



CATACHAN ONE NINE MARK FOUR MARK TWO

COMRADES IN ARMS

BY STEPHEN J. DUTTON



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2.1 : COMRADES IN ARMS

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The Catachan VII Division is deployed to the planet Lyannus Prime to help control the sudden outbreak of rebel activity. Fighting alongside the Catachans is an Imperial Guard regiment that has already suffered heavy losses and it is rumoured that it will be made a permanent part of the Catachan VII with Lieutenant Wolf being promoted and transferred to it. But first there is the matter of a rebellion to put down...

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1.

Lieutenant Emilia Wolf sat alone in the mess hall, reading from a dataslate as she ate the reconstituted proteins that seemed to be the standard foodstuff served aboard the three-kilometre long troop ship transporting the Catachan VII Division. The VII Division was made up of four regiments, the XII regiment, Wolf's own XIX regiment, the XXV regiment and finally the XIV armoured regiment. Despite this meaning that there were thousands of Imperial Guardsmen and women crammed aboard the massive vessel Wolf had often found herself alone during the three week voyage from Par Shallon. Not native to the jungle deathworld of Catachan she had only been assigned to the XIX Regiment by chance when aliens had captured her and rescued by the Catachans. Unfortunately Catachans were infamous for their mistrust of anyone not from their own world, 'outsiders' as they knew them and even the platoon she had been given command of, fourth company's second platoon, had failed to fully accept her. This was how Wolf came to be eating alone again, her platoon was apparently eating in its barracks instead and none of them had bothered to send word to her quarters of the change.

The sound of the heavy hatchway swinging open made wolf look up from the pale sludge-like meal and she saw a single figure enter the room.

"Captain Fear." Wolf said as she got to her feet and stood at attention. The captain commanded fourth company's first platoon and was the second in command of the company itself under Major Trent.

"As you were Lieutenant." He replied and Wolf nodded as she sat down again, "Your platoon sergeant said you'd be here." He continued as he approached Wolf's table and sat opposite her, "Colonel Shryke's called a meeting for fifteen hundred."

"What's it about?" Wolf asked. Colonel Shryke was in overall command of the XIX Regiment so for him to call a meeting something important had to be going on."

"Deployment." Fear answered, "Though you didn't here that from me."

Wolf frowned.

"But we're still two weeks away from the staging grounds at Ornellius according to the pre-launch briefing."

She said, "Has the time dilation been more severe than was expected?" Travelling through the alternative dimension known as warp space could be unpredictable at times. Even when relatively undisturbed by the events known as warp storms that could fling a ship light years off course, rip it open or return it and its unfortunate occupants to the real universe changed and corrupted into something unrecognisable.

Furthermore time flowed in strange ways in the warp and the amount of time experienced by travellers in the warp frequently differed from the amount that actually passed in the real universe.

"No. As far as I know we're right on schedule." Fear told her, "But some of the navy crewmen have been saying that we've shifted course and are heading for somewhere closer. Apparently they've been told to prepare for translation back to realspace within the day."

"I assume it's in the section occupied by Shryke's command team?" Wolf asked and fear nodded.

"It is. Make sure you are." He replied and he got back to his feet. Then as he walked back towards the door he stopped and turned around, "Oh and lieutenant?" he added.

"Yes sir?"

"You may want to consider eating your meals with the rest of your platoon if you want them to accept you."

He said and Wolf frowned again.

The chamber where Colonel Shryke was holding his briefing had the same dull grey appearance as the mess hall, but in here there were no rows of tables. Instead rows of foldaway seats had been laid out facing a large display mounted on the far wall. As soon as Wolf entered the room she saw the other officers of fourth company already sat together and she headed towards them, sitting down beside another female lieutenant who shared Wolf's short stature. Lieutenant Selena was the company's supply officer and was referred to as 'Short-Arse' behind her back. As Wolf took a seat Selena pretended not to notice.

"Glad you could join us lieutenant." Major Trent hissed, "You cut it damned close."

"I got lost." Wolf replied, "All these corridors look the same and there's never a navy crewman around to tell you which way to go."

"Best to avoid asking." The company's third platoon commander, Lieutenant Lore answered, "From what I here they can often send you the wrong way knowing that they'll probably never have to see you again."

"Got caught out did you Lore?" Selena asked.

"I just heard it said." He replied. Then a man in a long black coat spoke up. This was the company's commissar. Like Wolf he was a non-Catachan and was even less popular than she was with the company, the Catachans had good reason to be suspicious of him though. He was the company's commissar and had

the authority to execute those he suspected of cowardice instantly.

"Shush. The colonel's here." He said as every officer in the room got to their feet.

Colonel Shryke did not enter the room alone. Accompanying him were Regimental Commissar Garratt and an adept from the Departamento Munitorum, the administrative service responsible for the supplying the Imperial Guard.

"Sit." The colonel said simply and as the regiment's officers sat down he activated the display at the front of the room, "This is Lyannus Prime." he announced as a grainy hologram of a planet was projected into the air, "It's a fairly unremarkable world about five hundred light years outside Ultramar. It's been a loyal Imperial world since the days of the great crusade when the Ultramarines legion brought its occupants to compliance. However, in recent months there has been an outbreak of violent cultist activity that the local government is struggling to contain."

"Another counter insurgency operation." Fear muttered just loud enough for Wolf to catch it.

"The planet has a relatively small population of about fourteen million. More than half of who live in the capital city, also known as Lyannus and it's here that the terrorist attacks have been concentrated." Shryke went on and he changed the display to show an island that was covered in densely packed urban sprawl. The island was surrounded by a water way fed from several rivers flowing together before heading away as one massive waterway. In places the urban sprawl of the island spilled over to the land around it, as well as to several much smaller islands located close by and all but one of these land masses were connected together by bridges. The display also made it clear why a Catachan division was being deployed to Lyannus Prime. Beyond the built up areas the terrain was almost entirely covered by foliage. Catachan itself was a jungle planet and its natives were known for their skill in operating in such terrain.

"The cultists are believed to be operating from bases in the jungle." Shryke continued, "When the world was first brought into the Imperium its inhabitants lived in scattered settlements and it is believed that the rebels may be descendants of some who managed to escape compliance who still worship whatever blasphemous gods they did ten thousand years ago."

"What sort of numbers are we looking at?" one of the gathered officers asked. Wolf recognised the man's face as the commanding officer of another company, but could not place his name or remember which company it was given the limited amount of time she had spent with the regiment so far.

"Unknown." Shryke replied, "Best guess is a few thousand with light arms and some explosives only. They aren't a serious military threat but the Imperial forces currently deployed to Lyannus Prime lack the specialist skills to hunt them down in the jungle."

"Then there are other Imperial Guard forces present?" Trent asked and there were groans from some parts of the room.

"Just one regiment." Shryke said, "The XIV Kordonian Regiment, known as 'Mallet's Hammers' after their commanding officer, Colonel Johann Mallet. They've been deployed at all of the river crossings and along the walls to the south of the city to try and prevent the cultists getting into the main city on the island but somehow they're still getting past the checkpoints." Then he grinned for a moment, "Of course once we drive them back to their hiding places and burn them to the ground that won't be a problem any more." At this point he glanced at the woman from the Departamento Munitorum, "Miss Clay, I think it's your turn now." He told her and he stepped back, allowing her to take his place to address the assembled officers.

"The division will be deployed with each regiment based at a single site." She announced, her accent clearly identifying her as a non-Catachan and around the room the careful attention that the Catachan officers had paid to their commanding officer gave way to a more indifferent attitude, "The nineteenth will establish a camp here to the north-west of the city." She added, pointing to the map of Lyannus City, "While the Seventh will be to the east of us, the twenty-fifth to the west and the fourteenth armoured will occupy the open farmland behind the walls to the south. All requisitions for equipment must be completed by the time we disembark."

"Oh great." Trent said, "The bitch expects us to already know what we need before we even set eyes on our camp site." The major said this just loud enough that it was audible from the front of the room and the regimental commissar glared at him while he acted as if nothing had happened.

"All company commanders will be issued datamaps showing the area where we will deploy so that they can determine their requirements in advance." Clay continued.

"I wonder how old those maps will be?" Lore commented.

"Probably the same ones used when the Ultramarines first landed." Selena responded. These two kept their voices low enough that they did not draw a reaction from the front of the room, but the fourth company's own commissar scowled momentarily when he overheard the exchange.

"That's all you need to know for now so-" Clay continued, but she was interrupted by Shryke.

"There's just one more thing actually." He said, "All of the regimental and divisional level commanders will be attending a formal function in the governor's tower at twenty hundred hours local time. That means that individual company commanders will have to liaise with one another about deployment. I'm sure I can count on you all to work together though." Then he looked towards the officers of fourth company, "Lieutenant Wolf

will also be required to attend the function." He added and Wolf's eyes widened as the Catachans looked at her.

"Me?" she asked, "Why?"

"Lieutenant," Commissar Garratt responded sternly, "the colonel told you what is expected of you. He is not required to explain himself."

"Maybe she's got to jump out of a cake." Selena muttered, "She's small enough."

"So are you." A captain wearing the white coat of a medicae officer over his combat fatigues responded.

"The order came straight from General Fortnam himself." Shryke said, looking at Wolf.

"I assume you won't be questioning the general's orders as well?" the regimental commissar said.

"No sir." Wolf replied.

"Good." Shryke said, "Now I suggest you all prepare your troops for landing. Disembarkation starts in four hours. Lieutenant Wolf I expect you in the number eight hangar in two hours along with a squad to act as an honour guard."

"Yes sir." Wolf said.

"You are dismissed." Commissar Garratt then called out and the Catachans began to get to their feet.

"Okay you heard the colonel," Trent said as the officers of fourth company rose, "we've got four hours."

"Are you sure we're dressed properly?" Wolf asked the Catachan sergeant in command of the squad accompanying her. She had chosen Sergeant Quinn's squad as an escort by default rather than an eagerness to have them accompany her. Of the half dozen that made up her platoon, including her command squad only Quinn's veterans had enough troops to provide an adequate honour guard and was led by someone that she felt she could rely on not to seek to undermine her or accidentally cause a diplomatic incident.

"We're fine." Quinn responded, "Quit asking."

"But this sort of event calls for formal dress uniform. Not combat fatigues." Wolf pointed out.

"Catachan regiments don't have formal dress uniforms. We're real soldiers so we wear real soldiers' uniforms." Quinn said, "Go join a Mordian or Praetorian regiment if you want to play dress up. Or there's always that dress we found for you."

"I would but you didn't get me any shoes to go with it." Wolf said. Then she saw Colonel Shryke across the hangar, standing by a shuttle with several other Catachans and Wolf was relieved to see that all of them were also wearing standard combat fatigues.

Aside from Shryke the only other member of the group that Wolf recognised was General Fortnam himself but it was not difficult to guess that the other three Catachans standing with them were the commanding officers of the division's other regiments. One of the three was a woman but she shared the same tall stature of most Catachans, in fact she was at least ten centimetres taller than one of her male comrades.

"That's Colonel Vorris of the Fourteenth Armoured." Quinn said when he noticed Wolf looking at the shorter officer. Shorter being relative, he still towered over her, "His height makes it easier to fit in the tanks."

Wolf nodded.

"What about the woman?" she asked as they drew closer to the shuttle.

"Colonel Hatch of the Twenty Fifth." Quinn told her, "And the other is Colonel Mann of—"

"Yes, of the Twelfth. That's the only regiment left." Wolf interrupted. Then as she and Quinn's squad reached the waiting officers they all stood to attention and Wolf saluted.

"Allow me to introduce Lieutenant Wolf. Formerly of- of, what regiment was it lieutenant?" Shryke said.

"The Lyrelian Thirty-Second sir." Wolf replied, still saluting until Shryke returned the gesture.

"Yes, she was a file clerk." Shryke added.

"And now the outsider's come to us to be a real Imperial Guardsman." Hatch commented.

"Now, now colonel." General Fortnam responded, "I think that the lieutenant will be perfect for the job."

"Beats wasting one of us on it." Vorris said.

"We're cleared to launch whenever you're ready general." One of the shuttle's navy crew called out from within the compact vessel and Fortnam nodded.

"I guess that's our queue to leave." The general said before leading the way aboard the shuttle.

2.

The trip to the surface differed from most of the shuttle flights Wolf had been on. Until now she had ridden only in the transports known as lighters, larger shuttles designed to move entire companies of Imperial Guardsmen and their equipment between planetary surfaces and orbiting starships. Packed in tightly, the troops aboard such vessels had no idea of how close they were to their destination. On the other hand the shuttle provided to General Fortnam provided a far more comfortable ride, giving more space to each passenger and given the inclusion of portholes along each side of the fuselage many of them were able to look outside and Wolf spent most of the trip staring through the porthole beside her seat.

"Wow." She said quietly when Lyannus City first came into view. It was around dusk local time and lights were starting to come on across the city. Given the density of population that the island required this meant that almost the entire thing was illuminated in contrast to the darkness of the surrounding jungle.

As it continued to descend the shuttle veered away from the bright lights of the city and headed towards the small island located to the east of the main one. This was also illuminated but not to the same extent as the larger island next to it and Wolf remembered from the briefing datafile she had been given that this was the location of the starport.

"Shouldn't be too long now Thale." Hatch said to Vorris and he frowned back at her, "Colonel Vorris isn't a fan of flying lieutenant." Hatch then added, looking at Wolf and Quinn and his men exchanged glances.

"I don't need to be." Vorris responded as he gripped the armrests of his seat, "I've never seen a Leman Russ fly."

"Two minutes." The pilot's voice called out from the cockpit.

"Thank the Emperor." Vorris muttered.

"Stand by." Quinn said and his squad all got to their feet, maintaining an upright position by grabbing onto handholds set into the ceiling.

The shuttle lurched somewhat as it touched down and then there was a hiss as the main hatch to the rear opened and Quinn's squad rushed down the ramp, forming two lines and standing up straight with their shotguns held across their chests.

"Move!" Vorris snapped as he pushed past Wolf and rushed down the ramp and right past the honour guard. As Wolf followed him she saw him standing a short distance away bent over with his hands on his knees for support and breathing deeply. Then she noticed a pair of men in military uniforms that both bore captain's markings.

"I thought Catachans were supposed to be tough." One said, "Fancy getting sick in a shuttle."

"He's too short for a Catachan." The second one added, "Unless there's such a thing as a Catachan Ratling."

Then Vorris straightened up and the two men saw the colonel's markings pinned to his uniform that was otherwise identical to that worn by the enlisted men of Quinn's squad and both of the captains stared at him in disbelief, aware that insubordination was treated very seriously by the Imperial Guard. Wolf watched as Vorris calmly held up one hand and beckoned the second officer towards him.

"Come closer captain." He said, putting the emphasis on the word 'captain' and the man reluctantly approached. When he was standing right in front of Vorris the colonel suddenly thrust his head forwards, butting the taller man in his face and causing him to collapse into a heap on the ground at Vorris' feet. Vorris ignored the prone man as he clutched at his face and groaned and instead turned to the other officer, "Do you have a handkerchief captain?" he asked and the captain nodded and held one out, "Thank you so much." Vorris said as he took the handkerchief and used it to wipe the blood from his forehead before tossing onto the man at his feet.

"Making friends already?" General Fortnam asked as he exited the shuttle.

"Just establishing discipline in the absence of a suitable commissar." Vorris replied.

"Well we don't have time. Our ride is here – Look." And the general pointed to staff car parked close by.

"Lieutenant." Shryke said as he exited the shuttle after General Fortnam.

"Yes sir?" Wolf asked.

"That chimera over there is for you and your men. There'll be a crew waiting inside it." Shryke told her and he pointed to a tracked armoured vehicle that was armed with a heavy weapon in a turret and a second in a fixed mount at the front of the hull in addition to the two rows of three lasguns set into the hull to be fired by passengers from inside the vehicle. The markings on the outside of the vehicle identified it as belonging to the Kordonian regiment already on the planet, with a cartoon hammer being used to crush several aliens.

"Yes sir." Wolf said and as soon as the regimental commanders were inside the staff car she turned to Quinn, "Sergeant, get your men inside the carrier."

"Yes lieutenant." He replied, waving his men after him as he headed for the chimera.

The inside of the chimera was more like what Wolf was used to from the Imperium's military vehicles. No thought had been given to comfort or luxury, instead every detail was something considered advantageous to getting its passengers into battle and providing them with supporting fire. As Colonel Shryke had indicated there was already a three man crew waiting for the Catachans. Their uniforms were different to those worn by the two captains Vorris had encountered so Wolf guessed that they had been part of the local defence force. As soon as the last of them was aboard the rear ramp lifted with a 'hiss' and slammed shut, the sound echoing around the inside of the vehicle.

"Go." The commander ordered from his seat in the turret and the chimera shuddered into motion.

Once again Wolf took advantage of being able to see outside of the vehicle as it drove. The view through one of the vision blocks intended for aiming was limited but it allowed her to watch as the chimera was driven across a bridge to the main island. The streets here were narrow and on several occasions there was a sudden blaring sound as the driver used an air horn that had been added to the chimera to warn drivers who had failed to notice the bulky armoured vehicle to get out of the way before he simply drove over their vehicles.

The staff car followed behind the chimera, so Wolf and Quinn's squad reached their destination before the regimental commanders.

"Two lines." Quinn ordered as the ramp dropped open and his squad rushed to disembark. As Wolf followed them she saw that they had been brought to a large building that was prominently marked with the Imperial aquila. Located at the side of the road, she had to tilt her head backwards to look up the steps that led to the entrance to the building, steps that were lined with local troops. More troops were positioned by the road to hold back journalists who had turned out to get a look at the newly arrived Catachans and there were flashes from cameras as some took photographs of Wolf and her men.

Meanwhile Quinn formed his squad up into two rows of five once more, again holding their shotguns across their chests. Then as the staff car pulled up beside him he glanced at Wolf.

"Lieutenant. Door." He hissed.

"Oh, of course." She said, darting to the staff car to open the door.

There were more camera flashes as General Fortnam exited the car, followed by the four colonels.

"Free Lyannus!" a voice called out from the crowd but in the moments it took Wolf to look around, her hand instinctively reaching for the las pistol holstered at her waist a pair of armoured figures in the familiar black uniforms of the Adeptus Arbites had already apprehended the culprit and were dragging him away.

"Here comes the governor." Wolf heard Colonel Mann say and she turned back towards the palace to see a pair of men coming down the steps towards them.

"General Fortnam." The man at the front of this group said, smiling in friendly manner, "I am so pleased to meet you. I am Junus Tarn, governor of this world and this is my assistant Mister Kellis.

"Governor." The general replied without the hint of a smile, "Shall we proceed inside?"

"Of course. Colonel Mallet is waiting to meet you." Governor Tarn said. Then as the other regimental commanders began to climb the steps Shryke turned to Wolf.

"Deploy your men lieutenant." He said softly, "But I need you to stick with the general."

"Yes sir." Wolf replied before she looked at Quinn, "Sergeant select one of your men to accompany you and come with me. Then have the rest of your men check the palace security."

Quinn nodded.

"Two teams of four should do it." He said, "After they've figured out everything the locals have screwed up they can hit the kitchens."

"I'm afraid there may not be time for them to eat sergeant." Wolf replied.

"Actually I was thinking they might be able to grab us some extra supplies. You know, stuff that doesn't taste like its already been passed through the digestive system of someone else."

"Good thinking." Wolf said, "Carry on sergeant."

The palace's main hall was crowded with the people considered important in Lyannus society. Some were the senior officials of government departments; both local and Imperial while others were simply members of some of the wealthier native noble houses who were anxious to demonstrate how loyal they were to the Imperium. The final group of people present was a small cluster of uniformed individuals; these were Colonel Mallet himself and several members of his regimental staff. Though Governor Tarn attempted to introduce the Catachan officers to several people closer to the entrance General Fortnam brushed them aside as he walked right up to the Kordonian colonel.

Colonel Mallet was a tall man, not far short of the tallest of the Catachans in height while those around him were of more average height for human males. Wolf noticed that all of the Kordonians bore tattoos on their necks that could be seen emerging from under their collars. One of the Kordonians, a gaunt appearing man with a shaven head who wore a long robe instead of a uniform had a more elaborate tattoo that extended up onto the top of his head.

"Colonel Mallet." He said and the colonel snapped to attention and saluted.

"General." He replied.

"At ease colonel." Fortnam said, "Allow me to introduce my regimental commanders, Colonel Galt Mann of the Twelfth, Thale Vorris of the Fourteenth, Jayk Shryke of the Nineteenth and Bess Hatch of the Twenty-Fifth. And this is Lieutenant Wolf of the Nineteenth."

Wolf was momentarily startled; she had not expected to be formally introduced to the Kordonian colonel.

"I look forward to working with you lieutenant." He said.

"Likewise sir." Wolf replied, confused.

At that moment a server appeared bearing a tray of drinks and Mallet took a glass for himself. Then when he noticed all of the Catachans waving the server away he queried it.

"Not partaking general?" he asked, "It's a very fine vintage. I'm told that the governor spent a lot of time and tax payers' money building up his wine cellar."

"You'll find most Catachans don't drink much alcohol." The general replied, "It dulls the senses and where we come from that will get you killed. Drunkenness is not tolerated in my division."

"A shame." Mallet commented as he lifted the glass to his mouth.

"I'll have one if that's alright." Wolf said before the server left and she grabbed hold of a glass and took a sip. Mallet was right she realised, it was a good vintage.

"Now perhaps you could tell us more about these cultists." Fortnam said to Mallet.

"Worshippers of ancient powers." The shaven headed man replied before Colonel Mallet could answer.

"Indeed." Colonel Mallet added, "I'm told that they've existed since before the Great Crusade itself. Perhaps even going back as far as the Dark Age of Technology. But until recently they were content to remain out there in the jungle. Now though, they seem more interested in driving the Imperium from Lyannus Prime entirely. I've deployed my regiment to try and choke off every way in and out of the city, but the cultists are still managing to get through."

"You haven't tried pushing back into the jungle?" Mann asked.

"At first we did." Mallet answered, "Using Planetary Defence Force troops as guides. But even with their help the cultists knew the terrain better than us and we just lost men for nothing. That's when the governor sent for help."

"We all fight for the Throne." The more heavily tattooed man said sternly and his scowl sent a shiver down Wolf's spine.

Guardsmen Howser and Jackson left the two other members of their group in the kitchen while they located the nearest exit and slipped outside to light up sticks of tabac.

"Well I'd call that a bust." Jackson said before blowing a jet of smoke upwards and Howser snorted.

"You got that right. You'd think in a place like this they'd have some decent food worth taking. But what do we get? Nothing but fresh stuff. We can't take that back, it'll just spoil." He replied.

"Still, one or two bits and pieces could be worth it." Jackson said and from a pocket he produced a large piece of orange fruit and he took a bite, "Feth that's fowl!" he snapped, spitting out what had just bitten off and Howser laughed.

"I think you're supposed to peel it first." He said.

"Right." Jackson muttered, frowning. Then he put the tabac stick in his mouth while he opened up the top of a large wheeled rubbish container beside him, lifting up the fruit with the intention of tossing it inside. But as he looked into the container he dropped the fruit and the tabac stick fell from his mouth, "Oh feth." He said and stepping back from the container he unslung his shotgun and looked around.

"What?" Howser asked, stepping towards the container and peering inside, "Oh feth." He added as he too took hold of his shotgun as soon as he saw the bodies someone had stuffed into the container.

3.

The locals grew something called golla beans. Wolf knew this because the finely dressed man now stood in front of her had spent a long time going on about how the cultist raids were making it difficult to process them and he would likely have to cut his workers' wages to make up the shortfall to his profits this season. As far as Wolf could tell the man was hoping that the newly arrived Imperial Guard division would be available to quell any rioting that resulted, though she had ceased paying proper attention to him just a few minutes after he had introduced himself and the woman that was supposedly his personal assistant, though Wolf guessed that what the woman really assisted him with took place in the bedroom rather than an office. Wolf pondered the possibility that drinking more of the governor's expensive wine may make the man less boring, but she remembered what General Fortnam had said about drunkenness and decided against it.

"Sorry to interrupt lieutenant." Quinn's voice said from behind Wolf and she smiled as she turned around, "But we may have something of a problem."

"Not at all sergeant. We are here to work and not enjoy ourselves after all." She replied. Then she glanced back at the man whose name she had managed to forget already, "I'm sorry but duty calls." She told him and then she walked off with Quinn, "Thank you for that sergeant." She said.

"For what?" Quinn asked.

"You mean there really is a problem?" Wolf replied.

"Only if you call a pair of bodies stuffed in the trash."

"Oh feth." Wolf said,

"That's what Howser and Jackson said apparently." Quinn said.

"So do we know who they were?" Wolf asked.

"Not exactly. Whoever killed them stole their clothes. But Jackson says they both had nice tattoos right here on their necks." Quinn answered and he pointed to his own neck, just below his ear, "Now does that remind you of anyone here?" he asked and he looked towards a nearby Kordonian officer.

"Get all your men up here right now sergeant." Wolf said, "We can't defend the entire palace with just one squad, but we can protect the general while the governor's guards-" and at that moment she was interrupted by the sound of an explosion.

The lights in the hall flickered momentarily and the more nervous amongst the party guests cried out in panic. Instinctively all of the Catachan officers drew their sidearms and looked around for any signs of a threat.

"What's happening?" Governor Tarn called out.

"I'd say your palace is under attack governor." Shryke replied, then he looked around and added, "Wolf!"

"Right here sir." Wolf replied as she and her two subordinates pushed their way through the crowd, Quinn and the other veteran making use of the butts of their shotguns to push back anyone who did not get out of their way fast enough, "My men are on their way here now colonel, but we may have a problem with infiltrators in Kordonian uniform."

"What was that?" Mallet asked when he overheard Wolf.

"I'm sorry to report this colonel," she replied, "but my men have discovered what they believe to be the bodies of two of your men in a trash container. Minus their uniforms."

Fortnam turned to where the governor was standing close by.

"Governor, how many men do you have in the building?" he asked.

"Eighty." He answered before there was a second explosion.

Then Quinn's micro-bead headset activated.

"Sergeant someone just took out the barracks." Jackson's voice told him.

"I don't think we can rely on your eighty men any more governor." Quinn said, "That blast just took out their barracks."

"We need to get out of here!" Tarn exclaimed.

"No!" Fortnam snapped, grabbing hold of the governor's collar as he turned to leave, "Everyone remain where they are!" he then yelled, "The first person to try and leave will be shot." And all of the other Catachans raised their weapons, pointing them all around, "Very good." Fortnam added as the guests and palace staff stared back in disbelief.

The sound of footsteps from a hallway outside attracted the Catachans' attention and they all aimed towards the doorway. But they relaxed when the rest of Quinn's squad arrived, shotguns held at the ready.

Shryke looked at Wolf.

"Lieutenant, the other colonels and I will remain here with the general to protect the governor and his guests. Take your men and find the intruders." Then looking at Fortnam he added, "Assuming that's alright by you general." And the general nodded once.

"I'll send some of my men with them." Mallet added.

"If it's all the same colonel it'd be better if you didn't." Quinn replied, "If we're dealing with cultists wearing your uniforms then we'll be better off not having any of your men around where they could get shot by mistake."

"Of course." Mallet said.

"Sergeant Quinn." Wolf said, "Let's move."

Upon leaving the hall where the governor's reception had been taking place, Wolf and Quinn's veterans headed towards where the second explosion had come from. As they made their way through the corridors of the palace they encountered several panicked staff members, all of whom had to be treated as suspects. Held at gunpoint while they were searched for weapons, they were ordered to leave the building by the most direct route possible before the Catachans moved on.

All of a sudden there was the familiar sound of gunfire from around a corner.

"Did you hear that?" Wolf asked.

"Yes. A las weapon." Quinn replied, "Could be one of the palace guards or maybe we've found who we're looking for."

The Catachans dashed to the corner and Quinn took a quick look around it. In the corridor ahead he saw a body lying on the floor. It wore a Kordonian uniform and as far as Quinn could see the man had died with his las pistol still in its holster. Of his killer, there was no sign.

"Clear." Quinn said, "But there's a man down."

"Go." Wolf said and the squad ran around the corner and down the corridor until they reached the body where they stopped to check it, "Well he's dead alright." Wolf said as she checked for a pulse. As she pressed her finger against the corpse's throat she noticed the tattoo on its neck and she was just about to roll the corpse over onto its back when Quinn stopped her.

"Wait." he said, grabbing her arm, "It may be rigged."

"Halt!" one of the veterans suddenly yelled out and both Quinn and Wolf spun around to see another man in a Kordonian uniform standing at the far end of the corridor with a pistol in his hand, "Drop the gun!"

"Don't shoot!" the man yelled as he raised his hands but kept hold of his weapon, "I'm on your side."

"Did you see what happened here?" Wolf asked and the man nodded.

"Somebody ambushed us." He replied, "They shot him in the back and then ran. I thought I might be able to catch them."

"Did you see who shot him then?" Quinn asked.

"No." the Kordonian replied, "By the time I turned around they were already around the corner." And he turned to point back the way he came. Then as he turned back towards the Catachans he took a step closer and Quinn promptly shot him in the chest.

"Whoa!" Wolf exclaimed, flinching at the sudden booming of the shotgun, "What did you do that for?"

"Look at his neck." Quinn replied, pointing to his own neck at the point where the Kordonians were tattooed. He and Wolf walked over to the body of the man he had just shot and Quinn used his foot to push its head to one side, revealing the place where the tattoo should be.

"Ah." Wolf said when she saw that there was no tattoo, "Well at least that's one down. Now all we need to do is find the other one."

All of a sudden a shot from a las pistol passed just over Wolf's head and instinctively she ducked. At the same time Quinn spun around just in time to see someone duck back around the corner the first impostor had appeared around and he fired his shotgun, hoping to catch the fleeing gunman. But he was too slow and the man was gone before the shot could hit him.

"After him!" Quinn yelled and the Catachans began to give chase.

"Hey! Wait for me." Wolf called out as she straightened up and went after them.

Quinn fired again as he rounded the corner, but once more he was just moments too late to get a clear shot at the man they were chasing. Rounding the next corner the Catachans saw their target duck into an elevator and just as they reached it the doors were already sliding shut.

Quinn dropped his shotgun and pressed his hands against the engraved metal elevator doors and tried to pull them apart. But as he did so there was the sound of a motor from the other side.

"Forget it sergeant." Wolf said and she looked at the display above the door, "He's heading down. We'll try and catch him." and she ran to the nearby entrance to the emergency stairwell.

As they descended the stairs the Catachans heard the sound of gunfire from below them.

"More las fire." Quinn said.

"But more than one weapon." Wolf added and Quinn nodded.

Bursting out of the stairwell onto the floor below the Catachans headed in the direction of the continuing las fire and they heard several shouted demands for surrender.

"Looks like some of the palace guard are still about." Quinn commented and as his squad charged through a large door the comment was proven to be true.

A group of about half a dozen palace guards, all armed with ornate lasguns were facing three Kordonians that they had lined up against a wall while a fourth lay dead on the floor.

"What's going on here?" Wolf demanded.

"We got word that the terrorists were wearing Kordonian uniforms." The commander of the palace guard unit replied, "We found them here."

"Let me guess," Quinn responded, "you opened fire."

"They were armed." The guard commander said.

"Of course they were armed. They're Imperial Guardsmen." Quinn snapped.

"But their uniforms-"

"Belong to them." Wolf interrupted, "There's a Kordonian colonel upstairs with the governor. Perhaps you'd like to go up there now and shoot all the guests as well."

"You can step away from the wall now." Quinn told the surviving Kordonians while the guard commander looked down at the body of their dead comrade as it suddenly dawned on him that his men had killed a loyal soldier.

"I think you better escort them out of here." Wolf told him, "And perhaps you ought to try identifying your targets properly before you start shooting."

The sound of a scream made everyone present look around as they tried to determine its source.

"What's that way?" Wolf asked the guard commander.

"Servants' quarters." He replied.

"Lieutenant if that cultist gets amongst unarmed servants-" Quinn began.

"I know." Wolf interrupted, "It'll be a slaughter. Let's go."

Running in the direction of the servants' quarters the Catachans heard a repeating banging sound, accompanied by the splintering of wood. Then as they entered a hallway they saw a single figure in a Kordonian uniform wielding a fire axe that he was using to try and break down a door. Obviously the servants inside their living quarters had been intelligent enough to try and barricade themselves in. Wolf ground to a halt and aimed her las pistol.

"Drop the axe!" she shouted.

Surprisingly the man did just as she said before he turned around and glared at the Catachans heading towards him, all of who came to a stop and pointed their shotguns at him.

"Free Lyannus." The man said, glaring right at Wolf and he pulled open his tunic to reveal the explosives strapped to his chest.

"Drop him!" Quinn snapped and the hallway was filled with the sounds of projectile fire as the veterans opened fire in unison, firing as many shots as they could in the hope that even if they did not kill the cultist before he could trigger his bomb then they may be able to damage the mechanism that would trigger it. The cultist jerked under the impact of the repeated impacts and something fell from his hand. Only when the object's fall was stopped by the cable leading to the cultist's explosive vest was it shown to be the detonator and the Catachans ceased fire. Slumping back against the door behind him, the cultist slowly slid down until he hit the floor.

Cautiously the Catachans advanced on the cultist, keeping their weapons trained on the seemingly lifeless body just in case he was still alive.

"He's dead." Quinn announced when he reached the body and he slung his shotgun over his shoulder.

"Listen." Wolf said as she holstered her las pistol, "Sirens."

Sure enough the sound of sirens could now be heard from outside the palace and looking out of the nearest window she and Quinn saw several black painted armoured vehicles heading towards them, flashing blue and red lights combining with the sirens to let people know to get out of their way.

"Arbites enforcers." Wolf said and Quinn snorted.

"Their timing's perfect." He said, "They arrive as soon as we don't need them any more."

"At least they can handle the clean up." Wolf replied and then she looked back at the dead cultist who was being searched by two of the Catachans, "Leave two of your men here to guard that." She told Quinn, "The rest of us better get back to the general."

"Sergeant I think you ought to see this." One of the Catachans who had been searching the body said before anyone could leave and he held up a compact dataslate.

"Give it here." Quinn said, taking the device and held it so both he and Wolf could see the display. When he first took it the device showed a map that was immediately recognisable as the interior of the governor's palace, while scrolling to the next file showed a picture of General Fortnam that looked to have been taken from an official personnel file. Continuing to scroll through the files produced similar images of the four Catachan colonels before cycling back to the floor plan.

4.

"This is outrageous general!" Governor Tarn exclaimed, "They attacked my palace. I want them wiped out. All of them."

"That is the idea of bringing us here governor." General Fortnam replied, scowling.

"They're back." Vorris then said from the doorway where he had been keeping an eye on the corridor outside and moments later Wolf and Quinn's veterans appeared.

"Report lieutenant." Shryke ordered as he and Wolf saluted one another.

"Both cultists are dead colonel." Wolf replied, "But one of Sergeant Quinn's men found this on the body of one." And she handed him the dataslate.

"Well this is interesting." Shryke said as he browsed the files on the dataslate and then tossed it to the general.

"Interesting?" Governor Tarn said in amazement, "Colonel the cultists just tried to kill me and my guests."

"Actually I'd say they were only after a few of your guests governor." General Fortnam said, "From the looks of this dataslate I'd say that they were here to try and kill us."

"Kill you? But why?" Governor Tarn asked.

"Isn't it obvious?" Colonel Mallet asked in response, "It would leave the Catachan division leaderless and with no obvious candidates to take over. At a stroke the entire division would be paralysed before it could be deployed to locate the cultists' hideouts."

"General I don't like this." Colonel Mann said, "Those images come from our own official records. This suggests that the cultists have got a highly effective intelligence gathering network with links to the planetary administration."

"Well they don't have spies in my division." General Fortnam said as he shut off the dataslate, "And I intend to deal with them before they can even try to place any."

Colonel Shryke joined Wolf and Quinn's veterans in the chimera for the ride away from the governor's palace. Rather than heading back to the starport the chimera drove them north, taking them over one of the bridge crossings off the island to the mainland. For a short time here their surroundings were just as they had been on the island, with densely packed buildings and narrow streets. But these soon gave way to a rural area that had all the signs of having been recently cleared of jungle and it was here that the Catachan XIX Regiment was establishing its camp.

The chimera halted at the main gate; flagged down by a pair of las gun armed Catachans watched over by two heavy bolter teams behind sandbag barriers.

"We'll walk from here." Shryke said and rather than wait for the chimera crew to drop the rear ramp he instead opened the smaller hatch set into it and climbed out ahead of the veterans.

"Colonel Shryke sir." One of the Catachans said in greeting, though he did not salute.

"Where has my command post been established?" the colonel asked, looking into the camp.

"That way sir. Just past where Sixth Company's setting up their servicing gear." The soldier answered and he pointed through the mass of half erected tents and soldiers scurrying back and forth while laden down with equipment despite the late hour.

"Very good. Carry on trooper." Shryke said before glancing around at Wolf, "Lieutenant, you and your men should follow me."

"Of course sir." Wolf replied as the colonel began to stride away.

On the previous world that the Catachan VII Division had been deployed to each company of the XIX Regiment had deployed at its own camp site, so this was the first time that Wolf was seeing the entire regiment in one place at once, around one and half thousand guardsmen all together. Most of them were hard at work erecting tents or putting together the components to the prefabricated structures used where tents were considered too flimsy. For this second task they were assisted by half machine cyborg servitors and here and there Wolf spotted the red robed figures of engineers of the Adeptus Mechanicus. Most of these were located where the regiment's sixth company was setting up. This was a fully mechanised company consisting of infantry mounted in chimera infantry fighting vehicles with a squadron of hellhound flame throwing tanks for support so most of their area of the camp used the tougher prefabricated structures to hold the machinery that only the techpriests understood properly to maintain and repair their vehicles. On the far side of this, just as the sentry on the gate had stated was the regiment's command post. This was a large tent marked by a tall flagpole bearing the XIX's regimental colours. Colonel Shryke walked straight into the tent, where most of the occupants snapped to attention.

"Report." The colonel said.

"We heard about the attack on the palace." Regimental Commissar Garratt said as he looked up from a map.

"It was just a couple of cultist infiltrators." Shryke replied, "Lieutenant Wolf and her squad handled them. What's our status here?"

From the corner of the room a hooded figure stepped forwards.

"Prefabricated units are sixty percent assembled." He said in an electronically augmented voice, "While seventy four percent of tent structures have been erected. Current projection is for the camp to be fully established by oh two hundred hours."

"Very good." Shryke responded, nodding to the tech priest, "That'll give the troops chance to get some rest."

"Commissar Chen has reported that the Ninth Company is down by eighteen men following the journey from Par Shallon however." Garratt added, "He requests permission to recruit replacements locally." The Ninth Company was the XIX Regiment's penal company and unlike the others contained troops from a variety of worlds.

"Tell him to approach the local authorities directly. Don't bother going through Adept Clay. She'll just through a bunch of dataslates at him to fill in. There's only so much space in Lyannus City's prison island so I expect they'll be glad to get rid of some of the overcrowding. But he needs to be ready to move out by lunch time."

"We're going to deploy so soon?" Wolf asked from the doorway behind the colonel where she and Quinn's squad waited.

"Probably early afternoon." Shryke replied, "The Kordonians are sending over some advisors to brief us on what they've already achieved, though that seems to be nothing more than sitting behind fortifications and waiting for the enemy to come to them."

"Then with your permission colonel I'd like to get my men back to the rest of my platoon." Wolf said.

"Yes go." Shryke said and Wolf turned to leave, "Problem lieutenant?" he asked when she paused.

"Yes there is just one thing." Wolf replied as she turned back towards him, "Where exactly is my platoon billeted?"

"Magos Serett?" Shryke said to the tech priest.

"Fourth Company is located here." Serett responded, extending one of the snakelike mechandrites grafted into his body to indicate an area of the camp shown on a map pinned to the tent wall beside him.

"Thank you." Wolf replied, "Sergeant, with me."

Fourth company's tents and the single prefabricated structure used to house their attached squadron of sentinel scout walkers were already fully assembled and erected when Wolf and Quinn's squad reached them.

"It was easy really." Wolf's platoon sergeant, Vance, explained in the sergeants' tent, "We just assigned one of Khor's ogryns to each group for the heavy lifting while everyone else hammered everything in place. We even beat Cogboy and Cornelliuss the Bastard in getting their shed up and running." Ogryns were a mutated strain of human, or abhuman. Their ancestors had been cut off from humanity for so long that they had developed physical characteristics better suited to their homeworlds. In the case of ogryns this had meant that they had grown much larger and more muscular than normal humans while their intelligence was reduced to that of a young child. In high demand in the Imperial Guard the most intelligent were cybernetically augmented so that they could better understand orders. The subjects of such modification were known as 'BONEheads' after the process known as Biochemical Ogryn Neural Enhancement. Since joining the XIX Regiment, Wolf had noticed that despite not being from Catachan and thus technically outsiders the ogryns were still fully accepted. That they never gave orders and only ever did as they were told helped though.

"Excellent." Wolf replied, "According to the colonel we'll be moving out tomorrow afternoon."

"Yeah, we heard." Another sergeant commented while he sat on the edge of his bed and cleaned his las pistol, "More outsiders coming to try and tell us our job."

"They have been here longer than us Sergeant Grey." Wolf pointed out.

"And what a great job they've done of things." Grey replied, "Still, that's what you get when you ask amateurs to fight in the jungle."

Wolf frowned briefly. Of her squad leaders Grey, the leader of second squad, remained the most hostile to her presence while the others now only seemed to be somewhat indifferent to it.

"Rumour is we're heading out with the second, seventh and eighth companies." The last of the sergeants said. This was Molla, first squad's leader. The son of a tour guide on Catachan his field craft skills were exceeded only by one other in the platoon and he had previously made an attempt to try and pass some of this on to Wolf, "Sentinels and rough riders to lead the way and our infantry to back them up."

"Rough riders?" Wolf said, her eyes widened and a smile appearing on her face.

"Yes, why?" Molla asked suspiciously.

"Will we get a chance to see them up close?" Wolf asked, "I just love horses. Not that I've ever seen one for real mind you, but I saw loads of pictures of them in books when I was growing up."

"I tell you what lieutenant," Grey said, "I'm heading over to Eighth Company first thing tomorrow. You can come along with me."

Wolf's face fell.

"Why?" she asked, "You don't like having me around."

Grey shrugged.

"Fine. Don't go. I just figured that it'd get you off my back if I did you a favour that's nothing to do with being out in the jungle where you've no business being." He replied and Wolf realised that the other sergeants were all staring at her.

"Okay I'm sorry." She said, "I'll be happy to go with you. Is oh seven hundred okay?"

"That should do fine." Grey answered and Wolf turned to leave the tent but she found her way blocked by the arrival of another Catachan.

"Corporal Mayer." She said.

"Lieutenant." Mayer responded.

"What brings you here Bomber?" Vance asked. Mayer led second Platoon's mortar squad and it was this that had earned him the nickname 'Bomber'.

"Oh I saw that Quinn's squad was back so I thought I'd see if there was any more information about us deploying." Mayer replied.

"Nothing new." Quinn replied, "We were somewhat busy dealing with angry cultists for the general to share much with us."

"But it's likely to be tomorrow afternoon." Wolf added and she smiled, "Which means I've got time to visit Eighth Company tomorrow morning. Now if you don't mind I want to go and find something to feed the horses with." And then she darted past him.

Mayer looked at the assembled sergeants with a confused look on his face.

"Wait a moment." He said, "Did she just say 'horses'?"

Vance sighed and looked at the grinning Grey.

"It's his fault." He said, "Best keep out of it."

5.

Wolf held a small bundle with her when she arrived at the sergeant's tent the next morning.

"I was able to grab some fresh fruit from the mess hall." She explained to Grey.

"Well we're just waiting on one more person." he replied, "Ah, here she is now." And he looked towards a Catachan woman heading towards them.

"Torrent? What's she doing here?" Wolf asked. Torrent was Second Platoon's medic. Initially a member of XII Regiment she had also been captured by tau forces and reassigned to the XIX Regiment upon her rescue. However, the shared experience of being prisoners of war had not provided the basis for the good relationship Wolf had hoped for. Instead she seemed just as hostile towards Wolf as Grey generally was. "I've got some supplies that Eighth Company were supposed to get." Torrent said, holding up a small package of her own.

"That's why I'm going over there." Grey added, "I want to make sure everything is sorted the way it needs to be."

"You should have told me if you got the wrong supplies." Wolf told Torrent.

"Can we just go?" Torrent asked and she looked at Grey.

"It would be a good idea lieutenant." Grey said, "Major Trent is likely to call a briefing soon and we can't miss that."

"Okay, let's go." Wolf replied.

Grey led the way through the regiment's camp, heading towards one of the structures made from prefabricated parts. This was the stable for the Eighth Company and as the group approached them Wolf smelt the air.

"Wow that's strong." She said, waving a hand in front of her face.

"Having second thoughts lieutenant?" Grey asked.

"No, I'll get used to it." Wolf said, "Oh look, there's one of the horses now." And she pointed to where a horse was being led from a wheeled vehicle, "Come on, let's go say hello." And she dashed ahead of Grey and Torrent who both just looked at one another and smiled before following her.

There were three Catachans around the vehicle as another horse was led out.

"What are their names?" Wolf called out to them.

"Huh?" one of the Catachans replied.

"I was just wondering what the horses were called." Wolf replied, "Sorry, I'm Lieutenant Wolf from Fourth Company."

"The outsider." One of the other Catachans commented to his colleague and Wolf frowned briefly.

"They don't have names." The other Catachan replied, "Or if they do I've not been told them. It hardly seems necessary. It's feeding time."

Wolf smiled.

"Can I help?" she asked, "I brought some-" but before she could continue the Catachan drew his las pistol and shot the horse between the eyes. Wolf's jaw dropped as the second horse was also shot dead and the Catachans knelt down and began to carve slices of flesh from them.

"You could bring one of those trays over here lieutenant." The Catachan closest to Wolf said and he nodded towards a set of metal trays leant up against the vehicle used to transport the horses. Then she heard laughter and looking around she saw Grey and Torrent both laughing at her. The package Torrent had been holding actually contained a camera that she was aiming at Wolf.

"Excuse me lieutenant, but we need those trays." The Catachan beside Wolf said, "If you are going to help-"

"Yes I've got them." Wolf replied as she wandered over to collect the trays. When she returned and gave them to the Catachans they began to load slices of horse meat onto them, splashing blood on Wolf's uniform.

"Come on." The Catachan said to Wolf when he stood up with the tray, "You can help with the feeding. There are gauntlets inside."

"Gauntlets? What do I need gauntlets for?" Wolf asked as she followed him towards the stable.

"Don't you know anything about us?" the Catachan asked.

"I thought you were the regiment's rough rider company." Wolf replied, "So where are your horses?"

The Catachan snorted.

"There are no horses on Catachan. Don't you know anything about us?" He replied, "We ride something more suitable for a deathworld." And then he led Wolf into the stable.

Immediately Wolf stopped and stared at the rows of pens that held not horses but large and vicious looking lizards with long legs and stubby arms. Most of these evil-looking creatures that snapped at one another

through the bars of their pens and growled at anyone walking past were about the same size as a typical warhorse, but at the far end of the stable Wolf spotted three much larger creatures.

"We'll do the raptors first." The Catachan said, "Then the carnososaurs later. You better put a gauntlet on." And he looked to a row of long gauntlets hung up beside the door.

As Wolf donned a gauntlet she noticed Grey and Torrent still watching and filming her and she scowled at them.

"Now just put a few handfuls of meat into the tray of each pen." The Catachan told her and Wolf did as she was told, picking up a handful of the blood soaked meat and depositing it into the tray at the front of the closest pen. Instantly the raptor inside lunged forwards to grab the meat and Wolf dropped it and jumped backwards.

"That thing almost took my hand off!" she exclaimed.

"That's why we use the gauntlets." The Catachan replied.

Still smiling as he watched Wolf, Grey heard a chime from the earpiece of his micro-bead communicator, "Go ahead." He said.

"Enough messing about." Vance's voice said, "The major's just called everyone together. So get back here and bring the lieutenant with you. She better be in a good enough state for parade as well." And then the channel went dead.

"Oh well." Grey said with a sigh, "It was good while it lasted."

"Good of you to join us lieutenant." Major Trent called out as she came running across the area reserved for use as Fourth Company's parade ground and took her place in line along with the rest of her platoon.

"Just in time." Vance hissed as Torrent and Grey took their places as well, "I hope it was worth it."

"Easily." Grey muttered in reply.

"Where's Rull?" Wolf whispered as she tried to locate the platoon's sniper.

"Off getting the lay of the land." Vance replied, "We've already done roll call though so never you mind."

Wolf nodded and looked towards the company's command staff where she noticed an officer in Kordonian uniform stood beside Company Commissar Layne.

"Now for the benefit of those among us who arrived late I'll allow Captain Greel to give you some background on our enemy." Major Trent said out loud and he looked at the Kordonian.

The man nodded and stepped forwards.

"We are dealing with a most insidious foe." Greel announced, "They have remained hidden for ten thousand years and only now are they making an appearance, striking out from their ancient settlements to try and drive us from this world. The Kordonian Fourteenth has found and put many of their heretical shrines to the torch, but for every one we destroy another is built. The arrival of your division looks set to change that however. The throne will prevail."

"Captain Greel will join Second Platoon." Major Trent said when Greel ceased talking and stepped back and Wolf heard several soft groans from around her, "And they will take the lead position in our advance along with Sergeant Gant's sentinel squadron." Trent continued and he glanced to the female sergeant in charge of the sentinels, "Our advance will be matched by the second, Seventh and Eighth Companies while the rest follow to support us as needed. Oh and Ninth Company is going to be acting as camp sentries, so you may want to make sure anything of value to you is secure. Remember, we are searching for any signs of human habitation, not just suspected military activity. According to the local government there are no friendly civilians outside the city for at least five hundred kilometres so anyone you encounter may be treated as hostile immediately. Even if you encounter someone who isn't an armed combatant they're probably helping support them, so make sure you don't let them escape. Now are there any questions?" Trent then waited a few seconds and when none of the platoon commanders replied he simply nodded and added, "Dismissed."

"Okay everyone, we need to get our gear together." Vance said, turning to face the rest of the platoon as they began to break ranks, "And make sure you pack enough rations. The major didn't say if we'd be back today, so count on spending the night in the jungle."

"Congratulations." A woman's voice said and Wolf turned to see Gant approaching.

"Huh?" Wolf responded.

"Congratulations." Gant repeated.

"What are you talking about Ursulla?" Vance asked.

"I just wanted to congratulate Captain Wolf on her promotion."

"Captain?" Grey exclaimed, "How the feth does she get bumped up to captain?"

Vance sighed.

"The merger." He said.

"Merger? What merger?" Wolf asked, looking around at her troops.

"The Kordonians are being rolled up into our division." Vance explained, "The major explained it all before you arrived."

"Though we heard rumours just before the parade started." Molla added.

"So that means that an officer will be appointed to liaise with them. Tell them how we work and who they need to report to." Gant said, "And we all think that it's going to be you Lieutenant Wolf."

"But that's not a lieutenant's role." Wolf replied, "Only a captain or- Oh." And then it suddenly became clear why General Fortnam had selected her to accompany him to the reception at the governor's palace the previous night. He had been introducing her to Colonel Mallet before she was assigned to his staff. Wolf smiled and she looked at Vance, "I'm going to be a captain." She said excitedly, "Isn't that wonderful. Oh wait, what about the rest of you? I'll have to leave the Nineteenth behind."

"Oh we'll be just fine." Grey said, smirking.

"So will it be you sergeant?" Torrent asked as the platoon picked its way through the jungle at the head of fourth company. Ahead of them there was the clanking sound of the four sentinel walkers leading the way while Second Platoon followed. Wolf had positioned her command section just behind Quinn's veterans at the front of the platoon and along with the four Catachans of her section she was accompanied by Captain Greel and a second Kordonian equipped with a vox caster set to their regiment's frequency to allow them to keep in contact with their own forces. Almost the entire Nineteenth Division was sweeping through the jungle itself, paying little attention to the trails and clearings that the Kordonians had already tried to use to locate the cultists.

"Will what be him?" Wolf asked in response.

"Your replacement." Torrent replied, "When we get to pick our officer the way it should be done among Catachans. Not an outsider imposed on us."

"I haven't left yet and you're already picking my replacement?" Wolf said.

"No, just the platoon sergeant if he thinks that the troops will pick him or if they think he's been tainted by having been in your squad." Torrent said.

"You're in my squad too." Wolf pointed out, "Maybe you've been tainted."

"Enough." Vance said, "There'll be a vote if and when Lieutenant Wolf leaves. Besides, it'll be Quinn. Even before the lieutenant was assigned to us it was obvious the men respect him more."

"Quinn doesn't want the job." Wolf said.

"The men respect Grey a lot from what I've seen." Torrent added and she glanced at Wolf, "It comes from standing up for what's right."

"I said that's enough Torrent." Vance said, "We've got a job to do out here."

All of a sudden the clanking sound from ahead ceased and the Catachans came to halt and crouched down, their weapons raised.

"Lieutenant, what's happening?" Greel asked.

"The sentinels have stopped." Wolf replied.

"Stopped? Why?"

"Well either one of them has suffered a fault or they've found something worth stopping to take a look at." Wolf told him before her micro-bead activated, "Go ahead." She said as she pressed a finger to her ear.

"Lieutenant it's Quinn. Gant's walkers have found a set of structures about a hundred metres ahead. Grid reference six four three by eight oh seven."

"Copy that Quinn." Wolf responded as she took out her dataslate and called up the latest survey data, "Six four three by eight oh seven. Sergeant my datamap shows nothing but empty jungle there."

"It's pretty overgrown lieutenant. I doubt the survey aircraft would pick it up unless the cogboys gave them some auspexes better than the usual stuff." Quinn told her.

"How big are these structures sergeant?" Wolf asked.

"Big enough that we can't see the far side. Rull's heading around to see if there's anything more interesting around there."

"Hold your position and wait for Rull to report." Wolf ordered him, "We're heading up to you now." Then she looked at Vance, "Sergeant, we're moving up to join Quinn's squad. Everyone else will stay put until we know exactly what we're dealing with here."

"Care to let us in on what you know so far lieutenant?" Greel asked.

"There's a structure up ahead captain." Wolf replied, "It's hidden from view from the air and far from a trail so it could just be the sort of place that the cultists would use as a hideout."

The command section crept forwards quietly, still accompanied by the two Kordonians to where they found Quinn's veteran squad positioned in cover while the four sentinels stood in a row just in front of them.

Beyond them were numerous stone structures that were barely visible under layers of moss and vines. But the straight lines that proved they were of artificial origin rather than a natural formation were identifiable even under this. Though only a handful of structures were directly in front of the Catachans it was clear that there were more behind them, though they had been abandoned for long enough that the jungle had encroached onto the area the structures occupied and trees grew in the gaps between individual structures. From the Catachans' position it appeared that the jungle had reclaimed a sizeable settlement. At some point

in the past several hundred people could have made this their home but now it looked completely lifeless. However, as any Imperial Guardsman knew appearances could often be deceptive.

"That's them lieutenant." Quinn said, pointing to the structures.

"How did you know we were here?" Greel asked.

"You make even more noise than her." Quinn commented, glancing around at Wolf.

"Blame Molla. He taught me." Wolf replied as she crouched down and took out a magnocular and lifted it to her face, "Wow, those look old." She added.

"Ten thousand years maybe." Vance commented as he too studied the structure.

"We've seen no signs of life since we got here." Quinn said, "Though as you can see there could be several hundred people in there and we wouldn't notice."

"Okay this is too big for us to handle alone." Wolf said, "We're calling this in. Orthan bring that vox over here." Orthan, the guardsman carrying a large backpack mounted vox set approached Wolf and passed her the handset.

"Lieutenant, I need to call this in as well." Greel said.

"Of course." Wolf replied before the two Kordonians retreated away from the Catachans. Meanwhile Wolf held the vox handset to her mouth, "Catachan one nine mark four, this is Catachan one nine mark four mark two. Do you read me? Over."

There was a short pause and then Major Trent's voice responded.

"Reading you Catachan one nine mark four mark two. State your message. Over."

"Sir we have located a large collection of overgrown structures at map reference six four three by eight oh seven. Requesting support to advance and secure the area. Over."

"Understood lieutenant." Trent replied, "Deploy your men to cover the structures but do not advance unless you are fired on. Over and out." And then the channel went silent.

Wolf passed the handset back to Orthan and activated her micro-bead, "Grey, Molla, advance and deploy either side of Quinn's squad. Corporal Mayer deploy your mortars and target the area around six four three by eight oh seven. Sergeant Khor, bring your squad to my location."

"Understood lieutenant." Molla replied, "We'll be advancing on your right."

"We'll take left," Grey added.

"Setting up." Mayer said and then there was a short delay while Khor activated the communicator built into his cybernetic modifications.

"Ogryns forwards." He said.

"You're bringing up ogryns?" Greel asked as he rejoined Wolf's command section, "Isn't that a bad idea?"

"See that captain?" Vance asked, pointing to the overgrown structures in front of them, "If we need to assault that then we'll need the ogryns. We'll send them in with the sentinels and then follow behind them. Besides I doubt that they'll make any more noise than you do."

"Your men are insubordinate lieutenant." Greel said to Wolf.

"They're Catachan." She replied.

"And you're not." Torrent muttered.

The seven ogryns advanced without paying any attention to the path they were taking. If there was undergrowth in the way it simply got trampled by the three metre tall abhumans.

"Ogryns halt!" Khor ordered and the squad promptly ground to a halt. Then Khor snapped to attention and saluted Wolf, "Ogryns reporting." He said.

"Very good sergeant." Wolf replied, remembering to return the salute before the ogryn remained at attention all day, "I need you to move your men over there. Position yourselves behind Sergeant Gant's sentinel squadron and advance only if they do. Do you understand?"

Khor looked in the direction of the ruins and saw the four lightweight walking machines.

"Yes lieutenant." He said and he turned to his squad, "Ogryns advance." He ordered and the seven ogryns headed towards the sentinels, once again trampling the undergrowth underfoot.

"Okay," Wolf broadcast using her micro-bead, "I want everyone to keep an eye on these ruins. If there is anyone at home I want to know about them before they start shooting at us."

6.

Major Trent arrived with his command section shortly after. In addition to the four Catachan veterans of his section, he was accompanied by Commissar Layne, a man in the robes of a priest of the Adeptus Ministorum armed with a shotgun, Enginseer Cornellius and a shaven headed man in garish robes that looked distinctly out of place in the jungle.

"So this is it then is it?" Trent asked as he looked at the ruins, "Doesn't look like much."

"Have you encountered ruins such as this before major?" Greel asked.

"Plenty of failed settlements on Catachan get overgrown in a few weeks." Trent replied. Then he looked at Wolf, "You did right to call me." He said, "We'll need the entire company to sweep them properly but until then we'll—"

"Copy that." Vance said suddenly as he received a message over his micro-bead, "Major, lieutenant, Rull reports people moving on the other side of the ruins. He says there's about a dozen of them, all heading away from us and all armed."

"Armed? How heavily?" Trent asked.

"Small arms, but some were carrying cases that could have held heavier weapons." Vance replied.

"Okay we're going in." Trent said, "No time to wait for First and Third Platoons, they'll just have to run."

At this Wolf activated her micro-bead.

"Sergeant Gant, advance. Weapons free." She ordered.

"Copy that, weapons free." Gant replied and all of a sudden the air was filled with the clanking sound of the sentinels getting back into motion.

"Ogryns! Forwards!" Khor bellowed, raising his bulky ripper gun into the air and striding forwards after the sentinels.

"Second platoon advance." Wolf said, broadcasting the order to the entire platoon, "Mayer, stand by to provide fire support as requested. Frag and smoke."

"Understood lieutenant." Mayer responded, "Rounds are ready."

Then as the platoon began to move into the ruins Wolf sent one more transmission.

"Rull, fire at will." She said.

No direct reply came to this last order but moments later there was a sudden scream from the far side of the ruins, followed by the sharp 'cracks' of gunfire.

"Sounds like Rull's putting the fear of the Emperor into someone." Vance commented.

"All men should fear the Emperor's justice." The ministorum priest added.

"Quite so." Greel said with a smile and he glanced to his vox operator, "We fight for the Throne."

"The light of Him On Earth has not reached this place before Preacher Black." The shaven head man said, "Great evil surrounds us." Then when he noticed Commissar Layne drawing his bolt pistol he smiled, "Do not worry commissar, it has not corrupted me."

"Not yet maybe Mister Veneel." Layne replied, "But if I sense any corruption on your part I will do my duty."

"I would have it no other way commissar." Veneel said.

There was a flash of light and a screeching sound as one of the sentinel pilots engaged the heavy flamethrower built into his vehicle and this was followed by an angry roar and the sound of powerful shotgun blasts.

"Your ogryns are engaging something." Trent said to Wolf before the rattle of stubber fire made both his company command section and Wolf's platoon command section dive for cover.

"Looks like some of them didn't try running." Vance said as he searched for the source of the gunfire.

"Over there." Trent's platoon sergeant said, pointing to one of the more dilapidated structures. At ground level there was a hole in the wall and each time the stubber fire was heard a muzzle flash could be seen inside it.

"Well spotted Stubbs." Trent replied.

Wolf reached for her micro-bead.

"Mayer. Target at six four four by eight oh nine. Single round, smoke for targeting." She signalled.

The rattle of stubber fire continued for a few seconds before there was a whistling sound from somewhere overhead and all of a sudden a mortar round punched its way through the jungle canopy. The round struck the ground between the Catachans and the heavy stubber position, bursting open to produce an expanding cloud of thick white smoke and the rattle of stubber fire halted.

"Move!" Stubbs snapped and he led the way as both command sections ran for the cover of another nearby ruin.

"We are beyond their field of fire." Cornellius said, "However, I have calculated the trajectory necessary to project an explosive through the aperture through which our opponents are firing."

"Do it." Trent said, nodding and from under his red robe Cornelliuss produced a standard fragmentation grenade. He removed the pin and tossed the grenade around the corner the Catachans were using for cover. Through the smoke there was the sound of the metal grenade casing striking stone as the grenade bounced off the edge of the hole in the wall.

Then came the explosions.

The grenade detonated inside the ruin and immediately triggered the detonation of something volatile that had been stored inside and even through the smoke produced by the mortar round the flash of the fireball was visible.

"Lieutenant, are you okay?" Quinn asked via his micro-bead.

"Fine. Not even a singed hair." Wolf replied, "Where are you?"

"Close enough to have felt that blast. There's someone taking pot shots at us from a window. I've got Marks and Fellow trying to get closer with their flamers. Whoever's shooting at us we're going to burn them out."

"Understood sergeant. Clear the building and let me know what you find."

Peering around the side of the ruin, Cornelliuss studied the structure where the heavy stubber fire had come from.

"Major I detect no signs of life." He stated.

"Looks like that blast was enough to put a stop to them." Vance commented and he looked at Wolf,

"Lieutenant?" he asked.

"Let's go." She replied, checking her las pistol and Vance dashed towards the burning structure, followed by the rest of the platoon command section.

The structure had been reduced to little more than a pile of rubble with more debris scattered around. Much of the smoke from the mortar had been dispersed by the explosion, but there was still enough in the air that the advancing Catachans had to watch their footing. Nearer to the ruined structure flames could be seen flickering from where the stubber fire had come from, the hole now torn wide open.

Vance crouched down by the hole and aimed his las pistol through it and he peered inside, wary in case there was anything else about to explode.

"Bodies." He said as Wolf joined him and she too looked through the hole.

Just inside she saw what was left of two people with a heavy stubber mounted on a tripod. The ammunition belt running from the weapon went into a case nearby, but the bullets on the belt had all burst open when the flames following the explosion had caused the propellant inside them to ignite all at once.

Trent and the rest of his section came up behind Wolf's section.

"Congratulations engineer." He said, "It would appear your aim was spot on."

"Of course it was major." Cornelliuss responded.

There was the sound of footsteps through the rubble and both command sections turned to see Quinn's veterans approaching.

"Excellent timing sergeant." Trent said, "We have a building to investigate."

"Not much of it left though." Vance added.

"Just makes it quicker to search." Quinn replied before crawling in through the hole, "Kind of dark in here."

He called out before igniting a chemical glow rod, "Some of the ceiling's come down, but what's left looks sound. We ought to be safe searching this place." He added and then the rest of his squad began to follow him into the structure.

"I think it advisable that we attempt to locate an alternate entrance." Cornelliuss said and Trent nodded.

"We'll split up." He told Wolf, "You take your section around that way and I'll take mine in the other direction."

Wolf nodded and while Quinn's veterans continued to enter the structure through the hole in the wall the two command squads split up, moving in opposite directions to encircle the structure.

Vance led the way for Wolf's section and so it was he that first found the entrance to it. The doorway had clearly been designed for humans to use but over time it had become overgrown and Vance drew his long Catachan blade and began to hack at the vines blocking it.

"Let me help." Wolf said, drawing her own blade but when she swung it she found that the vines were tough and she barely chipped them.

"Out of the way." Torrent said, "Let a real Catachan do it." And the medic pushed past Wolf and joined Vance in hacking at the vines.

"You know," Vance said, "If this doorway is blocked by these vines then it means no one's used it in some time."

"How long?" Wolf asked.

"I don't know." Vance said, "On Catachan there are plants that could cover this building in a matter of hours. But here I'd say it'd take years to get this overgrown." Then with a final swing he cut through one of the main vines and felt the rest shift as he pressed them, "Okay this is it." He said and he looked at the trooper carrying the command section's grenade launcher, "Better put that thing away Tully." He said and the trooper

nodded and slung the weapon over his shoulder, drawing his sidearm instead, "Good, now you and Orthan give me a hand. Lieutenant, you and Torrent may want to cover us."

With las pistols pointed towards the vine covered doorway, Torrent and Wolf waited as the other three Catachans took hold of the mesh of vines and ripped them free to expose the doorway beyond. Any actual door that had been present at some time was not there any more, instead there was just a gaping rectangular hole in the wall. From behind them Greel produced a flash light and shone it into the darkness. "Empty." He said.

"Sure looks that way." Vance replied, "But there was someone in there and we can't be sure that the cogboy killed them all with his grenade. Follow me in and keep that flash light pointed ahead of me."

As the group entered the ancient structure wolf activated her micro-bead again.

"Quinn, we're entering the ruin now. Watch out and make sure you know who you're shooting at."

"Copy that lieutenant." Quinn replied, "Though so far we've not seen anyone else down here."

The structure seemed as lifeless as Quinn had indicated as wolf's section made its way through it. Occasionally they encountered signs of staircases that at one time would have led up to a second storey above the ground, but this had long since crumbled to nothing and the staircases were blocked by a mix of rubble and more vines. However, as they continued on their way the group suddenly heard the sound of someone using a power tool.

"That way." Vance whispered, "Kill the light."

Greel nodded as he shut down the flash light and the passageway they were in was plunged into darkness. The only sound was that of the power tool cutting and Vance led the section in creeping closer.

All of a sudden there was a crashing sound and light flooded into the passageway.

"Hold your fire!" Stubbs yelled from outside the structure and Wolf's section saw the company command section looking back at them from outside where Cornelius had just sliced through the vines blocking another doorway.

"Major." Vance called out, "Is this the only way in you've found?"

"Yes sergeant." Trent replied as he stepped into the passageway, "Why?"

"Because we had to cut a way in as well." Wolf said.

"So what?" Greel asked and Vance sighed.

"See," he said, looking at Wolf, "this is why jungle warfare should be left to experienced troops."

Wolf turned to face the scowling Captain Greel, obviously annoyed at the Catachans' attitude.

"We had to break in and Major Trent's section had to do the same and let's not forget that Quinn's troops entered through a hole that had been blown open in an explosion. That means that of the three access points we've found not one of them could have been used by the cultists who fired on us."

"See?" Vance said to Torrent, "She's learning." But Torrent just snorted.

Wolf's micro-bead then activated.

"Lieutenant where are you?" Quinn asked.

"Still on the first floor." Wolf replied, "Major Trent's section has just joined us."

"Well you need to find a way down here to the basement." Quinn told her.

"What have you found?" Wolf asked.

"I'm not sure exactly. But it's probably important." Quinn said.

Even shining a flash light down the tunnel revealed no end to it. It had been dug into the wall of one of the chambers located below ground level and looked to have been constructed far more recently than when the structure had been abandoned by its original occupants.

"See? This is important right?" Quinn said, looking at both Trent and Wolf.

"It certainly is." Trent replied, "With tunnels like this the cultists could move around the ruins without us seeing them."

Wolf activated her micro-bead.

"All units report in." she said.

"This is Molla. First Squad is on the other of the ruins. We've hooked up with Rull and are setting up the heavy bolter to block any escape on this side."

"Gant here, someone was taking pot shots at us but Sergeant Khor and his troops seemed to have scared them off. We're moving in the only direction that they could have gone, but we can't find a trail."

"Hold your position Gant." Wolf ordered, "The cultists could be using tunnels to get around. Sergeant Grey, what about Second Squad?"

"We've found what could be a temple lieutenant." Grey answered, "But it's no shrine to the Emperor."

"Search it. See if there are any tunnels." Wolf ordered and then she shut off the micro-bead and turned to Trent, "Sir, my men have located a temple."

"Dedicated to some foul dark god no doubt." Black hissed, snarling.

"When First Platoon reaches us we'll have Captain Fear's combat engineers demolish it." Trent said, "But first I'd like to examine this place some more." And he looked around the chamber they were in.

There were several camp beds set up along the walls, more than necessary for the only two cultists they knew to have occupied the building. Other pieces of crude furniture were scattered about, mainly table made from packing crates that were now empty but in one corner Greel found something of interest.

"What have you got there captain?" the psyker Veneel asked when he noticed the Kordonian officer and his vox operator both studying something.

"Looks like a vox set." Greel answered, turning around and holding up a communications device about the size of a shoe.

"Be careful how you handle that." Cornellius warned him.

"Why? It's not booby-trapped. It would have already exploded if it was." Greel replied.

"That depends on how a detonator was set up." Cornellius said, "But I am more concerned that your thumb is currently placed on the tuning dial and will have disturbed the frequency monitoring."

There were groans from the Catachans, all of who realised that by isolating the communication frequencies favoured by the cultists it would become far easier to hunt them down. Cornellius took the device and studied it.

"It looks like one of our short range field units." Greel told him, "I was trying to get it working. To see if there was any vox activity."

"Where did the cultists get that?" Wolf asked.

"When they first started launching attacks we tried sending patrols into the jungle after them." Greel said, "Most were never seen again so I suppose that must have belonged to one of them."

"If the cultists were able to listen in on our communications it would allow them to act accordingly." Wolf said.

"Indeed lieutenant." Cornellius said, "Though I ought to point out that the Kordonian and Catachan forces on the planet use different frequencies and encryption patterns. That would limit their ability to predict our movement."

"We'll take it back with us anyway." Trent said, "Perhaps something can be learned from it. In the mean time we ought to take a look at where this tunnel leads to."

"Could these be how the cultists are bypassing the defences of Lyannus City?" Wolf asked as they began to file into the open tunnel mouth.

"I do not believe that possible lieutenant." Cornellius replied, "To construct one beneath the rivers surrounding the central city would require a considerable degree of engineering skill and resources. Any project of such complexity would undoubtedly draw attention. These tunnels are most likely a local feature only."

7.

Molla's squad was deployed to cover as much of the ruins as was possible, with their belt fed heavy bolter set up to fire along the length of the perimeter without needing to be turned to be brought to bear on anyone leaving in that direction.

Molla himself was searching the bodies of the cultists Rull had shot before First Squad had arrived on the scene. Seven of them had been lined up, while the other five had been able to escape into the jungle and even now were being hunted by Rull. Molla had no doubt that before too long there would be more bodies to search.

The cultists were all heavily scarred, though none of this was visible without opening up their jackets. A certain amount of scarring was to be expected from a life in the wilderness but the quantity and, more significantly, the pattern of the scarring suggested that they had been deliberately inflicted.

"Molla, are you there?" Gant's voice sounded from Molla's micro-bead.

"Right here." He responded, getting back to his feet and drawing his las pistol.

"You've got a whole bunch of cultists heading right for you." Gant informed him, "They managed to get away from my sentinels by ducking down some narrow passageways between different ruins. Khor's ogryns are still in pursuit, but they've got a head start and know the ground."

"Understood Gant." Molla said, "We'll have a nice little surprise waiting for them here." Then he looked at his squad, "Stand to! Contact imminent." He yelled as he rushed to take up a position alongside his men.

The first sign of the cultists' approach was the sound of the pursuing ogryns, whose yells carried a long way through the ruins. Then came several gunshots from a mix of las and slug weapons, presumably directed back at the ogryns. When the first of them appeared the Catachan heavy bolter team did not wait for an order to fire, instead the powerful belt fed weapon roared as it sent a stream of rocket assisted explosive projectile towards them. Designed to punch through the heaviest of body armour and even destroy light vehicles the rounds had no difficulty in killing the unarmoured cultists and even the slightest glancing hit could blow off a limb providing that the round detonated. At almost the same time the members of Molla's squad armed with las guns opened fire as well. The rocket flares of the bolter rounds acted to show both the Catachans and the cultists where they were heading and so the Catachans armed with las guns focused on other points along the perimeter of the ruins to pick off any cultists emerging away from the hail of heavy bolter fire.

The cultists not caught in the initial volley headed for cover, either in the undergrowth in front of them or retreating back into the ruins. However, although that was sufficient to stop shots from the las guns it was at best a temporary measure against the heavy bolter that could blast apart the stone ruins given enough time. A sudden 'pop' from beside Molla alerted him to the discharge of his squad's grenade launcher and he ducked as an explosive round landed amongst a group of cultists who had sought cover in the undergrowth, sending pieces of flesh and clumps of dirt flying in all directions.

He was about to shoot a cultist who had decided that the best choice was to fall back into the ruins when the hulking form of Khor appeared right in the cultist's path. Molla expected the ogryn to fire a burst from his ripper gun into the startled cultist at point blank range but instead he roared and swung his weapon like a club, gripping it by the barrel. The butt struck the cultist under his jaw smashing the bone and lifting the man clear off the ground. He landed in a heap, screaming in pain and his scream was cut suddenly short when Khor rushed up to him and stamped on his chest.

The remaining ogryns charged out of the ruins around Khor and ran right into the remaining cultists. None of them fired their ripper guns and Molla guessed that they had already expended all of their ammunition.

"Cease fire!" he yelled and the pounding of the heavy bolter and pulses of las gun fire stopped. Then he drew his long knife, "Charge!" he shouted.

The arrival of the ogryns had already thrown the cultists into disarray, forcing them to turn around to face the threat they posed and when Molla's squad charged at them from behind they found themselves caught between two forces with nowhere to escape to. One tried to make a break for it anyway, ducking down and trying to crawl under a fallen column.

"Going somewhere?" Molla asked as he reached down and dragged the cultist to his feet. The man reacted by turning a slug pistol towards Molla but the Catachan had far more experience at close quarters combat and he saw the move taking place before the muzzle of the gun could be pointed in his direction. He slashed at the cultist's forearm, slicing open his wrist and as the man screamed in pain Molla stepped closer and head butted him. Then when the man fell backwards Molla finished him off with a shot to the head from his las pistol.

Turning around Molla saw two more cultists die at the hands of his men, one was stabbed through the chest while the other was clubbed with the butt of a las gun and when he staggered backwards an ogryn wrapped

his hands around the cultist's throat and lifted him off the ground and a hurled him over his shoulder, breaking his neck.

Only one of the cultists now remained and he was struggling to locate a fresh magazine for the stub pistol he held.

"Hold your fire." Molla said to his men when he saw one of the Catachans aim his las gun, "The major will appreciate one that can still talk."

Unable to find any more ammunition for his weapon, the cultists dropped his gun.

"You won't take me alive." He hissed, "Your corpse god will not have my soul."

"Just grab him someone." Molla said and a pair of Catachans leapt forwards to grab hold of the man.

Unexpectedly he did not attempt to break free, instead allowing them to close with him until he was able to reach out and grab hold of a fragmentation grenade carried by one of the Catachans.

"Free Lyannus!" the cultist yelled, pulling free the pin of the grenade.

"Fire in the hole!" Molla shouted, diving for cover.

The Catachans and ogyrns sought whatever cover they could whereas the cultist remained standing and clutching the grenade to his chest. The explosive detonated seconds later, completely destroying the body of the cultist. But the fragments were not limited to the immediate area surrounding the cultist and unable to reach cover in time the two Catachans who had attempted to capture him were both caught up in the grenade blast. Molla heard a scream, but only one and he knew instantly that the other man was dead.

"Help him!" Molla snapped as he pulled himself to his feet and dashed to the injured man. One of the grenade fragments had struck his shoulder; missing his flak jacket by millimetres, "Hold still." Molla told the injured Catachan as he pressed down on the wound. Beside him another member of the squad unpacked a field dressing and handed it to Molla, "Somebody better get Torrent." He said as he took the dressing.

"This tunnel does not meet the construction standards laid down by the Ommissiah." Cornelliuss said as the two command sections and Quinn's veterans continued to explore the underground labyrinth. So far they had discovered passageways linking several of the ruined structures plus some enlarged chambers that were empty when they found them.

"You've said that about every tunnel we've seen." Stubbs commented.

"That is because none of them have met the appropriate standards. My function within the company is to advise on-" Cornelliuss began before Orthan spoke up.

"Sergeant Molla on the vox." He said, passing the vox handset to Wolf.

"Wolf here. Go ahead sergeant." She said.

"Lieutenant, where are you? I've been trying to get you on the micro-bead." Molla asked and Wolf looked at Cornelliuss.

"The rock strata above us may be interfering with low energy communication." The engineer told her.

"We're underground." Wolf told Molla, "What's your situation?"

"We've dealt with the cultists lieutenant. But we've got a man down and we could do with Torrent."

Wolf then looked at Major Trent.

"I think I've seen enough of this place." He said, "We'll head back to the surface and take a look at that temple while your medicae sees to your injured man."

"Help is on the way Sergeant Molla." Wolf signalled, "Over and out." And then she turned to Quinn,

"Sergeant, your squad had better escort Torrent to First Squad's location just in case there are any more cultists about."

"Yes Lieutenant." Quinn replied.

"Good, now that's settled let's find a way out of here." Trent said, "Who's got the map?"

"I have recorded each turning we have-" Cornelliuss began before Trent interrupted him.

"That was a joke." He said.

Grey had deployed his squad around the exterior of the temple building when Trent and Wolf arrived with their command squads. Just one look at what was left of the structure under the moss and vines pointed towards Grey's assessment of the building being correct. Columns surrounded the structure, though most had fallen over long ago and there were alcoves on the outer walls that held the smashed remains of statures of figures that looked not quite human.

"What are you doing out here sergeant?" Wolf asked, "I asked you to search-"

"Yes, search for tunnels." Grey responded before she could finish, "So we did. We gave the place a quick once over and found nothing. But I didn't feel like staying in there too long. There's something just not right about it."

"There is evil here." Veneel said, staring at the ruined temple, "Something old."

"You did the right thing sergeant." Commissar Layne said, "The corruption of your men is not to be risked." Grey smirked at Wolf.

"The commissar approves." He said and Wolf frowned.

"This place should be burned to the ground." Black hissed, "Purified so that it's evil can no longer pollute one of the Emperor's worlds."

"Yes it should." Trent agreed, "Though I think taking a look inside first may help. Mister Veneel, if you would be so kind as to lead the way?"

"Of course major." Veneel said before stepping into the temple. The moment he crossed the threshold he shuddered and Layne began to raise his bolt pistol, "Do not fear commissar." Veneel said, "I am still myself." "After you lieutenant." Trent said, looking at Wolf and she waved to her squad to follow her inside. Greel and his vox operator remained outside however, the Kordonian officer apparently unwilling to enter such an unholy place. Though none of her squad possessed the psychic abilities that Veneel did they all suddenly felt ill at ease when they saw what was inside.

"Is that blood?" Wolf asked, looking at the markings daubed on what remained of the temple walls. Unlike almost every other surface the Catachans had seen in the ruins, the interior of this structure had been cleared of the plant growth that had taken over the area before a variety of symbols and images had been painted on the walls. Obviously someone had considered this place to be important.

"Looks like it." Vance replied.

"Placed there as a part of some heretical practice no doubt." Black said as he followed Wolf's squad into the building.

"I think that was the alter." Grey said from the doorway, remaining just outside and he looked towards a raised stone platform.

"I think you may be correct sergeant." Veneel replied as he moved closer. Wolf followed, advancing just far enough to see that at one time there had been something else positioned on the platform that had been removed but had left marks on the stone where it had sat. Even these marks looked old however, so it seemed unlikely that it was something that the cultists had removed, "The veil between dimensions is weak here." Veneel added, "The warp flows strong."

"Get back from there. That's an order." Layne snapped and Veneel retreated before the Commissar could shoot him.

"What about tunnels?" Wolf asked, looking around.

"I can't see anything lieutenant." Vance replied, "Every other tunnel we've seen has been pretty easy to find. The cultists that dug them don't seem to have been worried about them being found."

"Then it's a fair bet that there are none in here." Trent said.

"The heretics feared damaging their blasphemous temple." Black added and he spun around to face Trent, "Major, we must burn this place. Burn it now."

Trent nodded and activated his micro-bead.

"Sergeant Gant come in." he signalled.

"Gant here major." She replied.

"Sergeant I have a job for your heavy flammers." Trent told her, gazing into the temple.

With the temple burning furiously under the concentrated fire of three heavy flammers the Imperial Guard gathered around the area where Molla's squad had engaged the fleeing cultists. Now their bodies were lined up next to those killed by Rull while Cornelliuss and Trent's squad medic inspected them.

"I tried to take one alive." Molla explained to Wolf, "But he seemed rather keen not to be captured. Took Pressman with him."

Wolf sighed.

"What about Young?" she asked, looking at where Torrent was treating the injured Catachan.

"Torrent says it's mainly muscle damage, but there could be some damage to the nerves as well. Either way it'll be a while before he's ready to return to full active duty." And Wolf nodded.

"So what about them?" she asked, turning her attention to the row of dead cultists.

"Not much to say." Molla said, "They weren't professional soldiers, I'll tell you that. They got caught between two forces and couldn't handle it. Pressman was the only fatality and that was because we didn't just shoot one of them."

"Which one?" Wolf asked.

"Ah." Molla replied.

"Come on sergeant, which one?" Wolf asked again.

"That one." Molla said and he pointed to a bulging plastic bag that had been dumped at the end of the row of bodies, "That's what we could find anyway." He added.

"Oh." Wolf responded as she pictured the Catachans scooping up body parts.

"Major I have completed my analysis." Cornelliuss announced.

"Go on." Trent replied.

"All are human that show no signs of artificial augmentation. However there is a high degree of scarring to the torso and arms." Cornelliuss reported.

"Yeah, I saw that." Molla agreed, "Too many to just be from accidents."

"I agree sir." Trent's medic told the major, "There are regular patterns that are repeated on each of them."
"They desecrate their flesh." Black said, snarling, "More blasphemy."
"Tattoos and ritual scarring are practised on a number of Imperial worlds." Greel pointed out.
"But not like that." Vance replied, "These guys cut themselves to shreds."
"What about the ones that got away?" Wolf asked, "I thought Rull was going after them."
"He did." Molla replied.
"So why isn't he back yet?" Wolf asked, "It's not like him to take his time hunting someone."
"He called in about ten minutes ago," Quinn answered, "He's trailing them to see where they go."
"He confirmed that there are five left." Molla added.
"Major that makes a total of thirty two when counting the bodies here, the five Guardsman Rull is following and the various small groups encountered within the ruins." Cornelius said.
"Enough to make a stand against our platoon." Grey commented.
"So why run?" Wolf asked, "If they had the numbers to fight then why not try?"
"They had no way of knowing how many of us there were." Greel said.
"Yes they did." Vance responded.
"Care to explain that sergeant?" Wolf said and Vance smiled.
"They didn't run at first did they?" he replied, "When we were sat just beyond the ruins they held their position as well. They only started to evacuate when we called for reinforcements to help secure the area. Thirty men can't hold back a full company, no matter how well dug in they are."
"The vox." Wolf said.
"Exactly." Vance replied, "They must have been listening in on our transmissions."
"Major that is not possible." Cornelius said, "Our encryption system ensures that no one can listen in on our battlefield communications."
"What about theirs?" Grey asked, looking at the two Kordonians.
"The vox set we found was one of theirs." Quinn pointed out.
"And you did report our movements to your own headquarters captain." Wolf added.
"Maybe the cultists were able to take a prisoner who told them how to break the Kordonian encryption." Veneel suggested and Trent walked up to Greel.
"Captain," he said, "I think that from now on you ought to retain communications silence until further notice."
"Yes, I totally agree major." Greel responded.
Trent then turned back to the bodies.
"I want those carcasses burned as well." He said, "Then Second Platoon will continue to advance ahead of us while my command squad waits here with Sergeant Gant's sentinels for First and Third Platoons to catch up with us." Then he looked directly at Wolf, "Lieutenant your orders are to locate wherever the surviving cultists are headed for and report in. Avoid engaging the enemy as far as possible. Oh and take Mister Veneel with you, just in case they've got anything nasty waiting for you. Hopefully he'll be able to warn you in advance."
"Oh great." Grey muttered to Quinn, "The bolt magnet."
"I think I should go with them as well major." Greel said.
"Why?" Vance asked, "You send one signal and you'll give us away."
"Yes sergeant," Greel replied, "but if you stopped to think for one moment then you'd realise that if the enemy is using Kordonian equipment to communicate then our vox set is the best thing to try and listen in on or disrupt said communications."
"Go then." Trent said and Grey snorted.
"Just when I thought we'd got rid of those two outsiders." He said, "Now we've got four to worry about."

8.

Without Gant's sentinels to lead the way Wolf repositioned First Squad at the front of Second Platoon to make use of Molla's superior field craft. Though the cultists apparently made poor soldiers the jungle was their home and they had concealed their tracks well. However, they had failed to conceal them well enough to prevent Rull from tracking them and the lone sniper had been leaving subtle marks to guide Molla that most others would fail to notice.

The cultists had followed a roughly straight path, indicating that they had a definite destination in mind while avoiding any of the handful of natural trails or roadways that existed. But despite being at ease in the jungle the cultists' destination was too far away for them to reach it by nightfall and as the sun set they stopped to make camp.

"Rull just checked in lieutenant." Molla signalled to Wolf via his micro-bead, "He says that the cultists have decided to stop for the night. They're settling down to sleep but they've set a sentry to keep watch."

"Do you have a visual yet?" Wolf responded.

"No. But according to Rull they should be just up ahead."

"I want you to make visual contact with them and give a full tactical report." Wolf ordered, "I don't want you or Rull engaging them yet though. If they look like they're withdrawing then let Rull keep following them. Understood sergeant?"

"Understood lieutenant. Do not engage, observe only." Molla replied and then the channel went dead.

"You know there are only five of them." Vance pointed out, "Molla's squad could easily—"

"Yes I know." Wolf interrupted, "First Squad could overrun that camp in a matter of minutes. Or I could have Rull take them all out or Corporal Mayer drop a mortar round into the middle of them all. But none of those solutions will get me what I want."

"Which is?" Torrent asked.

"Information." Wolf replied and she activated her micro-bead, "Sergeant Quinn, Sergeant Grey, Corporal Mayer, report to me immediately." Then as she shut off the device she looked at Vance, "I've got a job for you." She told him.

"What's up lieutenant?" Quinn said as he appeared, followed soon after by Grey and Mayer.

"I've an assignment for you all." Wolf said.

"Sounds good." Quinn replied.

"I wouldn't pass judgement until you hear what it is." Grey commented.

"Sergeant Quinn I need you to take your squad forward to rendezvous with First Squad. Then Sergeant Molla will identify the location of the enemy camp."

"Don't worry lieutenant. We'll take those traitors out." Quinn said.

"No sergeant. Under no circumstances will you engage them." Wolf told him and she looked at the other squad leaders, "You will also accompany Sergeant Quinn's squad, but you will leave your own troops behind. Assign command to your seconds for now, though I don't expect them to be needed."

"What are you planning lieutenant?" Vance asked.

"Like I said, I want information and you're going to get it for me." Wolf replied. Then she looked at Quinn and continued to explain her plan, "Sergeant Quinn's veterans are to spread out and encircle the enemy camp to cut off any retreat. A distance of thirty metres ought to be adequate. Right?" and she looked at Vance who nodded in agreement, "Good. Now Sergeant Quinn will remain with the rest of you and Sergeant Molla. Meanwhile I want Rull to observe the enemy. He is to wait until they appear to be asleep and then take out the sentry. At that point you and Sergeant Molla will infiltrate the camp and secure the remaining cultists. Do you understand?"

"Sure." Quinn said.

"Sounds good." Vance added and he glanced at Grey.

"What?" Grey said to him, "It does sound good."

"Not willing to risk doing it yourself though." Torrent commented.

"No I'm not." Wolf replied, "These men are my most senior troops and I have the utmost confidence in their ability to get close to the enemy without being discovered. On the other hand there are those of us who do not have such skill." And she looked at Veneel and the two Kordonians, "Myself included." Then she turned her attention back to the squad leaders she had gathered together, "Are there any questions?" and the Catachans just shook their heads, "Then go. Pass on your orders to Molla and Rull."

Second Platoon's squad leaders studied the small clearing in which the enemy had made their camp through their magnoculars. From their position with First Squad they could see the four resting cultists lay in a circle around their equipment while the sentry paced up and down, holding an auto gun that he periodically pointed

into the jungle. The Catachans knew that more of their number were waiting in the darkness just in case anything went wrong while somewhere Rull was also watching the camp, but he was doing so as a predator searching for the best place from which to strike.

The Catachan sniper could have taken out the sentry at any time, but to do so before all of the other cultists were asleep would have resulted in the immediate failure of Wolf's plan. Fortunately Molla was experienced enough to recognise when a man was sleeping and as soon as all four appeared to be asleep he tapped his micro-bead.

"Any time now Rull." He whispered.

No reply came from Rull but seconds later a tiny red dot appeared on the sentry's back, glowing brightly in the darkness.

The single subsonic bullet made no noise thanks to the silencer fitted to Rull's rifle and the sentry collapsed. Rull had timed the shot so that he fell against a tree and collapse at the base of its trunk, making too little noise to wake any of his sleeping comrades.

"Okay let's go." Vance said softly and the five squad leaders began to move closer. They carried their las pistols in their hands just in case any of the cultists awoke and reached for the weapons that were beside their beds, but as the Catachans entered the camp the cultists were still sleeping soundly.

Each sergeant picked a sleeping cultist and positioned himself next to the man's head. Meanwhile Mayer prepared four sets of plastic handcuff ties. Then when these were ready he looked at Vance and nodded. The others also looked at Vance, their hands now hovering over the cultist beside them.

Then Vance nodded.

All at once the Catachan sergeants reached down and wrapped their arms around the cultists' necks, dragging them from their beds. The cultists awoke, struggling to get free. But each held in a choke hold they found themselves unable to escape or reach their weapons. Mayer rushed to the closest cultists, the one held by Grey and grabbed hold of the man's wrists.

"Hurry." Grey said.

"I am hurrying." Mayer responded as he continued to handcuff the cultist, "Hold him still. There – done." And he leapt up and ran to the next cultist while Grey pushed the man to the ground and held him face down with his arms raised up behind him in an obviously painful position.

Mayer handcuffed each cultist in turn before the Catachan holding him forced him into the same unnatural position as the first. Then Mayer activated his micro-bead.

"All done lieutenant." He said, "All four cultists secured."

"Excellent corporal. I'm on my way." Wolf replied.

"You hear that?" Grey asked, looking down at the cultist on the ground at his feet, "The little outsider is coming to ask you some questions."

"Free Lyannus!" one of the cultists was able to gasp before Vance kicked him in the ribs.

"Now, now, we'll have none of that heresy." He said sternly.

When Wolf arrived she brought more than just her own command section with her. Khor and his ogryns also followed her and the BONEHead snarled as soon as he saw the bound captives.

"Traitors." He growled and at the mention of the word the other ogryns all drew large blades and advanced on the cultists.

"Stop!" Wolf shouted and the ogryns came to a halt, "Good." She added before turning her attention to the captured cultists.

"Did they give you much trouble?" she asked Vance.

"None." He replied, "You did good with that plan. Rull took out the sentry without raising the alarm and we were able to just walk right in while this lot slept."

"Very good sergeant." Wolf said and she smiled as she crouched down beside the cultist Vance was holding on to and looked him in the face, "Now why don't you save yourself a lot of discomfort and tell me where you were heading?"

"Say nothing Pike!" the cultist held by Grey yelled.

"Pike? Is that your name?" Wolf said, "Well Pike, I suggest you ignore your friend over there because right now he's about to pay the price for resisting." And she nodded at Grey.

Grey smiled and looked down.

"This might sting a bit." He said before forcing the cultist's arms forwards sharply and there was a tearing sound as his shoulders dislocated and he screamed in pain.

"Now Pike, why don't you answer my question?" Wolf asked the cultist in front of her as the screaming from his comrade continued.

"Tell her." Vance hissed, twisting the man's arms for a moment and causing him to wince.

"You'll never defeat us!" Pike yelled, "The Messenger is already among you and he will see you all burn to light our way."

"The Messenger?" Wolf repeated, "Is he your leader?"

"He is the bearer of the word, the divine truth that will free Lyannus."

Wolf was about to continue her questioning when she felt a hand on her shoulder and turned to see Veneel beckoning her away from the cultists.

"Yes, what is it Mister Veneel?" she asked him as they walked.

"Lieutenant I am concerned about that last answer." Veneel replied quietly, making sure that the cultists would not overhear what he had to say.

"How so?" Wolf asked, also lowering her voice.

"That prisoner spoke of the 'bearer of the word'." Veneel said.

"Yes, is that significant?"

"It may be lieutenant. What do you know of the Adeptus Astartes?" Veneel asked.

"Space marines? What do they have to do with this?" Wolf asked in response, surprised to hear the Imperium's elite genetically enhanced soldiers mentioned.

"I fear we may be dealing with a renegade faction of them." Veneel said and Wolf's jaw dropped. Though exact details were highly classified it was known throughout the Imperium that at some point in the distant past some formations of the Adeptus Astartes had broken their oaths of loyalty to the Emperor and attempted to overthrow him. The revolt had failed but it had come close to shattering the Imperium and some said that it had never fully recovered from the blow, "There is one particular group known as the 'Word Bearers'," Veneel went on, "and their preferred method of operation is to create heretical cults on worlds that they are about to attack."

"You mean we're about to be invaded by traitor marines?" Wolf asked in horror.

"I cannot say." Veneel replied, "But if we are to forestall such an invasion we must move quickly. We cannot afford to waste time questioning these heretics."

Wolf nodded and turned around.

"We're done here." She announced, "We'll keep on the same heading we've been on and see where these traitors were going. But I need to call this in."

"What about them?" Quinn asked, glaring at the cultist at his feet.

Wolf looked around.

"Don't waste any ammunition on them." She said and almost at the same time all of the sergeants drew their knives.

"Say again Wolf, I didn't quite catch that. Did you say marines? Over." Trent asked, holding the handset of his squad's vox unit to his head.

"Yes sir. Mister Veneel believes that there may be a small group of them on the planet and that they are responsible for the sudden cult activity. Over." Wolf answered.

For a moment Trent lowered the handset and shook his head. Even a single squad of space marines was capable of taking out his entire company and if a force was planning an invasion then there was no telling how many of them could be on their way. Sighing he lifted the handset to his head once more.

"Lieutenant you are to do whatever it takes to confirm the presence of traitor marines on Lyannus." He ordered her, "Above all you must report their location to either myself, or Colonel Shryke. All other considerations are secondary. Do you understand me lieutenant? All other considerations secondary. Over." Wolf understood what he meant fully. If reporting in the marines' position would mean the death of her and every Imperial Guardsman under her command then she was to sacrifice them all to send the warning. Only by giving as much warning as possible would the VII Division stand a chance of organising a defence. The extra time would be worth far more than a single infantry platoon.

"Yes sir, I understand. Over." Wolf replied hesitantly.

"Then good hunting lieutenant and may the Emperor's light go with you. Over and out." Trent told her.

As Trent returned the handset to his vox operator Stubbs noticed the look on his face.

"Problem sir?" he asked.

"What?" Trent responded, "Oh, its just you know I hate sending people on suicide missions. It feels even worse knowing that Second Platoon doesn't even have a real Catachan in charge."

"We've buried the bodies." Vance reported as Orthan took back the handset from Wolf, "No one ill be finding them in a hurry." Then he saw the expression on Wolf's face, "What's wrong?" he asked.

"Gather the platoon." Wolf replied, "Major Trent has given me orders."

"Yes lieutenant." Vance said and he turned around and took a deep breath, "Second Platoon!" he shouted, "Fall in!"

The Catachans gathered around Wolf and her command section gazing at her with what looked to be little enthusiasm. However Wolf did notice that there were far fewer sneers than when she had first been assigned as their officer and none of them were averting their gaze as many had done at first.

Right as I'm about to get them all killed. She thought to herself.

"Major Trent has confirmed my decision to follow along the route the cultists were taking." she announced and the platoon continued to look at her without interest. Then she paused before she went on, "If we confirm

the presence of traitor space marines then we are ordered to call in their position immediately so that the division can organise a full scale assault."

"And if the marines have vox interception gear?" Molla asked.

"Which they will." Mayer added.

"We still call it in." Wolf replied, "Everything else is secondary to warning either Major Trent or Colonel Shryke."

"Including our lives." Grey commented.

"I'm afraid so." Wolf said, "The risk of—"

"Afraid?" Quinn interrupted, "Lieutenant this is the Imperial Guard. We were dead men the moment we signed up. It's just taken a bit longer than it probably would have back home."

Wolf looked around at the gazes of the Catachans and she saw that their expressions had hardly changed from when she started speaking.

"Go and gather your equipment." She told them, "We'll move out as soon as we can. There's no trail to follow so no point in waiting for first light."

"You heard the lieutenant." Vance added loudly, "Grab your gear and be ready. You've got ten minutes."

Then as the platoon began to disperse Wolf noticed Grey still staring at her and smiling.

"Something amusing you sergeant?" she asked.

"No, I just wanted to point out that I told you so back on Par Shallon." He replied.

"Told me what?" Wolf asked.

"That's you get us killed." Grey answered before turning his back on her and walking away.

9.

To Wolf, who found navigating through jungle that all looked the same at the best of times difficult, attempting the same in the dark was impossible and so she found herself leaving Vance to handle the directing of each squad. All three line squads were deployed in a long line with of the command section, while Mayer's mortar squad and Khor's ogryns remained just behind them. This gave the platoon the widest possible coverage of the terrain, with each trooper searching the strip of ground in front of him whilst also keeping in visual contact with those either side of them.

As usual Rull was somewhere on his own, periodically checking in with one of the platoon's sergeants to let them know of some natural feature to be aware of. But as the first rays of morning sunlight began to penetrate the jungle canopy overhead they had yet to find anything that looked to be the cultists' destination. A state of affairs that lasted until Rull first found the road leading through the jungle.

"Yeah, those tracks are fresh." Molla said as he crouched on the dirt road and inspected the imprints left by some vehicles that had gone past recently. The imprints were from vehicles fitted with the standard track links used on the overwhelming majority of Chimera and Leman Russ based vehicles of the Imperial Guard, "And they're heading that way." He added, pointing along the road.

"Even I knew that." Wolf said softly. Then she looked at Captain Greel, "Captain, those tracks are heading away from Lyannus City. Now we're the furthest unit of the Nineteenth Regiment out here, so they don't belong to us and I thought that your regiment had abandoned sending patrols into the jungle."

"We had." Greel answered, "But as I've already pointed out to your lieutenant, the reason for that was the losses we suffered from the cultists. Obviously they were able to capture some of our vehicles and are now operating them themselves."

"So what could we be dealing with?" Vance asked, "Are we just talking Chimeras or could they have Leman Russes out here?"

"These tracks are too shallow for battle tanks." Molla commented.

"But they could have more." Vance replied and he looked back at Greel, "Right captain?"

"Who are you to interrogate me sergeant?" Greel replied angrily and he in turn looked at Wolf, "Lieutenant, can you not control your—"

"Just answer him." Wolf interrupted. Then she added, "Sir."

"My regiment has no Leman Russes." Greel said, "Just light armour based on the Chimera chassis and several Atlas recovery vehicles. Nothing heavier."

Wolf looked at each of the Catachans carrying the platoon's support weapons.

"All grenade launchers should have Krak rounds loaded." She ordered, "And I want the melta gun and missile launcher ready for immediate deployment in the anti-tank role." Then she looked at Veneel, "I don't suppose you can do anything against armour can you?" she enquired.

"Only in as far as the energy I can project will penetrate it." The psyker replied, "I'm afraid that my powers do not include the ability to disrupt machinery that some of my kind possess."

Wolf nodded.

"Then we'll just have to make do with what we've got then." She said, "Now where's Rull?" she added.

"He'll have gone that way." Vance replied, pointing in the direction that the tracks headed, "He won't be too far ahead though."

"Good." Wolf said, "Let him know we're following the road as well. If there is any armour up in front of us I want him to warn us in advance."

"We're not actually going to risk following the road itself are we?" Greel asked.

"Yes captain we are." Wolf replied, "Time is of the essence and we'll have plenty of warning from Rull if there's trouble up ahead."

"And if more cultists arrive from behind us?" Greel then asked.

"Then I suggest you listen for the ogryns noticing them." Vance suggested, "Even they can spot armoured vehicles on an open road and they tend to be noisy about everything they see."

"Ogryns?" Greel replied and he turned to look at Khor. The bulky humanoid grinned, exposing his yellow teeth.

"Ogryns march." He said.

The platoon split into two groups, each forming a column and marching down the sides of the road. The intent was that should they be attacked every member of the platoon would be able to throw themselves into the undergrowth at the side of the road immediately. The Catachans remained alert, holding their weapons at the ready as they watched for any signs of an ambush. Despite Rull being ahead of them none wanted to take the chance on being attacked from a different direction. Without needing to be ordered to, the Catachans focused their attention on the jungle in their side of the road, while those at the head of the

columns also watched the road ahead. By allowing different elements of the platoon to focus in different directions the odds of someone getting close enough to attack while no one was watching were dramatically reduced.

The first warning Wolf got of trouble ahead was when Quinn stopped, pressed a hand to his micro-bead headset and held up a clenched fist for the column to stop. The Catachans halted and crouched down while they waited and Wolf stared at Quinn, watching as he spoke to whoever was in contact with him until he suddenly stood up and rushed over to her position.

"Let me guess," she said, "Rull."

"Got it in one lieutenant." Quinn replied, nodding, "He says there's another structure ahead and that there are Chimeras parked outside." Then he looked at Greel, "They're in Kordonian colours."

"They haven't been defaced?" Wolf asked. For millennia the Imperium had found itself facing enemies equipped with weapons stolen or otherwise acquired from its own forge worlds. But it was a common feature that any markings relating to the Imperium and in particular the Emperor himself would be vandalised to show their new allegiance. For the original markings to still be in place suggested that either the vehicles had only recently been captured, something that Greel's statements seemed to make impossible, or that the cultists had deliberately left these undamaged so that they could masquerade as Imperial troops.

"Captain, just how thorough are the security checkpoints around Lyannus City?" Vance asked, clearly thinking what Wolf was.

"Thorough enough to check the inside even of our own vehicles sergeant." Greel told him, "Particularly if those vehicles are coming out of the jungle we haven't patrolled for weeks."

"Well that's another idea of how they're getting into the city down the drain." Wolf said. Then considering the possibility that Catachans may not understand the saying she looked at Quinn and Vance and added, "That means-"

"Yes lieutenant, we know what it means." Quinn responded before she could finish."

"Get the platoon back into the jungle." Wolf ordered, "We need to check this out without being seen."

Taking just her own command section and Quinn's veterans with her, Wolf advanced as far as the structure identified by Rull. By the time they got there the sniper had already moved on, circling around it to make sure that there was nothing more concealed on the other side of it. The Catachans came to a halt far enough within the jungle to make it nearly impossible for anyone within or close to the structure to detect them but allowing them to observe it closely through their magnoculars.

Like the ruins that Second Platoon had already encountered cultist forces in this ancient appearing stone structure looked to have been abandoned. However, this sizeable lone building had was not overgrown as the ruins had been and apart from lacking doors, proper windows or a roof the walls seemed to be relatively intact.

Three Kordonian Chimera transports were parked in a row between the Catachans and the abandoned building, all of them pointing towards the Catachans so that they could see inside any of them even though the large ramps to the rear were all lowered.

"I don't see anyone." Wolf commented, "Could they be empty?"

"Possibly." Vance replied, "But do you want to take the chance on crossing that pen ground with three heavy bolters and three multilasars pointing at you? Not to mention the heavy stubber on that pintle mount."

"No." Wolf said, "Sergeant Quinn, what's your assessment?"

"Grey's squad should be able to knock out any of them easily." Quinn replied, "The problem is that there's quite a distance between those vehicles and the tree line. I'm not sure that there'll be enough of a punch left in a melta blast from that sort of range to punch through the front armour."

"And volley firing grenades into them would take too long." Vance added. Then he noticed movement from within the structure, "Wait, what's this?" he said, focusing on the small group of cultists that emerged from a side door and approached the Chimera fitted with the extra heavy stubber. This vehicle also mounted several prominent vox antennas that suggested it had been the transport for a command section like Wolf's prior to its capture. If the enhanced vox equipment was still intact then that vehicle would allow the cultists to listen in on and disrupt communications over a wide area. The cultists stopped on the Chimera's ramp, obviously talking to someone inside the vehicle but whoever this was they did not reveal themselves to the Catachans. Then after a brief conversation the cultists returned to the building and went back inside.

"I don't see them." Quinn said.

"That's because they've gone inside." Greel commented from his position behind the Catachans.

"Yes, but where they went in they should have been visible through that window right by the door." Quinn replied.

"Unless they didn't need to walk past it." Vance added, smiling.

"There are more tunnels." Wolf said, "They've gone underground."

"Lieutenant whatever this place is it's important." Vance said, "It isn't just some ad hoc jungle camp. Start digging holes under a building like that and it'll come crashing down on your head. Whatever's under there is meant to be there."

"And if what that cultist had to say was true that could include a force of renegade space marines." Wolf commented.

"Do you plan to sit here and wait for them to come out?" Greel asked.

"No." Wolf replied, shaking her head, "We have to go in there after them."

"You're kidding." Greel exclaimed, "Facing traitor marines in a confined space is suicide. Tactical doctrine calls for them to be engaged at a distance using heavy support weapons."

"Don't worry yourself captain, you're not going." Wolf said.

"He's not?" Vance asked.

"No, he's going to wait here just in case we don't make it out. If we don't check in at least once every hour he can send a vox signal back to Lyannus City for the rest of the Nineteenth Regiment to surround this place and flatten it. I don't care how good traitor marines are up close, they can't do much when they're buried under a hundred tonnes of dirt."

"We still need to get past those Chimeras." Quinn pointed out.

"The door the cultists used is round the side of the building." Wolf said, "The platoon can sneak around and get in without the crews of any of those vehicles noticing us."

"Not the ogyrns." Vance pointed out.

"No." Wolf agreed, "So they'll have to stay up here as well."

"You're leaving them under my command?" Greel asked.

"No, I think it better if they move round the other side of the building and join up with Rull. We'll leave a vox set with them so he can call it in if the marines appear on the far side of the building." Wolf explained.

"Then we have a plan." Vance said.

"When do we move?" Quinn asked and Wolf returned her magnoculars to her belt and instead drew her las pistol.

"We'll fall back about a hundred metres and build a hide for Captain Greel to wait in. he doesn't need line of sight to the target to receive our transmissions, but he needs to stay out of sight. Then as soon as that's built we'll begin the attack. There's no point in waiting any longer than that."

10.

Tunnel fighting invariably took place at point blank range and so the mortars of Mayer's squad, First Squad's heavy bolter and Second Squad's missile launcher were to be left on the surface, hidden in the jungle with key components removed to make them useless should the cultists happen to find them. The crews of these weapons would instead fight as regular riflemen in this engagement.

Circling around the side of the structure the Catachans kept watch on both the entrance that was their target and the row of Chimeras. Any activity from the armoured vehicles could radically alter their situation and with their primary anti-armour weapon now hidden close to Captain Greel's hide they had only their short ranged melta gun and the much less powerful grenade launchers to rely on.

Quinn's veterans moved in first, dashing across the open ground between the tree line and the entrance to the structure. With his knife drawn Quinn peered inside and saw a set of stairs descending into darkness almost immediately inside.

"This is it lieutenant." He whispered into his micro-bead. Then something caught his eye at the bottom of the stairs, "Sentry." He added.

"Can you take him out without making any noise?" Wolf asked.

"Of course I can." Quinn replied. Then he waited for the sentry to go back out of sight and began to creep down the stairs, his las pistol in one hand and knife in the other. The pistol was for use only if he was spotted before getting close enough to use the knife and upon reaching the bottom of the stairs he pressed himself against the wall, holstered his pistol and waited, listening for the sentry's return.

The moment the sentry came into view Quinn struck. The cultist noticed him at the last moment and gasped as he attempted to bring his auto gun to bear. But in the confines of the tunnel the rifle was too long to move quickly and before he could aim it Quinn's knife was already being pushed between his ribs and twisted. The Catachan manufactured blade first sliced through one of the cultist's lungs and then pierced his heart, killing him before Quinn twisted it and pulled it out. As the dead cultist collapsed, Quinn reached out and grabbed his rifle before it could hit the floor and give his presence away. Then he crouched down beside the body and put down the rifle in favour of his sidearm and he swung it from side to side, checking the tunnel for any signs that he had been detected.

"Sentry's down." He said softly using his micro-bead, "Come on in."

The other Catachan squads of Second Platoon then began to make the crossing from the jungle to the structure, moving as swiftly as they could across the open ground before heading inside and straight down the stairs. As she ran Wolf looked towards the Chimeras parked just around the corner, wondering if she would be able to see inside and gain more information about the stolen vehicles. But the angle was not good enough for her to be able to see even to the top of the ramp of the nearest transport before she entered the structure and went running down the stairs.

Second Platoon gathered in the tunnel at the bottom. Unlike the structure above ground this showed clear signs of habitation and lumen globes were positioned at intervals that provided a dim light that was just enough to see by.

"At least we don't need flash lights." She muttered, knowing that using such equipment could easily give them away.

"Yes, it was thoughtful of our enemies to leave the lights on for us wasn't it?" Molla commented.

"So does your plan go as far as deciding which way we should go lieutenant?" Grey asked, looking down the two passageways that led away from the stairs.

"Did the sentry favour either passage?" Wolf asked Quinn.

"He looked like he kept heading down that one while I was watching him." Quinn answered, pointing down one of the passages, "Though I didn't wait for long before I took him out."

"Then that way it is." Wolf announced, "Orthan, inform Captain Greel that we are inside and proceeding with the mission."

Greel passed the handset back to his vox operator and leant back against the wall of the hide.

"They're inside." He said, taking out a ration bar and starting to unwrap it.

Then there was a sudden 'snap!' from outside the hide as someone trod on something.

"It could be that sniper. Rull they called him." the vox operator said quietly.

"I don't think he's the type to accidentally stand on a stick." Greel replied, "You better check it out."

"Yes sir." The vox operator said, removing the bulky vox set from his back and setting it down. Then he picked up his las gun and headed for the entrance to the hide. Slowly he poked his head outside, followed by his weapon. But rather than Rull he found himself looking at a cultist and the man was not alone.

"Well?" Greel whispered from inside the hide, "Is it Rull?"

"No sir. No it's not."

"This place is too big for us to stick together." Wolf commented as Second Platoon continued to make its way through the tunnel system that obviously extended far beyond the limits of the structure above ground. Like an iceberg from the ancient history of Holy Terra, most of what had been built here lay below the surface. So far the tunnels and chambers they connected had proven to be empty, though the continued presence of lumen globes and footprints on the floor indicated that they were still inhabited. It was just that all of the inhabitants were somewhere else for now.

"We're too bunched up anyway." Vance added, "If we were ambushed now we'd lose half our men to one grenade and those that were left would just get in one another's way."

"Order the squads to split up at this junction ahead." Wolf said, "Corporal Mayer's team can come with us, but the others should each go in a different direction. They can report in anything they find."

Vance nodded in agreement just as Quinn's squad, still at the front of the platoon reached a junction where the passageway split into three different directions.

"One squad per passageway." Wolf said, "And we'll double back down one of the ones we went down earlier. If anyone finds any signs of a traitor marine presence they should call it in direct to either Major Trent or regimental command, whoever you can reach. Then let everyone else know and we'll get out of here as fast as we can. Corporal Mayer, your squad is to accompany mine."

"Yes lieutenant." Mayer replied, while the other sergeants simply picked out passages and directed their squads to follow them.

"I assume that I am to remain with you as well Lieutenant Wolf?" Veneel asked from just behind Wolf.

"That's right." Wolf replied, "Though I don't suppose you can give us some psychic insight into what's going on down here can you?"

"I'm afraid not lieutenant." Veneel replied, "I can channel my psychic energy into lethal bolts or conceal those around me from mortal view, but prescience is not amongst my abilities."

"Pity." Torrent commented, "That would have actually made you useful."

"Come on." Vance said, "We can't just stand around here while the others do all the work." Then he looked at Mayer, "Okay Bomber, you and your men can go at the front for once."

"Gee, thanks sarg." Mayer replied.

Wolf's group retreated back down the passageway to a junction that they had initially gone right past and this time they turned down the side passage instead. This new passageway appeared to be no different to any of the others they had explored, but as they continued down it they suddenly heard a low droning sound.

"What's that?" Wolf whispered, "Some sort of machine?"

"No." Veneel responded with a scowl before anyone else could reply, "It is the sound of prayer."

"Why do I get the feeling that you're not going to tell me that they're praying to Him On Earth?" Vance said.

"They are not." Veneel said, "They are praying to something altogether different."

"Good job that Emperor Botherer Black isn't here with us." Vance said, "He'd go berserk."

"Mister Veneel, can you sense any psychic activity at work?" Wolf asked.

"Not from here." The psyker replied, "Though if there is a ritual underway it could be that this stage is intended just to prime the blunts involved so that a psyker can then harness their energy."

"Blunts?" Torrent said.

"I think he means people like us." Vance responded.

"Oh right." Torrent said, "So not freaks then." Then she looked at Wolf, "No offence." She added and Wolf frowned.

"We keep going." Wolf then said, "but stay alert and stay quiet. Sergeant Vance, would you mind taking point with Veneel?"

"If you say so." Vance replied and he began to continue down the passageway. Veneel paused for a moment, unused to be placed at the front of a unit but then he too headed onwards. It was clear that Wolf meant to use him to track any possible psychic activity in the tunnels, while Vance was there to watch for the cultists themselves as well as their space marine masters who had yet to make an appearance.

Vance slowed as he approached a chamber at the very end of the passageway, expecting the source of the sounds that were now more recognisable as multiple voices speaking in unison to be inside. However, the chamber was just as empty as all of the previous ones had been and Vance waved the others onwards.

The only difference in this chamber to the others the Catachans had encountered was that the far wall was mostly missing. Instead it rose only about half a metre from the floor and through the gap where the rest of it should have been a second, much larger chamber was visible.

"Oh I've got a bad feeling about this." Wolf said she cautiously advanced to where Vance and Veneel had already taken up positions crouching behind the low wall and were peering over it.

On the far side she saw that the floor of the larger chamber was quite far below and row after row of kneeling cultists were lined up facing towards the far end. None of them looked at this focal point however, instead each of them had his or her head bowed towards the floor as they continued to chant in a language that was

far removed from Gothic, the standard tongue of the Imperium. Around the sides of the main chamber were more smaller ones at the same level as that occupied by the Catachans and it looked as if at one time these would have been used to allow individuals to bear witness to events in the main chamber. Now however they all looked deserted.

Wolf looked towards the far end of the chamber and what she saw sent a shiver down her spine. Several naked human bodies had been mounted to the far wall, apparently by means of metal spikes driven through their limbs. It did not look as though they had been left to endure the agony of crucifixion though, instead they had been gutted and blood from them had been used to create markings on the wall identical to those that had adorned the temple Grey's unit had come across in the ruined settlement. Finally, at the centre of all this were two hooded figures. One of them stood in front of the chanting cultists, calling out phrases that Wolf was glad she did not understand while the second simply sat in a plain wooden chair that rested against the blood soaked wall.

"See how the markings seem to spread from around the chair." Veneel whispered.

"Is the guy sat in it a psyker then?" Vance asked.

"I cannot tell." Veneel replied, "But I can tell you that neither he nor his comrade are space marines."

They could have just taken off their armour." Wolf suggested.

"And made themselves about half a metre or so shorter?" Vance asked, "Remember lieutenant, a marine is in height to most of us what we are to you."

"Something's happening." Mayer said suddenly and he pointed to a doorway where more cultists had just arrived. Most remained there, just outside of the main chamber while one approached the hooded figure leading the chanting.

"We have brought them." The cultist announced in gothic the hooded figure stopped chanting. The crowd of cultists continued to do so on their own however.

"Bring them." The hooded figure replied and the cultist turned and beckoned his comrades to come closer.

Wolf gasped as she saw the cultists enter, bringing along Captain Greel and his vox operator with them.

"Oh feth." She hissed, "They captured Greel."

"Kneel." The hooded figure in front of Greel and his vox operator said as the pair were led forwards and both knelt side by side, their heads bowed.

"I don't like the look of this." Mayer whispered.

"Maybe we can rescue them." Wolf said, "They aren't dead yet and—"

"No." Mayer interrupted, "Look at Greel's belt."

"What about his belt?" Wolf asked.

"The holster." Veneel said with a snarl.

"His pistol is still in it." Vance added just as the figure standing in front of the two Kordonians lowered his hood to reveal the face of the shaven headed and heavily tattooed priest who had accompanied Colonel Mallet to the official reception at the governor's palace.

"Oh feth." Wolf said again.

"The temple at Mok Shaar is gone." The priest said, "Along with all those entrusted to protect it. You failed us. You failed the throne itself." And he glanced back at the second hooded figure sat behind him.

"I am sorry magister." Greel replied, "We knew that the defending forces would be able to deal with a single platoon. But when the rest of the company was called in we had to warn them to evacuate. We had no idea that their sniper would alert the others to the withdrawal and prompt them to advance."

"Our men were caught out of position." The seated figure announced and he stood up and strode towards Greel, "I am the Bearer of the Word and I have given my soul so that the throne shall have this world and grant me the rewards of such service. Because of you that agreement is now at risk. Another place of summoning must be now be prepared."

Wolf looked at Vance.

"Well at least we don't appear to be dealing with marines. Just a few traitors amongst the Kordonians." She said.

"I wouldn't be too sure about that." Vance replied as he watched the man who had refer to himself as the Bearer of the Word and saw him remove his hood.

"And I think that a blood sacrifice from you is in order." Colonel Mallet said before he plunged a dagger into Greel's neck.

"Blood for the Blood God!" the tattooed man yelled as Mallet moved on to the vox operator and stabbed him before he could try to flee, "Skulls for the Skull Throne."

"For the Throne." Mallet repeated.

"If the Kordonians are all traitors then that explains how the cultists are getting past the checkpoints." Wolf said, "The Kordonians are simply letting them through. Though what I can't figure out is why have two of their men killed at the reception to replace them with cultists."

"Perhaps because whatever they've got planned requires them to be believed loyal." Veneel suggested,

"They spoke of a place of summoning."

"Well we need to warn Major Trent about this." Wolf said and she reached out towards Orthan and the guardsman passed her the handset to the vox unit, "Catachan one nine mark four this is Catachan one nine mark four mark two. Come in, over." But instead of a reply there was just static. Wolf frowned and instead tried to contact Colonel Shryke directly, "Catachan one nine this is Catachan one nine mark four mark two. Come in, over." But once again the only reply was static.

"The Chimeras." Vance said, "One of them was equipped with an enhanced vox system. They must be using it to jam our signals."

"Then we need to do what damage we can and fight our way out of here." Wolf replied. Then she added, "If I'd brought the entire platoon we could have used Quinn's flamers to deal with all these cultists."

"If you had kept the platoon together we would probably not have doubled back to find this place." Veneel replied.

"And we're not entirely unarmed anyway." Vance added and he looked round to the Catachan holding the command section's grenade launcher, "Tully, fragmentation rounds. Target that traitor Mallet first and then put the rest of the drum into the crowd."

"Yes sir." Tully replied and he lined up his weapon at the far end of the main chamber.

"The tunnels must be searched." Mallet announced to the crowd of cultists, "The Imperium's forces must not be allowed to pollute this place with their presence."

"It is already being done lord." One of the nearby cultists announced just as a pair of armed cultists appeared in the door behind the Catachans.

"Don't move!" one yelled as the crowd below looked up in their direction suddenly, "Drop your weapons!"

"Of course gentlemen." Veneel said and he tossed his las pistol onto the floor between him and the cultists.

But as they glanced down at the weapon he summoned all the psychic energy he could and pointed his arm directly towards them. In an instant, bright blue lightning arced from his fingertips and danced across the cultists. Both men screamed as their clothing caught fire and their weapons fell to the floor. But the noise and the light from above had revealed to the cultists in the main chamber that they had been discovered and Colonel Mallet reacted immediately.

"Up there!" he yelled, "Guards! Destroy them."

Vance looked down and saw a group of Kordonian guardsmen in carapace armour standing in a doorway close to the seat that the colonel had occupied. Clearly he had kept his personal guard out of the way while whatever ceremony he was involved in was being performed.

"Uh-oh." Vance said, "Tully, now."

Tully stood up and aimed his grenade launcher at the colonel and pulled the trigger. Then while the explosive round was still flying through the air he lowered his aim and fired again and again, sending one grenade after another into the cultists below.

"Cover your ears!" Mayer yelled as he ducked, opening his mouth and covering his ears and the other followed suit just before the first grenade went off. The chamber seemed to shake as in rapid succession each of the half dozen grenades held in its magazine went off, filling the chamber below with flying metal fragments. When the noise of the explosions subsided all that was left was the screaming of the handful of cultists to have survived the barrage. But when Vance peered over the wall he saw that Mallet's personal guard were nowhere to be seen.

"They're coming." He said, "We need to move." And he scabbled towards the doorway.

Just as he stepped into the passageway outside he heard heavy footfalls and spun around to see Mallet's personal guard appear ahead of him. Defiantly he fired a shot from his las pistol at the closest, only to see the shot absorbed by the traitor's armoured breastplate without even slowing him down. Then he ducked back through the door as the traitors returned fire and the passageway was filled with las gun shots.

"Okay not that way." He said, "We need another way out."

"Another way out?" Wolf exclaimed, "There's only one door."

"But there is another way out." Mayer responded and he looked at the massive hole overlooking the main chamber.

"Oh great." Wolf said.

"It's better than staying here." Vance said, "Bomber, give us some cover."

"Yes sergeant." Mayer replied and he and his men took up positions by the doorway, firing bursts from their las guns out into the passageway. A single scream indicated that at least one round had found a weak spot in a traitor's armour. Meanwhile Vance and the other Catachans dropped lines over the side of the wall into the main chamber.

"Come on, ladies first." He said, looking at Torrent and Wolf, "Don't worry, we'll cover you."

Torrent just nodded and climbed over the wall before using the rope to brace herself as she walked down it,

"Come on lieutenant. We don't have time to hang around."

Wolf nodded and then copied Torrent, climbing over the low wall and starting to lower herself down the line. But when she was about halfway down she lost her grip and squealed as she fell the remainder of the way.

"Sorry Torrent." She said as she picked herself up, "I didn't mean to land on you."

"You didn't." Torrent replied and Wolf looked down to see that the corpse of a cultist had broken her fall and that her hand was pressed against a gaping wound in his abdomen. Wolf squealed again as she scabbled away. Torrent just shook her head and sighed.

"Outsider." She muttered.

Tully and Orthan came next, followed by Vance and Veneel. Then there were more grenade blasts as Mayer and his men tossed several into the passageway to keep the traitor guardsmen back while they followed the command section over the wall.

"That doorway." Vance said, pointing to the one that Greel had been led in through.

"What about it?" Wolf asked.

"Well if Greel was brought in through there it may just be the one closest to the way back to the surface."

Vance pointed out.

"Lieutenant. Can you hear me?" Molla's voice suddenly sounded in Wolf's micro-bead before she could reply, the signal distorted by static.

"Yes. Yes I can hear you sergeant." She replied.

"What's happening? We heard explosions and we can't raise Captain Greel." Molla said.

"Greel's dead." Wolf told him, "The Kordonians are traitors. There are no marines, they're the ones in charge of the cultists. Treat any you encounter as the enemy. I've tried warning Major Trent and Colonel Shryke but I can't get a vox signal out. Vance thinks that they're jamming our communications with that Chimera with the big antennas mounted on it. We need to meet up back at the stairs and withdraw."

"Understood lieutenant." Molla said, "We're falling back now. But what about Grey and Quinn?"

"Try and warn them." Wolf ordered, looking back up at the small chamber that the last of Mayer's men was now withdrawing from, "We're a little occupied right now."

The moment the last of the Catachan's reached the floor they set off across the chamber, heading for the doorway that Vance had pointed out.

As they neared it there was a flash of las fire and a shower of sparks as the vox unit carried on Orthan's back was struck. Then a second shot struck the Catachan's head and he fell.

"Down!" Vance shouted as he returned fire. But while the Catachans had been caught out in the open Mallet's own guards now had the benefit of the wall to shelter them.

Wolf opened fire as well, but like Vance her shots struck the wall but not the men shooting at them.

"Tully, can you get another grenade up there?" she asked but there was no reply and when she looked around she saw Tully lying beside her with a smoking hole in his chest.

Seeing this Mayer crawled across the floor as more las gun shots flew overhead and he picked up the grenade launcher.

"Empty." He hissed as he checked the cylindrical magazine and he began to rummage through Tully's webbing to find more ammunition.

All of a sudden there was flash of orange light and a roar and when Wolf looked up at where the traitors had been firing from she saw flames expanding out of the small upper chamber.

"What happened?" Wolf asked out loud, "Did one of them drop a grenade or something?"

"I didn't hear and explosion." Vance replied and he looked at Mayer, "Bomber? Any ideas?"

Mayer shook his head.

"None."

Then, with the flames no subsided and the las gun shots ended three figures appeared in the upper chamber.

"Is everyone okay down there?" Quinn called out as he looked down into the main chamber with a flamer-armed guardsman either side of him.

"Where the hell did you come from?" Vance shouted as he stood up again.

"Catachan. Same as you." Quinn replied with a grin, "We heard an explosion and were on our way to investigate when Molla told us what was going on. Looks like we got here just in time."

"Too late for Orthan and Tully." Torrent said as she double-checked each man for the faintest signs of life.

"We don't have time to worry about them now." Vance said, "We need to get out of here." And he looked up at Quinn, "Drop some new lines. We'll climb back up to you. Mayer, grab that launcher and any ammo that's left for it."

"All these damned passageways look the same." Grey said as he led his squad through the underground tunnel network. He had been keeping a map of what turnings they had taken, but with the disruption to communications the risks of being cut off were suddenly increased.

Then ahead of him he saw the stairs that led back up to the surface and he noticed shadows indicating movement at the top of them, "Wait." he hissed, bringing his squad to a halt and he activated his micro-bead, "This is Grey," he broadcast across the platoon's network, "Has anyone made it back to the surface yet?" To begin with he was greeted only with static, but after almost a minute he received a response.

"Khor. Ogryns here." Khor said.

"Khor is anyone else with you?" Grey asked.

"Ogryns." Khor replied, "And Rull."

Grey sighed. That meant that only the Catachan units left on the surface to begin with were above him and that whoever was at the top of the stairs could not be considered friendly. All it would take was for them to roll one grenade down and Second Squad could be wiped out.

The obvious solution was to have Rull and the ogryns assault whoever it was standing at the top of the stairs. Providing they remained around the side of the above ground structure they would be sheltered from the heavy weapons mounted on the Chimeras. Of course giving orders to ogryns was fraught with difficulty so that meant giving them to the only other person left.

A noise from behind them made Second Squad turn and aim their weapons back down the passageway, but they relaxed when they saw Molla arriving with First Squad.

"What's going on?" Molla asked, "Why are you still here?"

"Check it out." Grey replied, pointing to the moving shadows, "Whoever that is, they aren't on our side."

"Charging up those stairs is going to be tricky." Molls said and Grey nodded.

"I've already thought about that." he replied before activating his micro-bead, "Rull," Grey signalled, "I've got something for you to do."

Two squads of Kordonian infantry waited by their transports. Word had reached them that there were Catachan forces in the area and they were alert for an attack that could come from either above or below ground. Unfortunately Captain Greel had been in such a hurry to report to Colonel Mallet that he had not given them exact details of the force. But what they did know was that it was a light infantry platoon and could not match the firepower of the Chimeras.

As it happened, the Kordonians did not even notice they were under attack when it first happened. One of their number headed around the corner of the building to relieve himself privately when Rull shot him in the back of his head and it was only when he failed to return that they became suspicious.

"How long are you going to take?" his squad leader called out and when there was no reply the squad leader signalled to his men to follow him around the building to investigate. At worst they would simply find their squad mate still urinating.

But as they advanced the squad leader failed to notice the tiny red dot that appeared on his chest before Rull's silenced bullet pierced his heart.

"Down!" one of the other Kordonians yelled as the squad leader collapsed and the rest of the squad dived to the ground and began firing short bursts of las gun fire into the jungle at random, hoping that they would hit the sniper by chance. It was right as the squad lay prone and all facing in one direction that Khor and his ogryns struck.

"Ogryns kill!" Khor bellowed as he burst out of the jungle, firing his ripper gun at the stationary Kordonians.

The other ogryns roared as they followed the BONEHead out into the open and also opened fire. The barrage of fire from the heavy shotguns tore through the Kordonians who could not turn to face the sudden onslaught from the unexpected direction. In a matter of seconds all of them were dead, the only one not succumbing to the ogryns' shooting was clubbed to death by Khor as he tried to get up to run away.

The second squad of Kordonians was better placed to respond however and without an order being necessary they opened fire with their las guns and the las pistol of their leader. But an ogryn's bulk and natural resilience made them difficult to harm with anything other than massed fire from lightweight weapons like las guns, even the bolt guns of the Adeptus Astartes could not be relied upon to inflict serious wounds on them and the reaction of the ogryns was to simply turn their attention to this second squad.

The ripper guns fired again, sending four of the squad to the ground in just a few seconds before the remainder decided that the safest option was to withdraw.

"Sounds like the ogryns are giving them hell up there." Molla said as the sounds of battle reached the Catachans waiting below ground.

"Who?" Vance asked as the rest of the platoon arrived, "And why are you all waiting down here when the lieutenant's orders were to get back outside?"

"Well the lieutenant should have considered the fact that someone could be waiting for us up there shouldn't she?" Grey replied with a frown.

"Just tell me what's going on Tyler." Vance responded, scowling back at Grey.

"There were more Kordonians waiting for us up top." Molla explained.

"Makes sense." Quinn commented, "If Colonel Mallet was in one Chimera then that still leaves two others to be full of troops we haven't seen yet."

"Obviously trying to charge up the stairs was a stupid idea," Grey added, "so I called Rull and got him and the ogryns to distract them. Which I think it's safe to say they've done."

"Then maybe we ought to be getting out of here." Wolf said and she looked round at Quinn, "Sergeant, could you and your squad check to see that the way is clear."

"On it lieutenant." He replied and the veteran squad moved through the rest of the platoon to the bottom of the stairs and waited while Quinn crept upwards. He reached the top of the stairs in time to see the surviving Kordonians fleeing past him. One of them came within arms reach and while he was still focused on the ogryns Quinn reached out and grabbed hold of the man's ankle and pulled. Startled, the Kordonian fell past Quinn, tumbling down the stairs until he reached the rest of the veterans waiting at the bottom who promptly plunged a knife into his chest just above the top of his body armour.

Quinn saw the ogryns continue their pursuit of the Kordonians but then he heard a disturbing sound, that of a twin coupled multi burn engine and one of the Kordonian Chimeras drove around the corner into view. The hull mounted heavy bolter and turreted multi laser opened fire at the ogryns immediately. The two heavy automatic weapons were far more effective than the handheld rifles of the Kordonian infantry and two of the ogryns fell with massive holes blasted and burned through them.

"Warner!" Quinn yelled, "Get that melta gun up here now!" and he stepped back as one of his men rushed up the stairs with the squad's melta gun.

Warner took aim at the Chimera. The vehicle was close now, so close that its crew could not see the Catachans just inside the ancient structure and so the driver took no action to try and present the vehicle's thicker frontal armour towards them. At this range it would have hardly have mattered anyway, the energy beam of a melta gun rapidly lost energy but at point blank range they were some of the most effective anti-armour weapons in the galaxy and this was the shot that Warner was presented with now. A brilliant white beam erupted from the weapon when he pulled the trigger and Quinn felt the heat of it on his face as he blinked from the sudden flash. Striking the side of the Chimera about level with the turret the beam punched a hole right through but the damage did not cease there, instead it continued through the vehicle creating a fireball as it superheated the air inside that blew the turret out of its mount and forced open all of the hatches. Then as the turret came crashing back down to the ground the burning chassis came to a complete halt and Khor let out a roar.

"Ogryns forwards!" he shouted, waving his remaining troops onwards after the Kordonians.

"Okay move." Quinn said as he led his squad out of the structure. Behind them came the rest of the platoon that had gone underground and it was just as the last of them emerged that a second Chimera came rumbling around the corner.

This one followed a path that took it around the burning vehicle, keeping the wreck between it and the Catachan melta gun. But as it continued it found itself side on to the ogryns. The vehicle's commander turned his turret towards the abhumans and fired, catching one of them on the shoulder but not causing enough damage to trigger anything more than a cry of rage.

"Ogryns smash!" Khor shouted as he charged right up to the armoured vehicle and slammed his shoulder into it, causing the whole vehicle to shudder. He continued to push against the Chimera as the other four ogryns also reached it and added their weight and strength and the Chimera began to lift. Inside the crew panicked as they felt the Chimera tilting. The driver attempted to accelerate away, but the only track unit in contact with the ground was no longer flat against it and all he managed to do was create a rut that only made it easier for the ogryns to tip the Chimera over entirely.

The only remaining Chimera now was the command vehicle with the enhanced vox system and rather than follow the previous two around the corner the crew of this one had chosen to hold their position, rotating to face the corner rather than keeping its back to the structure. The remaining handful of Kordonian infantry set up either side of this and all fired their las weapons in short bursts to dissuade the Catachans from pursuing them around the corner. Only the hull mounted heavy bolter and heavy stubber of the Chimera did not fire, presumably saving ammunition until there was something for the crew to aim at.

"That thing's sealed up tight lieutenant." Molla said as he took a quick look around the corner, "No way Rull's going to pick off the crew."

"Range?" Quinn asked.

"About thirty metres." Molla replied.

"That's too far to rely on the melta gun." Quinn said.

"And we can't be sure that Second Squad's missile launcher is still where we left it." Wolf added as she tried to formulate a plan. Fleeing was one option, but if the Kordonians realised what was happening then they would send the Chimera around the corner and shoot them all down as they fled. On the other hand, if her platoon remained where it was indefinitely then it was only a matter of time before more Kordonian or cultist forces arrived to overwhelm them, so whatever she came up with had to be done quickly.

"How much rock would you say was between the tunnels and the surface?" she said, directing the question to no-one in particular.

"A couple of metres I suppose." Molla responded.

"I thought so." Wolf said and she turned to Quinn, "Sergeant, I want you to collect all of the krak grenades for the launchers and pool them with your own squad's krak grenades. Then go back underground and locate a tunnel running under that Chimera's position."

Quinn grinned.

"I think I get it." he said, "A bit of excavation, yes?"

The cultist was not visibly armed when he ran around the corner, but that did not prevent Quinn from firing two rapid blasts from his shotgun into the man. The concealed explosives carried by the cultist at the governor's palace had taught him not to take chances. Then he began to stride forwards again.

"Twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three." he said, counting his paces out loud. This was an ancient method of measuring approximate distance but without access to the advanced equipment of the Adeptus Mechanicus to precisely calculate his position in relation to that of the Chimera it was the best he could do, "Halt." he said, then added, "Shush." even though no one was speaking and he looked up at the tunnel ceiling as he listened for the low rumble of the Chimera's engine, "Okay, this is it." he said, "I hope." and he reached into his webbing for a grenade.

Using reels of strong tape the squad fixed their armour-piercing krak grenades to the tunnel ceiling, all aligned to direct the blast upwards. The levers were all taped down using lighter surgical tape from emergency aid kits and the pins removed carefully so as not to disturb the tape. While Quinn was finishing this off one of his men took out a fragmentation grenade and began tying a length of thin cord to its safety pin.

"Marks, we'll need that spare promethium can of yours as well." Quinn said, glancing at one of the two veterans armed with flamers and the man nodded as he unhooked the canister of volatile fluid from his belt and passed it to the man with the fragmentation grenade. The grenade was taped to the canister which was then set down on the floor and the squad retreated around the corner.

"Okay you know the drill." Quinn told his men, "Cover your ears and open your mouths. I don't want to have to be giving you orders in sign language."

"Don't worry sergeant." one of his men responded, "We know you only know a couple of gestures." and he clamped his hands over his ears as Quinn scowled briefly.

Then he pulled on the cord and quickly clamped his own hands over his ears and opened his mouth wide.

The detonation of the fragmentation grenade ripped open the promethium canister and ignited the contents, producing a rapidly expanding ball of flame that filled the tunnel. Immediately above the canister the flames burned through the surgical tape and all of the levers on the krak grenades flew off at almost the same time. One or two dropped from the ceiling, the tape used to secure them unable to resist the extreme heat and flames but the majority stayed in place and a few seconds later they detonated almost in unison.

Back above ground the Chimera was still firing its multi laser towards the Catachans, keeping them pinned down behind the structure. In return the Catachans fired the occasional burst of las gun fire back around the corner just to let the Kordonians know that they had not gone away. or least that most of them had not.

"Come on Quinn, where's that explosion?" Wolf muttered and as if to answer her there was a sudden 'Boom!' as the ground beneath the Chimera was torn apart, the blast sending dirt and rocks high into the air and killing all of the remaining dismounted Kordonian infantry at the same time.

The Chimera on the other hand plummeted straight down into the hole created by the simultaneous detonation of the krak grenades. The fire from its main gun ceased abruptly and when Wolf looked around the corner again she saw the battered front of its hull sticking vertically up out of the hole and the twisted remains of its vox antennas scattered around.

"Vox!" she snapped, reaching out to the closest vox operator for a handset. As soon as it was passed to her she activated it, "Oh thank the Emperor." she said when she found the channel now clear, "Catachan one nine mark four, this is Catachan one nine mark four mark two. Come in, over."

"Catachan one nine mark four mark two, where have you been? Over." Major Trent's voice replied and a wide smile spread across Wolf's face, "Major, we have located an enemy structure at grid four five eight by nine seven two. Over."

"Confirmed. Four five eight by nine seven two. How many marines are we talking about? Over."

"Major there are no traitor marines on Lyannus. The Bearer of the Word mentioned by our prisoners was Colonel Mallet of the Kordonians. It appears that the regiment are traitors, I recommend General Fortnam be informed immediately and steps be taken to secure Lyannus City. Over."

There was a pause and Wolf frowned.

"Hello Catachan one nine mark-" she began.

"I'm still here lieutenant." Trent replied, "Can you repeat that last statement? Over."

"Yes sir. Colonel Mallet and the Kordonians are traitors. Over."

"Throne no." Trent said, "Okay lieutenant hold your position if possible, I'll inform the general and bring the rest of the company up to join you. Over and out."

The channel went quiet and Wolf passed the handset back to the vox operator, smiling.

"Why so happy?" Torrent asked, "Don't you know what this means?"

"What do you mean, 'what this means'?" Wolf asked.

"It means you don't get your promotion to captain any more." Grey said and both he and Torrent then grinned.

"Yeah, so I guess you get to stay with us forever." Molla added and he grinned as Grey and Torrent's faces fell.

EPILOGUE

The Catachans had not had chance to check the bodies in the underground chamber. If they had then they would have found that the heavily tattooed man was not among them. Injured and bleeding he made his way to an exit to the surface that they knew nothing about and staggered out into the daylight where he was met by several cultists.

"Magister, what happened?" one asked.

"The Bearer of the Word is dead." he replied, "Killed by the servants of the Corpse God."

"Then we have failed." the cultist said.

"No." the Magister said sternly, "We will carry on. We will bring our masters here and they will deliver our vengeance a thousand times over."