



CATABHAN ONE NINE MARK FOUR MARK TWO

INVASION

BY STEPHEN J DUTTON



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2.3: INVASION

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With the completion of their ritual, the treasonous Kordonians have successfully summoned a force of chaos marines to Lyannus Prime and now the VII Catachan division is on the defensive. But when a weakness is discovered in the enemy strategy it becomes apparent that one sudden strike could turn the balance of the war.

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1 .

Lieutenant Emilia Wolf, the officer in command of the Second Platoon of the Fourth Company of the Nineteenth Catachan regiment decided that she hated the jungle. This was something of a problem given that the death world of Catachan was a jungle world and every regiment raised there specialised in fighting in such terrain. Wolf herself was not a native of Catachan though, nor had she been trained as a combat officer either. She had been an administration officer in the XXXII Lyreian regiment until captured by alien mercenaries and separated from her regiment. Her rescuers had been Second Platoon, who had just lost their own officer to an ambush and so, given that the Imperial Guard was not willing to expend the resources necessary to return her to her own unit, she had been transferred to the XIX Catachan as a replacement. This had not gone down well with the Catachans one bit. Always an independently minded people, they openly referred to her as an outsider and clearly resented her presence. In time some of the more obvious contempt had faded and the Catachans had tried to teach her some of the basic skills that came naturally to them as part of their upbringing on a world where more than half of the population died before adulthood and serving in the Imperial Guard could be said to represent an easier life, but there was still a lingering mistrust of her.

Now though she was entirely on her own as she made her way through the jungle, swatting insects and doing her best to avoid all contact with anything bigger as she headed towards the location where she hoped that a flight of Imperial navy valkyrie transports would collect her and the rest of Second Platoon to evacuate them. Fourth Company had been deployed to investigate several sets of ruins being used by the treasonous XIV Kordonian regiment, an Imperial Guard regiment that had been supporting anti-Imperial cultists on the planet Lyannus Prime. Unfortunately the ruins had turned out to be part of a complex ritual that had opened up a portal to other allies of the Kordonians and, before Second Platoon could put a stop to it, traitor legionaries from the Black Legion had started to arrive on Lyannus Prime. Knowing that one severely under strength platoon of Imperial Guardsmen, even one as tough as Catachans in their native environment was not enough to hold back the increasing numbers of chaos space marines coming through the portal Wolf had given the only order she could.

Run.

Moving as a platoon and at the rate of their slowest member, Wolf knew that Second Platoon would never have made it back to the pick up point before the Black Legion caught up with them and wiped them out. So Wolf had ordered the platoon to scatter, with each individual making their own way back to the pick up point. Though traitor marines were rightly regarded as one of the greatest threats the Imperium had ever known, being just as effective as the Imperium's loyal Adeptus Astartes warriors, they were few in number and the amount of resources they would have to expend in tracking down every last Imperial Guardsman was not worth the effort. Wolf knew that her troops would be relying on their own jungle navigation skills to reach their destination but she lacked this level of ability and so was instead relying on satellite navigation and a map on her dataslate. But from the watch on her wrist she knew that she was rapidly running out of time before the navy would arrive to collect the Catachans and she was becoming concerned that she would be left behind. Then from overhead she heard the sound of engines and looking up through the tree she saw the familiar shape of a Valkyrie

"Hey! Down here!" she yelled, waving her arms and jumping up and down in the hope that the crew would notice her and descend low enough for her to be able to signal them with her microbead communicator. Seeing the valkyrie start to bank she smiled, thinking that they had indeed seen her. But then all of a sudden there were flashes of light from the nose of the aircraft as laser blasts erupted and wolf gasped as she realised that the valkyrie was engaging an airborne target. From out of sight there was a loud screeching sound and all of a sudden another winged shape came into view. But unlike the conventional shape of the valkyrie this one was a hideous combination of metal and warped flesh known to the Imperial Guard as a Heldrake. Lacking any form of cockpit for a pilot the flying chaos war engine instead mounted a head shaped like that of ancient mythical flying beasts from the legends of ancient Holy Terra and in keeping with those myths this war machine unleashed a jet of flame from its maw.

The pilot of the valkyrie took immediate evasion action and though the flames washed over the side of the aircraft it kept flying. But worse was to come as the Heldrake flew directly at the valkyrie, catching up with it in seconds and slamming into it. The Heldrake possessed a pair of massive claws at the roots of its wings and with these it proceeded to literally rip the valkyrie apart. Wolf watched helplessly as the aircraft was destroyed, continuing to hope that she would see a parachute to indicate that at least one of the four crewmen had escaped right up until the last piece of burning debris fell from the sky and disappeared from sight and the Heldrake flew off.

The appearance of this machine was a disturbing occurrence. The portal that had allowed the Black Legion to come to Lyannus Prime had only been big enough to allow traitor marines who were just over two metres tall to come through so for a Heldrake with a wingspan of about twenty metres to have come through either the portal must have expanded or more worryingly the chaos marines must have already been able to

establish an alternative means of arrival.

Knowing that her only hope of rescue was now to make it to the pick up point in time and hope that it was not overrun by more Heldrakes Wolf checked her dataslate once more before continuing on her way through the jungle.

It was not long before Wolf heard the sound of running water from ahead and she headed towards it, hoping that the river bank would offer her a means of travel that was not as heavily overgrown as the rest of the terrain was. But she came to a sudden halt when through the undergrowth she spotted the familiar uniform of one of the Kordonians. It seemed unlikely that any non-Catachan guardsman would be travelling the jungle alone and so she looked around for any signs that he was not alone. But she saw no further signs of an enemy presence, nor could she hear any of the noises associated with either guardsmen or cultists making camp. Therefore, putting her dataslate away and drawing her las pistol Wolf began to creep closer.

She kept her pistol pointed at the Kordonian, aiming the weapon right between his shoulder blades. But as she drew closer she saw that the Kordonian was on his knees, slumped forwards and leaning against a tree close to the river. Wolf was able to walk right up to the Kordonian and she saw that his arms hung limply by his sides while his las gun lay on the ground close by. Reaching out she pushed the Kordonian and then leapt backwards as he fell to the ground, rolling over to lie face up with his lifeless eyes staring into the trees above him. The cause of his death was clear to see now. Someone had slit his throat from ear to ear and both the front of his uniform and the tree trunk he had been propped up against covered in his own blood. Returning her las pistol to its holster, Wolf reached down and picked up the Kordonian's rifle and checked it. The weapon was a standard issue las gun, featuring the longer main body than the lighter weight version issue to Catachan troops. Wolf had been trained to use such a weapon in basic training but as an officer she had been issued with a las pistol instead and had not fired a full sized las gun since then. According to the readout, the las gun's power cell still carried a full charge and rummaging through the Kordonian's webbing she found several spares that she tucked into her own pouches. There were also two grenades amongst the dead man's belongings that Wolf took and added to her own but that was where she stopped. Her own Catachan-made knife was superior to the basic issue blade carried by the Kordonian and she did not consider it a wise idea to take any rations or water from a follower of the Dark Powers, there was no telling if it had been contaminated in some way either by illicit chemicals or some other more malign fashion. So armed, she then continued towards the pick up point.

The sound of sirens brought Colonel Shryke, the commanding officer of the XIX Catachan from his tent but before he could ask someone what the reason for the alarm was it became clear as the three hydra anti-aircraft guns protecting his regimental command post all turned in the same direction and roared into life, their quad auto cannon arrays filling the skies with tracer fire. Then he ducked as a Heldrake swooped in low over the command post, unleashing a torrent of flame that consumed half a squad of Catachans as they were still running for cover.

But this was followed by a sudden 'Whoosh!' as nearby another Catachan trooper sent a shoulder fired flak missile towards the Heldrake. The explosive struck the flying machine at the base of one of its wings and the head emitted a shrieking sound as it began to spiral down to the ground, exploded just after it ploughed through the treetops.

Colonel Shryke ran towards the command tent itself, one easily recognisable from the ground by the addition of sandbags around the outside to reinforce it. Although when viewed side on this reinforcement did make the tent stand out, the large camouflage nets placed over each tent concealed these from the air and made it impossible for the Heldrakes to pick it out.

"What have we got?" Shryke asked as he rushed into the tent where several of his staff were communicating with other units via large vox sets and plotting the information on a large map that showed the area that the Catachans were covering, not only the XIX Regiment but also the other three regiments of the VII Division.

"All regimental and divisional commands are coming under air attack." a man in a long dark coat replied from by the table. The man's accent indicated that he was not a native Catachan. This man was Regimental Commissar Garratt and it was his job to ensure the loyalty of the men around him. As an outsider who technically had significant authority his presence amongst the Catachans was not welcome. The commissar was not the only outsider present though, Adept Clay of the Departamento Munitorum was on hand to assess requests for extra equipment while beside her was the delicate hooded form of Kaitlin Shayal the XIX Regiment's astropath. Given the recent disruptions to vox communications the powerful psyker was remaining with the command post so that she could communicate telepathically instead. The final non-Catachan present also concealed his features beneath a hooded cloak but red rather than the green of Kaitlin's and he had none of his original facial features remaining. Magos Serett UVR-997 was a tech priest of the Adeptus Mechanicus who had once held a much higher rank in that organisation but after losing out in an internal power struggle had been assigned to the XIX Regiment to oversee the maintenance of all of their technology. In common with other tech priests his association with technology had gone as far as replacing as many parts of his own body with cybernetic replacements as possible.

"What's the navy doing?" Shryke asked.

"Thunderbolts are en route from the capital, but they're still twenty minutes out." one of his staff replied.

"Active Valkyrie units have suffered sixty percent losses." Magos Serett added, "The navy is withdrawing its remaining aircraft until fighter cover can be provided."

From outside there was a loud explosion and Clay flinched.

"Throne!" she exclaimed, "What in the name of Him On Earth was that?"

"A promethium storage tank has just been hit." Serett answered, his internal systems receiving updates from monitoring devices placed throughout the command post, "Fuel reserves have been depleted by thirty two percent."

"Have we heard anything more from Lieutenant Wolf's platoon?" Shryke asked, "Her initial report didn't mention anything about Heldrakes."

"There hasn't been any word from Second Platoon since you gave them permission to fall back." Garratt replied, the reply sounding almost like an accusation.

"They had been falling back to the same location the navy dropped them off at." Shryke said, "But I'm guessing that the navy won't be picking them up any time soon." then he looked at one of the vox operators, "Try and get me Major Trent." he said, "Maybe someone else in Fourth Company can tell us what's going on out there."

Then over the noise of the anti-aircraft fire from outside came another sudden shriek and one of the vox operators turned around.

"Colonel, triple A batteries report a second hit on an enemy aircraft. The target has not been destroyed but the surviving aircraft are all withdrawing."

"Obviously we turned out to be a much tougher target than they expected." Commissar Garratt commented.

"Hopefully the other commands will have similar success." Colonel Shryke added. Then he looked at the vox operators, "Any word from Fourth Company yet?"

"I've got Major Trent for you now sir." one replied, turning and holding out a handset for the colonel.

"Major Trent." he said as he lifted the handset to his head, "What's your situation?"

"There's a massive light show to the west colonel." Major Trent replied, "I'd say its coming from the centremost ruins."

"Confirmed Major. Lieutenant Wolf's platoon reported that the enemy have opened up some sort of warp portal. We've got traitor legionary forces deploying now, including aircraft. All commands have reported coming under attack."

"Well we haven't seen any signs of them yet sir. But I've only got half my Third Platoon with me. If we run into a force of traitor marines I doubt we'll have the numbers or firepower to hold them off."

"Understood Major. Second Platoon was last reported falling back to their insertion point to await pick up. I suggest you order the rest of your company to head there as well and we'll see if the navy can muster up enough aircraft to airlift you all out of there."

"Copy that colonel. We're on our way. Catachan One Nine Mark Four out." Major Trent responded and then the line went dead and Colonel Shryke passed the vox handset back to the operator.

"It's in the Emperor's hands now." he said.

2.

The problem with the map Wolf was using to find her way back to the pick up point was that it lacked detail about how easy any particular patch of ground was to traverse and right now that left her trying to wade through thick mud that she had hoped was an open trail that she could use to speed up her travel through a particularly dense area of jungle. Fortunately the las gun she had picked up was coming in useful as a walking stick and by sticking the butt into the mud she was able to use it as something to help lever herself free as she lifted her feet from the mud. All of a sudden she noticed that the usual noises of the jungle, those of birds and animals had changed. Moments earlier they had been coming from all around her and now she could tell that they came from only one side. The training that Sergeant Molla of her First Squad had attempted to instil into her suddenly kicked in and Wolf recognised this change as an indication that she was not alone. Lifting the las gun's butt out of the mud she braced it against her shoulder, wincing slightly as she felt the mud slide off the butt and drop inside her top.

Then she turned in the direction of whoever it was that was nearby and went to take a step forwards that would take her into the cover of the undergrowth. But without the las gun to steady herself while she took the step Wolf found herself unable to pull her foot free of the mud and as she shifted her body weight she overbalanced.

Squealing, Wolf fell forwards to land face first in the undergrowth. But the vegetation was so dense either side of the muddy trail that it had hidden the fact that the ground sloped downwards steeply and Wolf tumbled over the edge and began to roll down hill, crashing through the undergrowth until she reached the bottom of the slope and landed face first in yet more more mud. By some miracle she had been able to keep hold of the las gun as she fell and she tried to pull it back towards her, groaning. But the weapon did not move and slowly Wolf lifted her head out of the mud to see what it was caught on.

It turned out to be a combat boot.

"On your feet." a stern sounding voice said from above and it took a moment for Wolf to realise that it had the Catachan accent that had by now become familiar to her and she looked up and smiled when she saw Captain Fear, the commander of First Platoon staring back down at her, "I said on your feet Lieutenant Wolf." Fear said, looking around, "We've not seen any of the enemy yet, but they're definitely out there somewhere."

"Yes sir." Wolf replied as she pulled herself out of the mud and got to her feet. At the same time Fear took his foot off the las gun so that Wolf could pick it up, "Captain, the rest of my platoon are—"

"At the rendezvous point already." Fear interrupted, "With one exception. We ran into your man Rull about ten minutes ago and he told us where to find you."

"Rull?" Wolf replied in surprise. Guardsman Rull was Second Platoon's sniper and his navigation and field skills were second to none. At one time the platoon had had a six man squad consisting of three snipers each with his own spotter but over time combat losses had reduced this until only Rull remained and the others had never been replaced on the grounds that Rull could be more effective on his own. 'Does not play well with others' had been written in his personnel file by Wolf's predecessor, "But I would have thought he'd have been the first to the rendezvous." she added.

"Not when he was looking out for you." Fear told her and all of a sudden Wolf knew how the Kordonian she had taken the las gun from had died. Rull was more than capable of walking up behind someone and slitting their throat before they knew he was there, "He made an appearance about ten minutes ago and told us where to find you."

"If you don't mind me asking sir, why are you here? I thought First Platoon was to the south." Wolf said.

"We were. But Colonel Shryke has ordered the whole of fourth company to link up at your insertion point and wait for the navy to come and get us. I don't know if you've been keeping up on events, but the enemy have brought aircraft through that portal you reported and have been attacking our command and control, trying to decapitate us effectively." Fear replied and Wolf nodded.

"I saw a Valkyrie get taken down by a Heldrake." she said, "I didn't see any chutes either."

"That doesn't surprise me. Now fall in lieutenant, you'll march with my squad."

When the navy had transported Second Platoon to investigate the ruins it had landed them in various small clearings big enough for a Valkyrie to touch down in just long enough for the transported unit to disembark. Three of these aircraft had been disabled by a zone of electrical disturbance and had crashed, killing two of the three crews and now the remains of these aircraft were just piles of wreckage in the jungle. However, the much depleted Second Platoon was able to make use of these for cover, concealing themselves both inside and behind the wreckage rather than risking waiting in the clearings where they could be seen from the air by any more passing Heldrakes. Most of the Catachans were armed with small arms only, las pistols, las guns and shotguns. But the platoon still had two mortars available to it that had been set up in a hastily constructed hide. In addition to the four Catachan troops manning the mortars inside this hide there were four bulky abhuman ogyrns positioned outside to protect it. The ogyrns were not native Catachans, instead

they came from a world that in the distant past had been cut off from humanity and during this isolation had inhabitants had developed to suit the harsh environment, resulting in a massive increase in muscle mass paired with a reduction in mental capacity. The leader of this squad, Khor, had had his slightly higher intelligence boosted further by means of cybernetic implants in his brain known as biochemical ogryn neural enhancement which lead to the term BONEHead being used to describe him and others like him. Khor's intelligence was still limited however and he did not give orders to anyone outside of his own squad. Because of both this and also their obvious use for load carrying through the jungle and as powerful assault troops the ogryns were treated with respect by the Catachans rather than the suspicion they held for other outsiders. Their bulk meant that ogryns were uncomfortable in confined spaces and so placing them close to the hide kept them much calmer and thus less likely to make any sudden noises that would give the platoon away.

In the absence of Wolf command of Second Platoon fell to Platoon Sergeant Vance who sat in the wreck of one of the Valkyries with the vox operator Abott and two men who were not part of the platoon. Preacher Black was a ministorum priest attached to Fourth Company. As a native Catachan he was respected by the others though they did not share his devout nature and rarely attended any of his regular sermons. Like Wolf, the second man was not a Catachan and his presence was the reason Black had accompanied Second Platoon. Aloysius Veneel was a sanctioned psyker, able to call upon incredible mental powers. But as well as regarding him as an outsider, the Catachans distrusted him because of these powers. Using them meant calling on the power of the warp and this was a always risky. Many psykers had been corrupted or died horribly when they failed to control the energy they called on or worse still had become portals for unnatural beings to gain entry into the material universe. Always wary of witchcraft, Black had come along to ensure that if Veneel showed any signs of corruption he would be on hand to execute him.

One other member of the platoon command squad was not with Vance and the others though.

Guardswoman Torrent was Second Platoon's medic and given the number of injured she was doing what she could to keep their conditions from becoming worse until they could be evacuated to a proper medicae facility. Therefore, when there was a sound from close by Vance assumed that it was her returning. But when he looked around he instead saw Sergeant Quinn, the leader of Second Platoon's veteran squad, approaching.

"We've got incoming." Quinn said as he crouched beside Vance, "There's a large unit approaching from over in that direction." and he pointed into the jungle.

"Traitor marines?" Vance asked, concerned at the possibility of having to fight the arch enemy's elite troops with nowhere else to fall back to.

"Don't know." Quinn told him, "Whoever it is, they know how to move through jungle but there are too many of them to hide themselves completely."

"Okay." Vance said, nodding, "Get back to your men and get ready with those flamers. If we're facing marines then I want that jungle burning around them before they get chance to get among us. I'll tell Molla's lot to stand by with that heavy bolter." and then he activated his microbead, setting it to broadcast to the entire platoon, "Eyes open people. Enemy forces closing in from the north."

"Sergeant Vance?" Wolf's voice responded unexpectedly and Quinn and Vance exchanged glances.

"Lieutenant?" Vance asked, "Rull found you then?"

"Yes he did. Though it seems he left me to wander about and instead sent First Platoon to come and get me. We're the ones coming in from the north. Tell everyone to stand down."

Vance breathed a sigh of relief. The addition of First Platoon's numbers and firepower to what remained of Second Platoon's now gave them a chance should a squad of chaos marines discover their position.

"Confirmed lieutenant. Welcome back." he said.

The first elements of First Platoon to come into view were its two veteran squads who positioned themselves among the forces of Second Platoon to strengthen their line. They were followed by Captain Fear's command squad and Wolf as well as the six man team of combat engineers who were permanently attached to the platoon. This group quickly located the remnants of Wolf's command squad and ordered all of Second Platoon's squad leaders to gather around so that both platoons could be updated.

"How many made it?" Wolf asked, looking around at the other members of her platoon while she waited for the other squad leaders to arrive.

"Everyone." Vance replied, "Molla was the last one out and he said that aside from a few bolter rounds fired after him the enemy didn't even bother sending anyone to try and chase us down."

"I guess we were just too much trouble." Molla announced as he came walking up to them. Then he looked down at Wolf and smiled, "Hello lieutenant. We were starting to get worried about you."

"Not all of us." another voice added as Sergeant Grey arrived as well. Unfortunately Wolf knew that Grey's words were not intended to indicate that he had confidence in her ability to get here on her own but instead that he did not care whether she made it or not.

"Have you tried making vox contact with Colonel Shryke?" Wolf asked and Vance shook his head.

"We've been maintaining vox silence just in case the enemy were listening in. We didn't want them knowing that we'd regrouped in one place."

The final two arrivals from Second Platoon then arrived before Wolf could reply. These were Khor and

Corporal Mayer, the leader of the mortar squad and when they joined the two platoon command squads Wolf clapped her hands together.

"Okay," she said, "now we're all here I can fill you in on what Captain Fear has told me. The portal we saw has either expanded or been superseded by another that is large enough to allow Heldrakes to come here so there's no telling what other heavy equipment the traitors have been bringing through. These Heldrakes have attacked all of our regimental and divisional command assets but it seems that they have failed to destroy any of them. However, they are causing problems for the navy so our airlift out of here has been indefinitely postponed. With this in mind Colonel Shryke ordered all of Fourth Company to meet up here, so Major Trent and Lieutenant Lore should be along with Third Platoon at some point."

"They'll take ages to get here." Molla commented, "Lore's got those recruits with him. They can find their way through the jungle easy enough but a lot of them are fresh from Catachan and aren't used to carrying full loads yet."

"That just gives us more time to reinforce our position sergeant." Fear replied.

"We're going to need trenches and dugouts." Wolf said.

"But don't clear any ground." Fear added, "Without any serious anti-air assets we're sitting ducks if the enemy sends any of those Heldrakes our way."

"Should be fine captain." Molla said, "There's enough vegetation about for us to conceal our handiwork until the enemy blunders right into it."

"Sergeant I want you to organise our defences." Wolf told him, "Work with Captain Fear's engineers and veterans to site defences accordingly." then as Molla nodded and turned to walk away she looked up at Fear, "Sergeant Molla's my best at-" she began.

"Yes lieutenant." Fear interrupted, "I have known him longer than you after all."

"Of course sir. Sorry." Wolf said.

"Never mind lieutenant. Hopefully all of this will end up just being something to keep the troops' minds occupied before General Fortnam figures out a way to send those traitors packing back through that portal."

3.

Unlike most Catachan units that moved through the jungle quietly, the XIV Armoured regiment simply crashed through the undergrowth. The sixty tonne weight of a Leman Russ battle tank was enough to crush most natural obstacles in its path. But for those areas too stubborn for this the regiment also possessed several Hellhounds. Built on the lighter Chimera chassis these armoured fighting vehicles mounted bulky inferno cannons in a turret that could spew forth flames intense enough to clear the thickest of jungle. On Catachan itself these vehicles were in common use for keeping the ever expanding jungle from encroaching on inhabited areas so it made sense that every Catachan regiment raised included them.

As the most mobile of the VII Division's regiments, the XIV Armoured had been at the forefront of their pursuit of the Kordonians as they tried to flee into the jungle and so now eight companies of the most powerful of the division's regiments was also the best placed to strike at the enemy and General Fortnam had given orders for Colonel Vorris to launch an immediate counter attack with the intention of capturing the portal site and doing whatever was necessary to prevent further chaos troops or equipment from coming through.

The drawback to this strategy was that a large armoured formation consisting of more than fifty heavy battle tanks of various types and over thirty lighter vehicles such as Hellhounds and Chimeras to carry the accompanying infantry could not be easily hidden and the traitor marines had ample warning to prepare a defence.

Colonel Vorris was sat down inside his personal Leman Russ with the top hatch open when he heard the sound of the first tank exploding and he quickly pulled himself up through the hatchway to see what was happening. At the front of the advancing formation one of the Hellhounds was now burning furiously, the promethium from the large tanks meant to fuel its main armament now supplying the fuel for the fire. As he watched the colonel saw a sudden flash of light erupt from the jungle and a second Hellhound was consumed by fire.

"Las cannon!" he exclaimed over the regimental vox net, "Contact bearing three zero zero. HE. Fire for effect."

The ground shook under the recoil of so many heavy calibre guns firing at once. Normally Vorris would have instructed only a handful of vehicles to engage a single target but given that the regiment was likely dealing with traitor marines he was taking no chances and the jungle in the direction that the las cannon blast had come from was torn apart. But rather than the infantry squad Vorris had been expecting to find there, the sudden destruction of the intervening terrain revealed an armoured vehicle with a lower profile than a Leman Russ that mounted an auto cannon in its angular turret and a las cannon in a sponson on either side of its hull.

"Predator." Vorris announced, "Target with AP rounds."

However, before the Catachan tanks could switch to their anti armour weapons the traitor tank swung its main gun around and opened fire. The auto cannon was significantly less powerful than the las cannons it had used against the leading Hellhounds, but it had a significantly higher rate of fire and there was a rhythmic pounding as it fired a volley of rounds into the sides of several Leman Russes. Unable to fully penetrate even the vertical side armour, many of these rounds bounced off without doing anything more than disturbing the crews with the hammer blow sounds of their impact. But enough struck vulnerable points that one of the heavy tanks ground to a halt and smoke began to pour from its engine as its crew hurriedly climbed out of the nearest available hatch to escape their burning vehicle.

The first armour piercing rounds then began to hurtle back towards the Predator. But before any could strike their target the tank released a cluster of grenades that burst open between it and the Catachans to create a thick cloud of smoke that obscured the targeting scopes of the Imperial Guard gunners.

"Infantry dismount." Vorris ordered, "Third Company follow that Predator but watch out for an ambush. I doubt he's alone." then he grabbed hold of a set of magnoculars from a clamp mount inside his turret and began to search the jungle. If he had been planning this ambush then he would have placed several anti-tank weapons in the opposite direction to the Predator just in case the entire regiment had gone after it and presented the much thinner rear armour of their vehicles to them. Sure enough Vorris saw exactly what he had been expecting, the optics of the magnoculars picking up numerous figures in bulky powered armour standing amongst the trees with many holding heavy support weapons of one sort or another.

"Second Company steer zero two zero and engage. Enemy infantry in the trees. All remaining companies pop smoke and continue to advance."

The regiment began to spread out, with two tank companies moving to engage the enemy forces they already knew to exist while Colonel Vorris led the third onwards. Over the vox he heard reports from individual tank and squadron commanders as they began to engage the enemy and for a short time everything seemed to be going well until one of the supporting infantry units that had gone with Third Company called out a warning.

"Helbrutes!"

Helbrutes were the chaos legions' equivalent of loyalist space marine dreadnoughts. But where a loyalist dreadnought held the physical remains of a great warrior whose life had been preserved by the suit so that he could continue to fight for the Emperor, being entombed inside a Helbrute was considered a great misfortune by chaos marines and over the millennia most had descended into madness. The armoured walking machines were armed with both ranged and close combat weaponry and the channel was suddenly filled with the sounds of auto cannon and heavy bolter fire as they opened fire on the infantry to clear them out of the way as they charged towards their real targets, the Leman Russ tanks of Third Company. At the same time the chaos marines being engaged by Second Company opened fire. The thick frontal armour of a Leman Russ was proof against many weapons but the chaos troops had thousands of years of fighting experience and they knew all the weak points of the tanks. In under a minute two of the Leman Russes were burning wrecks while a third had been blown to smithereens when a shot from a las cannon had pierced its magazine and detonated all of the ammunition it carried at once. The commander of Second Company was amongst the casualties and his second in command took over to order the company to come to a halt and instead provide fire support from their escorting infantry and sentinel scout walkers as they advanced towards the traitors' positions.

On the other hand, the main force led by Colonel Vorris had been able to press onwards without interference and he saw an opportunity to assist the other two tank companies.

"First Company command I want you to peel off two squadrons and send them around to engage the enemy forces to our flanks from the rear." he ordered and seconds later six Leman Russes began to turn aside. But unfortunately this was just what the traitors lying in wait ahead had been waiting for and four intense beams of light cut through the jungle to strike one of the tanks just as it presented its side armour. There was a flash from within the Leman Russ and its turret flew upwards, propelled by the expanding ball of flame created when its fuel tank was ruptured. Vorris searched for the source of the attack, the pattern of four las cannons suggesting to him that they were facing one of the most powerful armoured vehicles available to the traitors and sure enough from out of the jungle came the distinctive shape of three Land Raiders, flanked by more Predators. These Predators differed from the first one encountered in that their turrets mounted twin las cannons and almost as one these armoured vehicles opened fire on the Imperial forces.

"Fourth Company, get those Demolishers forwards." Vorris ordered. A Leman Russ Demolisher replaced the standard turret mounted battle cannon with a larger calibre demolisher cannon. This was intended for destroying fortifications but the sheer weight of explosive inside the shell it fired made it a lethal anti-tank round as well, capable of breaking open the heaviest armour with ease. The drawback was that the weapon had a relatively short range and the Demolishers were positioned towards the rear of the force waiting to be called upon, "Other units use las cannons to target those Land Raiders."

The gunner of Vorris' own tank's main gun opened fire. The battle cannon could do little against a Land Raider so instead he targeted one of the Predators and the shell blew the turret off the tank. But in retaliation the chaos tank turned one of its sponsons towards Vorris' vehicle and fired. The high energy beam struck the front of the Leman Russ right where the driver's vision block was located and punched right through before it burned through the driver's torso as well. The beam continued to burn its way through the tank and there was an explosion as it reached the fuel line for one of its sponson mounted heavy flamers.

Still sat so that he was stuck out of the tank's turret, Vorris felt the impact of something striking his side and he was thrown from the turret. Landing beside his burning tank Vorris reached to his side and felt a large piece of metal sticking out of him as well as the blood pumping from the wound.

"The colonel!" someone called out as Vorris' vision began to blur.

All of a sudden he was surrounded by infantrymen who began to drag him away from the tank. The shrapnel in his side shifted when this was done and Vorris let out an involuntary cry of pain.

"He's hit. Quick get a medicae." one of the infantrymen shouted and it was not long before one of the regiment's medical personnel was kneeling beside him. The first thing she did was inject Vorris with a powerful pain killer. Vorris immediately became drowsy as the pain of his injuries went away and the world around him became blurred. He was barely aware of his wound being dressed and of being lifted onto a stretcher before being carried away. Then he was loaded aboard a Chimera that shuddered into life right before Vorris finally lost consciousness.

Commissar Garratt snapped to attention when General Fortnam entered the XIX Regiment's command centre though the Catachans remained relaxed about his presence.

"At ease commissar." the general said.

"General, I wasn't expecting you." Colonel Shryke said.

"Right now I'm avoiding advertising my location." Fortnam replied, "Those warp spawned Heldrakes have been causing havoc behind our lines and the navy's not worth an outsider's jungle sense. Every time they put a Thunderbolt in the air the enemy just pulls back. I came by Chimera rather than my Baneblade."

"What about our counter attack?" Shryke asked.

"The Fourteenth Armoured was ambushed." Fortnam answered, "It seems that in addition to aircraft the enemy has been able to bring through a number of tanks and they were waiting for us. Colonel Vorris has been critically injured and more than half his regiment's tanks were destroyed before the rest withdrew." then

he looked at Commissar Garratt, "The losses included all of the commissars." Everyone present knew what this meant. The commissars had ordered the Catachans to stay in the fight after the loss of Vorris and only after they were all killed, either by the enemy or the crews of their own vehicles had the survivors been able to retreat, "Right now they've been reduced to three artillery companies that weren't involved in the fighting and a handful of other units. Most of which are damaged."

"The enemy didn't pursue them?" Adept Clay asked.

"No. Our intelligence suggests that so far they lack the numbers to both attack us and protect that portal of theirs." Fortnam said.

"So far." Shryke commented.

"Exactly." Fortnam said, "Jayk, we're dealing with the Black Legion here and if they carry on bringing troops and equipment through that portal then eventually we're going to be overrun."

"We will fight to the last man then." Garratt said and for a moment every Catachan in the room held their breath, waiting for the reaction from either Colonel Shryke or General Fortnam. Garratt seemed to realise that he had made a mistake here and his hand moved towards his sidearm just in case he needed to defend himself.

"A direct assault with heavy armour failed." Fortnam said eventually, "And I doubt that lighter units will fair any better."

"Your Baneblade remains the most powerful weapon at our disposal." Magos Serett said, his augmented voice showing no hint of humanity at all.

"It's also the only super heavy we've got." Fortnam pointed out, "Unless we can clear out the enemy's armour first then it'll be overwhelmed. No, what I plan is a series of limited engagements to draw the enemy as far away from their portal. Then maybe we'll be able to hit their supply lines and starve them of resources."

"How much do we actually know about how they got here?" Clay asked.

"Next to nothing. The navy are going to try and get some images but I'm not waiting for them to finally be able to get a plane over it before we act."

"The industrial capacity of Lyannus Prime should be requisitioned and re tasked to the production of armaments." Serett said.

"That's already in hand." Fortnam told him, "As soon as I received word of the Black legion's presence I issued a decree of Imperial martial law. This was endorsed by the local Adeptus Arbites, Mechanicus and Ministorum. The governor has stepped down and I am in charge of all planetary functions now. The PDF is mobilising and I've given orders that every adult member of the population be issued a weapon."

"That could cause problems for the Arbites after we're done here general." Clay said.

"Maybe so, but it won't be my problem." Fortnam replied, "The Arbites had a list of known troublemakers anyway and we'll collect them together in penal battalions. They'll calm down after we've hanged a few dozen of them in front of the rest."

"How soon do we start operations general?" Shryke asked, getting back to the issue at hand.

"As soon as possible colonel. Colonels Mann and Hatch are moving the Twelfth and Twenty-Fifth Regiments this way to join you. I'm sending what's left of the Fourteenth Armoured back to the capital to protect it. Now I believe that your Fourth Company is currently positioned close to the enemy is it not?"

"Yes sir." Shryke replied and he pointed to Second Platoon's insertion point on the map in front of them,

"They are regrouping here after Second Platoon was forced to withdraw when the enemy opened its portal here." and he moved his finger to the site of the ruins where the Kordonians had carried out their ritual to open the portal.

"Very good. I take it that its only their combat units that are there?" Fortnam said.

"Correct. Their support platoon is still here on the camp. As is the sentinel squadron attached to them, fortunately it was stood down from escorting Colonel Vorris' tanks before the attack."

"Then I want them despatched to join the rest of Fourth Company with all haste. They are to establish a secure base of operations and scout out the area. Every time an enemy force leaves their base I want Fourth Company to trail it. They'll give us the strength and heading of every unit so that we can plot a response. This is the jungle and the jungle is our ground. I intend to make the Black Legion bleed colonel. They've plagued the Imperium for ten thousand years and I want them to spend the next ten thousand remembering how badly we beat them here."

"What about communications general?" Shryke asked, "If Fourth Company uses voxes to tell us where the enemy is it won't take them long to figure out where they're based."

"No it won't." Fortnam agreed and he looked at the green robed astropath.

"You're sending me out there as well aren't you?" she asked, her sightless eyes still facing straight ahead.

The four female Catachans sat around an upturned crate playing cards on it when Doctor Altman, Fourth Company's medicae walked up to them. Two were members of Fourth Company themselves. Lieutenant Selena, known as both 'Short Arse Selena' owing to her height and also 'Anna Ass-wipe' because of her role was the company's supply quartermaster and headed its reserve platoon while Sergeant Gant commanded the sentinel squadron attached to the company. The other two were both stationed with Colonel Shryke's regimental command but had close links with Fourth Company. Bess Quinn was the younger sister of

Second Platoon's veteran squad sergeant, Ibram and Jenni Molla was Sergeant Tari Molla's daughter.

"What's up doc?" Gant asked, glancing up from her cards.

"Selena, Gant. Grab your gear we're moving out." Altman replied.

"Moving out? Where to?" Selena said.

"I don't know. But I just got orders to pack up my stuff. It's got something to do with the rest of Fourth Company and that portal everyone says is bringing these chaos marines to the planet."

"Has anyone said anything about Ibram?" Bess asked.

"Or my father?" Jenni added.

"Not a thing." Altman said, "But I-

"Leash." Selena said suddenly and Altman turned to see Fourth Company's commissar limping towards them with the aide of a walking stick.

"Cards? Lieutenant Selena, Captain Altman." he said, "I do hope neither of you were gambling with common enlisted troops."

"Of course not Commissar Layne." Selena lied, "This game was purely for fun."

"Need me to tell you what that means?" Bess muttered and both Jenni and Gant smirked.

"What was that guardsman?" Layne asked.

"The others were teaching me the rules of this game commissar," Gant said, "and I'm not very good with how the scoring works yet."

Layne scowled, guessing that he was being lied to but knowing that he would never be able to prove it.

"Well then, this is your lucky day sergeant." he said, "Because these two can explain it to you while we travel."

"Oh they're not part of Fourth Company." Altman said.

"Yes doctor, I am aware of that. But Colonel Shryke has ordered that we are to take his personal astropath with us so she will need looking after. A bodyguard and someone to monitor her health. So since everyone in Fourth Company will be busy with their regular duties I have been given permission to requisition the use of extra personnel and I think that these two will do just fine. A courier and a nurse are the logical choices for taking care of such a valuable communications asset after all. Now hurry up and gather your equipment, we leave within the hour."

4.

Given the larger size of Fourth Company's Third Platoon it had made sense for it to be split in half while searching the ruins, with Major Trent taking personal command of one half and it was his half of the platoon that arrived at the new camp site first, followed just under two hours later by Lieutenant Lore. By this time the work on building fortifications was well underway, with a network of trenches linking numerous camouflaged hides constructed from whatever materials were at hand.

While this construction was underway Wolf found herself without a significant role to play. Her training in the arts of jungle warfare had not covered such work and no one had time to teach her now, while her small size made her of little use in any of the physical labour. This was unlike Khor and the rest of his squad, the ogryns' enormous size and strength making them worth a squad of men on their own. Instead Wolf found herself relegated to simple fetching and carrying tasks while the Catachans worked and she soon began to wonder if most of the errands she was being asked to run were even necessary or were a means for the Catachans to send her away from them. One of the obviously useful jobs however, was the filling of canteens and Wolf was frequently sent to the nearby river to ensure that the company's water supplies remained topped up. It was on one of these trips that she heard the unmistakable sound of machinery approaching through the jungle and instinctively she drew her las pistol and pointed it along the river bank.

"Major Trent." she whispered into her microbead, "I think someone's coming."

"Standby lieutenant." the major's voice replied, "We'll be there shortly."

Wolf waited nervously, the sound of machinery growing louder before all of a sudden both Major Trent and his adjutant Company Colour Sergeant Stubbs arrived.

"What's going on then Wolf?" Trent asked, "I take it that you signalled about that sound?" and Wolf nodded. "It started a few minutes ago sir." she said.

Trent smiled and looked at Stubbs.

"Sentinels?" he said and Stubbs nodded.

"Sounds like it." he said, "But the question then is whose are they? The Kordonians had sentinels of their own."

"I don't hear anything heavier though." Trent said, "Looks like our defences are about to be tested."

The trio fell back to the camp site and Trent ordered the company to stand by to defend itself. Every squad climbed into one of the hides and readied their weapons. Had the hides been constructed using proper camouflage netting rather than vegetation the Catachans would have kept their weapons within them. But given that the impact of a shot from a las gun or las pistol would risk setting the vegetation used in their construction alight the Catachans instead poked the muzzles of the weapons through just far enough that they would not set fire to their own hiding places. Second Platoon was positioned facing in the direction of the sentinels and Wolf gripped her las pistol in both hands as she pointed it through the camouflaged wall of leaves and branches. Then she saw movement as one of the lightweight scout walkers known as Sentinels pushed its way through the undergrowth and just behind it Wolf saw a figure dressed in black and she fired. The energy blast from her las pistol narrowly missed the figure, striking a tree behind him and leaving a smouldering hole where it hit.

"Hold your fire!" Vance hissed, "They're ours." and all of a sudden Wolf realised that she had almost shot Commissar Layne in the head.

"Who fired that shot?" Layne demanded, limping forwards on his stick and pointing back at the burned tree trunk, "Major Trent!" he added as Trent and his command squad made their way from their position to meet him, "I insist that the person who almost shot me be identified and punished."

"Well you see I can't do that commissar." Trent replied, "You see I gave orders to give a warning shot to anyone that failed to identify themselves properly."

"And how would I have known that?" Layne asked sternly.

"Standard procedure sir." Stubbs added.

"The company sergeant is correct." Gant said from the open cockpit of the sentinel, "I was just about to call out when the shot was fired."

Layne just scowled. Meanwhile Wolf stared dumbfounded towards the commissar, horrified at how close she had come to killing him.

"Vance, what's going on?" Grey asked as he came running along the trench that led to Wolf's position.

"The lieutenant had a bit of an accident." Vance replied and Grey smiled.

"You mean she almost shot Layne?" he said.

"That's right." Torrent answered with a frown, "Just like an outsider to miss when it counted."

"Lieutenant Selena," Trent called out when he saw her walking towards him through the other new arrivals, "what are you doing here?"

"General Fortnam's new strategy sir." she answered, "The Fourteenth was ambushed and took heavy losses. Now the general wants to fight a guerilla war and we're to provide intelligence." then she looked around at where Jenni Molla and Bess Quinn were walking alongside Kaitlin, though despite being blind her psychic

sense meant that the astropath was aware of everything around her and was in no danger of tripping over anything, "Guardsmen Quinn has full orders from the colonel."

"Get a move on then guardsman!" Stubbs yelled, "Let's see these orders." and Bess came rushing forwards and presented Trent with a dataslate that he activated and began to read.

"This all looks straight forwards." he said, "As you can see we've already made a start on establishing a forward base. But what about the equipment we'll need to finish it. There's no way you carried it all by hand through the jungle."

"No sir." Selena replied, "The truck brought us as far as they could but the supplies will be dropped by air."

"Very well. In that case all we can do is wait for the air drop and then I'll decide how we'll deploy. Carry on lieutenant."

Back in the camouflaged hide Wolf's command squad was joined by Captain Fear who was also looking for the individual who had fired at Commissar Layne.

"Okay, who's the joker that can't hold their fire?" he asked as he jumped down into the hide.

"Err, that would be me captain." Wolf admitted, "I'm sorry. I saw the black coat and-"

"Shut up lieutenant." Fear interrupted, "You're obviously tired so I suggest you get some rest and if you negligently discharge your weapon again you won't need to worry about that fething leash coming after you because I'll shoot you myself." Captain Fear then climbed back out of the hide and headed back towards his own post. At the same time Vance leant closer to Wolf.

"Haven't you learnt yet?" he asked, "Next time just go along with the warning shot story the major just gave."

"Unless she shoots one of us." Torrent added.

"Hey," Grey said, peering out of the hide, "isn't that Jenni and Bess?"

"Bess? As in Bess Quinn?" Wolf asked, "She must have brought orders for the major."

"Short-arse could have brought them." Vance replied as he too looked out of the hide, "Now something else is going on. Wait, there by Molla's kid. Isn't that that witch that the colonel hangs around with?"

"Oh great." Grey said, "Bad enough we've got one bolt magnet hanging around. Now we've got two. Botherer Black will go nuts."

A dozen Valkyries flew low over the trees, keeping their speed high enough that they would not appear to be undertaking a supply drop. But as they approached the target zone all of the aircraft lowered their large rear ramps without cutting back on their speed and inside the rear compartment of each Valkyrie the door gunners stood ready to eject the cargo they carried on wheeled pallets.

The command 'Go,' was given almost simultaneously in each Valkyrie and the gunners shoved the pallets, allowing them to roll out of the large rear hatchways and drop into the jungle below. None of the pallets were fitted with parachutes or rocket boosters to slow their descent, instead each one was simply allowed to crash through the jungle canopy and break open on impact with the ground. Again this was to hide what was happening from the enemy. The sight of parachutes opening or rocket motors firing would tell them instantly that something had been dropped and could bring chaos marines to investigate before Fourth Company was ready for them. The contents had all been selected so that they would survive a high speed, low altitude drop even if they did end up somewhat dented. Waiting in the jungle below the Catachans watched as the Valkyries then continued to fly in the same direction so as to give the impression that they had not yet reached their destination. In part this was true, each of the aircraft carried a surveillance pod under one wing so that they could record any enemy units they located and take that information back to the Imperial commanders. Then once they were confident that no further heavy objects were about to come falling from the sky the Catachans moved in to recover what had been dropped.

Most of the supplies consisted of fuel drums, rations and ammunition. But there were also tents, camouflage netting and equipment and weapons packed into shock resistant canisters. All of these were gathered up and moved back to the camp site where in just a few hours it went from being an area of jungle surrounded by concealed trenches to one where the undergrowth between the trees had been cleared and replaced by tented structures and camouflage nets strung up to hide them from both the air and ground.

Wolf slept through all of this. In accordance with Captain Fear's orders she lay down in her unit's hide and was soon sound enough asleep that Fourth Company was able to erect the camp without waking her. When she finally did wake up what she saw confused her.

"Where the feth am I?" she said as she looked around the tent she was now inside. Then she noticed that although she could hear some activity from outside the tent it was generally quiet and from her experience Catachans were not normally quiet people, their camps were hives of activity with orders and conversations being spoken loudly. Only when something was wrong would they become silent and Wolf got up off the bunk she found herself lay on and drew her las pistol before heading outside to find out what was going on.

"Ah, awake then?" Bess said from where she and Jenni were sat on a now empty crate eating some of the chocolate rations that they had recovered, "You're not going to start shooting that are you?" she added, looking at the las pistol.

"What's going on?" Wolf asked as she holstered her weapon.

"Well while you were asleep the rest of us did all the hard work in finishing the camp." Jenni replied without looking at Wolf, "Then my dad told us two to move you to a tent rather than leaving you in that hole in the

ground.”

“Don't worry by the way.” Bess added, “He also told us not to mess with you while you were asleep.” and Jenni snorted.

“Don't see why he's sticking up for an outsider.” she muttered before taking another bite of chocolate and Wolf frowned.

“But what's going on?” Wolf asked again, “I only see a few people around.”

“You also slept through a briefing.” Bess answered, “Your major's taken two platoons, that bolt magnet of yours and the sentinel squadron and gone off to hunt for the enemy. Second Platoon's been left to keep an eye on things here along with your support troops.”

“I slept through a briefing?” Wolf exclaimed, “Oh throne, I'm going to get it for this. Why didn't someone wake me?”

“Because no one thought you could contribute anything to it.” Jenni replied and Wolf scowled.

“Oh!” she exclaimed before she ran off in search on one of her squad leaders.

“You shouldn't be so hard on her Jenni.” Bess said, “Ibram says she's not as bad as most outsiders.”

“She's still not one of us though is she?” Jenni replied, “And she never will be.”

Wolf found Mayer with the remains of his squad in the same dugout she had last seen them in, though now there were far more cases of mortar ammunition stacked up around the two weapons.

“Lieutenant.” he said when he saw her.

“What's going on corporal?” she asked, “I've just been told that I slept through a briefing.”

“Oh yes. Captain Fear told Commissar Layne that he'd ordered you to double check the camp construction and Vance filled in for you.”

“And where is Sergeant Vance now?”

“Command tent.” Mayer replied, “Commissar Layne has gathered all the sergeants and officers together to go over what he expects of them while Major Trent is gone.”

“What about Doctor Altman?” Wolf asked, “Technically he's a captain and he took over once before when it was just me and Lieutenant Selena left.”

“The doc's busy with our wounded. We can't pull that trick on the commissar this time.”

Before Wolf could reply there was the sound of a distant explosion and both of them looked skywards. The mortar position had been sited where the rounds could be fired through a small gap in the canopy but it was too small for anything that was not directly overhead to be seen.

“I can't see anything.” Wolf said.

“The clearings.” Mayer said and he reached out to pick up his las gun before both of them climbed out of the dugout and began to run towards the closest of the nearby clearings. Once there Wolf took her magnoculars from her belt and lifted them to her eyes.

“I see Valkyries.” she said, “They're under attack.”

“Must be the flight that dropped off our equipment.” Mayer responded, “There were about a dozen of them. They kept on heading in that direction.”

“Well there aren't a dozen of them now.” Wolf said, “I only see three of them, but they aren't the only things out there.” and then she recoiled from her magnoculars when there was a sudden flash as one of the remaining Valkyries exploded.

Pursued by a swarm of Heldrakes the two remaining Valkyries flew at top speed away from them, their course meaning that they would not come near Fourth Company's camp. Even when their lives were threatened the navy pilots knew that they were to avoid risking giving away the position of the camp. Looking through her magnoculars again Wolf watched helplessly as a volley of cannon fire from one of the Heldrakes tore through the fuselage of one of the fleeing Valkyries and ripped it apart. The pilot of the final Imperial aircraft began to jink but the chaos machines remained on his tail, firing their head mounted cannons. Some of the shells fired by these clipped one of the engines mounted above the fuselage and smoke began trailing behind the aircraft. The damage to the engine slowed the Valkyrie's speed and the first of the Heldrakes soon shot past it, attempting to strafe it from the side by turning its head as it went by. But the Valkyrie pilot was able to pull up and the burst of cannon shells past harmlessly underneath the aircraft.

The Valkyrie's luck finally ran out when whatever malign intelligence was driving one of the Heldrakes decided that since shooting at the Imperial aircraft had failed it would instead take more direct action and first gaining altitude, it then dove down at the Valkyrie, aiming straight for it. The machine struck the Imperial aircraft in one of its twin tails, ripping it and much of the rear flaps away. Combined with the damage already inflicted on the engine, this was too much for the Valkyrie to bear and it began to spin. Satisfied that their prey was dead the Heldrakes turned, leaving the stricken Valkyrie to its fate. Then Wolf saw part of the cockpit canopy fly off and one of the crew followed it as he activated his ejector seat. This was joined by something else being jettisoned from beneath one of the wings. While the Valkyrie continued to spiral towards its death parachutes deployed from both the crewman and also the second falling object. At any moment Wolf expected one or more of the Heldrakes to notice this and double back to rip them both apart but much to her surprise and relief she watched both parachutes drift all the way down out of sight.

“Someone got away,” she said, lowering her magnoculars, “and I've got their position.”

5.

Sergeants from Second Platoon and Fourth Company's support platoon were gathered together in the command tent along with Lieutenant Selena while Commissar went over every last detail of duty assignments and expected performance levels, apparently oblivious to the growing frustration of guardsmen who knew how to do their jobs. Behind the commissar stood an armoured figure in a red robe, Fourth Company's attached tech priest Cornelius B5T-RD-3X who was known to the Catachans as 'Cornellius the Bastard' thanks to his official name amongst other tech priests. Like Layne he too was oblivious to the Catachans' frustration but in his case it was because he had no such feelings himself and although to him the meeting seemed to be going very slowly compared to the virtual information exchanges that took place amongst the Adeptus Mechanicus he saw no need to hurry it along. Therefore this was only interrupted when Wolf burst into the tent with Mayer.

"Ah, Lieutenant Wolf. How pleasant of you to join us." Layne said, "So does the standard of construction meeting your requirements?"

"The what?" Wolf began before remembering the excuse that Mayer had told her that Layne had been given, "Oh yes commissar. Fourth Company's ability to construct a defensible position using only the most basic of equipment is very impressive."

Layne snarled.

"Of course it is." he said.

"Commissar," Wolf said before he could continue with the briefing, "Corporal Mayer and I observed an air to air engagement between a Valkyrie flight and a force of enemy aircraft. Though I must report that the navy's forces were wiped out I did observe one of the crew successfully eject from his aircraft and make it to the ground without being engaged by the enemy."

"It is your opinion that he is still alive then?" Layne asked.

"It is." Wolf replied, "and I was able to record his approximate location on my magnoculars."

"Excellent." Layne said, "Then we can inform Major Trent and he can have one of his scouting parties go and pick him up."

"Ah, err, we can't do that commissar." Molla said.

"Oh really? And why can my orders not be followed sergeant?" Layne replied.

"I'm afraid that they contradict standing orders from both Colonel Shrike and Major Trent." Selena said.

"The lieutenant is correct." Cornelius added, the tech priest unexpectedly joining the discussion and Wolf felt a sense of relief at this. Commissar Layne had full legal authority to execute guardsmen if he believed that they were being derelict in their duty but he could not touch the tech priest without incurring the wrath of the Adeptus Mechanicus, "Vox use is limited to reception only from this location. Violation carries with it the risk of detection via radio direction finding."

"Something else was ejected from the Valkyrie as well." Wolf added, "I saw it fall from under the wing and deploy a parachute."

"Interesting." Cornelius replied, "Please hold." and then he stood in silence while the Catachans just stared at him, "As I suspected." he said eventually, "The aircraft concerned was equipped for surveillance. The object that Lieutenant Wolf saw being ejected was the surveillance recorder."

"How do you know that?" Layne asked.

"Because it is broadcasting a location beacon." Cornelius replied.

"Then there's clearly no need to worry then is there? The scout parties will detect the signal and-" Layne began before Cornelius interrupted him again.

"You are in error." he said and Layne scowled. Even the Catachans who did everything they could to subvert his authority at every turn were never so blunt, "The signal is not being broadcast on a frequency normally monitored by the Catachan Seventh Division. The forces under Major Trent's command will not detect it."

"Commissar I'd like to volunteer second Platoon to go and rescue the downed navy pilot and recover the surveillance recorder."

"Your platoon is severely under strength lieutenant." Layne pointed out.

"There are enough of us left to go find a pilot commissar." Vance said.

"My assistant and I will also accompany the platoon." Cornelius added.

"You? Why?" Layne asked.

"I have already informed you that the surveillance recorder is broadcasting a location beacon. Though this signal is not on a channel normally monitored by Imperial Guard units the enemy are likely to be monitoring it. If the beacon is not deactivated before the recorder is moved then there is a high probability that the enemy will use it to track our location. There is also the likelihood that they have despatched their own search party to hunt for the beacon."

"So we'll need to move quickly then." Grey said.

"Light arms only." Quinn added.

"I would recommend refitting some of my servitors with heavy weapons but time constraints make that an impractical solution."

"Hopefully we'll be able to make it to the pilot and recorder before the enemy do." Wolf said.

"Very well." Layne said, "Lieutenant Wolf you are to take the members of Second Platoon who remain fit for duty to recover both the pilot and the surveillance recorder and return them both here. Do you understand?"

"Yes commissar." Wolf replied.

"Good. Then you and your men are dismissed. I shall discuss with Lieutenant Selena's men how to make up for your absence."

"Yes commissar." Wolf said and she saluted him before turning to leave, followed by her men.

"Nice one lieutenant." Molla said when they were all outside.

"What?" Wolf responded, "What did I do?"

"You found an excuse to get us all away from that damned leash." Grey added.

Normally Second Platoon consisted of forty two humans plus seven ogryns. But the losses already suffered had reduced this to twenty-two plus four ogryns who were fit for duty. A further six men and one ogryn were currently listed as injured but given the need to move quickly these were being left behind. The platoon was joined by both Enginseer Cornelius and his assistant however. Unlike the tech priest himself this assistant, Technician Nathin PL673, was a native Catachan whose technical aptitude had been noticed at an early age and he had been inducted into the Adeptus Mechanicus as a lay member.

"Sure you still know what the jungle is Cogboy?" Grey asked Nathin as the group left camp.

"Oh I'm sure it will all come back to me." he replied and he smiled, "If not I can always ask your lieutenant what to do. I hear she's getting better at this." and Grey frowned.

Travelling on foot, the group followed the directions provided by Lieutenant Wolf who had decided that the pilot would be their first concern. This did not sit well with Cornelius who regarded humans as an expendable resource while the technology of the surveillance pod was something that should not be allowed to be lost but the tech priest understood that he could only advise her and was not in a position to give orders.

Even given the natural talent of Catachans to move quickly through jungle terrain, easily picking out routes that may have been more roundabout than a straight line but had fewer obstacles to slow them down, it still took more than three hours for them to reach the location where Wolf had seen the pilot come down.

"Over here!" Molla called out and the rest of the platoon gathered around to see him looking up at where the pilot had come through the jungle canopy, smashing through branches and scattering foliage around on the ground below.

"So at least we know my map co-ordinates were right." Wolf commented.

"We also know he survived his landing." Vance added as he dragged his heel across a patch of disturbed ground to reveal the dull grey fabric of the pilot's parachute, "Looks like he buried his chute to avoid being found."

"Okay everyone spread out." Wolf ordered, "Look for tracks or something. We need to find that pilot."

"Hey navy!" Molla suddenly shouted at the top of his voice, "Catachan Nineteenth Division here to rescue you, where the feth are you?"

"Or we could just shout out to him." Torrent commented, looking at Wolf.

"Hello, over here!" a voice called out that lacked the distinctive Catachan accent.

"Sergeant Quinn, go check that out." Wolf ordered, "Everyone else follow and stay alert."

"Got it." Quinn replied, waving the four remaining members of his squad onwards as he headed towards the source of the voice.

"Suspecting a trap lieutenant?" Vance asked as the command squad began to follow Quinn's veterans.

"I don't know." Wolf replied, "I just don't want to take any chances."

"Good." Vance said.

A few seconds later there was movement from ahead of the platoon and the Catachans raised their weapons as a man in a battered navy flight suit emerged from the undergrowth.

"Don't shoot!" he exclaimed, raising his hands, "Flight Officer Turrow of the Six-hundred and First Valkyrie wing."

"Any more of you?" Quinn asked, knowing that according to Wolf the pilot had ejected alone but asking the question just in case it was a trap and giving Turrow the chance to give himself away by claiming to have comrades.

"No, just me." Turrow replied as Torrent walked up to him and began to inspect the minor cuts he appeared to have sustained during the process of ejecting from his aircraft and crashing through the trees.

"I don't see any signs of infection." she said, "But I better get these wounds cleaned anyway just in case."

"My co-pilot was killed before I ejected and I don't know what happened to any of the rest of my crew."

Turrow continued, "I didn't see any of them bail out."

"There was only you and the surveillance recorder." Wolf told him.

"The recorder!" Turrow exclaimed excitedly, "We have to find it."

"Then there is something useful on it?" Grey asked and Turrow nodded.

"That's right." he replied, "My flight was able to get right over the enemy headquarters and our gear recorded absolutely everything."

"The beacon indicates that the recorder is located bearing two nine eight point four degrees with signal strength indicating that the range is between nine hundred and sixty three and one thousand four hundred and fifty two metres from this point." Cornelius said.

"Through this terrain that could be another half hour to an hour." Vance said and Wolf nodded.

"Then we better get moving." she replied, "I'd kind of like to be back at camp before it gets too dark to see." then she turned to Cornelius, "Engineer, could you keep Sergeant Molla's squad up to date with the bearing of the recorder beacon? He'll be leading the way."

"Understood lieutenant. I shall provide updates at intervals of ten minutes or one hundred metres whichever occurs soonest. Does that meet with your approval?" Cornelius asked and Wolf looked at Vance who just shrugged.

"I guess so." she replied and the tech priest strode towards Molla's unit, clutching the large power axe he was armed with.

"That could come in handy for chopping through branches." Molla commented, staring at the weapon.

"It is significantly more efficient than your blades." Cornelius agreed.

Now relying on the tech priest's built in vox receiver to point the way towards the surveillance recorder Wolf allowed Cornelius to guide the platoon and the combination of Molla's field craft and the ability of Cornelius's power axe and backpack mounted servo-arm to cut through even the densest of undergrowth meant that they reached their target ahead of the time estimate given by Vance.

The recorder was in a case almost two metres long. This had contained the parachute used to slow its descent but this had automatically been detached when it landed and just in case the point of impact had been over water several flotation devices had burst out from inside the case and inflated so that now the recorder sat on a cushion of bright orange balloons.

"Okay it's all yours." Wolf said to Cornelius, waving at the recorder.

"Technician Pee-Ell Six Seven Three, assist me." Cornelius said, making use of Nathin's official designation within the Adeptus Mechanicus and the pair walked up to the recorder and began by cutting open the inflation devices to deflate them so that they could get closer to the casing before inspecting it for damage. Once they were satisfied that it was not externally damaged they opened up an access panel and started to study the insides of the device. Cornelius reached inside the recorder with one of the snakelike mechandrites he had built into his body, joined to him at the base of his spine and then he looked up at Wolf, "Lieutenant, the beacon is now deactivated." he told her, "Also the data core appears intact. We can move the recorder safely without being tracked."

Vance then raised a hand to his microbead headset.

"Good thing too." he said and he looked at Wolf as well, "Lieutenant that was Rull. He says we've got company. Bad company."

"How bad?" Wolf asked.

"Very bad. Looks like the Black Legion did detect the recorder's beacon and are almost here."

"Can Rull take them out?" Wolf asked.

"He says that there's ten of them." Vance replied, "he could get one or two but-"

"But then they'd figure out where he was and kill him." Wolf interrupted, "Okay, so we don't have the numbers or the weapons to fight off a squad of traitor legionaries. We need to withdraw."

"And go where exactly?" Grey asked in response, "If we head back to camp they'll easily be able to follow more than twenty sets of tracks and find out where we're based."

"And if we split up it takes only one idiot to lead them back there." Torrent added and Wolf knew that the idiot Torrent was referring to was her.

Molla looked around, focusing on the four ogryns and Cornelius. Then he smiled.

"Something amusing you sergeant?" Wolf asked.

"Kind of." he replied and he looked at Cornelius, "So tell me engineer, how good are all those things grafted to your body at digging a big hole?"

"Oh that's good." Quinn said as he realised what Molla's idea was.

"Very good." Mayer added.

"But we'll need bait." Vance added.

"What are you lot talking about?" Wolf asked.

"Technically any of us apart from Engineer Cornelius or the ogryns would do." Nathin commented.

"But we really want someone small and light." Torrent said.

"Yeah, a real short arse." Grey added and Wolf suddenly realised that the entire platoon as well as Cornelius and Nathin were staring at her.

"Oh I've got a very bad feeling about this." she said.

"You want me to do what?" Wolf exclaimed as Vance explained the plan while Cornelius assisted and guided Khor's ogryns and Mayer's mortar crews in digging a large hole that blocked the entire width of a nearby trail. While this was going on most of the rest of the platoon were gathering fallen branches and leaves from the

surrounding area that others were then weaving together.

"Just run." Vance said.

"But right over the trap." Wolf said.

"Don't worry," Vance said, "the cover will stand your weight easily. It'll stand the weight of an Astartes in power armour for a second or so as well. But mark my words as soon as there's a decent number of them on top of it the it'll come crashing right down and drop the lot of them into that hole."

"And me along with them if I'm still on top of it as well." Wolf replied.

"Then don't be." Torrent said as she walked up with an armful of branches and set them down.

"What about her?" Wolf asked Vance, pointing to Torrent, "She's like a stick. She'll be light enough to run across it as well."

"I look like a real soldier though." Torrent said, "We need someone that looks too worthless to shoot."

"Shoot? They'll be shooting at me?" Wolf exclaimed.

"Maybe." Vance said, "But I doubt it. You let them see you and then run. Chaos marines love to chase down their prey I've heard."

"But what if this lot don't?" Wolf asked.

"Then you'll be glad that you didn't allow your only medicae to be the one hit by bolter rounds." Torrent replied.

"All this kind of depends on us getting that hole finished first though." Vance said and he looked towards where the digging was being carried out, "Bomber! How's that hole going?" he shouted, using Mayer's nickname in the platoon.

"Err, hang on." Mayer replied, "Khor, how's it going?" and he looked down at where the abhumans were shovelling dirt from the hole that his own men were then carrying away.

"Ogryns dig." Khor replied.

"Still digging." Mayer shouted back at Vance.

"The excavation is eighty percent complete." Cornellius said, "At the current rate or progress I estimate that it will be completed in eighteen minutes."

"That's not good." Vance said and he activated his microbead, "Okay Rull, how long do we have?" he asked and he sighed when he got the reply, "Okay we need you to buy us an extra ten minutes. Try some of your tricks to lead them off before drawing them back here. The bait will be in position in twenty minutes."

"Bait?" Wolf asked, frowning as she glared at Vance.

"Just be glad we're not tying you to a stake." Torrent said and Wolf's frown deepened.

"Maybe not this time." Wolf said and she turned and walked away.

"What did that mean? 'Not this time'?" Torrent asked Vance.

"Ask Sergeant Gant and Short-Arse." he told her, "They once stripped her and tied her to a tent post for a night."

"Really? Just once?"

6.

The ten strong squad of chaos marines advanced cautiously towards the last known location of the beacon they had been tracking. For a time they had believed that someone had been shadowing them in the jungle and had attempted to flush out this individual. But the only thing their efforts had achieved was to delay their arrival at the target site.

“Over there.” one of the marines announced, pointing his bolter to the parachute that had broken away from the surveillance recorder and the squad moved quickly to investigate.

“It is gone.” the squad leader announced, “Whoever was following us was trying to slow us down while they took our prize. I swear that I shall offer their head to the gods for this insult.”

From the bushes Wolf watched the chaos marines, focusing on the weapons they carried. Like the marines themselves these were large and imposing and she knew that any one of them could be used to end her life in an instant. Given that they were being carried on the marines' own private vox network, she could not hear the words being spoken nor would she have been able to understand the ten thousand year old dialect being spoken even if she had. But from the way they moved it was obvious to Wolf that they were talking to one another. Even after ten thousand years and extensive genetic engineering some human traits still remained in them. When all ten were looking the other way wolf crept out of her hiding place and stood at the start of the trail she needed to draw them down and took a deep breath. Then all of a sudden she let it out as an ear-splitting scream.

Wolf turned and broke into a run just as the chaos marines were turning around and there was a sound like a thunderclap as one fired his bolter and the trunk of a nearby tree exploded when the rounds detonated against it.

“No!” the squad leader snapped as he pushed the bolter aside and spoiled his subordinate's aim, “I want to look in her eyes as I pluck them out. After her.”

The chaos marines broke into a run as well, following Wolf down the jungle trail and she could feel the pounding of heavy footfalls from the armoured giants pursuing her. Then came an amplified roar from one of the chaos marines and Wolf risked a glance over her shoulder to see the squad of giants in black armour chasing after her. All of a sudden Wolf felt the ground beneath her shift slightly and she realised that she had made it as far as the camouflaged trap. Beneath her feet now was only a thin layer of dirt scattered over a cover made of woven branches and leaves and beneath that nothing but a sheer drop into a pit with no way out.

Wolf kept on running, knowing that she had only to get a little further before the marines would be on top of the trap as well and according to Vance the combination of their own body weight and that of their armour would cause the cover to give way and drop them into the pit. It was a crude trap of a type that had existed since before mankind had even learned to build primitive cities but it was the only chance that the Catachans had of taking on a squad of chaos marines that they outnumbered by only two to one.

Then came a tearing sound, accompanied by more amplified roars only this time they were roars of rage and Wolf risked another look over her shoulder, expecting to see the chaos marines all tumbling helplessly into the pit. But as she turned Wolf felt herself falling as well and she screamed, picturing herself trapped in a pit with ten angry chaos space marines. But rather than falling through free space wolf landed face down on the trail and she realised that she had instead tripped over while trying to look around. She could taste blood in her mouth and lifting a hand to her face she felt blood coming from her nose. Then she rolled over and looked back down the trail and saw that where just a few moments earlier there had been ten traitor legionaries pursuing her there were now just three standing on the far side of the pit trap.

“Open fire!” Vance's voice yelled out and all of a sudden all hell was let loose as the entire platoon opened fire from within the jungle to either side of the trail. The Catachans were all located on the same side of the pit as Wolf so their weapons fire was directed down it rather than towards each other, removing the risk of friendly fire deaths.

“Ogryns fire!” Khor's voice sounded above the sounds of las guns and shotguns and the sound of weapons fire grew even louder as the abhumans opened fire with their ripper guns, heavy calibre fully automatic shotguns that were designed to be wielded by the bulky abhumans' hands.

The three chaos marines were enveloped by the weapons fire and they staggered backwards away from the edge of the pit. But their armour was amongst the best in the galaxy and none of them fell. Instead one raised his bolter and began to spray explosive rounds into the jungle. Knowing that she was the only target not in cover, Wolf scrambled to the side of the trail to seek cover and a hand reached out and dragged her into the undergrowth.

“Thanks.” Wolf said as the guardsman responsible turned his attention back to shooting at the chaos marines and she too drew her las pistol. From somewhere Wolf heard an all too human scream and she knew that one of her men had been hit by the bolter fire before she joined in the return fire as well.

All of a sudden one of the traitor marines cried out in pain as his leg gave out beneath him and he fell, clutching at his knees as blood pumped from it and Wolf knew that Rull had found one of the few weak points

in the marine's armour.

"Fall back." one of the remaining two marines said, reaching down to grab hold of his injured comrade. But as he turned around his head jerked backwards as a bullet fired from a concealed position smashed its way through one of his helmet's eyepieces and he collapsed.

"Get the guy on the ground!" Wolf ordered as she fired her las pistol at the marine lying on the ground and the rest of the platoon follow suit. Despite the protection offered by his all enclosing armour some of the shots fired at him found more weak points and there was a spurt of blood as a las shot struck the joint at his neck. The energy of the shot also served to cauterise the wound externally, but internally the bleeding continued and the marine found himself choking on his own blood.

The final marine decided to abandon his comrades in the pit and just broke into a run, retreating down the trail. But as he fled another figure in powered armour leapt out of the jungle to block his path. The traitor marine towered over Cornelius but the engineeer still stood his ground against his enemy, holding his power axe in both hands while his servo arm flexed behind him.

"Out of my way slave to the false emperor." the marine said and then he fired his bolter. Standing out in the open, Cornelius was an easy target but his armour was every bit as effective as that of the marine and each round did nothing more than pit the outer surface of his armour. In frustration the marine charged at Cornelius, casting aside his bolter and drawing his combat blade. However, this was just what the engineeer had been waiting for and all of a sudden a mechandrite emerged from under his armour and swung whip like to knock the blade from his hand. Cornelius then swung his power axe and there was a flash as the energy field that surrounded the blade triggered at the same moment that it struck the chaos marine's arm and effortlessly sliced it off mid way between his wrist and elbow. Finally the servo arm struck, extending over Cornelius to bend downwards before it moved in an upwards arc that caught the marine under his jaw and seized hold of him by his neck. The servo arm's motors whined as Cornelius instinctively tried to lift the marine off the ground. But the armoured giant was just too big and heavy for this to be achieved. However, the servo arm's massive claw still tightened around the marine's neck and all of a sudden it was ripped free, spraying blood all around as the severed head flew through the air and the headless corpse just collapsed. Now all that remained was to deal with the marines in the pit before they were able to climb out.

The pit was approximately three metres deep and lacked any handholds that the chaos marines could use to climb out individually. But this was a situation that would not last indefinitely, all it requiring being the chaos marines to support one another as they climbed out of the pit and sure enough an armoured gauntlet appeared at the side of the pit, ready to pull its owner up onto the trail. Seeing this Quinn aimed his shotgun and fired three shots in rapid succession that took enough fingers off the hand inside the gauntlet that the chaos marine fell back down into the pit before he could pull himself out of it.

"Marks! Do it!" Quinn snapped and beside him one of the veterans armed with a flamer nodded. But rather than rushing towards the pit to fire his weapon into it he picked up the spare canister of promethium fuel that he had set beside him on the ground. This had been modified with a krak grenade taped to its side. These grenades featured a shaped charge designed to punch through the armour of most light to medium fighting vehicles, with only the heaviest being immune to their effects from all angles. On this occasion however, the grenade had been taped to the promethium canister so that the warhead faced it, meaning that when it detonated it would send a blast of molten metal directly into the volatile liquid.

Marks darted forwards out of cover and crouched down on the trail close by the pit while he pulled the pin from the krak grenade. Then using both hands he hurled the canister into the pit and dived back into the undergrowth for cover just as the krak grenade went off. The blast from the grenade immediately ignited the promethium and there was a sudden 'Boom!' and a roar as the pit was filled with fire that rose up and shot into the air as well. The intense heat of the chemical fire found and melted through the joints even in the chaos marines' power armour, roasting the occupants. But even this was not quite enough to kill all seven of the chaos marines in the pit thanks to some of them being shielded at least in part from the initial blast by their comrades. But the Catachans had expected there to be some survivors and while Marks had been moving into position the rest of the platoon were pulling fragmentation grenades from their webbing and removing the pins.

"Now!" Wolf yelled as the flames from the initial explosion in the pit died down and she hurled her grenade into it. The other Catachans rapidly followed suit, a steady stream of the fist sized explosives flying into the pit.

"Ogryns grenades!" Khor ordered and the much larger grenades carried by the abhumans went into the pit as well right before the first one detonated. Just as with the exploding promethium canister, a lot of the blast from the exploding grenades was forced upwards by the pit. But the shockwave created by the combined detonations was also enough to cave in the sides of the pit, bringing down the dirt walls onto the surviving chaos marines. The crater that this produced lacked the steep sides of the original pit and would have been easy to escape but the combined explosive force that the chaos marines had been subjected to had been too much even for their powered armour and all of them who had fallen into the pit were now dead as well. Cautiously the Catachans emerged from hiding and gathered around the crater.

"Think there's anything left amongst that lot worth keeping?" Molla asked as he stared at the pile of mangled bodies mixed in with dirt and the ashes of the branches used to cover the pit.

"I doubt it." Vance replied, "Anything of intelligence value will have been incinerated."

Wolf looked around at the bodies of the chaos marines who had been able to avoid falling into the trap and she noticed that the closest had a bolt pistol in a holster worn on his waist.

"This look like it still works." she said as she walked over and drew the weapon, checking to see if it was loaded. The bolt pistol was designed to be held by hands much larger than Wolf's and its grip was correspondingly large, making it difficult for her to hold even using both hands.

"It doesn't look like you can use that thing properly. Perhaps you should try it out on that tree over there."

Torrent suggested an she pointed into the jungle.

"I'm sure it'll be fine once I get the grip replaced." Wolf replied, taking aim at the tree. Then she squeezed the trigger and unleashed a short burst of explosive rounds. Although each of these rounds was fired at a relatively low velocity before its internal rocket motor ignited to accelerate it the recoil was tremendous, far in excess of what Wolf had been expecting and she squealed as the pistol tore itself out of her hand and all around her she heard the sound of laughter.

"Perhaps you should leave firing bolters to people who have been trained to do it lieutenant." Quinn said.

"Oh there's plenty she does without having been properly trained for it." Grey muttered in reply.

"You all knew that was going to happen, didn't you?" Wolf said.

"Of course we did." Molla replied, "But we figured it was something you just had to find out for yourself."

"Plus it was funny." Torrent added.

Vance then approached Wolf.

"Lieutenant if we want to be back at camp before dark like you said then we really need to get going." he told her and she nodded in reply.

"Okay." she said, "Sergeant Khor, have your squad carry the recorder. But remind them not to drop it. Understood?"

Khor nodded and smiled before turning to his squad.

"Ogryns fetch." he said, pointing to where the surveillance recorder had been concealed.

7.

Upon their return to the camp Cornelliuss had the surveillance recorder moved to his workshop for study. This was not as extensive as the prefabricated structure he normally used to maintain and repair Fourth Company's technology but it was more than adequate to allow him to remove the actual data recorder itself and examine its contents frame by frame.

As Cornelliuss had anticipated these showed that a large area of the jungle had been cleared in a relatively short space of time to make room for all of the vehicles that the Black Legion had brought through their portal. But what Cornelliuss had not been expecting to see was the portal itself. He had of course been provided with copies of the reports concerning the creation of the portal but it had been of little interest to him. The Adeptus Mechanicus dealt in science, not sorcery and so rituals involving blood sacrifices held no interest to an engineer of his status. But he had seen enough of the report to know that the portal had been created in an underground chamber and had been large enough to permit the passage of one chaos marine in full powered armour at a time. Now however, the portal was visible from the air and it was much larger. The ruins in which the portal had been created had been largely dug up by the Black Legion and the much enlarged portal exposed. The video footage stored in the recorder showed the portal pulse with an unnatural light as another armoured vehicle, in this case a Rhino armoured personnel carrier, drove through. But more interesting to Cornelliuss than the portal itself were the three identical structures that surrounded it. These were tapering arcs that spat lightning into the portal and to Cornelliuss they were reminiscent of the gateways used by the alien Eldar to access their webway, the network of passages through warp space that was their favoured method of interstellar travel.

Then something else caught the attention of Cornelliuss. As well as all of the machinery and military hardware that the Black Legion base was littered with, he could just about make out individual people moving about. Most of these did not look like marines of the Black Legion and Cornelliuss guessed that they were either Kordonian traitors or the cultists they had been helping. But here and there he saw something else that both intrigued and concerned him, figures that appeared to be dressed in red.

The video footage had only a limited capability for Cornelliuss to zoom in on an object, particularly one as small as a human being, so the tech priest instead turned to the matching set of still images and quickly located one of the images that showed one of these individuals in red. Centring on this figure, Cornelliuss repeatedly zoomed in and his suspicions were confirmed.

Now moving away from the visual recordings entirely, Cornelliuss studied some of the other data recorded when the Valkyrie flew over the enemy base and he searched for instances of very specific energy emissions that would let him determine the scale of the problem that the Imperial forces faced. With this information logged Cornelliuss was then in a position to deliver his findings.

Unfortunately the temporary workshop lacked the equipment to produce hard copies of the images that Cornelliuss wanted to show to the Catachans but as a tech priest he had an alternative solution. Summoning one of his servitors, mind wiped cyborgs created either from cloned tissue samples or alternatively from the living bodies of those who had crossed the tech priests of Mars in some way, he copied the relevant images into its memory before commanding it to follow him. All of this took place without a single word being spoken. Cornelliuss maintained a permanent wireless link to all of his servitors, and it followed him from the tent.

"Pee Ell Six Seven Three." he said to Nathin, pausing on his way out of the tent.

"Yes sir?"

"I require heavy weapons fitting to two servitors."

"Yes sir. What weapons would you like me to fit?"

"One each of heavy bolter and multi-melta. I will require them to be ready by the time I return. It is likely to be within twenty minutes."

"I'll get started now then." Nathin said and Cornelliuss set off again.

Cornelliuss' destination was the command tent where in the absence of the Catachan combat officers he hoped to find at least one out of Commissar Layne or Lieutenant Wolf. However, when he got there the only individuals present were a pair of Catachan vox operators monitoring Imperial Guard communication frequencies for any reports from the scouting units.

"State the locations of Commissar Layne and Lieutenant Wolf." Cornelliuss said to the guardsmen.

"Try the mess tent." one of them replied.

"The daily schedule does not indicate that meals are currently being served." Cornelliuss said.

"No, but that Emperor botherer is giving a sermon." the other Catachan replied.

As a disciple of the Ommissiah, Cornelliuss did not attend the services given by Preacher Black and he had observed that although they followed the God Emperor the Catachans also avoided them. However, neither Layne nor Wolf were native Catachans and they were known to attend the services regularly.

"I shall leave the servitor here." he announced to the Catachans, "It is not to be interfered with." then he turned and left the tent, instructing the servitor to wait inside the command tent for him to return.

Preacher Black stood behind a table on which he had laid out his books and a pair of candles while he delivered his sermon. The congregation for the sermon was small, consisting of Layne, Wolf, Khor's ogryns and also Turrow while the theme Black had chosen for today was the inevitable damnation that awaited all traitors. This had been a common theme of late and although the ogryns would listen attentively each time it was delivered both Layne and Wolf were beginning to find it repetitive. Therefore, it came as something of a relief when Cornellius entered the mess tent unannounced.

"Commissar Layne, Lieutenant Wolf. I must speak with you immediately." he said, interrupting the sermon.

"Of course." Layne replied, getting to his feet with the aid of his cane, "Shall we use my tent perhaps?"

"I have a servitor waiting in the command tent. But I can relocate it to yours if you wish commissar."

Cornellius said.

"Ah. Actually I was meaning the command tent." Layne said and Black smiled briefly in amusement at the commissar's attempt to portray himself as the commanding officer being ignored by the tech priest. Then as Layne left the tent with Wolf and Cornellius, Black turned his attention back to Turrow and the ogryns sat in front of him.

Meanwhile Layne and Wolf accompanied Cornellius back to the command tent where the servitor waited.

"I have completed my study of the information recorded by the Valkyrie surveillance aircraft." Cornellius announced.

"Excellent." Layne said as he sat down, "Is it ready for the colonel's astropath to send it back to headquarters?"

"It is my opinion that the information should be regarded as time critical and any delay in action could invalidate its usefulness." Cornellius answered.

"Then perhaps you ought to fill us in engineer." Layne said.

"That is precisely why I summoned you both here." Cornellius replied and at the same he instructed the servitor to activate the projector built into its head and the recordings from the Valkyrie were projected onto the wall of the tent.

"This is what the surveillance recorder contained?" Wolf asked as she looked at an image of the portal now expanded to be large enough to allow vehicles to pass through.

"Correct." Cornellius replied, "As you can see the portal remains active despite the ending of the ritual."

"And it's bigger than it was too." Wolf added.

"Indeed. Both of which pose the problem of where the energy to sustain it is coming from." Cornellius said.

"I thought that it was created by witchcraft." Layne responded.

"Correct and the energy used to create the portal would have been exhausted soon after its creation. Now though the portal has been expanded and sustained by these." Cornellius replied and he switched the image to one that showed one of the three arcs.

"What in the Emperor's name is that?" Layne asked.

"Three such constructions are located around the portal's event horizon." Cornellius said and Wolf frowned.

"Event horizon?" she said.

"The point of the portal at which real space intersects with warp space." Cornellius explained, "And it is my assessment that these are devices to draw energy from warp space that can then be used to maintain the interface between universes."

Neither Layne nor Wolf had any idea how what Cornellius was describing would be achieved, the secrets of such knowledge were guarded jealously by the Adeptus Mechanicus and anyone else who attempted to uncover them would inevitably regret it. But to Wolf this in itself posed an interesting question.

"How would they know how to do that?" she asked.

"That brings me to something else I discovered when reviewing the surveillance data." Cornellius replied and again the projected image changed, this time showing examples of the figures that he had seen in the images viewed from above, "As you can see there are numerous warriors that appear to be a part of the Black Legion present." he began, shining a focused beam of light at some of the images, "But these are outnumbered by both Kordonian troops and what look to be native cultists. However, I have observed another set of individuals at the portal site." and he focused on one of the red robed figures.

"That looks like a tech priest." Layne said.

"That is because that individual is one of the supposed Dark Mechanicus." Cornellius replied, "A former adept who rejected the commandments of the Omnissiah in favour of pursuing heretical and corrupt knowledge. The machines created by these hereteks are abominations. Some of which we have already witnessed in action here on Lyannus Prime."

"The Helderkes." Wolf said.

"Correct lieutenant. Only hereteks of the Dark Mechanicus are capable of binding the sentiences controlling their creations to the machines themselves. It is my belief that there are eight such individuals present on Lyannus Prime."

"How can you tell?" Layne asked.

"Up to five of them can be seen simultaneously in video footage." Cornellius said, "But the surveillance pod that the Valkyrie was equipped with was also capable of scanning across a wide range of electromagnetic frequencies, including those used by the Dark Mechanicus for remote communication and this revealed the

presence of three others out of sight of the optical surveillance devices at the time.”

“I’m guessing you’re about to tell us that we need to take out all of these – these, what did you call them?” Wolf asked.

“Hereteks is the official term.” Cornellius replied, “Each of them has betrayed the highest principles of the Adeptus Mechanicus and must be made to pay for their crimes in the only way possible. Full termination. But eliminating these individuals will not be sufficient to stop the Black Legion. The portal is a form of warp gate that connects to a remote location, most likely a world within the Eye of Terror itself and as long as it remains operational the Black Legion will be able to bring through supplies and reinforcements. If we destroy both the gate and the contingent of Dark Mechanicus hereteks then we will have cut off their supply line and also prevented them from establishing the means to resupply themselves on Lyannus Prime.”

“And an army without supplies will inevitably wither and die.” Layne said, a smile spreading across his face. “Given the supplies that a typical marine unit is capable of carrying with them compared to the rate at which they will expend them, I estimate that eleven days after the destruction of the portal the Black Legion units on Lyannus Prime will no longer be combat capable.”

Wolf frowned.

“But why not take this to General Fortnam?” she asked, “He could order a missile strike that would wipe that base off the map.”

“I have identified numerous surface to air las cannon emplacements around the perimeter.” Cornellius replied, “The odds of a Deathstrike missile being able to penetrate these defences are less than three percent. There is also the problem of confirming the termination of all eight of the Dark Mechanicus. If even one escapes in an operational condition then he will be able to establish local production facilities for the Black Legion.”

“So it’s an infantry attack to take out the tech priests and-” Wolf began.

“They are not tech priests lieutenant.” Cornellius interrupted, though as usual his cybernetically altered voice showed no hint of annoyance, “They surrendered the right to that title when they turned their backs on the Ommissiah.”

“Sorry.” Wolf replied, “So we take out these hereteks and find some way of sabotaging the portal before any more can come through. Right?”

“Correct lieutenant.” Cornellius replied, “Though I should warn you that the destruction of the machinery sustaining the portal will likely have significant secondary effects.”

“Secondary effects? As in kaboom?” Wolf said.

“There will be a vast release of energy. I estimate that the blast radius would be in the order of two thousand metres.” Cornellius told her.

“So it’ll consume the traitors as well then. Excellent.” Layne said.

“Only those within the blast radius commissar.” Cornellius responded, “The more significant loss than the manpower and equipment will be their stockpile of supplies. The figure I gave you for the time until they would no longer be capable of fighting effectively was based upon the loss of all of these.”

“Only unless any of the teams sent out by Major Trent return to camp, what remains of Second Platoon is the only force we have at our disposal to carry out this assault.” Layne said, “Around twenty men to take on an army.”

“I shall also accompany the attack force.” Cornellius said, “Destruction of the portal will require careful examination of the technology used to sustain it and that cannot be done remotely.”

Wolf found the rest of Second Platoon located outside the supply tent. Inside Selena and two of her men were going through crates and taking out equipment that they then handed out to Wolf’s platoon.

“What’s going on?” Wolf asked Selena when she saw this.

“You’re about to go marching into the middle of an army aren’t you?” Selena asked in return, “So I thought you’d appreciate all the extra help you could get. Here, take these and this.” and she promptly handed Wolf a bandolier of krak grenades as well as another, larger explosive device.

“A melta bomb?” Wolf commented.

“Just the thing for demolishing something big and important lieutenant.” Molla commented from close by and Wolf noticed that his entire squad was also now equipped with krak grenades while he too had a melta bomb hanging from his webbing.

“How did you know that’s what we’re about to do?” Wolf said, looking around at the other squads and seeing that all of them had been issued with the extra types of grenades as well all the weaponry that they would be entitled to as full squads rather than just the reduced force they were.

“That stuff the Bastard was showing you on the tent wall could be seen from outside as well.” Quinn said, “Vance and I were out there listening.”

“And I will be joining you as well lieutenant.” Black announced as he walked up to them, “If there are traitors to be condemned then I shall be there to deliver the Emperor’s damnation in person.”

“Looking a bit light there preacher.” Quinn said and he looked at Selena, “Hey lieutenant, how about some extra firepower for the Emperor’s personal representative?” he called out to her.

“How’s this?” Selena asked, taking a shotgun and bandolier of ammunition from a nearby rack.

"I will see that it is put to good use." Black replied as he accepted the weapon and then began to insert shells into the magazine.

"And here comes the Bastard who's got us into this to begin with." Grey said as he saw Cornelius approaching. As before he carried his power axe and had mechandrines poking out from under his robes. But his time he had a pair of servitors following him. Each of these had had one arm removed and replaced with a heavy weapon grafted into their bodies.

"I am ready to depart." the tech priest announced.

"With friends I see." Quinn commented, looking at the two heavily armed combat servitors, "Will those things be able to keep up with us?"

"Affirmative. These units are designed for cross country performance and their chemical stimulant packs will easily last the journey to the enemy facility." Cornelius replied.

"What about coming back?" Mayer asked.

"These units are expendable." Cornelius told him, "They can be abandoned if necessary."

Wolf reviewed her force one last time before heading out. In total it numbered just under thirty including the two half man half machine servitors but for all its small size it packed a great deal of firepower, though if they were to encounter any more space marines of the Black Legion then only a handful of their weapons could be counted on to penetrate their powered armour without a lucky hit finding a weak spot. But then she noticed that not quite everyone was present.

"Where's Rull?" she asked.

"Where do you think?" Grey responded, "He's already gone on ahead."

"He hung around just long enough to root through my stock of sniper rifle ammo and took all the rounds he wanted before setting off." Selena added.

"He'll let us know if the enemy has patrols out." Vance said, "Especially marines."

"In that case let's get going." Wolf replied, "I don't want us falling too so behind Rull that he can't get a signal to us. Sergeant Molla, your unit has point."

The platoon was just starting to move out when Selena suddenly called out.

"Lieutenant Wolf." she said and Wolf looked around, "Good hunting." Selena said, standing at attention and saluting.

Surprised, Wolf returned the salute before turning around again.

"That was nice of her." she said softly to Vance.

"She just doesn't expect you to make it back." he told her.

"Why give us all this extra equipment if she doesn't think we'll be coming back?" Wolf responded.

"Not us, just you." Torrent said.

"Oh." Wolf replied, "That's not very nice after all."

8.

Already familiar with the route from their camp to the target site Second Platoon made good time through the jungle. No word was heard from Rull and no enemy patrols were encountered. But as they got closer to their destination things became less familiar.

"Throne." Wolf exclaimed when she saw the portal for her self through a gap in the trees, "Is it me or that thing getting even bigger?" and she began to take out her magnoculars for a better look.

"Evil grows when left unchecked." Black commented, "Only through faith in the Emperor will we prevail."

"You are correct lieutenant." Cornelliuss said in reply to Wolf's original question, "The volume of the portal has increased two hundred and twelve percent since the navy reconnaissance flight was able to record the footage we are basing this mission off." then he reached out and placed a gauntleted hand on the hand Wolf was holding her magnoculars in, "I should caution you against focusing on it for too long however lieutenant. The visual emissions may cause adverse side effects to a brain lacking the correct defensive filter system." Just then Molla, whose squad had been leading the platoon through the jungle from far enough in front of Wolf's command squad came walking towards them.

"What is it sergeant?" Wolf asked.

"Rull just made an appearance." he replied, "He says the enemy perimeter is just up ahead and the surveillance images were right about the amount of firepower they've got there."

"He told you in person?" Vance asked, "He didn't use his microbead?"

"No. He reported face to face." Molla answered, "He says that as well as fortified barriers and gun emplacements there are vox antennas all over the place, Far too many to be just a command and control system. He reckons they've got a full RDF set up in place. He's heading back to see if he can find any of those renegade engineers we're to take out."

"That is logical." Cornelliuss said, "The heretekks of the Dark Mechanicus will have the capability to put in place such a system."

"So if we use comms they'll know we're here in an instant." Wolf said, frowning, "Okay pas the word. No comms, microbeads or vox unless it's absolutely necessary. Did Rull have anything else to say?"

"Just one thing lieutenant." Molla replied, "He said it's not just Kordonians and cultists defending this place. He says he saw Astartes."

"Can we avoid them?" Vance asked.

"That is unlikely sergeant." Cornelliuss said, "Astartes, even members of the traitor legions are capable of adapting to changing situations. If we plot our incursion to avoid their current deployment then they are likely to amend it in order to counter us."

"We also need a way through the perimeter." Grey said from close by.

"Could we take out one of their positions quietly?" Mayer suggested.

"If they've got good comms then they're probably checking in with a central command post regularly." Vance pointed out and Wolf smiled.

"I think I've got an idea." she said, "One that can deal with the command and control as well as keeping the Black Legion occupied."

"Got a company of loyal space marines in that uniform of yours?" Torrent asked but Wolf ignored her, instead turning to Quinn.

"Sergeant, do you think that your men could get close enough to the enemy positions that you could disable their communications?" she asked.

"Probably." Quinn replied, "But even if we cut off their comms before we take them out the enemy commanders are still going to notice that they aren't responding."

"I know, that's what I'm counting on. But I don't want you to take any of them out. Just disable their communications." Wolf told him.

"What good does that do us?" Vance asked, "The Black Legion will come running and there'll still be a load of Kordonians to deal with."

"But none of us will be there." Wolf replied.

"An ingenious plan lieutenant." Cornelliuss said.

"How about one of you explain it properly then?" Grey asked, folding his arms.

"It's easy." Wolf replied, "We isolate one of the guard posts from the command and control structure and the Black Legion come running to see what's going on. But there aren't any of us there to fight because we've moved on to another position chosen at random. Cut off the comms there as well and that will prompt another response from the Black Legion."

"I get it." Vance said, smiling, "Pretty good. We take out the comms of enough posts and there won't be any more marines left to come running to see what's going on."

"And that's when we take out the occupants of one of the isolated guard posts." Wolf added, "One that doesn't have any Black Legion troops there."

"The surveillance images indicated that most of the guard posts are equipped with automated weapon

batteries." Cornelliuss pointed out, "Destroying these will attract attention."

"Not if it's done right." Quinn said, "Cut the right lead and the power to the gun will be cut off without a big bang telling everyone we're there."

"That would be beneficial." Cornelliuss said, "It may be possible to reactivate the weapon and turn it to our use. Though that is conditional on the weapon's machine spirit not having been corrupted."

"Then we'll try not to count on it." Wolf said, "But our aim has to be to take control of at least one of the perimeter guard posts. Ideally one as close to the portal as possible."

Quinn looked at Molla.

"So are you up for a little sneak about?" he asked and Molla smiled.

"Sure. Why not?" he replied.

Keeping flat against the ground both Molla and Quinn crawled towards the nearest guard post. This had been built using prefabricated sections bolted together. These bore defaced Imperial aquilas, suggesting that they had been part of the XIV Kordonian's armoury prior to their being exposed as traitors rather than something that the Black Legion had brought with them. Built into the armoured barrier was a gun mount that was fitted with a las cannon that slowly swung back and forth. As the two Catachans crawled closer to the guard post it became apparent that the Kordonians or cultists manning this post had done what far too many troops were prone to do when standing guard alongside an automated weapon system and had become complacent, leaving the auspex system of the weapon to alert them to an approaching enemy. But they had overlooked the limitations of what was a relatively primitive auspex system. The weapon system used a motion sensor keyed to detect enemy troops by their body heat as they moved through its field of view. But because they were operating in a jungle environment filled with animals the auspex had to use a very narrow definition of what a humanoid looked like and this was based on a person standing straight up rather than crawling along the ground. Therefore, although the gun's auspex did pick up the approach of both Molla and Quinn it did not alert the guards, dismissing the two Catachans as part of the local wildlife instead.

When they got close enough to hear voices Molla and Quinn stopped to listen, counting the number of individuals present in the guard post. Molla held up eight fingers and Quinn nodded in agreement. Then they waited for the tell tale pattern of speech used when using a vox set to communicate with a command post. This came in the form of a call sign followed by a confirmation that everything at the guard post was normal, the presence of the two Catachans almost within arms reach being unknown to the occupants of the post. Now knowing where the vox unit was located Molla and Quinn continued to crawl closer, getting right up to the armoured metal barrier and then moving around towards the location of the vox.

In order to limit interference with one another, the vox sets in the guard posts used a fixed land line rather than broadcasting wirelessly and this meant that the line needed to get out of the post and run all the way to a communications hub elsewhere on the site. Molla quickly located where a short length of this cable emerged from the guard post and promptly ran down into the ground where it had been buried and he nodded at Quinn as he drew his knife. Then while Quinn drew his las pistol and a fragmentation grenade from his webbing to provide cover for them if they were discovered, Molla began to scrape away at the ground with his knife until he found the cable buried at a shallow depth. He could of course have used his knife to simply slice through the cable but that would prove that it had been sabotaged. Therefore, Molla instead rubbed his knife blade back and forth along the cable. This first scraped away the insulation before then wearing through the conductive cores. The rough nature of this break gave the cable the appearance of having been chewed through by some sort of animal rather than deliberately cut and Molla pushed the two broken and frayed ends back into the hole before he and Quinn retreated to deal with the las cannon.

The fact that the weapon was swinging back and forth meant that cutting off its power was not an option, despite the manner in which the troops inside the guard post had shirked their duties they would inevitably notice if the automated weapon stopped moving. The answer to this was to disable the sensor, something that could be easily achieved by obscuring it with anything that would block the heat signatures of a target. But the difficulty in doing this was that the sensor was mounted above the barrel of the las cannon itself and the only way to reach it was to stand up. Fortunately, the terrain in which the guard post had been erected presented the Catachans with a solution. The jungle that had dominated the area before the arrival of the Black Legion had been cleared to make way for the various structures, leaving behind debris from the felled trees in the field of mud that the base had become.

"We need something to stick over the auspex lens." Quinn whispered and Molla nodded. Then while Quinn looked for and retrieved a long, narrow branch that lay in the mud nearby Molla took a protein bar from his pocket and opened the wrapper, taking care not to make too much noise. He took a single bite from this and began to chew, returning the rest of the bar to his pocket. Meanwhile Quinn took out his knife and slowly and quietly used it to saw through the branch so that he was left with a small 'V' shape at the end. About a minute later Molla lifted his hand to his mouth and spat out the half chewed mouthful of protein bar into it. The solid bar had been reduced to a sticky, malleable mush by Molla and Quinn just snarled as it was held in front of his face. In return Quinn held the V shaped end of the branch towards Molla who shrugged and then gently pressed the chewed mass into the 'V'. Quinn then slid sideways and lay right under the las cannon and as the weapon continued to move back and forth he raised the branch up above him, using the las cannon's

mounting itself to keep it hidden from the Kordonian guards. Then when the chewed protein reached the same level as the auspex lens Quinn used the branch to press the protein against it. When he subsequently removed the branch Quinn saw that the protein remained in place, effectively blinding the automated weapon while giving no obvious indication. Finally he nodded at Molla and the two Catachans began to crawl away, heading back to the tree line.

While Molla and Quinn moved on to another guard post elsewhere on the perimeter the rest of Second Platoon kept watch on this first one, waiting to see how the enemy would react. As it happened they did not need to wait very long. Running towards the guard post, their armoured feet kicking up significant mud as they ran came a ten strong squad of Black Legion troops.

"Here they come." Wolf said as she studied them through her magnoculars.

"And those guards don't look happy about it." Grey added as he saw the occupants of the guard post suddenly leap to their feet and take up the positions they should have been in to begin with. The Black Legion were clearly not fooled by this and their leader, a marine in armour that included a helmet featuring a pair of horns that looked large enough to impale a human being, shoved the first Kordonian he encountered to the ground and as the others looked on in horror proceeded to stamp on his chest until he was dead. Then the Black Legion inspected the guard post's vox unit and, finding it intact if inoperable they tugged on the cable and pulled it from the ground as far as where Molla had cut through it. Clearly the Black Legion troops were not impressed at what they saw to be further negligence on the part of the Kordonian guards but their reaction was not quite what Wolf had expected from them. With swift, fluid movements the squad leader drew his bolt pistol and pressed it to the forehead of the vox operator before pulling the trigger. The mass reactive round exploded inside the Kordonian's skull and he was instantly decapitated. Then, as if not trusting the Kordonians to take their duties seriously the Black Legion troops entered the guard post and joined their supposed allies in taking up positions facing the jungle.

"Over there." Mayer said suddenly and he pointed to a second guard post where Black Legion troops were rushing towards it to investigate why its occupants had failed to reply to a vox check.

"I've got number three." Grey added before a distant 'Crack!' indicated that another Kordonian had just paid the ultimate price for failing the Black Legion.

"I am no longer able to see any Astartes troops moving about within the perimeter." Cornelius announced. Unlike the Catachans, the tech priest had no need of magnoculars to keep watch on the enemy base, his own eyes had long ago been replaced with bionic versions that if anything gave him even better vision than was possible with the Imperial Guard issue optical devices.

"So they've deployed all they've got then?" Torrent asked.

"Not necessarily." Vance replied as he searched for any signs of figures in black power armour, "There could be more inside. But what matters is that we've depleted their mobile reserve. My guess is that there'll be one or two more squads available and then they'll run out."

"In that case let's just hope that Molla and Quinn can keep up the good work." Wolf said.

9.

On the far side of the base perimeter Molla and Quinn studied the effectiveness of their handiwork from just within the jungle. It was getting dark now, but using the light amplification of their magnoculars they could see each of the guard posts they had sabotaged from here and saw that five of them now had Black Legion marines in them as well as Kordonian and cultist forces.

"They're on the move." Quinn said and Molla turned to look in the same direction as his fellow sergeant. There he saw a group of figures in black powered armour getting out of a guard post before they dashed around the inside of the perimeter until they came to another that the two Catachans had sabotaged where they began to berate the troops stationed there for failing to notice that their vox system had failed. Once again though the marines found no evidence of sabotage. The quad auto cannon array mounted in this guard post had not been active when the Catachans had approached, so rather than block the auspex they had disabled its power supply in the same way that they had cut off the vox communications with the command post.

"Looks like they've found our little present." Quinn commented when one of the marines held up a small rodent like creature that he had found where the power line was severed. To add to the illusion that the damage was as a result of animals chewing through cables they had placed the body of the creature that they had found in the jungle so that it appeared to have been electrocuted as it bit through the power cable.

"Perhaps we ought to be getting back to the others." Molla suggested, "If the Black Legion are abandoning guard posts they must have exhausted their numbers."

"And we wouldn't want to be late for the main attack would we?" Quinn responded and he put his magnoculars away.

The two men then made their way back to where they had last seen the rest of Second Platoon, keeping to the jungle and watching for any patrols they may have missed. Sure enough when they reached the rest of the platoon they found them carrying out their final checks before beginning their attack. However, they also noticed that both Mayer's mortar squad and the ogyrns were missing.

"Where's Bomber?" Quinn asked, looking around for any member of the mortar squad.

"The lieutenant sent his squad and Khor's to the north." Vance told him.

"I want them to provide us with a diversion." Wolf added, "A few mortar rounds should get people's attention focused elsewhere after we deal with the guard post and want to move further in."

"Plus Rull's found where those Dark Mechanicus are hiding when they're not busy keeping that portal going." Vance added.

"Sounds good to me." Quinn replied as one of his men handed him the shotgun he had left behind when he and Molla went to sabotage the guard posts.

"Well the Black Legion have abandoned the guard post closest to us so that's the one we're going to take." Wolf said.

Second Platoon made their way to the tree line and those with magnoculars took one last look at the guard post they planned to take. Given the absence of the Black Legion troops the six remaining Kordonians had reverted to leaving the automated las cannon that they still believed to be fully operational to alert them to anyone approaching while they took cover behind the armoured barrier except for one of their number who was keeping watch in the opposite direction just in case the Black Legion returned, this prospect apparently concerning them more than the possibility of a surprise attack like the one they were about to face.

"Knives out." Vance said, drawing his traditional Catachan blade and the rest of the platoon did likewise.

Then he led the way by lying flat on the ground and starting to crawl towards the guard post. Cautiously the force made its way across the uneven ground between the jungle and the guard post and Wolf found herself focusing on the las cannon that continued to move back and forth as it searched for a target, the machine spirit unaware that its auspex had been crudely disabled.

The command squad was the first to reach the armoured barrier around the guard post, followed close behind by Quinn's veterans. With nine members of the platoon plus Preacher Black now in place Wolf knew that she already outnumbered the enemy troops defending the guard post and she nodded at Quinn. In response he crawled around the side of the guard post, halting barely a metre away from the Kordonian who had been tasked with warning the others if the Black legion returned to check on them. All of a sudden Quinn reached out and grabbed the Kordonian guard by the collar of his flak jacket, dragging him closer before plunging his knife into the man's neck and twisting it.

At the same time the others leapt up and vaulted over the armoured barrier, taking the rest of the Kordonians completely by surprise. Torrent slammed an elbow into the face of another guard before thrusting her own knife up under his flak jacket and into his heart. A pair of Quinn's veterans then forced a third guard face down into the dirt floor of the guard post before Black grabbed him by his helmet and lifted his head backwards.

"Meet the Emperor's justice heretic!" he hissed before plunging his knife through the traitor's eye.

This now left only three of the Kordonian guards left alive and one of them was able to lunge at Torrent. She

brought her arm up to block his attack but he reacted by opening his mouth wide to reveal two rows of sharpened teeth that he then plunged into the arm and Torrent gritted her teeth as he bit deeply. Wolf stuck her knife into the guard's back, severing his spine. Then as he collapsed, gasping with pain and letting go of Torrent's arm the medicae slashed at his throat.

One of the two surviving guards made an attempt to escape, scrabbling out of the rear of the guard post. But he did so just as Molla arrived ahead of the rest of his squad and he pulled the fleeing man back by his ankle before stabbing him in the gap between the collar of his flak jacket and the base of his helmet.

Only one guard remained now and he reacted by kicking his las gun away and raising his hands.

"I surr-" he began before a Catachan's knife silenced him permanently.

Turning back towards the jungle, Vance took out a flash light and sent a signal of two swift pulses that told Cornelliuss that it was safe for the tech priest to come out of hiding and join them in the guard post. In the meantime Wolf went to Torrent.

"Let me see." she said, looking at where Torrent was covering her wound with her other hand.

"It just needs cleaning and a dressing." Torrent responded.

"And you only have one hand with which to do it." Wolf reminded her.

"A traitor's bite can carry more than one type of infection." Black said as he stepped closer and he produced a silver flask marked with an aquila that he opened. Taking hold of Torrent's arm he tipped the flask up over the wound and poured the contents over her arm.

Torrent winced.

"What is that?" Wolf asked.

"Just water lieutenant." Black told her, "But blessed with the correct litanies of purification to allow it to combat the corruption of the warp."

"Damned cold if you ask me." Torrent added as Black sealed the flask and put it away. Then she looked at Wolf, "So give me a hand with this dressing if you're going to." she added.

While Wolf helped Torrent with her injury Grey, Molla, Quinn and Vance surveyed the enemy base from within the guard post and Cornelliuss worked to make the las cannon operational again. Simply scraping away the protein bar blocking its auspex may have enabled the weapon to once again engage targets the machine spirit would have fired on the Catachans rather than the Kordonians or their Black Legion allies. To overcome this Cornelliuss used one of his mechandrites to access the las cannon's internal control system, rewriting its friend or foe identification system and adjusting the specified field of fire to cover the area within the base perimeter as well as outside it.

"This weapon is now functional." he announced, "I have uploaded full visual identity files of Second Platoon into the machine spirit."

"Are you certain that it has not succumbed to the same corruption as the rest of the traitors here?" Black asked with a scowl.

"Affirmative." Cornelliuss replied, "This weapon comes from an Imperial Guard armoury and its machine spirit remains pure."

"A good job as well." Vance said as he lowered his magnoculars from his eyes, "We may need its firepower. Look." and he pointed to where a pair of Black Legion Predator tanks were just arriving back at the base."

"They must be coming back to refuel and rearm." Wolf said as she took out her own magnoculars to study the tanks for herself.

"You know they could just be the first of a returning battle group." Molla commented and Wolf sighed.

"I know." she said, "Platoon Sergeant Vance, signal Corporal Mayer and Guardsman Rull. It's time we got this started."

The two mortars that Mayer's squad had available were set up on a patch of high ground where there was a gap in the trees large enough to allow the weapons to be fired over a wide arc. To protect the four gun crew, including Mayer himself, Khor's ogryns were deployed between them and the enemy base. Magnoculars were of no use to the BONEHead, being both too delicate and too complex for him to operate properly, but the enhancements carried out to his brain also included enhanced optics that would allow him to spot anyone approaching through the jungle and warn Mayer before they arrived. But he was also able to detect a small spot of white light that flashed from just inside the enemy perimeter towards him.

"Corporal Mayer." Khor said, "Light. Look." and he pointed to the signal.

"Okay this is it." Mayer announced to his squad as he looked down at his targeting chart, "Angle seventy four, bearing zero zero two. Two charges. Fire!"

a mortar bomb was dropped into each of the steeply angled tubes and the crews recoiled and clamped their hands over their ears as they discharged, sending the explosive rounds up through the gap in the jungle canopy and high into the air before arcing back down towards the ground. As soon as the first two rounds had left the tubes Mayer checked his list of targets again.

"Okay, who else has been naughty?" he said to himself before looking back at the rest of his squad, "Angle seventy two, bearing zero one three. Fire!"

Before setting off to position his mortars, Mayer had studied the enemy base along with the rest of Second

Platoon's senior officers and he had a list of targets guaranteed to make the enemy sit up and take notice. The first two rounds were aimed at a stockpile of ammunition for the Black Legion. Most of this was small arms ammunition for the bolt pistols and bolters. Individually these had little destructive power but when the two mortar rounds detonated amongst them the blast scattered them over a wide area while the heat of the flame ignited the rounds' propellant and the booming of the mortar detonation was followed by a chorus of sharper cracks as bolt rounds started flying in random directions. This created immediate panic amongst the nearby traitors and heretics as the explosive armour piercing rounds began to punch through the various lightweight structures and ricocheted off more solid structures, producing a swarm of randomly moving and deadly projectiles that sent them fleeing for cover. The smartest, mainly the trained former Imperial Guardsmen of the Kordonian regiment, simply threw themselves to the ground as fragments flew overhead and instead struck those who made the mistake of remaining upright and in the line of fire.

To compound this the second pair of mortar rounds then came down close to a row of armoured vehicles. They were both targeted at a set of storage tanks for the promethium used to fuel the vehicles but only one of them landed directly on target while the other detonated harmlessly between a pair of Rhino armoured personnel carrier. The round that found its target detonated the moment that it struck one of the metal tanks. This blew the tank apart, producing a fireball that swelled to consume everything around it, including more of the promethium tanks. The armour of most of these tanks allowed them to withstand the sudden rise in temperature, but one of them was at that moment being used to fuel one of the newly arrived Predators and the open fuel line between the armoured vehicle and the fuel storage tank melted almost immediately, allowing the flames to travel into the fuel tank of the Predator and into the larger storage vessel and both of them were blown open.

The explosions produced shockwaves that were felt in the command post where around a dozen Kordonians were stood around a central table while a single member of the Dark Mechanicus and one Black Legion marine stood back and watched. Only these two remained unphased when the others reacted with concern at the explosions.

"What's going on?" the senior Kordonian demanded.

"We're under attack." one of his subordinates responded.

"I know that, but how?"

"Mortars." the Dark Mechanicus heretek answered, his voice buzzing from the augmentations made to his face and throat, "There are two such weapons located to the south of this facility."

The Kordonian commander turned to the armoured marine.

"Can you send a squad to deal with them?" he asked.

"No." the marine replied, "It is a trick."

"A trick? They're shelling us. You have to do something."

"No." the marine repeated, "Two mortars is not a serious attack. The servants of the false Emperor hope to draw us out while they strike elsewhere."

"We can't let them keep dropping mortars on us though." the Kordonian said and right on queue there was another pair of explosions as two more mortar rounds landed within the base.

"And you should not." the marine told him, "Organise a force of your own men to flush them out. Mine will remain here until our Lord commands otherwise."

The Kordonian frowned.

"Your Lord still hasn't bothered to make an appearance yet." he said, "I'd have thought you'd have-" and then he was cut off as the marine simply drew his bolt pistol and shot the Kordonian in the chest.

The other Kordonians looked on, their eyes wide with fear.

"Instruct two squads to leave the perimeter and head south." the heretek ordered and when none of the Kordonians reacted he added, "Now." and placed a hand on the weapon holstered at his waist.

10.

"Looks like Bomber's got them all stirred up." Grey said as he watched the enemy troops dashing around as they tried to control the fires started by the mortar barrage and to take stock of the damage inflicted. "He's going to have company soon though." Vance added when he saw a group of around twenty Kordonians and cultists gathering together near the southern perimeter where they were sheltered from the mortar barrage by the fortified guard posts. "At least they're not Black Legion." Quinn said, "Bomber and Khor should be able to deal with them." "Well while they're dealing with those troops we need to take care of why we're here." Wolf responded, "Sergeant Molla." "Yes lieutenant?" Molla asked in reply. "I want you to hold this position. Use your heavy bolter and this las cannon to make sure that we have an exit. The last thing I want is for us to achieve our goal only to find ourselves totally surrounded." "Yes lieutenant." he said again, this time in acknowledgement instead of as a question. "Sergeant Grey I want you to take your men and find those Dark Mechanicum adepts. Rull should be hunting them as well so watch out for him." Wolf then told Grey and he nodded once. "And Sergeant Quinn, you will bring your squad with mine and Engineer Cornelliuss to destroy the portal. Now are there any questions?" Wolf finished and she looked around. Then when no one spoke she smiled, "Then may the Emperor protect us." she said.

Khor was still watching the jungle in the direction of the enemy base when he saw movement in the undergrowth and he snarled and raised his ripper gun.

"Ogryns, rippers." he said and the other three ogryns stood either side of him also raised their weapons and waited. Then a man in a Kordonian uniform stepped out of the bushes not far in front of the ogryns and Khor immediately turned his ripper gun towards the man, "Ogryns fire!" he bellowed as he pulled the trigger and there was the roar of gun fire as all four of the massive abhumans opened fire together, shredding the startled Kordonian as well as much of the undergrowth behind him in which more enemy troops were still concealed. In response the enemy fired back at the ogryns with an assortment of small arms. But natural toughness of the abhumans made them almost invulnerable to even direct hits and this return fire had no effect other than to make them angry.

One of the ogryns stepped forwards when his ripper gun ran out of ammunition and was about to charge at the enemy troops on his own, but Khor was quick to react before the other ogryn could do anything rash.

"Ogryns stay." he ordered and the other ogryn came to a halt, reloaded his weapon and fired it again.

The sound of the gunfire as well as several loud screams reached Mayer and he dropped his map and targeting chart to the ground.

"Las guns." he said as he unslung his las gun. Then after the rest of his squad had done the same he turned towards the jungle and added, "With me."

Rather than head directly towards the gun fire to reinforce Khor's squad, Mayer led his men around the ogryns. Keeping his las gun ready he watched for any signs of enemy activity while he tried to take up a position on their flank. Amongst the roar of ripper gun fire Mayer also heard the sharp 'Snap!' of a las gun and, knowing that it did not come from any of his squad, he held up his hand for his men to halt while he searched for the source of the shot. There was a second las gun shot and this time Mayer saw the brief flash of light from its source and he smiled.

"Twenty metres dead ahead." he whispered and from his webbing he took out a grenade. Pulling the pin he hurled the explosive towards the source of the las gun shot and waited for the inevitable explosion.

When it came it was accompanied by multiple screams and although Mayer could not make an accurate count, he knew that he had inflicted multiple casualties, "Stand by." he said softly, knowing what would happen next.

Then just as he had expected several figures, a mix of former guardsmen and cultists appeared advancing towards the Catachans and he opened fire immediately. His first burst took a cultist off his feet, the man dying without a sound but then Mayer threw himself to the ground as there was a volley of return fire from the enemy.

"Try to pick out the Kordonians." he told his men as he switched from fully automatic to semi automatic only to avoid wasting ammunition. But the return fire from the enemy troops continued as well and Mayer heard the sound of someone falling to the ground as one of his men was hit. Without turning around Mayer could not know whether he had been hit by a Kordonian or a cultists and for now it did not matter so he carried on firing. Despite the jungle being the Catachans' natural environment three of them alone could not hold back a force more than four times their size and the enemy continued to get closer and Mayer knew that the cultists amongst the enemy would inevitably charge his men to engage them in hand to hand combat. Rather than let this happen he slung his las gun over his shoulder again and drew his knife and another grenade.

"For the Emperor!" he shouted before hurling the grenade into the midst of the enemy troops. Then as soon as it detonated he leapt up and charged.

Mayer's war cry carried as far as Khor and the other ogryns and the BONEHead just about understood what was happening. The enemy troops had diverted away from his squad to engage the Catachans and most had vanished from the ogryns' line of sight. Therefore, Khor gave the only order that would keep his men in the fight.

"Ogryns!" he called out, raising his ripper gun above his head, "Charge!"

The cultists had not expected to be charged by the Catachans, while the few remaining Kordonians could not draw a clear line of fire to them without shooting through their own men so Mayer and the survivors of his squad reached the cultists without being hit by enemy fire as they charged and Mayer thrust his knife into the torso of a wide-eyed and heavily tattooed cultist. The blade entered just beneath his ribcage, angled upwards so that it penetrated his heart and as Mayer pulled it back down cut the organ in half inside the cultist's chest. Then came a loud roaring and just as the enemy troops were moving to counter Mayer's charge Khor and his ogryns also came charging out of the jungle, swinging their ripper guns from side to side like heavy clubs that sent men flying when they were struck by them.

From this point on it was all over for the Kordonians and cultists. The ogryns did not stop when they reached the first of the enemy, instead ploughing through them and roaring with defiance as they swung their ripper guns at anything within arms reach. Even Mayer and his men dived out of the way to avoid being accidentally struck by one of them. This meant that after the ogryns had made a single pass through the enemy force the survivors were separated from the Catachans and they used this opportunity to turn and flee. But even the cultists who called the jungles of Lyannus Prime home could not move through this terrain as rapidly as either the highly skilled Catachans or the ogryns who could just trample the undergrowth underfoot and the fleeing troops were easily caught and run down.

"Let's go grab our las guns." Mayer told his two remaining men, "Then we'll go give the others a hand."

Grey and his two men darted from one piece of cover to another as they made their way towards the building that housed the Dark Mechanicum. They paused frequently to avoid enemy troops as they hurried about to try and deal with the havoc that the now discontinued mortar bombardment had caused. Their attempts to avoid the enemy was not perfect though and as Grey peered around a corner he found himself face to face with a cultist. Grey reacted quickly, grabbing the man by his collar and slamming his face into the adjacent wall. He dragged the stunned and disorientated man back around the corner before slitting his throat, then as he dropped the body to the ground he waved his men on again.

When the Dark Mechanicum's barracks came into view the three Catachans concealed themselves between a pair of generators and Grey studied their target.

"Okay, I see one outside and there's movement inside as well." he said softly.

"Shall I take him out?" one of Grey's men asked, the only one of them armed with a las gun.

"No." Grey replied, watching the figure who appeared to be working to repair an antenna array mounted on top of the building, "Those machine men are just as heavily armoured as marines. Your las gun probably won't get him on the first shot and he'll just alert the others."

But then through his magnoculars Grey saw a tiny red dot appear on the back of the heretek's head and he smiled.

"Do it." he whispered to himself, knowing that there was no way for Rull to hear him. But almost as if Grey had been speaking directly to the sniper via his microbead the heretek's head suddenly jerked sideways and the antenna array on the other side was sprayed with a mix of blood and other less organic fluids as an armour piercing round punched right through and embedded itself in the antenna. The heretek dropped to his knees before toppling sideways and sliding from the roof.

"Cole, standby. Krak." Grey said, "The doorway."

Cole, the guardsman armed with a grenade launcher switched his weapon to chamber a krak grenade and pointed the weapon towards the doorway that faced the Catachans. Moments later the door opened to reveal another of the hereteks, coming to investigate why his comrade had suddenly stopped communicating and fallen from the roof. Without waiting for an order Cole fired and sent a high explosive shaped charge round towards the heretek. The bionic and other enhancements made to his body allowed the heretek to detect the approaching projectile but they did not make him fast or agile enough to evade it. Therefore, as he turned towards the Catachans, a weapon tipped mechandrite lifting up to return fire the round struck him straight on and the shaped charge detonated. The molten metal from the grenade's casing punched through the heretek's armour and kept going, bursting what little remained of his natural organs and shattering the artificial replacements.

"Frag! Now!" Grey snapped as the heretek was thrown backwards so that he blocked the door from closing when he landed and Cole switched the grenade launcher from armour piercing to anti-personnel area effect rounds before firing one shot after another at the building, targeting the open door and the small windows he could see light emanating through. The grenades detonated in rapid succession, blowing out what remained of the windows and the Catachans rushed from their hiding place towards the open doorway.

Upon reaching the building Cole squatted down in the doorway, his grenade launcher being of little use for

clearing a building while actually inside it and covered Grey and the las gun armed Catachan as they burst into the building. Inside the building was a mess following the multiple explosions that had been contained and concentrated by the walls. It appeared that it had been a workshop of some form, understandable given the nature of the Dark Mechanicum adepts that it housed.

Grey saw movement and as he turned towards it he saw another heretek lay on the floor amongst the wreckage, attempting to rise after the grenades had inflicted so much damage on his limbs. Grey ran towards the heretek, firing his las pistol as he went but each shot just bounced off his armoured body. As he reached the heretek Grey dodged a flailing mechandrite that came close to striking the side of his head and in return he swung his knife at the appendage, creating sparks where the two toughened metal objects struck one another. Then he looked down and saw that although the fragmentation grenades had not killed the heretek they had split open the casing around his head and the vessel that now contained his brain was visible.

"For the Emperor!" Grey hissed as he dropped to his knees and jammed the muzzle of his las pistol into the opening and pulled the trigger.

Then Grey heard a scream that was all too human and he looked around from the dead heretek to see that another of them had just impaled the other Catachan with a mechandrite and lifted him up off the floor. Grey fired on the move as the heretek attempted to target him with a weapon built into a second mechandrite and all of a sudden lightning erupted from the appendage that Grey avoided only by hurling himself to the floor behind a wrecked work station. He bobbed up to fire again and placed three shots in rapid succession into the heretek's armoured chest but not one of them was able to penetrate the toughened plate.

"Throne I hate these mechanicum bastards." he muttered before the heretek hurled the now dead Catachan he had impaled towards Grey, the body landing right next to him. Grey emerged from cover and fired again, heading back towards the door and the heretek came after him.

"Knowledge is power and the false Emperor offers only ignorance." the heretek recited.

Since the heretek already knew his exact location Grey saw no point in continuing with the communication silence ordered by Wolf and he pressed a hand to his microbead.

"Rull I need an assist." he said before he dived through the doorway.

"Sergeant what's-" Cole began, startled to see him suddenly appear.

"Just move!" Grey snapped, dragging him away from the doorway.

Moments later the heretek appeared and lashed out with a mechandrite, coiling it around Grey's ankle and dragging him back towards the door while swatting Cole aside with a second one.

"Any final words?" the heretek's voice buzzed and Grey smiled.

"I could ask you the same thing." he said as he focused on the tiny red dot between two of the heretek's visual auspex lenses before his head exploded as an armour piercing bullet split it wide open, "Thanks Rull." Grey transmitted as he recovered his las pistol and then went to Cole, "Okay let's go." he said, "This place is clear."

The heretek in the command centre tilted his head.

"The forces of the false Emperor are here." he said.

"Are you certain?" the marine beside him asked.

"Quite certain. All of my order at our manufactorum have been terminated and those responsible are definitely of Catachan origin according to data transmitted to me."

The marine looked around at the Kordonian staff.

"Sound the alert." he announced, "There is a breach in our perimeter and I want it found."

Klaxons sounded as Wolf's group approached the portal, like Grey's team using whatever cover they could to avoid being spotted. The last time Wolf had stood so close to it the portal had been contained underground but now it occupied a large crater in the ground and still managed to tower above her.

"I think they know we're here." Vance said.

"Well it wasn't anything we did." Quinn added, "So let's hope Grey managed to do what he set out to do before being spotted."

"Lieutenant," Cornelius said, "observe the east tower." and Wolf quickly tried to figure out which of the towers surrounding the portal was the east one. Each of the towers looked identical, tall and tapering structures that consisted of an outer framework of walkways and ladders surrounding a collection of machine and organic components that pulsed with an eerie green light and on one of the walkways of the tower indicated by Cornelius was the unmistakable form of a member of the Dark Mechanicum.

"Can anyone see any more?" Wolf asked as she turned her attention to the other two towers.

"Yeah, I see one." Vance commented, "There at the base of the one to the left."

"And there's a third on the top of the last one." Quinn added.

"So one per tower." Wolf commented.

"That is logical." Cornelius said, "The energies of the warp are unpredictable. Each tower likely needs constant supervision to maintain its stability."

"Does that mean that all we need to do is take out those heretek and the portal will collapse?" Wolf asked.

“Negative lieutenant.” Cornellius answered, “The instability will increase with time until it becomes critical but there will still be a sufficiently long period in which replacements can be brought in. We must destroy the towers as well. Given the weapons at our disposal I suggest that we use the melta bombs that you, Sergeants Vance and Quinn and I are carrying to destroy two of them and the demolition charge carried by guardsman Downs to destroy the third. First however, we must deal with the enemy troops protecting it. A task perhaps best suited to one of my combat servitors.” and in response to this the servitor fitted with a heavy bolter stepped closer to its master.

“Weapon system armed and ready.” the mindless cyborg announced.

Located close to the centre of the enemy base the portal was not heavily guarded, its defenders believing that any attack would be stopped before an attacker could get this far. But there were still two squads of Kordonian troops dug in nearby as a precaution and also to man the portable air defence platforms that mounted quad belt fed stubbers.

The Catachans advanced towards these defences, keeping in cover as much as possible. But now alerted to the presence of Imperial forces the portal's defenders were watching for any signs of attack.

"Over there!" someone yelled.

"Down!" Wolf shouted and the Catachans dived for cover before a hail of high calibre bullets streaked over their heads.

"Looks like it's your show now." Vance said to Cornellius and without speaking the engineer instructed the heavy bolter armed servitor to continue to advance.

Walking out into the open the cyborg made an easy target for the quad guns and their operators swung them around. But the machine-enhanced brain of the servitor was quicker and its heavy bolter roared into life, spraying the closest defence platform as well as the former guardsmen close to it with explosive rounds that blew off limbs and punched holes in the light armour plating of the platform itself. This did not prevent the other platforms from firing on the servitor though and a stream of bullets struck it. These rounds were powerful enough to rip through the standard flak armour worn by Imperial Guardsmen but the body of the servitor was significantly more heavily armoured and all that the attack achieved was to make the cyborg stagger as it endured the barrage. Then the heavy bolter roared back into life, spraying a second defence platform and supporting troops with explosive rounds.

"Forwards." Wolf ordered, "We need to take advantage of this." and she jumped up and ran towards the nearest tower, their way between it and the Catachans clear for the moment at least.

There was only one other defence platform that could come to bear on the advancing servitor and its operator continued to fire, hoping to find a weak spot in the cyborg's armour. But in being so focused on his target the operator left watching in other directions to the other troops around him without realising that they too were focused on the servitor and none of them noticed as the second combat servitor emerged and aimed its multi-melta at the platform until a brilliant white beam of intense heat struck it, melting through the gun mounting, vaporising the operator and cooking off all of the stored ammunition in one go.

The three heretekes who had been continuing with their work oblivious to the fighting going on below them now reacted to the destruction of the defence platforms on that side of the portal and all three positioned themselves to be able to fire on the Catachans now rushing towards them both with pistols holstered at their waists and weapons grafted into their bodies. But the firepower offered by these weapons was limited and the Catachans reached the base of the closest tower unharmed.

"Preacher Black, Engineer Cornellius, can I leave you two here to deal with him?" Wolf asked, pointing up the tower to where the heretek was trying to get a clear line of fire at the Catachans.

"Affirmative." Cornellius replied.

"The Emperor's hand will guide me." Black added before he defiantly fired two rapid blasts from his shotgun that did not even make the heretek above flinch.

"Good." Wolf responded, "Sergeant Quinn, take your unit that way to that tower. Everyone else with me."

Leaving Black and Cornellius to start scaling the tower while the two servitors waited on the ground the rest of the group split in two and moved in both directions around the portal itself. This inevitably brought them into the line of fire of the remaining defenders but at such short range the Catachans were able to target them more accurately and a single blast from the melta gun carried by one of Quinn's veterans blew one of the remaining defence platforms apart before it could even be brought to bear on them. In the other direction however, Wolf's squad lacked a support weapon and so they attempted to use the various machinery lying around to get close enough to engage the platform with thrown grenades. The vox operator Abbott was the first to try this, standing up and hurling a Krak grenade directly at the platform. But one of the nearby Kordonians spotted him and a burst from a las gun took the Catachan off his feet and spoiled his throw, the grenade sailing past its target and exploding harmlessly when it hit the ground instead.

"Torrent see to him." Wolf said as she ducked into cover before the defence platform could target them, "Sergeant Vance, we need cover."

Nodding, Vance pulled a smoke grenade from his webbing and tossed it ahead of them. The grenade burst open and a cloud of billowing smoke began to expand from it, producing a screen between Wolf's team and the Kordonians. The enemy gunfire continued however, tracer fire from the defence platform easily visible as it passed through the smoke. But neither Wolf nor Vance was planning on just getting up and charging through the cloud, instead they both began to crawl forwards and while looking up at the bright flashes of tracer fire above them. They came to a halt at about the point the flashes of light began and Wolf looked at Vance.

"How far?" she asked, referring to the distance from the muzzle of the stubbers before the tracer element in

the round would ignite.

"About ten metres is typical." he replied as they both took Krak grenades from their webbing and together they pulled the pins from the grenades and threw them towards where the stubber fire seemed to be coming from. Vance's guess and both of their throws were accurate and the two anti-armour grenades struck the front plate of the defence platform's gun mounting and blew it and the operator apart in an instant. Torrent then crawled up behind Vance and Wolf.

"Abott?" Vance said and she shook her head.

"He was dead before he even knew he'd been hit." she replied.

"Well get that las pistol ready to avenge him." Vance said and Torrent did as she was told, drawing both her las pistol and knife.

"Okay let's go." Wolf said as there was a break in the las gun fire through the smoke and all three of them suddenly leapt up and rushed forwards without a word.

Vance was first to emerge from the smoke and he found himself almost face to face with a surprised looking Kordonian sergeant.

"Abott sends this." Vance hissed as he slashed the Kordonian's throat open and at the same time fired his las pistol at another nearby enemy soldier.

Behind him Torrent and Wolf emerged together and charged at the same opponent. Regarding Torrent as the bigger threat owing to her size the Kordonian swung the butt of his las gun at her, aiming to strike her jaw.

But in doing so he left himself open to a counterstrike by Wolf who thrust her knife into his side where there was a gap in his flak armour for his arm. This sent the blade right through his heart and lungs and he spat a single mouthful of blood over Torrent as he died.

Torrent then spun around, glaring at Wolf.

"Hey I-" Wolf began before Torrent raised her las pistol, pointing directly at Wolf.

"Down!" she snapped and Wolf ducked to allow her to fire a single shot into the Kordonian who then fell forwards, landing on top of Wolf who felt blood from his wound pour down the back of her neck.

"Stop messing about you two." Vance said as he reached down to pull Wolf out from under the dead Kordonian. But then they heard the sound of rounds being chambered in a heavy calibre weapon and they looked around to see the last of the defence platforms pointing towards them.

Instinctively Wolf reached for another Krak grenade but before she could take hold of one there was the booming of shotgun fire and the operator slumped forwards over the controls. The three other Kordonians around the platform whirled around as another volley of fire from Quinn's squad dealt with them as well. Looking directly at Quinn, Wolf smiled in gratitude and he nodded before turning his attention to the tower beside him.

While Quinn and Wolf were making their way around the portal to the other towers Black and Cornelliuss had been climbing up the first after the heretek above them. A blast from a las pistol punched through the walkway above Black's head as the heretek fired down at him.

"Die heretic!" Black yelled as he aimed his shotgun upwards and fired two rapid blasts back that forced the heretek back.

Meanwhile Cornelliuss rushed on ahead, pushing the enhancements made to his body as hard as he could to get him up to the heretek as quickly as possible and as the member of the Dark Mechanicum was backing away from Black's fire the loyal engineeer appeared behind him and with a swing of his power axe he severed both of the heretek's mechandrites.

Spinning around to meet this new threat the heretek lashed out with the stump of one of his mechandrites. The tentacle like appendage had little length or power left to it but there was just enough to knock Cornelliuss' power axe from his hand and the weapon bounced off the walkway with a 'clang' before falling over the edge and dropping to the ground below. Now both adept and heretek were armed with just las pistols and both aimed them at one another and fired shot after shot that failed to penetrate the other's powered armour.

"Knowledge is power and the false Emperor promotes only ignorance!" the heretek yelled as he cast his las pistol aside and lunged forwards to try and push Cornelliuss from the walkway. The tech priest blocked his opponent using his mechandrites and the heretek responded by grabbing hold of them both, hoping to be able to gain some leverage to throw Cornelliuss from the walkway. But Cornelliuss could tell what was being attempted and he released the connections at the base of his spine, both mechandrites simply dropping away leaving the heretek holding them as Cornelliuss tried to shoot him with his las pistol again but with no more success than before. Now regretting disposing of his own weapon so rashly, the heretek let go of the mechandrites and reached out to take hold the arm Cornelliuss was holding his las pistol in, hoping to wrestle the weapon away from him. With his free hand Cornelliuss formed a fist and repeatedly punched the heretek in what passed for his face, making his head jerk backwards with each strike and cracking some of the lenses of his visual auspexes. However, aside from the cosmetic damage the heretek remained unharmed. But while they had been fighting Preacher Black had continued to climb the walkways and now he suddenly appeared beside them both and pressed the muzzle of his shotgun to the side of the heretek's head.

"I deliver the wrath of the Emperor!" he hissed before pulling the trigger.

At such short range the blast was enough to rip the heretek's head free of his artificial spine even without the

projectiles that smashed through the side of his head and bounce around inside, shredding circuitry and reducing what remained of his organ brain matter to pulp.

"Effective." Cornelliuss commented as the heretek collapsed at his feet.

"Our job remains incomplete." Black reminded him, "And the Emperor's work must never be left undone."

"I concur." Cornelliuss replied, reaching under his cloak for the melta bomb he carried.

The heretek that Quinn's squad faced was the most heavily augmented of the three at the portal, with multiple weapons built into his mechadrites that he fired down at the Catachans. The veteran armed with a melta gun pointed his weapon upwards at an angle and fired through the walkway, melting a wide hole through several levels but missing the heretek. In response the heretek extended a mechadrite over one of the holes and used them to determine the exact angle needed to return fire and a laser blast struck the guardsman in his chest. Fortunately his flak jacket absorbed most of the energy and although he cried out as he fell he was not killed.

"Light him up!" Quinn yelled and while Quinn saw to the injured man both flamer armed veterans stepped forwards and pointed their weapons up through the hole above them and fired. The two blasts of burning liquid spread out as it went and when it reached the level the heretek was on it enveloped him, instantly igniting the robe he wore and turning him into a torch. Any normal man would have screamed in pain but the extensive modifications done to his body had long ago taken the ability for him to feel pain away from him. Instead the heretek staggered back as every sensor built into his body reported that it was overheating critically. Most significantly the life sustaining fluid that surrounded his brain began to boil, cooking the organ inside him. This heat was too much for the heretek to tolerate for long and as one system after another shut down to try and prevent further damage the primary interface with his brain also ceased to function and he as suddenly disconnected from every bionic component of his body, including those that supplied the oxygen to his brain and he simply collapsed in a still burning heap.

As they climbed the third tower, Wolf's group exchanged las pistol fire with the heretek above them. But although Wolf and the Catachans scored several hits, all of them failed to inflict any damage on the heretek's toughened body. Additionally, at the same time as the group was climbing up the tower the heretek was descending to face them directly and just as Vance was about to climb another set of stairs the heretek leapt down and pushed him backwards into Torrent, the pair of them landing in a heap on the walkway. Vance was about to lift his las pistol to fire at the heretek when all of a sudden he brought an armoured foot down on the weapon's barrel and crushed it underfoot. Wolf fired repeatedly at the heretek but even from close range she failed to do anything and she backed away as he advanced towards her menacingly.

But all of a sudden the walkway beneath one of the heretek's feet exploded upwards, taking his leg off at the knee. Unprepared for this the heretek fell sideways over the edge of the walkway and he only stopped himself from falling by grasping it with his mechadrites. Looking down the heretek saw Grey and Cole rushing towards the tower and he instantly knew that it was Cole that had just fired a krak grenade at him and taken off his bionic leg. In return the heretek took aim with his las pistol, intending to shoot Cole before he could fire another anti-armour grenade. But just as he was about to fire one of his mechadrites was severed, causing him to swing sideways and sending his shot off target. Looking back up he saw Wolf standing over him with her long Catachan knife in her hand and before he could react she brought it down on the second mechadrite and cut through that one as well, sending him plummeting towards the ground where he came crashing down on a portable generator.

Grey and Cole rushed up to the heretek and found him floundering around as he tried to regain control of his smashed body. All his remaining limbs and what was left of his mechadrites lashed out at random but Grey was able to slip between them and pressed his las pistol to the heretek's head before firing a single shot through his brain.

"Sergeant Grey!" Wolf shouted down to him, "You arrived just in time."

"Yes lieutenant." he replied.

"Now wait there, I'm on my way down." Wolf continued and before hurrying to the stairs leading downwards she tossed her melta bomb at Vance, "Here." she told him, "Check with Enginseer Cornelliuss to make sure its set right." and he nodded.

"My comrades at the portal have ceased functioning." the heretek in the command centre announced and the Black Legion marine turned to him.

"We cannot lose the portal." he said, "I will divert a squad of my men to deal with the intruders before they can damage it."

"It is not important." the heretek replied.

"Not important? But without the portal we will be cut off."

"Yes we would. But what I meant is that your intervention is not important. I am aware of the state of the portal and it will soon solve the problem for us. I believe that your master is about to join us and the handful of Imperial fools my comrades saw before they ceased functioning will be no match for him."

12.

A ramp led up to the portal itself and Wolf was just running past it when the portal flared, bathing her for a moment in a bright light. Sliding to a halt Wolf turned to look directly at the portal and from within she saw an ominous looking shadow.

"Get back!" she shouted as she waved at Grey and then a moment later a single figure stepped out of the portal and began to walk down the ramp.

Just like the other members of the Black Legion that Wolf had seen so far this figure wore black armour that was trimmed with gold. But unlike those other marines this one wore a much bulkier suit of armour that looked to have the head set lower down into its chest and had various trophies impaled on spikes running across the top of the armour. Wolf had learned of such things during her basic training but she had never thought that she would see one in real life whether as a part of an enemy or an allied force. But nevertheless she now stood at the bottom of the ramp while a chaos terminator strode towards her, a combi-bolter in one hand and a sword with a blade longer than Wolf was tall in the other.

"Who are you?" the terminator demanded when he saw Wolf standing before him.

None of the weapons wolf carried had any real hope of piercing the terminator's armour and Wolf watched him approach as she tried to think of a way of preventing him from killing her.

"I am Lieutenant Emilia Wolf of the Fourteenth Kordonian Regiment. I was sent here to meet you." she said suddenly.

"That is not the uniform of a Kordonian." the terminator said, "It is the uniform of a Catachan."

"I have just returned from acting a bait to lure in Catachan troops." Wolf said, "Do I sound Catachan?"

"No. No you do not. But I would have hoped that I would warrant a more fitting welcome than a single human."

The terminator now stood directly in front of Wolf, looking down at her while the other Catachans watched this from their vantage points on the tower walkways. Knowing the danger that Wolf was in Cornelliuss ordered his servitors into action and the two cyborgs began to advance towards the base of the ramp.

"What is going on here?" the terminator demanded as he looked up from Wolf and instead looked around at the bodies and took note of the klaxons sounding.

"The base is under attack." Wolf said and then she noticed the first of the two servitors coming around the portal, "If you'd like to follow me." she added turning around and starting to walk away so that she could get out of the line of fire. Almost right away she heard the pounding of the servitor's heavy bolter and the detonations of the mas reactive ammunition as the entire burst struck the side of the terminator. But even this heavy weapon was insufficient to stop the terminator and he spun around, raising his combi-bolter and returning fire. For a few seconds the terminator and the servitor traded fire, neither being able to penetrate the other's armour. But then the terminator ceased its automatic fire and took a moment to line up the combi-bolter on what he knew to be a weak point on the servitor and as it continued to walk towards him he blew its head off with a round placed just under what remained of its jaw.

The second servitor then came into view and turned its multi melta at the terminator. The powerful weapon would make short work even of terminator armour but before the cyborg got the chance to fire the terminator hurled his sword at it and the massive blade impaled it through the chest, taking it off its feet and pinning it to the ground as it landed. The servitor quivered as its internal workings stopped functioning and there were small explosions and sparks as various components failed before the cyborg finally lay still.

Then the terminator turned back towards Wolf but unexpectedly he found her charging straight for him, diving in under his combi-bolter. He reacted by swinging his arm, striking her in the chest and hurling her backwards. Wolf screamed as she flew through the air and landed heavily before looking up to see the terminator advancing towards her, apparently not considering her worthy of expending ammunition on. All of a sudden the Catachans who had been watching opened fire and volleys of las pistol and shotgun fire struck him. None of the hits were able to penetrate his armour however, and the terminator looked back down at Wolf just as she lifted up her hand to show him what she was holding.

The pin from a Krak grenade.

Inside his armour the terminator's eyes widened as he tried to turn to look down at where Wolf had dived into him but the bulk of his armour did not allow for this. Nor did it allow for him to reach to his hip where she had wedged the grenade before it went off.

Positioned so that the explosive charge was directed at one of the armour's joints the grenade blew a hole right through the relatively weak point and tore off the terminator's leg entirely. The terminator let out a roar of pain and defiance as he toppled over, only his superhuman physiology keeping him from blacking out immediately. Seeing this Grey came running up, pulling out his melta bomb and slamming it against the terminator's chest plate before pulling the pin at the same moment that he dived out of the way before the melta bomb detonated and burned right through the terminator, killing him instantly.

Grey then rushed over to Wolf and attempted to help her up.

"What the feth were you thinking? Taking on a terminator single handed?" he asked. But as he tried to pull Wolf to her feet she screamed in pain, "Torrent get down here!" Grey yelled.

The Catachans soon gathered around Wolf, watching for any signs of further enemy troops while Torrent checked Wolf's injuries.

"Broken ribs." she said, "At least three. She can't stay here."

"Dark Mechanicum." Wolf gasped, looking at Grey.

"It's alright." he said, "We nailed all four at the manufactorum they were setting up."

"That's a problem then." Vance responded, "There were only three here at the portal which still leaves one to go."

"We can't exactly stay here long." Quinn pointed out, "We've taken casualties and the enemy is bound to figure out that something's going on here soon."

"The portal." Wolf gasped.

"The charges are all set to detonate on a coded signal lieutenant." Cornelliuss replied.

"Then we go." Vance said, "We'll figure out what to do with that other heretek later on. In the mean time Torrent help me with the lieutenant, we'll have to carry her."

In the guard post Molla's men had set up their heavy bolter to point into the enemy base and were now waiting for the others to return. They had heard gunfire from several directions but as of yet no one had broken communications silence to contact them.

All of a sudden there was the sound of movement from outside the perimeter and Molla turned around, expecting to see an enemy patrol choosing that moment to return to the base. But instead he saw Mayer and Khor running from the jungle towards them.

Without calling out Molla waved them towards him and the new arrivals rushed up to the guard post and jumped inside.

"What happened Bomber?" Molla asked.

"They sent a force after us." Mayer replied, "I figured that since everyone would have used the break in our firing to start the next phase of the attack we were better off abandoning the mortars and coming to see if you needed our help."

"Sergeant, movement." the heavy bolter's gunner said softly and the Catachans prepared to open fire.

The emplaced las cannon swung around when its auspex detected the approach of the group but when it did not fire Molla knew what that meant.

"Stand down." he said, "Friendlies." and sure enough the rest of second platoon came hurrying out of the darkness.

"Everyone grab your gear" Vance said as they came to a halt by the guard post, "The charges are ready to go and we need to be as far away from here as we can get."

The Catachans packed up the heavy bolter as rapidly as they could and with Torrent and Vance still carrying Wolf between them they withdrew back into the jungle, leaving the las cannon on automatic just in case anyone tried to follow them.

Once back in the jungle they retraced their route away from the enemy base until Cornelliuss called them to a halt.

"We are now beyond the blast radius of the portal." he announced, "I can trigger the charges at any time."

"Then do it." Vance told him.

The demolition charge and melta bombs had all been placed against what Cornelliuss had identified as key energy transferring components used to focus the gathered warp energy back into maintaining the portal and when he transmitted the correct signal from his built in vox system they all detonated in unison. The towers continued to draw power through the portal but now they were unable to feed it back into maintaining the system which meant that it just built up within them with the inevitable consequence.

Almost in unison the towers exploded violently and fragments of them were hurled way out beyond the perimeter as the shockwave and growing fireball washed over the base, incinerating anyone unfortunate enough to not be in cover and simply smashing any unfortified structures into pieces.

Even within the fortified command post the occupants felt the ground shaking as vox units fell from their benches.

"What's happening?" the marine demanded, turning to the heretek.

"It's the portal." the heretek replied, "The stabilisation system has failed and gone critical. The entire portal will collapse in moments."

"What about us?" the marine asked.

"We'll be safe enough in here but anyone outside will be killed." the heretek told him, "And we will lose all of the equipment we have stockpiled here."

"Isn't there-" the Black legion marine began before the portal itself collapsed and spewed out a massive wave of energy that lit up even the inside of the command post.

In the jungle the Catachans saw the night sky light up as the portal went critical.

"Well that's one job done." Quinn said.

"What about that other heretek?" Grey asked, "All this will be for nothing if he can set up a manufactorum to

supply all those Black Legion troops that weren't in the base when it blew."

"Maybe he was killed in the blast." Mayer said hopefully.

"That is not something we can assume." Cornelius said, "His death must be confirmed."

"She needs to be taken back to see Doc Altman as soon as possible." Torrent said, looking at Wolf who was sat down by a tree, wincing with pain with each breath she took.

"Then I guess that leaves us with only one option then." Vance said.

The Kordonians in the command post groaned as they crawled out from under the debris that had fallen on them and one lit a chemical glow stick to illuminate the room. On the other hand both the marine and heretek recovered rapidly and made their way to the collapsed entrance and began digging their way out through the collapsed sandbags and flakboard. When they reached the surface they climbed out and looked around, surveying the damage. As far as they could tell the destruction was total, not one of the base structures remained intact now and there were not even any cries for help from trapped soldiers, suggesting that all of them had been killed in the blast. Including the other Black Legion marines. The marine from the command post turned to the heretek and was just about to suggest that they withdraw and try to locate one of the Black Legion raiding parties when he noticed something odd. Where the heretek had replaced his forehead with a metal plate into which various auspex lenses were located there was now a tiny red dot between two of them. But before he could warn the heretek there was a single gunshot from the jungle and the top of the heretek's head was blown off.

"Copy that Rull." Vance said, his hand held up against his microbead headset. Then he looked around at the others and added, "Job's done. We can go back to camp now." then finally he looked at Wolf and then at Khor, "Khor," he said to the BONEHead, "would you mind carrying the lieutenant back to camp? She's not feeling herself."

"Ogryns carry." Khor replied with a grin.