the high calibre automatic shotgun issued to many ogyrns in the Imperial Guard.
"Ogyrns fire!" he bellowed and the weapons his his squad roared as they joined in the firing into the jungle. This was followed by screams from within the jungle that were just about audible over the combined noise of the shooting before Vance gave the order to stop.
"Cease fire!" he shouted, raising a hand and the platoon's guns went silent, "Anyone see any movement out there?"
"Nothing." Molla replied.
"I think we got them all." Quinn added.
"Motion scan indicates no further human presence in range." Serett said, "The logical conclusion is that there are no survivors."
"Survivors?" Wolf asked as she sat up, "What's going on around here?"
"Perhaps you should check out your back lieutenant." Grey suggested and Wolf reached an arm behind her back, her eyes widening when her fingers wrapped around the shaft of the arrow now embedded in her flak armour.
"I've been shot." she said, plucking the arrow free, "With an arrow."
"Whoa lieutenant!" Molla exclaimed, lunging forwards as Wolf held the arrow up in front of her and was about to touch the tip with her finger. Grabbing hold of the arrow he snatched it from the startled Wolf's grip and looking directly at her he added, "Haven't you learnt anything yet? It's poisoned. Look." and then he dragged the tip of the arrow across a rock on the ground and rather than just leaving a simple scrape mark it left a pale green trail where the venom coating it rubbed off.
"Most likely a naturally occurring venom taken from an indigenous life form." Cornelliuss said.
"We should examine the chemical structure to produce a suitable anti-venom as a defence against further attack." Serett added, "Give me the arrow Sergeant Molla." and from under his robe Serett extended a mechandrite, one of the cybernetic tentacles that were plugged into his spine through his armour.
"Sure. I don't want it." Molla replied, holding out the arrow so that the tech priest could take it from him.
"So now do you believe we're not trying to kill you?" Vance asked as he walked up to Wolf and offered her his hand to help her up.
"At least for now." Grey muttered.
"Not helping Tyler." Quinn responded.
"Can you blame me?" Wolf said, "Ever since I've been with you I've felt unwelcome."
"Throne!" Vance exclaimed, "You're our officer so damn well act like one. This isn't some regular Imperial Guard unit where a bunch of posh boys get to play at being soldiers, this is a proper Catachan regiment and any good Catachan officer knows that without his men he's nothing. So just pay attention when we offer you advice and stop trying to be something you're not. And I promise you this. If we do decide to kill you we won't come sneaking up on you from behind and all the ogyrns and cog boys in the galaxy won't be enough to save you. Understood?"
Wolf nodded.
"Good." Vance said, "Now I think there's a bunch of bodies out there we need to examine. Or are you going to sit here and sulk some more?"
"Lead the way platoon sergeant." Wolf replied.
"I shall accompany you as well." Cornelliuss said, stepping forwards.
Then there came several angry but muffled grunting sounds and looking down the platoon's leaders saw Torrent struggling to sit up on the ground, unable to spit out the bandages stuffed in her mouth or get her wrists free.
"We're going to need her to examine the bodies." Wolf commented and she looked at Vance, "Perhaps you ought to handle untying her though."
"Of course lieutenant." Vance replied and he turned to Quinn, "Sergeant Quinn, see to it that Guardswoman Torrent is untied."
"Yes platoon sergeant." Quinn replied and he in turn looked at Molla, "Sergeant Molla, find someone to untie Guardswoman Torrent."
Molla nodded.
"Grey, get someone to untie Torrent." he said and Grey looked towards the rear of the platoon.

"Hey Bomber!" he called out, "How do you fancy a date that doesn't talk back and won't slap you the face for grabbing her arse?"

"Oh grow up you lot." Gant said suddenly and she walked up to Torrent and helped her to her feet before taking out her knife to cut through the bandages binding her wrists, "I can't believe you let an outsider get the drop on you." she said, prompting a muffled response, "Oh you grow up as well you big baby." Gant said, "When Selena and I did this to Wolf we stripped her naked first and left her tied to the main support of the ogryns' tent."

Wolf groaned.

"Don't remind me." she said before holding out Torrent's pistol and knife for her to take back as soon as she was untied. Scowling, Torrent took them back without a word, "Okay, now let's go see who's shooting poison arrows at me."

"And tell them to aim higher next time." Torrent muttered.

6.

There had been six men in the party that had attacked Second Platoon, or at least that was the number of bodies that there appeared to be fragments from in the jungle. Though the las and shotgun blasts would have inflicted enough damage to be fatal the mass reactive rounds from the heavy bolters had literally torn the bodies apart as they exploded inside them. Therefore every one of the corpses was incomplete to some extent and the estimation of their numbers was based solely on the amount of duplicate parts that could be located.

Each of the squad leaders apart from Khor, along with the men of Quinn's and Wolf's squads left the rest of the platoon to study the bodies, the veterans forming a perimeter around them while the others gathered around to watch Cornellius and Torrent carry out the actual examination.

"Those heavy bolters really did a number on them." Torrent said as she tried connecting the various pieces together.

"Hey don't look at me." Molla responded, "My lads never got theirs pointing in this direction. It was the servitors that did this."

"They were human though weren't they?" Vance asked, "I mean the tracks looked human and so did the one I caught sight of before he shot the lieutenant."

"Yes they were human." Torrent replied, "Even the more similar xenos species such as Eldar have enough physical differences that we'd be able to tell if they weren't."

"There is further organic material mixed in with these corpses." Cornellius announced, "It appears to be the preserved dermis of some other creature."

"What did he just say?" Quinn asked.

"That they were wearing animal skins." Wolf told him.

"I think there's something else as well." Torrent added and she reached into her medical kit for some gloves before wiping blood away from the skin of a severed arm, "Does that look like it's growing on the skin itself?" she then asked Cornellius and the tech priest leaned in closer.

"Correct." he replied, "Some form of fungal infection."

"Is it dangerous?" Wolf asked.

"No way of knowing." Torrent replied, "But I suggest we burn these bodies, or rather what's left of them anyway and everyone should be checked regularly to make sure they aren't affected either."

"This is most disappointing." Cornellius added.

"What? A simple fungal infection on one of them?" Molla replied, "In the jungles back on Catachan we'd already be fighting off scavengers trying to get at the meat."

"I am not referring to the condition of the flesh sergeant." Cornellius said, "It was my hope that at least one of the corpses would have on them some item taken from the vessel that is the source of the beacon we are searching for. That all of their possessions seem to have originated on this world indicates that they have little or no access to the technology of the vessel."

"Well so long as the beacon's still working-" Wolf began before there was a sudden 'Whoosh!' followed by an explosion and a roar.

"That sounded like a missile launcher." Mayer exclaimed before there were several bursts of las gun fire.

"Let's go." Wolf ordered, "Leave the bodies."

Rushing back to the platoon they emerged from the jungle to find Grey's and Molla's squads firing into the jungle ahead of them.

"What's going on?" Grey called out.

"Some sort of large predator sergeant." one of his men told him, "About the size of a Leman Russ battle tank. We got one with a missile but the others retreated before we could reload. They don't seem to like las gun fire either though."

"Lieutenant we can't stay here." Vance said, looking at Wolf.

"He's right." Molla agreed, "The local predators are starting to get the scent of the blood from those bodies and they'll be heading this way."

"What about the native humans?" Wolf asked.

"What about them?" Vance responded.

"Well they must live somewhere mustn't they? And surely it'll be somewhere that the wildlife can't get to. If we can track them back to there then maybe we can find shelter." Wolf explained and then she glanced at the two tech priests, "And maybe we can get some answers about how much they know about the crashed ship." Vance smiled.

"Good idea." he said and he activated his microbead, "Rull, can you tell us where our friends with the bows and arrows come from yet?"

Back on the move, the Catachans found themselves having to fire their weapons almost continuously to drive off predators. There were no further signs of the battle tank sized creatures described by members of Greys squad but not only the blood from the native corpses, but also the Catachans themselves had now attracted the attention of numerous predatory animals that were starting to converge on the platoon. Even with the considerable amount of extra ammunition that the servitors were carrying Wolf was beginning to get concerned about running out. Technically Imperial Guard las gun and las pistol charge packs were self charging and only needed to be left in the sun, or in a desperate place in a fire to recharge. But for that to be achieved Second Platoon needed somewhere that they could stop and wait.

But just as she was about to ask Vance how much further they needed to travel before reaching the native camp Molla signalled for the platoon to stop.

"Sergeant Molla, report." Wolf signalled via her microbead.

"I smell smoke." he replied and beside Wolf, Vance smiled as he overheard the reply.

"As in camp fires?" he responded, activating his own microbead.

"That would be my guess, yes." Molla answered.

"I want to know what we're facing before I have the entire platoon march into it." Wolf said, "Sergeant Molla take First Squad and advance. You are not, I repeat not, to initiate contact with the natives unless you have a clear opportunity to acquire a prisoner."

"Understood lieutenant. Moving out." Molla replied and then the channel went dead.

Molla and his men advanced slowly through the jungle. Rather than hacking at it to clear a path they picked their way through gaps in the undergrowth, ever alert for any local creatures in their path. Eventually they saw that the jungle was coming to an end and that the ground ahead looked clear. Staying just within the undergrowth for cover, Molla stared out to see what lay beyond. In the clearing on the other side of the tree line he saw that much of the ground was dominated by massive wooden stakes that had been driven into the ground at an angle and the tips sharpened. The spacing of these meant that a human, even one on the back of a riding animal would be able to get between them easily without any real risk of being impaled, but a larger predator such as those that had attacked Second Platoon would not be able to simply rush out of the jungle and across the clearing at the settlement that lay beyond the stakes.

This settlement was hidden from view by a large stone wall that had been standing long enough that the stones used to make it had become weathered. However, it was obviously well maintained with no traces of moss or vines growing across it that could potentially break down the mortar holding it together and bring the whole thing crashing down.

Molla took out his magnoculars as raised them to his eyes, focusing the optical device on the top of the wall and just as he expected he saw the shapes of men walking up and down and periodically peering over the side towards the jungle. Then he lowered the angle of the magnoculars to inspect the base of the wall and he saw that there was another line of defence between the angled stakes and the wall where someone had dug a trench all the way around the settlement. Quite why this had been done was something Molla could not tell since it looked too narrow to prevent a fast moving person or creature from simply leaping over it and from the angle he was looking at it from he could not make out either how deep it was or what lay within.

"Lieutenant it's a settlement alright." Molla transmitted via his microbead, "Looks like it's well fortified with traps and a wall as well. Not as good as what we'd use on Catachan mind you, but these people don't have the technology we do. This does look like a good place to stop for a rest though."

"Okay we're on our way." Wolf replied but before she could give the order for Second Platoon to advance Serett stepped forwards and placed a mechandrite on her shoulder.

"Lieutenant," he said, "this is a first contact situation."

"He's right." Vance added.

"Oh great." Wolf replied, "Do you know how these work?"

"I'm just a soldier from Catachan." Vance answered, "Diplomatic stuff is for officers and commissars from fancier places to handle."

"I can instruct you lieutenant." Serett said, "Please give me your dataslate."

"Sure." Wolf replied, holding out the device. Serett activated it remotely and text began to scroll over the display.

"Data transfer complete." Serett announced, "Simply follow the instructions provided."

"Thanks." Wolf replied as she looked at the dataslate, reading the procedure for the approved method of making contact with humans not formerly part of the Imperium. Then she looked at the members of her squad, "Come on, I can't do this on my own." she added.

"I will accompany you also." Cornelli said, "Just in case there are signs of advanced technology being used. Sergeant Molla be an excellent tracker and soldier, but he is not qualified to identify the use of pre-Imperial technology."

"Fine. Just stay back." Wolf replied, "I don't want your appearance freaking out the natives."

"Err lieutenant." Mayer then called out, "What exactly do we do if the natives won't invite us into their

compound?" and Wolf looked at the three mortar tubes currently that lay on the ground.

"Corporal Mayer," she said formally, "your squad is to set up your mortars. If we cannot negotiate a way into that settlement then I expect you to be able to fire into it without damaging the walls." then she looked at Vance and added, "After all, they attacked us first. The Imperial Guard has rules about that."

"Yes it does." Vance responded before following her to where Molla and his squad still waited, observing the settlement in the clearing.

"There's a gate in the wall over there lieutenant." Molla told Wolf, pointing off to the side, "Rull's been all around the clearing and he says that's the only way in or out. There aren't any signs of hidden tunnels or anything like that."

Wolf studied the settlement walls and the rows of stakes for herself through her own magnoculars.

"So is this what settlements on Catachan look like?" she asked as she did so.

"Not really." Vance told her, "We clear killing grounds more than two hundred metres all around the walls and they need re-clearing every day to get rid of the new plant growth. Of course we use automated weapons along the walls as well as manned patrols and even that's not enough to last forever and we have to rebuild everything every few months."

Wolf took a deep breath.

"Well here goes." she said and then she looked at the squad's vox operator, "Okay Turner, let's go."

Covered by the rest of the group Wolf and Turner made their way to the very edge of the clearing, keeping as low as they could. Then wolf took hold of the handset for the vox unit Turner carried on his back while he adjusted it to function as a loud speaker.

"In the name of the God Emperor of all mankind," Wolf announced, her voice amplified by the vox set, "this world is hereby claimed for the Imperium and I order you to submit to my authority." Then she waited to see what would happen.

"They aren't answering lieutenant." Vance said from behind her, "What do those instructions Serett gave you say to do now?"

"Err, hang on a moment." Wolf replied as she re-read the first contact procedure, "Ah, here we go. If natives do not reply then it is possible that they are not blessed with knowledge of the languages spoken in the Imperium. Should this be the case then repeat the verbal claim to the world only louder and slower."

"What quill-pusher thought that up?" Molla asked as he and Vance looked at one another.

"In the name... Of the God Emperor of mankind..." Wolf called out, more loudly than before and breaking up her speech with a pause, "this world... is hereby claimed for the Imperium... and I order you-" but before she could proceed any further there were shouts from the top of the wall and Molla and Vance saw a line of men with bows appear.

"Lieutenant! Get down!" Vance yelled as the first volley of arrows was let loose towards her and Turner. At the same time a single flaming arrow flew down from the walls and into the trench and there was a sudden 'Whoosh!' as flames sprang up from within it and swiftly spread all around.

"Okay that does it." Wolf exclaimed angrily as she took cover behind a tree while arrows flew past her,

"Mayer can pound that place flat for all I care."

"We still need those walls." Molla reminded her.

"Yeah, well the walls are where they're shooting at me from." Wolf said, "Again."

"I shall draw their fire." Cornellius said suddenly and he strode forwards, walking out into the open at the edge of the clearing with his las pistol in his hand and he began to fire it at the walls.

The hail of arrows now turned towards the tech priest, bouncing harmlessly off the powered armour beneath his cloak. But then an arrow caught the edge of his hood and pushed it down, exposing his part organic and part cybernetic head. Almost immediately there were shouts from the walls and the arrows ceased.

"What happened?" Wolf called out.

"I don't know. Maybe they're out of arrows." Vance replied.

"And here they come to ask for some back." Molla added as the gateway was lowered, forming a bridge over the burning trench and a small group of the natives came rushing out, their hands held in the air and yelling at Cornellius.

Not knowing their intentions the tech priest aimed his las pistol towards the running men but as he did so they dropped to their knees and bowed down before him, still calling out to him.

"What are they doing?" Wolf asked.

"They look like they're worshipping him." Vance replied as he stared at the native in disbelief.

"I believe that is exactly what they are doing." Cornellius said as he returned his las pistol to the holster at his waist. Then he activated his noospheric link to communicate directly with Serett, <Magos, it would appear that a breakthrough has been made.>

<The lieutenant has established contact?>

<No. I have. I think you should come quickly. I am uploaded linguistic data. The locals appear to be speaking a version of a proto-gothic tongue.>

<I am on my way.> Serett replied.

"Adept Cornelius." Wolf called out, peering around the tree she was using for cover, "Could you please explain what is happening?"

"It would appear that the locals regard me as a figure of worship lieutenant." Cornelius answered.

"Yes, you've said that already. But why?" Wolf asked.

"I do not know exactly. But they are making references to individuals known as sleepers." Cornelius told her.

"Sleepers. Right." Wolf replied, still none the wiser and she activated her microbead so that she could communicate simultaneously with all of her squad leaders, "Second Platoon advance." she ordered, "The natives appear to be friendly up to a point. Try not to provoke them but make sure you keep an eye on them just in case this is some sort of trick."

When Magos Serett emerged from the jungle the native looked at him and cried out again.

"They do seem rather impressed with our appearance." he said out loud so that the Catachans could hear him as well as Cornelius, "Have they agreed to allow us into their settlement yet?"

"I have not asked Magos." Cornelius answered, "As yet I have not fully deciphered their language and did not wish to risk a misunderstanding."

"Ask anyway." Serett commanded, "If they cannot be made to understand we still have the option of forcing our way inside. Something that will be much easier now that their gateway is open."

Cornelius stepped towards the natives, his arms and mechadrites outstretched and as the metallic tentacles appeared from under his robe the cowering natives gasped. Then Cornelius spoke, using his arms to first indicate Second Platoon and then pointing towards the open gate.

One of the natives promptly leapt to his feet and ran back towards the settlement, shouting, while another began to speak and waved his arms about.

"If I am correct we have been granted access to the settlement Magos." Cornelius said.

"Err, does that include all of us as well?" Wolf asked.

"I did ask permission for Magos Serett, myself and all of our followers to be admitted while we rest lieutenant." Cornelius told her.

"Oh so we're his followers now are we?" Torrent commented.

"What about that group of them we killed in the jungle?" Vance asked.

"There is no indication that their attack was authorised by the leaders of this tribe. It was probably an error." Cornelius answered.

"Probably?" Vance repeated.

"Let's just get inside." Wolf said, "I need to signal Major Trent and tell him what's happened."

7.

Despite the outer walls of the settlement being made from solid stone the majority of the structures inside looked more like the tents used in the camp the XIX Regiment had established at their landing zone, while numerous camp fires burned between them. The only other structure of note was a well at the centre of the settlement that looked as if it was the reason it had been sited here, providing the inhabitants with a steady supply of fresh water.

"Sergeant Vance," Wolf said when she saw this, "have Torrent test that water and if it's suitable see about getting all of our canteens refilled."

"We have adequate reserve supplies carried by our servitors." Serett commented.

"Never hurts to have more magos." Vance replied.

"And in the mean time I'm going up to the top of the walls for a good vox signal." Wolf added, "Turner, you're with me."

As she made her way through the settlement to inspect the well Torrent paid close attention to its inhabitants and she noticed that many of them showed signs of injury as well as infection by the fungal growth that had been evident on the bodies of the party that had attacked them.

"I'd advise minimising contact with the locals." she said to the rest of the platoon, "That fungus doesn't seem to be distressing the natives but they may have built up some innate resistance to it since their ancestors arrived here."

"I suppose that's your plans for the evening down the drain then." Vance said to Molla.

"Busted." Quinn added.

Grey came to a sudden stop and looked around, noticing that he was in the approximate centre of the settlement and then he looked up into the sky.

"This looks like a good spot to charge up the power cells." he said, "Plenty of light here."

"Do it." Vance responded and looking around at the rest of the platoon he addressed them, "Okay you know what to do, hand over all your expended power cells and Second Squad can get to work charging them up." then he looked around again, this time focusing on the natives, "And make sure you all know exactly how many you're getting charged. You never know when some wide eyed native may try and grab something they don't understand."

From the top of the walls the vox set carried by Turner was easily able to establish contact with the XIX Regiment's camp site and Wolf was soon talking directly with Major Trent.

"Humans?" he responded when she reported to him that Second Platoon was stopping temporarily in the native settlement.

"Yes sir, adept Cornellius and Magos Serett are current trying to establish proper contact with them. It appears their language is primitive but the tech priests know just enough to try and translate. Over." Wolf explained, "It may be worth sending more patrols into the jungle to see if there are any more settlements like this around though. I doubt that the couple of hundred people here are all that there are on this planet."

"I'll pass your recommendation along to Colonel Shryke and I'm sure that the commissars will agree. But we're coming under increasing attack from local predators and right now every spare man is working on a barrier to surround the camp. When you get to the beacon there may be a delay in sending out Sixth Company to bring back anything you find. Over." Trent told her. Sixth Company was a mechanised infantry company, equipped with Chimera armoured infantry fighting vehicles and supported by fast moving Tauros vehicles and Hellhound flame throwing tanks. It was the heaviest hitting company in the XIX Regiment and would be able to move the fastest along the trail being cleared by Second platoon.

"Understood major. I'll check in before we move off again. Over and out." and then as Wolf passed the vox handset back to Turner she sighed, "Looks like we're on our own for a while." she said and as she turned her back on him the Catachan guardsman snarled at her.

Descending from the wall Wolf was met by Nathin.

"Lieutenant." he said to her, "Magos Serett would like you and your sergeants to join him and Enginseer Cornellius in that large building over there and he pointed towards one of the few more permanent looking structures in the settlement It looks like the local chiefs are giving some sort of sermon to everyone."

"Okay I'll gather them up." Wolf replied and she hurried towards where her platoon were seeing to the recharging of their power cells and refilling canteens from the well after Torrent had declared the water free of any agents that their filters could not remove.

Inside the structure Second Platoon's leaders found a group of the natives, all of whom wore clothing of animal skins like those worn by every other inhabitant of the settlement but the clothing of each of these individuals was decorated with various badges and totems and Wolf could not help but notice that a few of

these appeared to be electronic components that could not possibly have been produced by a society with the level of technology she had seen displayed elsewhere in the settlement. Most of them sat either side of the two tech priests and like them looked towards the far end of the building that wore clothing even more heavily decorated and masks made to look like angular humanoid faces.

"Have we missed anything?" Wolf whispered to Cornellius as she made her way towards where he sat behind Serett.

"Very little lieutenant." he replied, "The individual in the centre has sacrificed some sort of native animal and is now reciting the story of how they believe human civilisation began on this world."

"So they don't know that they're just a lost colony mission then?" Wolf asked.

"Lieutenant I do not believe that the vessel that crashed here was even the colony ship that was hoped for. I believe that it was in fact an exploration vessel."

"An exploration ship?" Wolf repeated.

"Exactly." Cornellius said, "The local chieftain has made references that would tend to indicate that the vessel came here in response to a signal they detected. If that is true and their auspex equipment survived the crash then it would mean our mission here will bring incredible advances even without the STC system that would have been aboard a colony vessel."

"But it's not the same signal that our ship followed here right?" Wolf asked.

"No. Whatever drew in the exploration ship is something different entirely." Cornellius replied.

"And what happened to that then?" Wolf asked.

"I do not know lieutenant." Cornellius replied.

"Are we supposed to understand any of this?" Quinn asked from behind Wolf and Cornellius.

"I know." Molla added, "I keep hearing the odd word that sounds familiar, but I don't have a clue about what he's saying."

"These people have been cut off from the rest of the galaxy for thousands of years sergeant." Wolf pointed out, "It's not surprising that their language developed differently to ours. When the Emperor travelled the galaxy to unite mankind he encountered lots of different languages that needed bringing together." then she frowned and stared at the masked chieftains, "Wait, did he just say 'kill the visitors?'" and she and Second Platoon's sergeants all reached for their sidearms.

"If he did then no-one's doing anything about it." Grey said as he rested his hand on the butt of his las pistol.

"Calm yourselves." Serett hissed, "The chieftain is telling the story of what happened immediately after their ancestors first arrived on this world, an event they refer to as the origin of their people." then he glanced at Cornellius, "Adept, would you please go and run a full diagnostic on all of our servitors."

"Magos, perhaps I should-" Nathin began but Serett interrupted him before he could finish.

"I wish Adept Bee-Five-Tee-Ar-Dee-Three-Ex to undertake the work in person." he commanded.

<By your command.> Cornellius replied via the noosphere and he turned and left the structure, prompting some nervous glances from some of the natives who appeared displeased that one of the two techpriests was leaving. But the figure speaking to the crowd continued while Gant edged closer to Nathin.

"What the feth was that about cogboy?" she asked quietly.

"I don't know." Nathin replied, "A simple diagnostic doesn't take a full adept to carry out. I could have done it easily."

"So Cornellius the bastard just isn't wanted around by his boss then." Gant commented, "That's damned interesting isn't it?"

Eventually there reached a point where the masked men stopped talking and pointed to Serett and the Catachans and there was a sudden shout from the natives present.

"Oh I hope that's not a call to arms." Wolf said as she watched for any signs of the natives drawing weapons.

"It is of a sort lieutenant." Serett said, "The local chieftain has just announced that it is their duty to escort us to the source of the beacon."

"So they know about the beacon then?" Wolf asked.

"Indeed they do. I informed them earlier of what we sought and they recognised my description from their folklore."

"And if they don't like us messing with their ancient relics when we find them?" Vance said.

"The beacon, like all machines, belongs to the Omnissiah himself and he will not be denied." Serett said, "If the natives will not willingly part with whatever is on this planet then it will be your job to make them."

Soon after the crowd began to disperse and as Nathin stepped outside the building Quinn suddenly grabbed hold of his arm.

"Not that way cogboy." he said.

"hey, what are you doing?" Nathin exclaimed.

"A good question sergeant." Wolf commented.

"Just come this way." Quinn said, "I want answers."

"So do the rest of us." Grey added as Nathin was led to the part of the settlement where the Catachans were

preparing to rest for the night.

"You've just missed Rull." Torrent said, looking up when she saw Vance approaching her, "He said he was going to-" but Vance held up his hand for her to be quiet.

"Okay spill." he said to Nathin after checking to see that neither of the two tech priests were close enough to overhear what was said.

"What do you want to know?" Nathin asked.

"We want to know about Magos Serett." Mayer said.

"He makes even our own Cornelliuss the bastard look human." Grey commented.

"So how about you tell us everything you know about him." Vance said, "Start with just how come an actual magos is serving with an Imperial Guard regiment. From what I hear those big boys don't get out of their workshops that much."

"Okay, I admit that it's unusual." Nathin replied, "But I'm not exactly on the magos' list of close friends. I'm not even a junior tech priest."

"I bet you've heard rumours though." Wolf said suddenly, "Every Imperial Guard regiment is full of rumours about how command staff got their positions. I doubt a Catachan regiment is any different, even if I'm never let in on the rumours myself."

Nathin sighed.

"He does know something." Gant said.

"Tell us cog boy." Molla said, "Even if it's just rumours and word of mouth."

"Magos Serett didn't choose to be assigned to the Imperial Guard." Nathin replied, "Or at least that's what I've got from comments made by other tech priests. Not to him but to each other."

"They actually spoke to one another?" Gant commented and then waving her hand across the top of her head she added, "They didn't use that inside of their heads vox thingy?"

"The noosphere? No. The noosphere can be monitored over a distance and I think they didn't want Magos Serett monitoring what they were saying so they just spoke out loud instead." Nathin explained.

"So what did they have to say?" Grey asked.

"They make it sound like he was exiled from his forgeworld." Nathin answered.

"What would get a senior tech priest exiled?" Wolf said, frowning, "Did he break some rule?"

"I don't think so." Nathin replied, "Rule breakers tend to get punished with the removal of access to technology or if it's really serious they're turned into servitors or executed. To be exiled normally means that someone just got on the wrong side of someone else more powerful than they are."

"So much for the Adeptus Mechanicus being one giant bunch of happy and efficient cog boys." Torrent commented from close by.

"But how does that explain what's going on here?" Mayer asked.

"Don't you get it?" Wolf asked in reply, "Serett thinks that if he can find some fancy piece of technology that's been lost for thousands of years then that will get him back in his superiors' good graces."

"Rediscovering even the most basic STC patterns brings great prestige." Nathin agreed.

"And Cornelliuss would be a rival for that, right?" Wolf asked and Nathin just nodded.

"Oh great." Grey exclaimed, "So we get dumped on a nothing world that's not even on any maps just so that some cog boy can indulge in a power struggle? What about us? Where do we fit into all this?"

"My guess is we don't." Wolf said, "Serett won't care if we live or die so long as he gets what he's looking for."

"Fething outsiders." Grey muttered and he turned around and walked away.

"So what do we do now?" Mayer asked.

"We need to make sure that Magos Serett doesn't put us at risk." Wolf replied.

"Yeah, because that job's already taken." Torrent said, glaring at her.

"I'm starting to like her better when she was gagged." Quinn commented.

"They're all outsiders." Torrent replied.

"Well this outsider doesn't like the idea of being used just so someone else can get a promotion." Wolf said.

"Haven't you heard lieutenant? That's what the Imperial Guard does." Molla replied.

"But are we just going to go along with it?" Mayer asked, "Wolf may be an outsider but she's never landed us in trouble because it suited her." and Wolf smiled.

"The cog boys assigned us this mission because they were worried a platoon led by a Catachan officer might turn on Serett." Quinn said and he glanced at Nathin, "You said so, right?"

"Right." Nathin responded.

"So maybe we ought to consider doing just that. A lot of accidents could befall someone out here. Especially someone not from a jungle deathworld." Quinn said.

"She won't let you." Torrent said, looking at Wolf, "It might set a precedent."

"I don't think trying to kill Magos Serett would work anyway." Wolf said, ignoring Torrent's comment, "At least not if you're planning on making it look accidental. The natives are going to show us to the beacon remember? And I get the feeling that they'll be sticking to him like glue. Face it, he doesn't actually need us any more." then she smiled, "Which we might be able to get to work in our favour." she went on.

"How?" Vance asked.

"Well wouldn't you recommend that those with the greatest experience of operating in this jungle lead the way when we leave?" Wolf asked and Vance smiled.

"Yes I would." he replied, "Which if the natives are coming along with us would be them."

"So we suggest to Magos Serett that his new best friends take the lead and we'll bring up the rear with all the equipment." Wolf said, "That way we can keep an eye on what he's up to."

"And if anything unpleasant should happen then it would be a terrible shame because he could get caught in the cross fire." Gant added.

"Hopefully it won't come to that." Wolf responded.

"But we need to be ready just in case it does." Vance added.

8.

A party of around twenty of the locals was gathered to accompany Second Platoon the next day. The recharging of power cells was not yet complete but Magos Serett had made it clear that he did not intend to wait for that to occur before the Catachan force continued towards the source of the beacon. Where he was open to suggestion however, was when it was put to him that the natives now joining the expedition should take the lead and without it even being put to him the magos then indicated that he would join them. This was on the basis that only he and Engineeer Cornelliuss were able to properly understand what they were saying and that Cornelliuss was needed to monitor the condition of the servitors. Wolf and her men knew the second part of this excuse to be a lie or course, the servitors brought with Second Platoon required only the bare minimum of monitoring and what little was needed could be carried out easily by Nathin. The only explanation that anyone else could come up with was that Serett was doing his best to make sure that all of the credit for whatever was found with the beacon would be his and his alone.

The preparations for the force to set out from the settlement appeared to be a cause for celebration among the locals with gifts being presented to those picked to accompany Serett and Wolf took the opportunity to take her squad leaders aside.

"Remember keep an eye on Serett." she said.

"Yeah, we know the plan." Gant replied.

"And watch what you say and how you say it." Wolf added, "Remember that Serett could be monitoring any vox transmissions we make."

"So we can't tell Major Trent what Serett's up to then?" Molla asked.

"The major probably already knows that he's up to something anyway." Vance commented.

"And also don't say anything around any of the servitors." Wolf warned, "We know Cornelliuss and Serett can access them remotely so any of them could be acting as a spy."

"So how are we supposed to signal that the cog boys are up to something?" Grey asked.

"Send someone to pass the message in person." Vance told him.

"That is the only way left open to us." Wolf said.

All of a sudden all of the servitors that had been standing motionless where they had halted after coming through the gates of the settlement the day before pivoted by one hundred and eighty degrees to face it once more.

"Looks like Magos Serett is ready to leave." Quinn said.

"Yes it does. Everybody get into position." Wolf replied.

Though the nameless planet was not as hazardous as Catachan, more than fifteen thousand years of isolation had enabled the natives to develop survival skills suited to their home and they led Second Platoon towards the source of the vox beacon at a similar rate to what the Catachans themselves had managed the previous day. Throughout the trip Magos Serett remained as close as possible to the native guides leading the way, even though this put him in a theoretically vulnerable position, with only the spears and bows of the natives to protect him should any local predators suddenly emerge from the jungle. But it was clear that Serett was continuing to converse with the guides about something though the obscure nature of their language made it impossible for any of the Catachans to pick out more than the occasional word. The only other person present who could translate was Engineeer Cornelliuss and Serett's orders had placed him much further back, behind most of Second Platoon with the servitors.

"I want to know what's going on." Wolf said, staring at Serett and the natives speaking to him.

"That cog boy does look more talkative than they normally are doesn't he?" Vance replied, "But how do you plan to find out?" and Wolf glanced over her shoulder.

"Cornelliuss." she said.

"What was that you were saying about being careful what we say?" Vance asked as he too glanced at the tech priest and his assistant, "All those servitors are right next to him."

"For now yes." Wolf responded, "But I think I know a way to get him away from most of them at least." and then she darted forwards, moving between the infantry squads that made up the bulk of Second Platoon until she reached the four Sentinel walkers that were now positioned behind the native guides and whistled and waved at Gant. In response to this Gant brought her machine to a halt and lowered it into a crouching position that allowed Wolf to climb up to the cockpit.

"What's up lieutenant?" Gant asked.

"I need you to drop back as if you've got a fault." Wolf replied, keeping her voice low and Gant frowned.

"Why?"

"Just do it. Okay?"

"Well if it's an order I'll see what I can do." Gant said and Wolf smiled before leaping down from the walking machine and returning to her own squad.

"Got what you needed?" Vance asked and Wolf smiled again.

"I think so." she replied. Then Gant's voice was heard across Second Platoon's communication network, broadcasting to all of their microbeads and vox sets.

"I'm losing hydraulic pressure." she said as she brought her Sentinel to a halt again, "I'm going to have to stop."

"We cannot afford any delays." Serett announced.

"Keep moving." Wolf broadcast, "I'll hold my squad back to protect Sergeant Gant's Sentinel while Engineer Cornellius checks it out. Though in this terrain I suggest we keep all the servitors moving just in case they can't catch up again."

"Confirmed Lieutenant Wolf." Serett responded, "Adept Cornellius you will calm the Sentinel's machine spirit."

"Understood magos." Cornellius replied and he began to walk towards the Sentinel at the same time as Wolf's squad did, forming a small circle around the stationary walker.

Upon reaching the vehicle Cornellius extended a mechandrite from beneath his cloak and plugged directly into it, interfacing with the control systems.

"Curious." he said out loud and he turned his head towards Gant, "Sergeant Gant, are you certain that the machine spirit failed?"

"Clear." the Catachan guardsman from Wolf's squad that was armed with a grenade launcher suddenly announced as he watched the last of Mayer's mortar squad disappear from view as the rest of the force continued to move.

"Good." Wolf said and she turned to Cornellius, "Engineer," she said, "can we speak without being monitored here?"

"We can." he replied, "But why? There is no fault with this machine is there?"

"No." Gant told him, "It's running just as well as when Nathin last carried out a blessing."

"Engineer, I have concerns about Magos Serett." Wolf said.

"You have had other concerns since leaving the landing zone as well lieutenant and they turned out to be baseless." Cornellius pointed out and Wolf noticed Torrent glare at her briefly.

"She's not the only one that's worried." Gant commented from within her Sentinel.

"What did those natives have to say last night?" Wolf asked, "Before the magos asked you to leave I mean."

"They were delivering a religious sermon." Cornellius replied, "It would appear that the arrival here of their ancestors has now taken on mythical status, distorted by a prolonged period of time being handed down from generation to generation."

"With each generation telling it slightly differently." Vance commented.

"Correct sergeant." Cornellius said.

"You mentioned sleepers last night." Wolf said, "Who or what are they?"

"Part of the crew of that crashed ship?" Torrent suggested, "Frozen in stasis?"

"Unlikely." Cornellius answered, "The natives believe that the existence of the sleepers pre-dates that of their own people. More likely they are connected to whatever drew the exploration vessel here in the first place."

"So they're unlikely to be human?" Wolf asked.

"Oh great." Vance said, "Now we're dealing with aliens as well?"

"If they're frozen in stasis they aren't going to be much of a threat." Gant pointed out.

"The natives believe that the sleepers can be woken to provide great power to whoever does so." Cornellius said, "That was as far as the sermon reached before I was instructed to leave."

"So Serett thinks that he can use this power to worm his way back to a decent job on a forge world instead of stuck out here with us." Vance said and Cornellius tilted his head.

"You are aware of how the magos came to be serving with the Nineteenth Regiment?" he asked.

"Word gets around engineer." Wolf replied.

"How many of us will he sacrifice to get what he wants?" Vance asked.

"As many as he has to." Cornellius replied and Wolf sighed.

"Oh I was afraid you'd say that." she said.

"I told Magos Serett that your platoon was unlikely to turn on him Lieutenant Wolf." Cornellius said, "Was I mistaken?"

"No. No-one's planning to kill anyone." Wolf replied, "Or at least not as far as I know." and she glanced at Torrent, "But we are keeping an eye on Serett."

"That would seem logical." Cornellius said.

"What about you engineer?" Gant asked, "What are you willing to do to get hold of whatever Serett's after?"

"If there is any data relating to lost STC technology present on this world then I will do whatever I can to obtain it in the Ommissiah's name." Cornellius answered but then he added, "However, our chances of success would be increased if I had your co-operation rather than having to rely on coercion."

"That's good to know." Wolf said, not fully satisfied with the answer but regarding it as preferable to what

Serett's attitude appeared to be, "Anyway, I think we better be getting back to the rest of the platoon."

"They've got quite a head start without us." Torrent said.

"The servitors will slow them down." Vance pointed out.

"Nevertheless, we've still got some catching up to do." Gant said and she looked at both Cornelius and Wolf,

"You two better climb up onto my Sentinel and hang on." she said, "We'll make better time that way."

When the group caught up with the rest of the platoon the first thing Vance did was check in with the other sergeants.

"Did we miss anything?" he asked, using his microbead to address them all at the same time.

"It's been pretty quiet." Grey said, "The locals seem to know the areas the big predators stick to and are leading us around them."

"Rull's well ahead of us." Molla added, "He signalled to let us know that he's laid eyes on the target."

"He's seen the beacon?" Vance said.

"No such luck. But he has found the ship. It's about ten thousand metres ahead of us mind you, so we're still a few hours off yet." Molla told Vance and he looked skywards to double check the position of the sun in the sky. He wore an Imperial Guard issued watch but that was running on the standard Imperial clock rather than being fine tuned to the rate of rotation of this planet and so was of little use in determining when sunset would occur. From the way the light was shining through the jungle canopy it appeared that the sun had yet to reach its highest point in the sky, indicating that there was still plenty of daylight left.

"Well we ought to reach it before dark then." Vance said to Wolf, "That's a relief. It'll be easier to secure a section of a ship to sleep in than an area of jungle."

"So we're spending the night in a space ship that's been abandoned for more than ten thousand years?" Wolf asked nervously, "What if there's something inside?"

"Not afraid of ghosts are you lieutenant?" Torrent asked.

"There is the chance that the machine spirit will have become unsound." Cornelius commented and Torrent and Vance looked at one another.

"Looks like we'll be stuck with two of them jumping at shadows." Torrent commented.

9.

The natives continued to lead Second Platoon towards the source of the vox beacon without incident, Grey's observation about their knowledge of the jungle proving accurate. They led the platoon up a slope and came to a halt when they reached the top, a position from where it was possible to look out over a vast area of jungle ahead and Wolf saw that the terrain became massively uneven towards the horizon.

"So that's it then I guess." Quinn said out loud while the natives pointed and began talking to Serett again and Wolf frowned as she heard this.

"What's it?" she asked, "I don't see anything."

"The starship." Vance told her, "Look." and he pointed towards a particularly uneven area.

"I don't see anything." Wolf said, taking out her magnoculars and trying to use them to see what the Catachans were pointing out to her.

"I estimate the vessel's length to be approximately one thousand four hundred metres." Serett announced, "Assuming that it survived the impact in one piece."

"So why can't I see it?" Wolf asked, prompting Torrent to shake her head and sighed.

"Outsiders." Grey commented.

"Don't look for the ship." Vance told her, "Look for the shape of a ship. Look, there's the prow." and he turned Wolf so that she was looking at a slope at one end of what looked like the side of a hill. Then he rotated her slowly until coming to an even higher peak about a kilometre away from this slope, "And there's the control tower."

"You mean it's buried?" Wolf asked.

"Of course it's buried." Vance answered, "What else did you expect? A brand new Lunar-class cruiser fresh from a forgeworld."

"But how long does it take to become like that?" Wolf asked and Vance looked towards Molla.

"Molla." he called out, "The lieutenant wants to know how long it takes for a jungle to cover a ship like that."

"Well if it was Catachan," Molla began, "a couple of months tops. But here I'd say a few hundred years at least."

"And it's been here for thousands." Vance added.

Wolf remained fixated on the size of the terrain feature that was in fact a starship that had remained buried on this world for around fifteen thousand years. She knew very well just how big warp-capable vessels were and by those standards this one was actually rather small, being approximately frigate sized but she had never seen one close up from the outside with anything around to compare it to for scale.

"Rull reports a possible access point about two hundred metres forward of the control tower." Molla called out.

"Tell him to circle around the whole thing." Wolf replied, "A sniper rifle isn't much use for fighting aboard a starship." then she looked towards Quinn's veteran squad. Armed primarily with shotguns almost identical to those used by the armsmen of the Imperial Navy they were ideally armed for combat at close quarters, "Sergeant Quinn, I want your squad to lead the way inside. Take Khor's ogryns for support." she ordered.

"I will accompany the entry team as well lieutenant." Serett announced, "Along with our guides."

"No surprise there." Vance whispered to Wolf.

"Quinn and Khor ought to be able to handle Serett and the natives if they are planning an ambush though right?" she replied just as quietly.

"Oh sure." Vance agreed, "Ten Catachans and seven ogryns with modern small arms against a couple of dozen stone age hunters? No problem. Even if they do have that cogboy to back them up." then he looked behind the command squad, "I'm more concerned about us."

"You don't think Cornelius will turn on us do you?" Wolf asked.

"Unlikely. The bastard's made it pretty clear he thinks that we're more use alive and I believe him. The problem is all those servitors. Serett could send a remote vox signal to get them to attack if he wanted and they're packing a lot of firepower."

"We could use our vox sets to jam his signals." Wolf suggested.

"We'll need to know what frequency he's operating on." Vance pointed out and Wolf nodded.

"I'll find out." she said before dropping back to where Cornelius and Nathin walked at the head of the pack of servitors.

"You require assistance lieutenant?" Cornelius asked.

"Can you tell me what frequency the servitors' built in vox systems are operating on?" she asked, making sure that the servitors were too far behind to overhear.

"You seek to prevent commands from being issued remotely?" Cornelius responded and Wolf nodded.

"Pee-ell-six-seven-three." Cornellius said to Nathin, "Assist the lieutenant with her vox issue."
"Yes adept." Nathin replied and he accompanied Wolf back to her own squad where he approached Turner to make the necessary adjustments to the vox set he carried on his back.

When the opening that would provide access to the starship came into view it looked to be nothing more than a cave beneath the roots of a large tree and the natives came to a halt some distance away, debating amongst themselves.

"Sergeants Quinn and Khor. Lead the way." Serett called out.

"What? Doesn't he want to go first?" Vance muttered.

"The natives don't look very happy to be going inside at all." Wolf added.

"Dark." Khor said, "Small." Ogryns were notorious for their dislike of confined spaces, something that made transporting them in armoured vehicles something of a problem. However, their unswerving loyalty to the Emperor and the officers they saw as his representatives in battle offered a solution.

"Sergeant Khor, your squad is to accompany Sergeant Quinn's into the cave." Wolf ordered as Quinn's squad were positioning themselves to enter the starship as if it were a defended position.

Initially Khor let out a low growl. But then he looked at his squad and spoke.

"Ogryns in." he ordered and he waved them forwards.

"Go!" Quinn suddenly yelled and accompanied by three of his men he rushed into the opening, hurling a chemical light stick ahead of them to illuminate the way. The rest of the squad followed almost immediately with Khor's ogryns bringing up the rear. Initially Serett and the natives remained outside as Serett continued to speak with them, apparently trying to persuade them to enter the starship and this meant that for the time being only Second Platoon's personnel were inside. Quinn took advantage of this to make sure that he studied his surroundings carefully, taking a flash light from his webbing and clipping it to his shotgun.

The starship had been buried for so long that the dirt covering it had become compacted into rock and the walls of the cave behind the opening had been painted by the natives at some point in the distant past. Now faded, the images were still visible and showed figures fleeing what appeared to be a point of light with many of them being consumed by it.

"Lieutenant." Quinn said, activating his microbead, "You may want to check out the walls in here. Looks like the natives recorded something of their history in pictures."

"Sergeant you are not here to evaluate native art." Serett's buzzing voice responded, "Advance."

"Yes sir." Quinn said, scowling before he led his men deeper into the cave.

The further in the Catachans went the wider the cave became until it was wide enough for Quinn's entire squad to stand side by side without touching one another and it was at this point that they found what they were looking for, the wall ahead of them was not made of rock but of metal and there was a narrow gap. Approaching this gap carefully Quinn shone his light through it and was about to peer inside when all of a sudden there was a series of shrieking sounds and a swarm of winged creatures with long tails burst out. Quinn dived aside, barely avoiding the swarm as it rushed past but the next of his men was not so fast and several of the creatures slammed into him, clawing at his face and neck.

"Get them off him!" Quinn yelled as the soldier's screams turned to a gurgling sound when the arteries in his neck were torn open. Two more Catachans leapt forwards to try and save their comrade but even as they took hold of him he slumped forwards, landing face down in a growing pool of his own blood. Meanwhile the swarm of flying creatures flew straight towards the ogryns and Khor roared before he swung his ripper gun through the air in front of him, swatting several creatures in one go. More of them tried to claw and bite at the massive abhumans, but their flesh was thick and tough enough that the creatures' tiny teeth and claws could do nothing more than irritate the ogryns as they ripped them free and crushed them with their bare hands.

"Flamers." Quinn said, "Clear that gap." and one of the two flamers armed veterans stepped forwards, pushed the muzzles of their weapons into the gap and fired them. This produced a flash of orange from within the gap and a wave of heat that filled the previously cold and damp cave. With the gap cleared of any remaining lifeforms the trooper stepped back and Quinn peered inside, poking his shotgun and its attached flash light through the gap to provide illumination, "Looks like some sort of docking port." Quinn commented and then he looked at the metal either side of the gap. From the looks of it the gap was a doorway providing access to the ship but the doors were open only a few centimetres, nowhere near enough for an adult human to fit through. Quinn tried to push the doors further apart but after thousands of years in place they did not move.

"Okay Khor." he said, stepping back, "Let's put those muscles of yours to use."

"Ogryns pull." Khor responded and his squad all walked up to the gap, reaching inside and grabbing hold of the doors. Then all together the ogryns pulled, snarling as they put their full strength to work. Initially at least the doors remained exactly where they were, but then there was a grinding sound and one of them suddenly lurched back. Then the other did the same and both began to move apart thanks to the combined strength of the ogryns, "Door open." Khor announced as the two doors slammed into their final resting places.

The opening that had been just a few centimetres earlier was now almost two metres wide, more than enough for a man to be able to pass through and Quinn looked inside the ship again. Just a few metres ahead he saw a second set of doors that were already wide open and beyond that a passageway that looked to be at a slight angle thanks to the massive vessel having come to rest unevenly. Quinn smiled and activated his microbead again.

"Lieutenant," he said, "we're in."

"Hold your position sergeant." Serett replied before Wolf could, "I will be with you shortly."

"Oh great." Quinn muttered, shaking his head.

Meanwhile outside the cave Serett walked up to Wolf and addressed her directly.

"The rest of your platoon will remain out here." he told her, "Secure the area and be alert for any other groups of natives that may be in the area. They are tribal and may not welcome our presence."

"Can't Enginseer Cornelius just talk to them the way-" Wolf began.

"No!" Serett snapped, displaying far more emotion than Wolf was used to from any of the Adeptus Mechanicus. Then he continued, "If any natives are sighted they are to be assumed to be hostile and engaged with maximum force."

"Of course." Wolf replied, "Will there be anything else?"

"No. Not at this time." Serett answered, "Carry on lieutenant." and then he turned around and walked away, heading for the entrance to the cave and calling out for the natives to follow him.

"Well everyone heard the man." Wolf announced, looking around, "Let's get this area secured. Sergeant Gant I want the undergrowth burned back for at least fifty metres. Enginseer Cornelius please deploy the gun servitors in a radius of twenty metres. Everyone else dig in." then she paused, "No wait. Sergeant Molla."

"Yes lieutenant?" Molla replied.

"Take your squad and locate Guardsman Rull. Find out whether he's seen any signs of humans in the area and try to determine where they might come from if we do encounter them." Wolf ordered and Molla nodded, "So how did I do?" she then asked Vance quietly.

"Pretty good." he replied, "Though I'm not sure I like the idea of losing a full squad if those servitors are going to end up turning on us."

"I know." Wolf agreed, "But I'm hoping that we've got that covered with the vox and I don't dare send less than a full squad out into the jungle alone."

"Good point." Vance said, "We can't all be as good as Rull."

Serett ignored the cave paintings as he led the nervous looking natives to the starship's docking port.

"Looks empty." Quinn said when he saw the tech priest standing behind him.

"This entry point is damaged." Serett replied, staring at where the flames from the flamer had burned the interior of the docking port.

"Oh yeah." Quinn said, "There was a nest of something living just inside the door." and then he glanced at where the body of the Catachan killed by the flying creatures had been moved to one side and wrapped up,

"I lost one of my men." he added.

"Your men are replaceable Sergeant Quinn." Serett said, "The treasures potentially within this vessel are not. You will take no further action that may risk any damage without my express permission. Do you understand?"

Quinn frowned.

"I understand." he said.

"Good. Now follow me. I shall lead the way." Serett said and he stepped into the starship.

In his time in the Imperial Guard Quinn had been on several starships, both transport vessels and warships. Some of these ships had, according to the few crewmen he had spoken with, been thousands of years old though none of them had spent most of that time buried beneath the surface of an alien planet. However, the crashed starship had been built well enough that it appeared to still be structurally sound even after everything that had happened to it. A handful of native lifeforms had made their homes inside the ship during the millennia it had spent here but these were scattered and Serett himself used his las pistol to pick them off before any of the natives or Catachans could react.

With no power being provided to any of the ship's systems all of the elevators between decks were inoperative and so such movement instead required emergency stairwells and ladders to be located and as Serett led the Catachans and natives from one of these to another Quinn noticed that he seemed to know exactly where he was going rather than randomly exploring.

"Can you tell us our destination sir?" he asked.

"There is a vox beacon still active within this vessel sergeant and I am able to track its signals." Serett replied, though Quinn knew that this was a lie. Tracking a signal would only point towards the source and would not identify a path that sometimes involved travelling in the opposite direction to reach a ladder.

Rounding a corner Quinn saw something in the beam of his flash light that he had expected to see more of

inside the starship, a body lay against the wall. On closer inspection however, the body turned out not to be a long dead crew member. Instead it was a humanoid machine with a skeletal appearance. It was far more human like than any robot Quinn had seen before and yet was definitely not a half human servitor, lacking any indication that it had ever possessed any organic components and Quinn looked at it more closely. "That machine is unimportant sergeant." Serett told him, "Ignore it."
"You know what it is then?" Quinn asked.
"It is just a minion sergeant. Something designed to obey without question." Serett replied and something about his answer bothered Quinn but with no reason to disobey the tech priest he continued to follow him. However, glancing at the natives as they passed the inactive machine Quinn noticed that each of them averted their gaze rather than look directly on it.

10.

Crouched beside a gaping hole in the ground Molla held a chemical light stick over it and let it go, watching as the glowing light fell into the darkness.

"Yeah." he said to his men, "I'd say Rull was right. This is another way into the ship." then he looked at his squad's vox operator, "Green, get over here." he said and as the man approached him Molla reached out for the vox unit's handset, "This is Molla. Are you there lieutenant?" and then he waited for a reply.

At first there was nothing but static but after a few seconds Wolf's voice responded.

"Go ahead sergeant." she said.

"Lieutenant, Rull's found what looks like another way into the ship. Do you want us to head inside for a look?" Molla told her.

"Negative sergeant." Wolf replied, "Hold your position. Where's Rull now?"

"Set up about fifty metres from here covering a trail that leads right up to this spot."

"Good. We've not heard anything from Quinn since he entered the ship so keep an eye out for him. It's possible that they'll find their way to that entrance."

"Understood lieutenant."

"Is there anything else to report?" Wolf asked.

"Negative lieutenant. That's all."

"Good. We're all set up to defend this position so I suggest we avoid further vox use. Just in case."

"Understood lieutenant." Molla replied, "Over and out." and he passed the handset back to Green.

"Just in case of what sergeant?" he asked.

"Just in case that cogboy inside this wreck is listening in." Molla told him.

Serett continued to make his way through the darkened corridors of the starship in a deliberate fashion, leading the others towards what he said was the source of the vox beacon. But he came to a halt when his way was blocked by a large double door at the end of a corridor and stood before it motionless.

"I don't like the look of this." Quinn said to his men as he raised his shotgun.

Then Serett extended one of his mechandriles towards the wall beside the door where there was an inactive control panel. But the moment Serett's mechandrite touched it the panel came to life, power being fed to it from the tech priest himself and moments later there was a low rumble as the doors slid open to reveal what lay beyond.

Unlike the rest of the ship the chamber was bathed in a pale green light that illuminated the column of machinery that extended from the floor up to the ceiling more than twenty metres above. Speaking briefly to the natives, Serett strode into the chamber and headed directly for this column while Quinn's squad entered behind him and spread out and Khor's ogyrns remained just inside the door. The contents of the room were a mystery to the Catachans but it was obvious that the central column was what interested Serett so that was where Quinn's squad also concentrated their attention towards it. The green glow was not coming from the column itself but instead from a smaller piece of equipment that had been connected to the base of the column with a single thick cable. This was positioned beside a chair that looked to be intended for an operator and from the angle Quinn viewed the chair it appeared that the last operator had never left the room, his lifeless body still sitting upright even after thousands of years.

But it was the device hooked into the column that attracted Quinn's attention most. Aside from the green glow, it appeared out of place in other respects as well. Every piece of technology in the room looked as if it could have been made on a forgeworld of the Adeptus Mechanicus, having the same general appearance of all the Imperium's technology and although Quinn knew enough to realise that a great deal of knowledge had been lost during the Age of Strife the glowing device still appeared to be too different to have been made by the same human civilisation that constructed the starship.

Meanwhile Serett walked up to the chair and stood beside it, looking down at the occupant.

"The sleeper will awaken." he said and turning the chair to face him the tech priest extended a mechandrite down to what Quinn now saw was not a body at all. Instead it was a humanoid machine similar in form to the one he had seen in the corridor, the primary difference being that this one was of a more ornate design. The mechandrite connected to the motionless robot and almost instantly a dull red glow appeared in its eyes as it raised its head, "In the Omnisiah's name, awaken." Serett said.

"Sarge, what is this?" one of Quinn's men asked as the natives suddenly squeezed around the ogyrns blocking the doorway and ran forwards before dropping to their knees.

"I don't know, but I don't like it." Quinn replied, "Everyone back away." and the squad began to withdraw towards the doorway.

The robotic figure turned towards the retreating Catachans and then looked back at Serett.

"You woke us?" it asked slowly in fluent High Gothic, the formal language of the Imperium, "Why?"

"I only wish to serve the Omnissiah. The God of the Machine." Serett replied.

"No." the robot responded, "No god. Just us."

This was enough for Quinn and he raised his shotgun, aiming it at the robot.

"Magos get clear!" he called out. He doubted that his shotgun would have much effect on the power armoured tech priest but he was unwilling to risk a random shot finding a weak point in his armour. But rather than follow Quinn's advice Serett looked towards the natives now cowering in front of him and the newly active robot and he uttered a few words of their proto-gothic tongue. In an instant the natives leapt to their feet with their weapons in their hands but Quinn reacted before they could attack.

"Open fire!" he yelled before firing his shotgun into the group of natives.

"Ogryns fire!" Khor added and all of a sudden the chamber was filled with the sounds of shotguns and ripper guns being fired. Armed only with bows and spears and lacking any form of body armour the natives stood no chance and just a few seconds all of them lay dead on the floor. But the distraction gave the robotic figure enough time to reach out and pick up a staff that was leant against the central column and point it towards the Catachans whereupon a beam of brilliant white light erupted from the tip and burned its way through two of Quinn's men who were stood one behind the other.

"Fall back." Quinn ordered, swiftly understanding the firepower within the staff, "Jackson, see what your melta can do to that thing." and the member of Quinn's squad armed with the powerful melta gun took aim and fired.

"No!" Serett yelled, diving at the robotic figure and pushing it out of the way of the powerful energy blast. But this meant that the tech priest was instead struck by the beam and the bulky back mounted power pack for his armour burst and exploded, severing both his mechadrites and the heavy duty servo-arm connected to it.

The Catachans continued to fire as they withdrew through the doorway and the concentrated hail of fire from the shotguns and ripper guns was enough to tear one of the legs from the robotic figure, causing it to collapse on the spot and drop its staff.

"We got it." Quinn said, "Stand down." but then as he watched the robotic figure dragged itself across the floor to where its severed limb lay and before Quinn's eyes cables erupted from the robot's hip that connected with the leg and pulled it back into place before the machine slowly began to get back to its feet.

"Holy feth." Quinn gasped. Then he realised that all of the Imperial Guardsmen, both Catachan and Ogryn were now in the corridor outside the chamber and he reached out and slammed his hand down on the same control panel Serett had used to open it. As Quinn had hoped the panel still had just enough power in it for the heavy doors to slid shut once more but he was not convinced that they would be enough to stop the robot as they were and he looked at Jackson again, "Give this a quick blast." he ordered, pointing at the point where the two halves of the door joined together, "Let's see if that thing can follow us when the door's welded shut."

Nodding, Jackson aimed his melta gun at the top of the door and pulled the trigger for a few brief moments. The intense blast of heat melted not only both halves of the door but also the door frame itself and when Jackson ceased fire before this was enough to burn right through the door or wall the heated material cooled back down and fused together, jamming the door shut.

"Okay, now let's get the feth out of here." Quinn said.

Inside the chamber the robotic figure looked down at Serett. The tech priest was not moving but the energy field within his cybernetic systems indicated that he was still alive for the time being at least. Then it turned to the energy cell that had maintained the vox beacon for the last fifteen thousand years and the figure stride towards it. Crouching beside the energy cell the humanoid machine disconnected it from the beacon and instead drew the power into its own body. This did not require the cables to be connected, that had been necessary only to interface with the alien, if compatible, human machinery whereas the device was capable of transmitting its power directly to the robotic figure without the need for a physical connection.

But the figure did not intend to keep all of this power to itself and as its eyes glowed brightly it uttered a single word.

"Arise."

Attempting to head back to the cave entrance from where they had entered the crashed starship, Quinn was thankful that when heading in the other direction the party had left a trail that was easy to track backwards in the dust covering the deck plates. However, as they continued on their way Quinn noticed another trail moving across their own and he paused as he tried to determine what had made it.

"Machine gone." Khor commented.

"What?" Quinn replied and Khor pointed to the side of the corridor where the trail began with a large area of disturbed dust.

"Dead machine gone." the BONEHead said and Quinn realised that he was talking about the humanoid robot

that Serett had dismissed as unimportant.

"Look sharp." he said, raising his shotgun and looking around. The trail on the floor indicated that the robot had headed down a side passage but given the unknown layout of the starship Quinn was not willing to bet that it would not be able to reappear from a different direction. Unable to spot any sign of the machine he raised one hand to his microbead, "I better call this." he said before activating the device and adding, "Quinn to Wolf." but all he heard in reply was static, "Reese, bring that vox over here. Maybe that can get a signal through the hull."

But as Reese stepped forwards and held out the vox handset there was a sudden flash of green light and one of the ogryns howled in pain briefly as the flesh melted away from his ribs which then also dissolved and the massive abhuman fell dead.

"Ogryns fire!" Khor bellowed, enraged by the loss of one of his squad and the remaining six ogryns turned on the spot and fired into the darkness. Even without a visible target the combination of high calibre shotguns and fully automatic firing meant that there were enough projectiles fired down the passageway to guarantee that something would be hit and there were sparks as the ripper gun rounds bounced off the metallic shell of the humanoid robot that as Quinn's veterans turned and pointed their flash lights towards was revealed to now be armed with some form of rifle weapon.

Dropping to his knees Quinn opened fire as well, working the action of his shotgun as rapidly as he could. But although the robot jerked under the impact of each blast from either Catachan or ogryn it remained standing and swung its rifle directly towards Quinn. Fortunately, before it could fire Quinn saw the flash of white light and felt the blast of heat as Jackson fired his melta gun at the robot. The beam punched right through the robot's chest and the resulting internal explosion hurled debris in all directions, leaving only a pair of legs that staggered randomly for a few moments before they collapsed to the deck. However, as Quinn and the others watched the severed legs as well as every other visible piece of debris faded away until there was no trace of the robot left at all.

"Well that doesn't look good." Quinn said, "I've got a bad feeling that he'll be back."

11.

Wolf sat on a rock and began to unwrap a ration bar when she thought she saw movement in the undergrowth just beyond the area that had been cleared.

"What's that?" she asked, pointing out the disturbance to the rest of her squad who were still lay in the shallow dug out that had been constructed for them.

"Looks like there's something trying to creep up on us." Vance replied.

"Probably some local predator." Torrent added.

"Grey!" Vance shouted, "Looks like we've got-" but before he could continue the ground beneath the undergrowth suddenly exploded upwards, hurling two nearby servitors through the air as the bulky spiderlike machine that had been buried there burst out and rose up into the air. About the size of a small vehicle the machine hovered as it looked down on the Catachans with what looked to be a cluster of glowing eyes on its head.

"Him on Earth!" Wolf exclaimed as she dropped her ration bar and threw herself back into the dug out, landing on top of Torrent.

"Get off me!" the medic yelled.

"Open fire!" a voice called out, but this order did not come from Wolf or any of the Catachans. Instead it was Cornelius that called out and at the same time as he drew his las pistol the defensive ring of gun servitors all swung around to engage the floating machine.

Initially only the heavy bolter armed servitors were in position to fire on the spider and the air was filled with the roar of their automatic weapons and the booming of the mass reactive rounds detonating. But the bolter rounds did not detonate inside the spider as they were intended to do. The machine's armour was tough enough that they could not penetrate and so instead they went off on the surface, accomplishing nothing more than pitting the armour where they struck.

"You heard him." Wolf called out to her troops, "Open fire." and there were flashes of light from all around as the Catachans joined in firing on the spider. Accompanying the las fire came the unmistakeable 'Bloop!' sounds of grenade launchers even these support weapons were even less effective than the heavy bolters used by the servitors and the spider remained unscathed.

"Get those sentinels moving." Wolf shouted, hoping that the heavier weapons mounted on the walkers would be of some use against the machine and Gant and her men rushed for their vehicles.

"Krak grenades!" Vance shouted and the two grenadiers switched from area effect fragmentation grenades to anti-armour rounds using shaped charges. One of these struck the spider where one of its front legs joined its body and the explosion ripped the limb away. Then the two multi melta armed servitors made it into optimum firing position to make use of their powerful weapons and two beams of energy leapt out at the spider from each side. One of the four shots passed harmlessly beneath the machine but the other three were on target and the thick armour proved no use against them, breaking away until the more delicate internal components were revealed and blasted apart as well. With its key internal systems destroyed the spider dropped out of the air and came to the ground with a 'Crash!'

"What was it?" Wolf asked, looking first at the wrecked spider and then at Cornelius.

"It is a Canoptek Spyder." Cornelius replied, "And we must destroy it."

"Looks pretty destroyed to me." Wolf said before there was a grinding sound and the spider began to rise back into the air.

This time however, the machine did not simply hover motionless while the platoon fired on it. Instead it lunged towards the gun servitors, picking out those armed with multi meltas before they could target it accurately and simply ripping them apart with a array of tools that extended out from beneath its head. Then, now under fire from the remaining servitors and Catachans, it retreated back to where its leg had fallen and scooped it up. Then it pressed the limb against where it had been mounted originally and when it let go the leg remained in place, its connection to the spider's body now restored.

At the same time there was a rumbling sound and to either side of where Second Platoon had cleared the jungle another pair of the spider like machines emerged from where they had been buried.

"Get that missile launcher set up." Grey ordered the two members of his squad that made up its attached heavy weapon team, "I want anti-armour rounds ready."

At the same time Gant's squad were starting up their sentinels and she quickly identified the closest of the spiders.

"Steer left." she ordered, "We'll soon put them back in the ground where they belong." and the four walking machines lurched into motion, striding towards the spider that retreated back into the jungle as they approached.

Too close to be engaged with his squad's mortars, Mayer and his men instead used their las guns to attack

the other newly emerged spider.

"Concentrate your fire on the head." Mayer ordered as he lined his weapon up on the cluster of lights mounted at the front of the machine that he hoped represented something important.

The combined energy of all six las guns focused on such a relatively small area paid off as the lights burst apart under repeated strikes by las gun blasts and went dark. This lasted only a short time however, as the lights began to come back on almost straight away and the broken coverings regenerated somehow. But the brief moment of confusion that the spider suffered while its senses were impaired was enough for Grey's men to line up their missile launcher and there was a sudden 'Whoosh!' as the missile flew from the tubular weapon and slammed into the spider's head before detonating. The shaped charge warhead forced a jet of molten metal through the casing of the spider's head that then travelled along its body, tearing it open from the inside in a ball of flame. This damage was clearly too much for whatever self repair system had reanimated the first spider and rather than putting itself back together the various pieces just faded away as they fell to the ground before vanishing completely.

The first spider then rushed forwards, smashing past a pair of gun servitors as it headed directly for Wolf's command squad. But as it looked likely to tear into them Cornelliuss put himself in its path, holding his large power axe in both hands before him.

"Abomination!" he yelled as he swung the axe, striking the same leg that had already been severed once and cutting it from the spider's body once more. Then as the spider turned its head directly towards the tech priest he used the servo arm mounted on his armour's back pack to reach out and grab hold of its neck. At the same time he activated his link to the technical servitors that were lined up beside the cave entrance and in unison the cyborgs all turned towards their master and charged forwards. Each of the servitors was fitted with a servo arm like that mounted on the tech priest's armour and using these they set upon the spider, ripping off legs and tearing holes in its armour. Seeing the chance to assist his superior, Nathin then leapt out of the dug out he shared with Wolf's squad and pushed his las pistol into one of the holes created in the spider's armoured shell before pulling the trigger as fast as he could. All of a sudden the lights in the spider's eyes faded as Nathin hit something vital and Cornelliuss released his grip on the machine just before it began to fade away like its comrade had.

This left only the spider that had retreated into the woods and Gant's squadron could just about see the machine through the undergrowth, seemingly hunched down on the ground as if trying to conceal itself.

"What the feth is it doing?" she said to herself. Then she activated the private vox channel that connected her to the other three walkers, "Krak missile. Fire for effect." she ordered.

"Copy sergeant. Target acquired. Fox one." and there was a 'Whoosh!' as the missile-armed sentinel opened fire, an anti-armour missile streaking over the undergrowth towards the spider.

The weapon struck the machine on its heavily armoured back, knocking it aside but not destroying it. Then it suddenly lifted up into the air and turned towards the advancing sentinels and at the same time a cloud of machines that looked like miniature versions of the larger spider erupted from the undergrowth beneath it.

"Throne!" Gant exclaimed as she saw the swarm heading towards her and she reacted quickly, firing the heavy flamer built into her Sentinel and a jet of fire spewed forwards to envelope dozens of the tiny machines. But there were far more in the swarm that were either not in the area covered by the flames to begin with or were able to move out of the way in time to avoid being burned and they continued to race towards the sentinels. Like Gant, the pilots of the other two flamer armed vehicles fired their weapons, dousing even more of the jungle with flame but this was still insufficient to hold back the swarm and it smashed right into the Sentinels.

Each of the tiny machines landed on one of the four Imperial walkers and using tiny mandibles built into their heads they set about eating into their armour and any exposed system. Gant heard a sudden release of pressure and felt her Sentinel sag as one of the hydraulic lines that controlled its legs was pierced and she knew that it had been crippled.

Throwing open the door at the side of her cockpit Gant leapt out and rolled as she hit the ground. Draining her las pistol she turned and fired at the insect like machines now consuming her Sentinel and although they were vulnerable enough that her las pistol could destroy them individually this made little difference to the size of the swarm. Then she heard a scream and she looked around to see another of the Sentinels covered in the alien machines only this time they had also flown into the cockpit and had begun to devour its pilot. The man tried to escape by climbing out of his vehicle but by then a number of the machines had latched onto him firmly and his body landed in a heap on the ground.

"We need to fall back!" Gant shouted, rushing towards the remaining flamer armed Sentinel and waving to try and attract the attention of its pilot. But before she could reach the vehicle the larger spider burst out of the jungle once more and slammed into the side of the Sentinel, knocking it to the ground before lashing out with one of the blades mounted under its head and slitting the pilot's throat even as he was struggling to release his harness.

Another missile flew through the air as the final remaining Sentinel fired again. This time however, the missile was intercepted in mid air by part of the swarm of smaller machines and it exploded prematurely as they ate

into its warhead.

"Go!" Gant yelled, "Get out of here!" but it was too late and before the pilot of the last Sentinel could even turn his vehicle around the swarm was upon him. Attacking the missiles still held in the launcher as they had done to the one intercepted in flight the machines found the warhead of one and triggered it while still in the launcher, blasting the cockpit off the Sentinel and leaving just a pair of legs that fell forwards with a loud 'Crash!'

Hoping that the alien machines would not pay too much attention to just a single person, Gant turned back towards second Platoon's position and started to run.

Molla had deployed First Squad to cover the trail leading up to the entrance to the starship, basing his defence around the heavy weapon team armed with a heavy bolter then placing the rest of his squad either side of this and positioned so that they could cover the jungle in all directions. But what they did not expect was to be attacked from inside the starship.

The first shot was silent, a projectile fired from a weapon built for stealth. But the impact of the round rang out as it struck a metal hand just as it clawed its way out of the starship.

"What the feth?" Molla exclaimed as he spun around just in time to see a humanoid machine falling away from the edge of the hole and bouncing into the darkness below.

A second machine peered over the edge of the hole only for its head to jerk backwards as Rull put another round between its eyes.

"Contact!" Molla yelled, pointing his las pistol towards the hole and firing at the next figure to drag itself to the surface, this one making it out of the hole without Rull being able to intervene. However, as it reached for the strange looking rifle that hung by its side the machine was targeted by every las gun and pistol that Molla's squad could bring to bear. At first these appeared to have no effect on the robot's armoured body and the machine unleashed a blast of energy that stripped the flesh from one of Molla's squad, taking enough time to kill the man that he had time let out a shriek of agony before his chest was blasted open and he could make no more sound. Given the volume of fire directed at the robot however, it was inevitable that some shots would find more vulnerable points eventually and a shot to its neck left its head dangling at an odd angle and the robot dropped to its knees and fell forwards. But just as the Catachans were starting to relax the machine suddenly reached up to take hold of its head and repositioned it before taking hold of its weapon and starting to get back to its feet.

The member of First Squad armed with a grenade launcher fired as the robot was still in the process of standing up, selecting an anti-armour krak grenade given the close proximity of the rest of the squad to it. The explosive projectile hit the robot in the centre of its chest, punching a hole right through and knocking it backwards. This time however, it did not hit the ground. Instead as it was still falling the robot began to fade from view and before it landed it had vanished completely.

Molla rushed up to the hole and looked down it, shining his flash light in to illuminate the sides and he saw several more of the machines scaling them towards the surface. Smiling he plucked a fragmentation grenade from his webbing and pulled out the pin. Estimating the amount of time it would take the grenade to drop as far as the climbing robots he released his grip on the grenade and paused for a moment before letting it go. Just in case any of the fragments made it as far as the surface Molla leapt back and waited for the sound of the explosion before peering back into the hole. Whether or not the grenade had been powerful enough to destroy the machines was impossible to tell. But it had certainly been powerful enough to break up the walls they had been clinging to when it went off and not one of them remained visible.

"Stay alert." Molla said, "There may be more of them. I'm going to call this in."

Wolf listened as Molla described the machines that had attempted to climb out of the buried starship.

"Understood sergeant." she replied, "Hold your position if you can but you have permission to withdraw if necessary. Over and out." and then she gave the handset back to Turner and turned to look at Cornellius, "You know what these things are don't you?" she asked.

"I do lieutenant." he replied.

"So tell us." Vance added.

"They are called Necrons." Cornellius answered.

"Necrons? I've never heard of them." Wolf replied.

"Few have lieutenant." Cornellius said, "Most likely because the overwhelming majority of those who have encountered them have been killed in the process. Even the victories reported have been pyrrhic ones with losses sustained far beyond those inflicted on the enemy."

"But they can be beaten?" Wolf asked.

"They can. With massive firepower. However, as you have seen even their damaged machines can be restored to active status. I recommend we inform Colonel Shryke so that he can organise a evacuation from this world and then withdraw from this position as quickly as we can." Cornellius told her.

"We can't leave without Quinn and Khor." Vance commented.

"No we can't." Wolf agreed, "But we can call this in. Give me back that handset." and she reached out to take the vox handset from Turner again and she raised it to her mouth, "Catachan One Nine Mark Four this is Catachan One Nine Mark Four Mark Two. Come in. Over." she transmitted and a reply came a few moments later.

"Catachan One Nine Mark Four Mark Two this is Catachan One Nine Mark Four." Company Sergeant Stubbs' voice said, "Go ahead. Over."

"Sergeant we have come under attack by xenos forces. Engineer Cornelius states that they are called Necrons and recommends a full withdrawal from this world. Over." Wolf said. For a while there was just silence and Wolf was about to repeat her message when Stubbs spoke again.

"Understood lieutenant." he said, "Major Trent has your message and will inform the colonel. What is your status? Over."

"We have light casualties but two of my squads and Magos Serett remain unaccounted for. We are holding position until they can be located. Over."

"Understood lieutenant. Over and out." and then the channel went dead.

"Well there we go." Wolf said as she passed the handset to Turner yet again, "Now we just wait and – What's that buzzing?"

There was a buzzing sound coming from within the jungle and the Catachans raised their weapons in anticipation of some sort of insect swarm appearing. But instead it was Gant that came rushing out of the jungle towards them, no longer at the controls of her sentinel.

"They're coming!" she yelled, "Thousands of them!"

"Thousands of what?" Vance asked in reply.

"Insects. Machines. Machine insects. That giant spider either dug them up or made them." Gant said, gasping for breath, "They destroyed my Sentinel and the rest of my squadron."

Then above the trees the sky began to darken as a massive swarm of the tiny machines flew towards Second Platoon.

"Scarabs." Cornelius said and looked at Wolf, "We cannot stand against that many."

"So what do we do?" Vance asked.

"Into the ship." Wolf said.

"Into the ship?" Grey repeated, "For all we know that's full of Necrons as well."

"Maybe." Wolf replied, "But I get the feeling we'll last longer inside against the humanoid ones than we will out here against them. Now let's move!"

12.

Moving into the cave that led to the starship, Wolf and the element of second platoon that she commanded ran right into Quinn and Khor as they were leading their squads back out, the two groups meeting up where the walls had been decorated with cave paintings.

"Lieutenant." Quinn said when he saw her heading towards him, "What's going on?"

"We're falling back." she replied.

"Fascinating." Cornelliuss said, ignoring this and instead focusing on the cave paintings.

"Falling back? But that way just leads into the ship and you don't want to go in there." Quinn said, pointing back over his shoulder. Then a buzzing sound was heard from the direction of the cave entrance that began to grow louder.

"They're coming." Grey said, aiming his las pistol back down the passageway.

"Who's coming?" Quinn asked.

"We need to go." Wolf said. Then she looked at Cornelliuss, "Adept Cornelliuss, come on. We don't have time to study native art."

"It does not matter." Cornelliuss replied, stepping back and looking around at the entire set of images, "I have stored the images for future references."

"Good. Now let's move." Wolf ordered and Second Platoon set off again, moving as quickly as they could until they reached the docking port that gave access to the ship itself, "Does this seal?" wolf asked, looking at the doors.

"Khor's lot dragged it open." Quinn replied, "They could probably drag them shut again. Faster with the help of those servitors."

"They will not be sufficient." Cornelliuss said, "A scarab swarm of the size approaching will be able to eat through that hatch in a matter of minutes."

"What if we bring the roof down?" Grey suggested, looking up.

"That could work." Cornelliuss responding, "The scarabs would be forced to individually burrow through the debris before even reaching the hatch."

"But how do we bring down the roof without burying ourselves in the process?" Wolf asked.

"We cannot." Cornelliuss answered, "Therefore, I recommend making use of the remaining servitors. If each were given a fragmentation grenade that they could trigger after we had sealed the hatch from the inside they could trigger them."

"What do you think?" Wolf asked Vance.

"Good job someone around here is expendable." he replied, "Let's do it." and he reached for a grenade. Leaving each servitor, both combat and technical types, with a single grenade Second Platoon hurried through the hatch as the buzzing from the scarab swarm grew louder behind them.

"Ogryns push." Khor ordered when the last of them was through the hatch and once more the bulky abhumans took hold of the hatch and began to push them closed. Meanwhile Wolf stood at the midpoint of the hatchway, watching for the arrival of the scarab swarm and just as the two halves of the hatch were about to meet she saw the first of the tiny machines appear in the cave.

"They're here!" she yelled, firing her las pistol rapidly before the hatch slammed shut, "Stand to." she ordered, "If this doesn't work then we'll have to try and hold those things here. Sergeant Quinn, I want your flamers at the front."

While the Catachans inside the star ship were preparing to defend the vessel against the Necron scarabs the servitors outside in the cave were being swamped by them. Possessing only the minimum amount of intelligence necessary to carry out their function the scarabs took note of the presence of the half human/half machine servitors but in the absence of any hostile action from them ignored them and instead headed for the now sealed hatch, landing on it and began to consume it. However, in doing so they failed to act as the servitors all removed the pins from their grenades and simply let them go. The fist sized explosives dropped to the cave floor and moments later exploded.

The sound of the explosion was deadened, but not totally absorbed, by the heavily armoured hatch and inside the starship the members of Second Platoon positioned to defend it looked upwards when dust fell from the ceiling as it shook.

"Get ready." Wolf said, looking straight down the sights of her las pistol. However, the hatch remained intact with no signs of even a single scarab having survived the blast in the cave.

"Okay so now what?" Quinn asked, "Aren't we kind of trapped in here?"

"We need to find somewhere in this ship that is defensible." Wolf said, "Somewhere we can wait for rescue."

"Rescue? What rescue?" Grey asked, "We're just one platoon. Colonel Shryke isn't going to bring the entire regiment here to rescue us."

"Even if he did we couldn't signal them to tell them where we were." Quinn added, "Our vox won't penetrate the hull."

"Then we'll go out the way Rull found." Wolf said, "Molla's men will still be there."

"And so will the Necrons lieutenant." Cornellius pointed out, "As machines they are infinitely patient and if they cannot find a way into us they will simply wait for us to come out to them."

"Congratulations lieutenant. Looks like you just buried us alive." Torrent commented.

"Not necessarily." Cornellius responded, "A vessel such as this would undoubtedly have been outfitted with significant hangar capacity."

"Are you saying there could be working shuttles in this thing?" Vance asked.

"Indeed I am sergeant. Possibly far more than we require for our purposes." Cornellius replied.

"And you can fly one?" Wolf asked.

"Most likely." the tech priest said and then he looked at Gant and Nathin, "With the co-operation of my assistant and Sergeant Gant."

"Me?" Gant said in surprise, "I can't fly a shuttle."

"Perhaps not. But some of the system will be similar to those you are used to dealing with in a Sentinel and that will be good enough."

"So where will the shuttles be?" Wolf asked.

"We will need to locate a dorsal hangar." Cornellius said.

"So up then." Vance commented and Wolf nodded.

"Okay we'll head for the upper decks and find a hangar. Then we'll see about getting a shuttle going." she said.

Though Serett had seemed intimately familiar with the layout of the starship, Cornellius had only the most basic knowledge of its internal configuration and so he could not lead them straight to a hangar and on several occasions it was necessary for Second Platoon to double back as they suddenly encountered a dead end or damage section of the ship that could not be crossed. But eventually they reached a large chamber filled with shuttles.

Wolf was amazed at just how similar the smaller vessels looked to the ones she had seen at any number of modern starports or aboard naval vessels but to Cornellius it was only natural.

"We must find one that is operational." he announced, "And also fuelled."

"You don't think that the refuelling system will be working them?" Gant asked.

"Even if it was we may not have the time necessary to transfer enough fuel." Nathin pointed out.

"Indeed." Cornellius agreed, "So I suggest we begin immediately."

"Okay then, everyone spread out." Wolf said. But before she could continue there was the sound of marching feet from outside the hangar.

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

"Neither do I." Quinn added and he rushed to the doorway and looked into the corridor outside, leaping aside and pressing himself up against the bulkhead beside it almost immediately, "Lieutenant, we've got company." he said, chambering a round in his shotgun.

"Right then. New plan." Wolf said, "Enginseer Cornellius, Technician Nathin and Sergeant Gant will locate and prepare a suitable shuttle. Everyone else get ready to defend that doorway."

"You heard the lieutenant." Vance called out, "Grab some of those crates and drag them over here. We'll make ourselves a barricade."

"What about closing those doors?" Torrent suggested, pointing to the large internal hangar doors that were currently open."

"No time." Quinn replied, "and it would expose Khor's squad to fire. Trust me, those xenos machines can take down an ogryn."

Quinn kept watch while Cornellius, Gant and Nathin set off in search of a serviceable shuttle and the rest of the platoon present prepared their defences as rapidly as they could.

Taking another look around the door, Quinn saw the first of what appeared to be a large number of Necrons as they marched in unison around a corner, all clutching the same type of rifle he had seen the last one of the machines he encountered. Raising his shotgun and rapidly fired two blasts towards them. The impact knocked one of the front row of Necrons down but it simply got straight back to its feet again and continued to advance. Then Quinn plucked a grenade from his webbing and pulled out the pin.

"Fire in the hole!" he yelled, tossing the grenade through the doorway before racing towards the barricade that his comrades were now positioning themselves behind and diving over it just a fraction of a second before the grenade went off and a cloud of fragments and flames came in through the door.

"I wish Molla was here." Wolf said, "His squad's heavy bolter would sure have come in useful now."

"I guess we'll just have to manage with what we've got then." Vance replied and then he looked around, focusing on the two Catachans armed with grenade launchers, "Krak rounds only okay?" he added.

"And don't try using that missile launcher in here either." Wolf added.

"Exactly what are we supposed to use?" Grey asked, "Harsh language?"

"Here they come." Wolf said out loud and she fired her las pistol repeatedly, each shot hitting one of the advancing Necrons but failing to have any effect.

"Ogryns fire!" Khor yelled as the other Catachans joined Wolf in firing at the Necrons and the hangar was filled with the sounds of ripper guns being fired.

Gant looked towards the door when she heard the shooting begin and she reached for her own las pistol.

"Sergeant, this way." Cornelliuss called out towards her from the hatchway of a nearby shuttle, "I believe this vessel may be functional."

"Coming." Gant replied, darting across the hangar towards him.

The shuttle had survived the crash of the starship in one piece but whether it was functional was another matter. Climbing aboard, Gant saw that Cornelliuss had plugged his mechandriles into the control console while Nathin was inspecting secondary control systems in the rear section of the ship where the passengers or cargo would be stowed.

"So what do you want me to do?" she asked.

"Sit in that seat there and tell me what the displays show." Cornelliuss replied.

"Sure." Gant replied as she sat down. Then she frowned, "I can't read this." she said, "It's in some sort of weird proto-gothic."

"I need only to know what colours the display shows." Cornelliuss said.

"Yellow." Gant told him and the tech priest detached one of his mechandriles from the console and replaced it elsewhere, "Okay now it's green." Gant said and when the display changed to show an image of the hangar ahead of the shuttle and a cross hair her eyes widened, "If this a targeting console?" she asked.

"That is my understanding, yes." Cornelliuss replied, "This vessel is equipped with two laser cannons in a forward mounting. We will require them to get out of the hangar."

"We will?" Gant said, confused.

"Well do you see an open outer door?" Nathin added as he entered the cockpit and sat down beside Gant, "The environmental systems are functional." he announced.

"Excellent." Cornelliuss responded, unplugging himself from the console entirely before sitting in the pilot's seat. Then all of the instruments in the cockpit lit up, "Stand by for take off." he said.

The Necrons were getting closer and although several of them had fallen under the weight of fire from the Catachans defending the hangar so far most had repaired themselves and got back to their feet instead of fading away, only the melta gun carried by one of Quinn's squad having been able to destroy any of them. "Flamers!" Quinn snapped as the Necrons came with range of the short ranged weapons and there was a screeching sound as both weapons discharged together, flooding the corridor outside with fire. Then the Necrons finally returned fire and a beam of green light shot out of the flames to envelope one of the flamer armed veterans, his flesh melting away.

Then there was a roaring sound from the other side of the hangar and Wolf turned to see a large shuttle rising up off the deck.

"Get down. We'll cover you." Gant's voice sounded across the platoon's communications network.

"Down!!" Wolf yelled before there was a brilliant flash of light from the nose of the shuttle and two powerful linked laser blasts shot over her head and smashed their way through the advancing Necrons, causing one after another to fade into nothingness as they were blasted apart, "Fall back!" Wolf shouted, "Run!"

"Ogryns run!" Khor ordered and the platoon began to abandon their position, running towards the now hovering shuttle. More laser blasts came from the shuttle's nose as the Necrons made it as far as the barricade and the first one to climb up onto it had a gaping hole punched all the way through its chest before it vanished entirely.

There were only a handful of benches in the rear of the shuttle so as they rushed aboard the Catachans just hurled their heavier equipment to the sides of the compartment before grabbing hold of whatever they could find to steady themselves on.

"What about Molla's squad and Rull?" Mayer asked as he rushed aboard with his squad.

"We'll have to pick them up on the way." Wolf replied before rushing to the door to the cockpit and looking at Cornelliuss, "Okay we're all in." she said.

"Then I suggest everyone holds onto something." Cornelliuss replied before pulling back on the control column.

The shuttle rose up further into the air as the still advancing Necrons began to fire on it. But although several of their blasts struck the shuttle they had no effect. Pivoting the craft around, Cornelliuss aligned it with the sealed outer hangar.

"Now sergeant." he said and Gant fired the shuttle's laser cannons again. It took three blasts to pierce the hangar doors, causing them and some of the rock that had been resting on top of them to fall to the floor many metres below. But this still left much of the compacted rock above this in place and the shuttle's exit

route was still blocked. Gant kept firing, each blast dislodging more of the rock and heating what remained until the structure above the starship became sufficiently destabilised that it gave way entirely and a shaft of sunlight shone down into the hangar from above.

"Engaging forward thrust." Cornelius said when he saw this and the shuttle sped towards the hole.

When Molla first heard the rumbling from below ground he suspected that more Necrons were about to emerge.

"Get ready lads." he announced, "Get that bolter turned around just in case-" and then he flinched as the ground about three hundred metres away suddenly exploded upwards and as the debris was still falling back to the ground a shuttle burst out of the hole left behind, "Throne!" he exclaimed.

"Sergeant Molla do you read me?" Wolf's voice called out from Molla's microbead.

"Right here lieutenant." he replied, "I take it that it's you in that shuttle?"

"It is. Sergeant the area is overrun with Necrons. We'll circle round and pick you up." Wolf explained.

"Understood lieutenant. We'll be waiting." Molla said before turning to his squad, "Grab your stuff. We're getting out of here," he told them.

Just as Wolf had promised Cornelius brought the shuttle around in a circle and descended towards First Squad, its hatch opening as it hovered just above the ground to allow them to get aboard.

"Where's Rull?" Vance asked as he helped Molla onto the shuttle.

"Where do you think?" Molla responded, "He's heading back on foot. Says he'll try and determine how many of those things there are in the area."

"Everyone's aboard that's coming aboard then." Vance said, closing the hatch behind Molla.

"Go!" Wolf yelled, despite Cornelius being right in front of her and the shuttle accelerated into the sky.

Peering out through a viewport and looking down Wolf saw a growing shadow on the ground that she realised was the swarm of Necron scarabs, now seeming to number in the millions.

"I estimate that our flight time to Regimental headquarters will be twelve minutes." Cornelius announced from the pilot's seat, "We are now safe."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that." Wolf replied, still staring at the swarm.

In the compartment containing the vox beacon the solitary Necron stood and watched as the jammed door began to glow green under the weight of fire from the other side. All of a sudden the disruption to the door's molecular structure reached a critical point and it disintegrated to reveal a squad of Necron warriors in the corridor outside.

"Bring that." the Necron inside the chamber ordered, pointing at Serett.