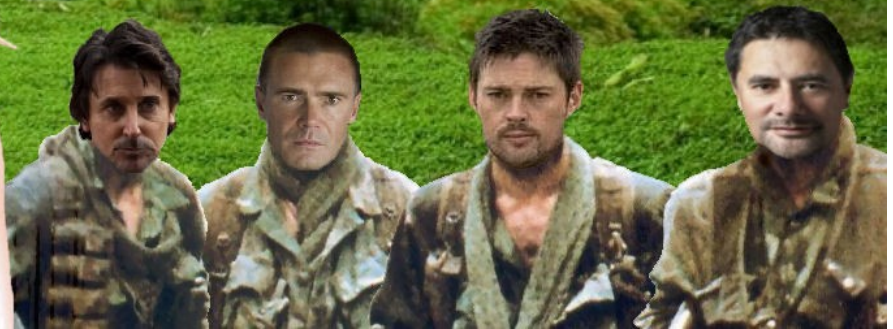




CATACHAN ONE NINE MARK FOUR MARK TWO

JUNGLE MANHUNT

BY STEPHEN J DUTTON



CATACHAN ONE-NINE MARK FOUR MARK TWO

1.3: JUNGLE MANHUNT

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

The war for Par Shallon is almost over. The rebellious defence forces have been defeated but there are still some tau forces left to be dealt with and the treasonous former governor remains unaccounted for. But the alien tau do not intend to simply let matters rest and they are preparing for the arrival of reinforcements.

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1 .

It was drops of water falling onto her forehead that woke Lieutenant Emilia Wolf from her sleep. Her eyes flickered as she looked up expecting to see a hole in her tent that was letting in the water. But then she realised that she could not hear any rain falling outside and she turned her head.

"Good morning lieutenant." Sergeant Molla said, smiling as he crouched beside her bed. In one hand he held a canteen that he was just dipping a finger into.

"Sergeant why are you in my tent?" Wolf asked, pulling her blanket up to her neck.

"So shy." Molla commented, "I've already seen you-"

"Yes I know." Wolf interrupted, frowning, "Now what are you doing in my tent?"

"It's oh five hundred hours lieutenant. Time to go."

"Go? Go where?" Wolf replied.

"Today's the big day lieutenant. Today you start learning to be one of us." Molla said and he smiled.

Wolf groaned and pulled the blanket over her head. She had been commissioned into the Imperial Guard as an administration officer in one of her homeworld's regiments, the Lyrerian thirty-third. But after being captured by kroot mercenaries she had been left behind on this planet and forced to join the regiment that had rescued her from her alien captors as a combat officer in charge of a platoon of soldiers. Unfortunately that regiment had been the Catachan nineteenth. Catachan was classified as a death world, a planet where the environment was deadly to its human inhabitants. In the case of Catachan the danger came from the plant and animal life, the vast majority of which was dangerous to human life. The effect of this was that the planet produced a population that was incredibly tough and resourceful when it came to jungle warfare. However, it had also created an independent streak in the Catachans and taking orders from anyone not from their own world, an 'outsider' as Wolf often found herself described as, did not sit well with them. The sergeants of the infantry platoon that Wolf had found herself in command of had decided that if they were stuck with her then they would at least try to teach her some of the skills they relied on in the jungle. Molla stood up and walked to the end of her bed, setting down the canteen. Then he grabbed hold of the bed frame and suddenly tipped it over. Wolf let out a squeal as she rolled onto the floor and then glared up at him.

"Okay, okay." She said, "Just wait outside while I get dressed."

"Of course lieutenant." Molla said before he picked up his canteen and walked out of the tent. Standing just outside the tent flap Molla looked around at the near deserted camp. He took a drink from his canteen and began to count backwards from ten. Just after he reached one he heard a sharp cry of pain from inside the tent and he grinned, "Problem lieutenant?" he asked as he stuck his head back inside the tent. There he saw Wolf sat on her bed and clutching at a foot that had a tack sticking out of the big toe.

"You put a tack in my boot!" she snapped as she pulled it out.

"Of course I did." Molla replied, "That's lesson number one."

"What? My boots will be filled with nails every night?" Wolf said.

"No. In a jungle there are all sorts of creatures looking for somewhere to set up a nest and to some of the smaller ones your boots are luxury accommodation. Always check them before you put them on."

Wolf frowned.

"I get it." She said as she shook her boot to double check that nothing more had been put inside while she slept.

Wolf yawned as she left the tent and looked around.

"Where is everyone?" she asked. The camp was normally home to a fully company of Catachans, just over two hundred officers and enlisted men, but today there were few of them about even given the earliness of the hour.

"Most of them have headed off to regimental HQ." Molla replied as the pair began to walk towards the main gate, "Its not often we get a day off and they're making the most of the opportunity to spend some time with their families. Grey's wife could be giving birth any day now."

"Wife?" Wolf said, "I didn't realise he was married."

"Of course not. You never asked." Molla responded, "Come to think of it you've never asked about any of our families."

"I- I-" Wolf stammered.

"Don't worry lieutenant, I don't think a lot of them would appreciate an outsider prying into their personal business."

"So what about you?" Wolf asked.

"What about me?"

"Well don't you have a family to go and visit?"

"I've a daughter, Jenni. She's a nurse at the main regimental medicae facility."

"So why haven't you gone to visit her?"

"Ah, well we've had a bit of a falling out. I'm giving her a bit of time to calm down." Molla explained.

"Oh I'm sorry."

"You should be. It's because of you. She's getting grief over the fact that I'm supposed to take orders from you and she's passing it on to me."

"Oh." Wolf said, aware of the prejudice against her in the regiment. Then as they approached the guard posts either side of the gate she noticed some familiar faces, those of her platoon's mortar squad. At this time however, the only weapons they carried were their standard issue lasguns. Despite most of the company being given a short period of free time some of them had to protect the camp and Wolf's platoon had been picked to provide the sentries. Several of them had commented that it was because she was an outsider that second platoon had been picked.

"Lieutenant. Sergeant." The Catachan in charge of the guards said as they approached.

"Bomber." Molla replied.

"Corporal Mayer." Wolf added.

"All set?" Mayer asked.

"All set." Molla said with a grin.

"I don't like the sound of that." Wolf said as she saw Molla's expression, "What exactly are we going to do today?"

"We're going hunting." Molla replied.

"Hunting? Then shouldn't we be taking rifles or shotguns instead of laspistols?" Wolf asked.

"It's not that sort of hunt." Molla said.

"No," Mayer added, "Sergeant Molla's lined up something far more dangerous than any of the local wildlife." And he smiled.

"Dangerous?" Wolf replied.

"Just follow me." Molla said and he led Wolf into the jungle.

"Nobody said anything about this being dangerous." Wolf said when Molla finally came to a halt in a small clearing along the trail he had followed.

"Don't worry lieutenant, nothing we do here today is designed to get you killed." He said, but Wolf just folded her arms and glared at her, "Or seriously injured in any way that could cause you to be ruled permanently unfit for duty." He added and then when he saw Wolf relax somewhat he finished off with, "So if anything like that actually does happen it'll only be an accident." And she frowned at him.

"Just tell me what I'm supposed to do." She said.

"Look around." Molla told her, "What do you see?"

Wolf looked around the clearing.

"Trees." She said, "Bushes. Vines."

"And what do you hear?"

"Animals. Birds I think." Wolf answered and Molla smiled, "I did well?" Wolf asked.

"No. You're dead." Molla answered and Wolf's face fell, "Lieutenant today you are going to try and track the most lethal predator that exists in the galaxy. A Catachan on ground he favours. You know him as Rull."

Guardsmen Rull was second platoon's sniper, the last surviving member of what had once been a six strong squad. The reason Rull had survived while his squad mates had not was because of his unparalleled stealth skills. It was also the reason why he had not been assigned to another squad, he worked far better alone.

"So I'm supposed to find Rull?" The man who is never seen unless he wants to be?" Wolf asked.

"And he never wants to be seen." Molla replied, "But no. You're not supposed to find him. You won't be able to. Even I couldn't track him and I've been doing this for longer than you've been alive. Rull has left a series of tracks and traps and I'm going to help you identify them."

Molla beckoned Wolf to follow him to the edge of the clearing and he crouched down on the ground.

"Footprints." Wolf said as she crouched down beside him, "So we follow them right?" and she looked in the direction they appeared to lead.

"Wrong." Molla replied and he reached out and turned her head to face the opposite direction.

"Sergeant I know which way these are pointing." She said.

"Yes but you haven't looked at the pattern of the imprint." Molla said, "Take a look at my footprints and compare them to these." And he pointed at one of his own footprints just behind him, "See how close the prints are together?"

"They look normal to me." Wolf replied.

"That's because you're so short." Molla said. Wolf was barely one and half metres tall and every Catachan in her platoon towered over her, including the other females. In fact there was only one other Catachan in the whole of fourth company that was Wolf's height and she was often referred to behind her back as 'Short-arse.'

"These tracks are closer together because Rull was walking backwards when he made them. You'll also

notice that the imprint is deeper at the toe and dirt has been kicked back behind them. Rull's starting you off easy."

"Easy?" Wolf repeated, "How do you know all this stuff?"

"All Catachans learn it. If you're going to survive on Catachan you need to know everything's that's going around you. It's what you don't see stalking you that eats you. I taught my daughter all this."

Wolf smiled.

"So what, it's like some coming of age ritual? You take her out into the jungle and show her this and then she's considered an adult?"

"Actually no. The footprint thing I taught her when she was three."

"Three? You took a three year old child into the jungle?"

"Almost all of Catachan is a jungle lieutenant. Children either learn how to survive in it or they die. More than half die before the age of twenty. Now start following these footprints and try to find out where Rull went. Then when we're finished I think that there's a barbecue planned back at camp."

Wolf sighed and looked down the dirt trail. To her it still looked as if the tracks were leading towards her rather than away from her, but Molla's field craft was second only to Rull's and she trusted that he knew what he was talking about.

"So how much of a head start does Rull have?" Wolf asked as she began walking down the trail, looking down at the footprints left for her.

"He left before sunrise." Molla replied, "He could have circled around and already be back at camp for all I know. Though knowing him he'll be out here somewhere keeping an eye on his handiwork."

The tracks continued for quite a distance and Wolf began to wonder how Rull had been able to walk backwards for so long when all of a sudden they simply stopped.

"That's odd." Wolf said, looking around.

"Of course it is." Molla said, "It's Rull. But think to yourself why has he suddenly changed the way he's been moving?"

"To throw me off." Wolf replied, "To make me look like an ignorant outsider."

Molla snorted, resisting the temptation to point out that she was an outsider to the Catachans and that she was ignorant of their ways. Of course he had already seen what Rull had done.

"If you can't see any more tracks then what can you see?" he asked and Wolf shrugged.

"Just a few leaves scattered on the trail. But there aren't enough to be covering anything." She said.

"Yes and they obviously come from the tree we're under. But you'll notice that there's just a patch of them rather than more scattered all around the tree. That tells you that something disturbed the tree above you."

Molla and both he and Wolf looked up into the tree, "Yes, see? Some of the branches are broken where Rull lifted himself up and then crawled along the main branches."

Sure enough Wolf saw the damage Rull had deliberately caused to the tree and she began to walk along underneath it, following the trail he had left above her head.

"This is hardly fair." She said.

"Jungle warfare is three dimensional lieutenant." Molla replied, "If there's not predators in the trees then your enemy could have dug tunnels beneath your feet so that they can move about more easily without leaving obvious tracks. You need to be able to see the signs of all of these."

"I get it." Wolf said, still looking up into the tree.

"Then perhaps you should watch where you're putting your-" Molla began, but before he could finish warning Wolf of the trap left by Rull she triggered it.

Wolf gasped as she saw the bucket come swinging down from the tree. Inverted, it disgorged its contents of assorted tiny crawling and burrowing jungle creatures all over her and she let out a piercing scream.

"Feet." Molla finished, stepping aside as the now empty bucket swung past him.

"Get them off me!" Wolf shrieked as she began to flail her arms about, brushing the creatures off and jumping up and down to try and shake them loose, "Get them off! Get them off!"

"Creepy crawlies are things you'll have to get used to in the jungle." Molla pointed out, "Though you're right to want to try and keep them off you. There are far too many that can lay their eggs in unpleasant places or inflict small wounds that then get infected."

"They're inside my uniform." Wolf said angrily, "Wait here."

"Where are you going?" Molla asked as she began to walk into the undergrowth.

"To get them out of it," Wolf snapped, "and I'm certainly not undressing in front of you."

"If you say so." Molla replied and he sat down to wait. He looked into the undergrowth in the direction Wolf had headed and a few moments later he saw her start to hang items of clothing over one of the larger bushes, "Lieutenant, are you sure you know what you're doing?" he called out.

"Of course I am. I know to dress and undress." Wolf responded.

"Actually I was thinking more about-" but once again the warning came too late.

'Twang!'

The bush that Wolf had been hanging her clothing on suddenly sprang upwards at an angle and Wolf screamed again as she saw all of her clothes catapulted up into the air, vanishing through the trees. "That's an old trick." Molla explained, "When you set one trap, you also set a second. That way when someone triggers the first and stops to deal with the consequences the second one hits them as well. Rull knew exactly how you'd react and planned appropriately."

Scowling, Wolf leant her head around the now upright bush.

"Give me your vest." She said.

"What?"

"I said give me your vest sergeant. That's an order. I'm not walking back to camp naked."

"The exercise isn't over yet." Molla pointed out, "Besides, isn't that your gun belt down there on the ground? You wouldn't be naked if you put that on."

Wolf just glared at him.

"Don't worry lieutenant." Molla went on, "The idea is to instruct you, not embarrass you. Look around, do you see a stick that's sticking straight up out of the ground?"

Wolf looked around and sure enough she saw a stick that someone had obviously pushed into the ground vertically.

"Yes I see one." She said.

"Good. Go pull it out." Molla told her.

Wolf hesitated, fearing what sort of trap she could be about to trigger this time. But when she finally reached down and pulled it up she found a length of cord tied to the other end that was too slack to be used as a trigger.

"There's string tied to the other end." She called out.

"Keep pulling." Molla replied, "Rull's left you a spare uniform in a pack." And just at that moment Wolf saw a guard issue pack appear from under the ground and she ripped it open to find a complete set of clothes inside.

"Oh thank the Emperor." She muttered as she hurriedly dressed before returning to where Molla waited, "So now what?" she asked.

"That way." Molla told her, pointing. You can see where he jumped down from the tree by the flattened grass." And Wolf nodded and began to walk. Then she stopped suddenly before continuing at a much slower pace as she searched for any more trip wires.

2.

This time there were no footprints in the dirt to follow. Instead Rull had kept to areas of ground covered by vegetation and so Wolf had to pick out the damage he had caused along the way. This was made harder by the fact that some of the jungle's larger animal life forms occupied this area of the jungle as well and they too had left trails through the undergrowth. Fortunately Molla was on hand to stop her whenever she looked to be getting too far off track and point her in the right direction.

That was until the trail simply vanished.

"Did we take a wrong turn somewhere?" Wolf asked as she tried to find any sign of Rull's passing, but there were no footprints and no signs of damage to the surrounding undergrowth

"No." Molla replied as looked around as well, "It's just that Rull's decided to make things somewhat harder for you."

"What does that mean?" Wolf asked.

"It means that he's moving like he normally does and there isn't a trail to follow. Not right here anyway. What you need to do is search around for where he decided to start leaving one again. Start by staying within about ten metres of the last track we have for him."

Wolf sighed and began to walk away from Molla and after a few paces she halted.

"I hear water." She said, "That way." And she pointed.

"So you think he headed for water?" Molla asked, "You know how we view river travel."

"Yes I remember. But not every river is going to be full of fish that lay eggs up your butt." Wolf replied, "And Rull needs to drink as well."

Molla smiled.

"Yes he does. Lead the way." And Wolf began to walk towards the sound of flowing water.

As she emerged from the trees she found herself on a muddy riverbank that stretched out in both directions and just a few metres along it was the smouldering remains of a fire.

"Oh this is too easy." She said, "He made a camp fire to cook his breakfast." And she began to stride towards the fire just as Molla emerged from the jungle behind her.

"Err, lieutenant." He said.

"Don't worry, there aren't any tripwires." Wolf interrupted, "I know what I'm-" and then the ground gave way beneath her.

Wolf squealed as she fell into the pit trap Rull had dug and then there was a squelch as she landed at the bottom. Molla rushed over to the edge of the hole and looked down into it. There at the bottom sat Wolf, covered in sticky mud that had apparently been deliberately put into the hole.

"Ooh!" she yelled, "I've had enough! I want to go back!"

Molla looked around.

"If we don't do this today we'll only have to do it-" he began.

"Not to camp! To my own regiment!" Wolf snapped, "I want to go back to being a file clerk. I've had enough of being afraid that my own side wants me dead, of being the butt of every joke and being dropped into holes full of - of -" and then she lifted some of what she had taken to be mud up to her nose and sniffed it, "Ew!! This isn't mud! Get me out of here!" and she leapt up and tried to pull herself out of the hole. But the sides had been designed to be difficult to get a grip on and instead of pulling herself out she slipped back down to land in the mess below and she screamed, "Get me out!"

From the corner of his eye Molla noticed a flock of birds take to the air across the river and he looked towards them.

"Shush." He said, holding up a hand to Wolf.

"Don't tell me to shush. Get me out of this hole right now!"

Wolf yelled. But rather than helping her Molla jumped down into the hole himself and as he ducked down below the level of the ground he grabbed hold of Wolf and clamped a hand over her mouth.

"Shush!" he hissed as Wolf stared at him with wide eyes, "Something's wrong." Then he released his grip on her and drew his laspistol.

Peering over the top of the hole he looked across the riverbank and for a few brief moments he saw the undergrowth on the far side quiver. But much to Molla's surprise no one merged onto the opposite bank.

"Sergeant, what's happening?" Wolf asked as she drew her own laspistol and tried to see over the top of the hole.

"I don't know." He replied softly, "But there's definitely something over there."

"Rull?" Wolf suggested.

"No. Rull and I planned this. He agreed to stick to this side of the river." Molla said. Then he noticed something odd about the water close to the opposite shore. For the most part the surface of the water was

level, with few obstacles to create waves but right now there was a cluster of small waves on the far side that Molla had not seen earlier. Reaching into a pouch on his belt he took out a magnocular and peered through it. The magnified image confirmed that something was disturbing the surface of the water but failed to reveal what it was. All of a sudden the water became more heavily disturbed for a brief period of time, splashing as if something unseen was being lifted up out of it. But the disturbance did not end there, instead a wide region of the surface now looked disturbed and Molla had seen that sort of disturbance before, it was the down blast of an aircraft engine. The problem was that there was clearly no aircraft to be seen or heard hovering above the water and that left only one option remaining.

"Down!" Molla hissed as he crouched down in the hole and slipped his magnocular back into its pouch. Then he dipped his hand into the filth at the bottom of the hole and began to smear it all over himself, "Cover yourself in this." He told Wolf.

"You're kidding! Don't you know what it is?" she replied.

"Yes, it's the only chance we've got of avoiding detection." Molla told her.

"Detection by who?" Wolf asked.

"The tau." Molla said, "They're here."

The Imperial Guard had been deployed to the planet Par Shallon to counter a rumoured revolution. As it happened the revolution came only when the guard forces were beginning to move on and only the Catachans were left behind and it became obvious rapidly that the alien tau were behind it, having deployed a large force to the planet in secret. Most of that had been destroyed, the tau armoured forces had been caught in an orbital bombardment while most of their infantry had been destroyed piecemeal along with the rebellious planetary defence forces by the Catachans and remaining loyalist defence force units. Now there were believed to be only a handful of xenos troops left to be mopped up, though the treasonous Governor Brecht who had invited them here had also eluded capture thus far.

"How many?" Wolf whispered as she reluctantly began to cover herself in muck from the bottom of the hole.

"I'm not sure. I think it's some of those fancy stealth power suits they use for scouting." Molla said.

"Battlesuits? But we can't take on battlesuits." Wolf said.

"I know, that's why we need to keep out of sight." Molla said, "Now stay quiet and stay down."

Both of them crouched at the bottom of the hole and waited, their laspistols in their hands just in case they were discovered. The weapons stood little chance of penetrating the armour of a tau battlesuit, even the lightweight scouting models that Molla believed they faced now but it was all they had.

Molla felt the ground shaking as the tau suits came closer. In addition to their legs, tau battlesuits included jetpacks for increased mobility and although the stealth fields of the versions currently close by could make them invisible and silent they could not undo the effect they had on the terrain around them. Therefore, as the battlesuits hovered nearby the down blast from their jetpacks still sent ripples of force through the ground.

"They're close." He whispered and slowly and carefully he raised himself up to peer out of the hole.

Looking towards the remains of the campfire he saw what he was looking for. The last wisps of smoke that the fire was still producing were being disturbed by the intakes of the battlesuits and looking at the ground around the fire Molla saw that some of them had touched down and created large footprints in the mud of the riverbank. Then the mud around those prints was thrown about as the battlesuits took off again and headed away, the shaking of undergrowth revealing their entry into the jungle on this side of the river.

"They're heading for the camp." Molla said as he crouched back down.

"But it's nearly empty." Wolf replied, "They won't stand a chance. We have to warn them." And she reached for the activation stud of the microbead communicator she wore clipped to her ear but Molla reached out to stop her.

"Don't." he said.

"Why not?"

"Because we're out of range." Molla replied, "The camp's about five kilometres from here in a straight line and our microbeads can transmit about one."

"So how do we warn them?" Wolf asked.

"The old fashioned way. We go and tell them ourselves." Molla said with a grin.

"But can we outrun them?"

"Of course we can. I could probably make it to the camp before them even if they weren't being held up."

"Held up?" Wolf asked, "By what?"

"Not by what. By who." Molla said and he activated his own microbead communicator, "Rull are you there?" he asked.

Wolf found herself struggling for breath. Using the skill built up over a lifetime of living and fighting in the jungles of multiple worlds Molla had no difficulty in maintaining a rapid pace whereas she had yet to grasp the instinctive way in which Catachans moved through even dense vegetation.

All of a sudden there was an explosion in the distance and Wolf ground to a halt and turned towards it, her laspistol in her hand.

"What was that?" she exclaimed.

"Sounded like a frag grenade to me." Molla replied as he too came to a stop, "Remember those traps Rull left for you?"

Wolf scowled.

"Yes." She said, "I'm covered in the proof of one."

"Well just think of what he would have put in that hole if he wasn't trying to avoid hurting you." Molla told her.

"Oh." Wolf responded.

"Oh indeed. Now come on, if the tau have split up there could still be some of them ahead of us." Molla said before he set off once more through the jungle.

3.

It was Molla that prompted the next stop, coming to a halt at the top of a hill.

"What's wrong?" Wolf asked as she tried to catch her breath.

"Nothing." Molla answered, "Look." And he pointed through the trees to where fourth company's camp could be seen. From this vantage point everything seemed peaceful which meant that the tau could not possibly have arrived yet. Then he activated his microbead, "Stand to, stand to. Inbound tau stealth teams."

There was a brief pause before a stern sounding voice responded, one that did not possess the distinctive Catachan accent.

"That joke is in remarkably poor taste. Who is this?" the voice of Commissar Layne asked. The commissar was theoretically responsible for maintaining discipline in the company, though as an outsider who spent every waking moment trying to tell the Catachans how to behave he was despised by them and numerous 'accidents' often befell him that although not life threatening forced him to defer his role to the senior Catachans in the company instead.

"Commissar Layne, it's Sergeant Molla. Lieutenant Wolf, Guardsman Rull and I were conducting a training exercise when we came across a force of xenos heading this way. Guardsman Rull remained behind to delay them long enough for us to warn you." Molla replied and then he shut off his microbead and looked at Wolf, "I really wish the major would just let us kill that pompous oaf." He said to her and Wolf nodded nervously, aware that some of the Catachans probably felt the same way about her. Possibly even some in her own platoon.

"This is Commissar Layne. Stand to." The commissar's voice then said, the message being broadcast over fourth company's communication net, "Incoming tau stealth teams."

"You heard the commissar lieutenant." Molla said to Wolf, "We better get down there and stand to. The tau are on their way."

There was significantly more activity inside the camp than when Molla and Wolf had left, with Catachans dashing to and fro as they prepared what defences they had.

"What happened to you?" Mayer asked as Molla and Wolf came rushing up to the checkpoint at the gate and he recoiled as he saw and smelt what they were covered in.

"Don't laugh, this may just have saved us." Molla replied.

Mayer frowned.

"Well the commissar wants to see you both. He's called a council of war in the command tent." Mayer said.

"Wait, he's called a council of war? What about Major Trent?" Wolf asked.

"On leave as well." Molla said, "Captain Fear as well."

"In fact you're the only platoon commander left." Mayer added.

"Look, let's just get a move on. Those tau could be right behind us." Molla said.

"Wait, can't we clean up first?" Wolf asked.

"No time. Do it after." Molla told her and he set off for the command tent. Wolf sighed and followed him.

Inside the command tent Commissar Layne had gathered together a variety of personnel from the company. Only one of these wore the standard combat fatigues of the regiment, a woman about the same height as Wolf. This was Lieutenant Selena, the company quartermaster who was often referred to as 'Short-arse' or sometimes 'Anna Ass-wipe' since she was responsible for providing the company with toilet paper. Apart from Selena and the commissar there were three other individuals present. Two of these were obviously male, though neither wore a standard uniform. The first of these was Mordecai Black, a ministorum priest who did his best to remind his fellow Catachans that the Emperor himself was always watching. This prompted the company to often refer to him as 'Emperor Botherer Black' or just 'Botherer Black'. The second, like Wolf and Commissar Layne was not a native Catachan. Aloysius Veneel was an officially sanctioned psyker, here to provide the company with psychic support. Like Wolf the Catachans saw Veneel as an outsider, but unlike her he was more accepting of this. Even sanctioned psykers were viewed with suspicion everywhere they went and Catachan regiments were no different. The final individual present was hidden beneath a hooded red robe and much of what showed from under this was technological in nature.

Techpriest B5T-RD-3X provided the company with its technical support. Having taken the name Cornellius to try and put the Catachans' at ease when speaking with him they in turn had taken to referring to him as 'Cornellius the Bastard' behind his back. Given that whatever emotions Cornellius had once possessed had been stripped out to make way for one or more of his cybernetic implants he did not concern himself with this abuse at all so long as anyone talking to him showed the proper respect for an individual of his position.

"Lieutenant Wolf reporting as ordered sir?" Wolf said, saluting as she and Molla entered the company commander's office. Around the room all but Cornellius sniffed the air, "I'm sorry sir, but Sergeant Molla and I

avoided detection by xenos forces by concealing ourselves in-

"Yes lieutenant that much is obvious." Layne interrupted, "But did you have to bring so much of it back here?"

"Err, I'm afraid that it was unavoidable commissar." Wolf replied.

"Well anyway, here is a map of the surrounding area lieutenant." Layne said, pointing to a large printed map of the camp and surrounding terrain, "Would you like to explain how you wish to organise the defence of the camp?"

"Me?" Wolf asked and Layne frowned.

"Yes lieutenant, you are the ranking military officer." He said.

"Even if you are an outsider." Selena commented.

"You think the troops would accept you better?" Preacher Black asked, "You're no combat officer."

"You feel that neither of these two officers is suitable to be given command?" Layne asked, turning to Black.

"No." he said simply.

"Very well, in that case I shall assume personal command of this camp and direct its defence myself." Layne said, looking down at the map as he spoke and thus not noticing the looks on the faces of the Catachans in the room.

"Feel good now?" Veneel whispered to Black.

"Be quiet witch." The priest hissed.

Molla frowned as he overheard this, knowing that there was no one in the room that could take command of the troops remaining in the camp without running into the difficulty of trying to give orders to soldiers that did not respect them.

"Try to stop this lot killing one another would you?" he whispered into Wolf's ear and he began to back away.

"Where are you going?" she responded just as quietly.

"This lot can't take command." He told her, "So I'm going to get someone that can." Then he looked at Layne and in a clear voice he said, "If it's alright by you commissar I'll just go and clean up. Lieutenant wolf knows everything I do about the tau."

"Yes very good sergeant." Layne replied without looking up and Molla slipped out of the room.

Rather than make his way back to his own tent to change Molla headed straight for the medical tent instead. Inside there were about half a dozen members of the company that had been injured either as a result of combat or accidents. But it was not one of the patients that he had come to see; instead it was the company's senior medical officer.

"Throne sergeant!" Doctor Altman exclaimed when Molla walked into his office, "What the hell are you covered in? No wait, I can tell. Look, just stay back over that side of the room okay?"

"Yes sir." Molla replied, remaining by the door.

"Good, now what do you want?"

"I'd like you to go to the command tent and assume command of the company." Molla said and Altman stared at him in disbelief.

"Are you insane?" he asked.

"No sir, I believe that you're the only one who can take command. Short-arse has no combat experience and both Wolf and the commissar are outsiders. You know what will happen if any of them start giving orders."

"Yes I do." Altman replied, frowning, "The troops will start ignoring them as they see fit. Not one of those three has been voted into a command position by the company."

"On the other hand you're a captain. Technically only Major Trent outranks you in the company and he's not here."

"But I'm not a combat officer either. I got my rank along with my medical qualification." Altman pointed out.

"But you were a field medic before that." Molla responded, walking forwards and leaning over the doctor's desk, "The men respect you more than everyone in that command tent right now combined. Captain, we need you."

Altman sighed.

"Fine." He said, "If only to get you away from me." And he stood up and removed his white medicae style coat, revealing his combat fatigues underneath as he hung the coat over the back of his chair. Then he reached for one of his desk drawers and opened it to reveal a laspistol in a holster that he clipped to his belt, "It's been years since I last carried this." He said and then he headed for the door.

"I told you, I didn't actually see any of the tau." Wolf was protesting as Altman entered the major's office.

"You must have lieutenant." Layne replied, scowling, "Planning an adequate defence relies on up to date intelligence."

"Commissar Layne," Altman said as he walked around Major Trent's desk to stand beside the commissar, "you may step back, I am here to take command."

Layne looked at the doctor, dumbfounded.

"But – but, you're just a medicae." He said.

"I am a captain in His Most Divine Majesty's Imperial Guard." Altman replied, "Or do you dispute my rank?"

"Of course not. But medicae officers are outside the normal chain of command."

"Then Lieutenant Wolf is in command." Altman said, "She is a combat officer and the date of her commission has seniority over that of Lieutenant Selena I believe. Of course as company commissar you may have your hands full convincing the troops of that."

All commissars attached to Catachan units were warned about how rebellious they could be when it came to following commands from them and stories circulated about the unusually high mortality rate even outside of combat. Layne himself suspected that many of the accidents that had befallen him may not have been so accidental, but nothing could ever be proven and until now he had never experienced an example of defiance as open as this. However, he could also see that Captain Altman was correct. His rank made him useful in providing an officer that the Catachans could rally around while they defended their position.

"Very good captain. Carry on." He said and he stepped back.

"Thank you Commissar Layne." Altman said as he turned to the map. Then he looked up at Wolf, "So what can you tell me?" he asked her.

"Not much sir." Wolf replied, "Sergeant Molla became aware of a force of tau stealth suits close to our location and we fell back."

"You managed to outrun them? How?"

"Guardsmen Rull remained behind to delay them." She told him.

"Sergeant Molla!" Altman called out and Molla stepped into the room, "I need an update from Rull." He said.

"Actually I've just heard from him sir." Molla replied, "He says he managed to draw the tau off for a while but that they are now heading back towards us. He managed to identify a dozen individual suits plus three of those drones they use. He's managed to take out two of the suits though."

"Will he be able to take out any more before they get here?" Wolf asked.

"I don't think so." Molla replied, "Rull says that the tau figured out they were being stalked by a lone sniper and just took off as fast as they could, not bothering about stealth any more. They've already got a big head start on him and they'll be here before long."

"I see." Altman said, "And what do we have to defend ourselves with?"

"From first platoon we've got Captain Fear's half dozen combat engineers." Selena replied, "And there are eight men from my support platoon who can shoot if they have to."

"And what of second platoon lieutenant?" Altman asked Wolf.

"Err, there's myself and Molla." She replied, "Plus Corporal Mayer and his heavy weapon squad."

"Mortars won't do us any good in this engagement though." Molla added, "But we do have Sergeant Khor's entire squad, that's seven ogyrns."

Ogyrns were a subspecies of humanity that was the result of colonies becoming isolated from earth for thousands of years. The harsh conditions of the worlds that the ancestors of the ogyrns had settled had favoured physical prowess over intellectual ability and so they had developed into hulking giants about three metres tall with only limited intelligence. They made excellent shock troops and were about the only outsiders that the Catachans respected. That they never attempted to tell anyone what to do was a major factor in this. Equipped with rapid firing high calibre shotguns known as ripper guns they offered a considerable boost to the defenders' firepower as well as excelling in close combat, an area that the tau were known to be weak in.

"Anyone know anything about third platoon?" Altman asked, looking around.

"Apart from the conscripts all of Lieutenant Lore's men have gone." Selena said.

"So how many conscripts are there?" Altman asked.

"Forty two." Selena replied, "None of whom are qualified to operate anything other than standard small arms."

Altman looked at Cornelliuss.

"That just leaves you." He said, "What can the Adeptus Mechanicus offer us?"

"I have my assistant, Technician PL673 and five servitors Captain Altman." The techpriest told him, his voice clearly produced by an implant rather than being his own, "They are currently all configured for standard repair duties, but I have a heavy bolter and a multimelta that I can add to them if needed."

"It's needed." Wolf commented.

"Then I shall have my assistant see to it at once." Cornelliuss said and unheard by the others he made use of one of his implants to issue the order to his subordinate.

"So," Altman said as he looked back at the map, "including my five remaining staff, that gives us a total of—" and he paused.

"Eighty eight." Cornelliuss said, "Including five servitors."

"We outnumber them almost nine to one." Layne said, smiling.

"Maybe, but with their stealth technology they're going to be pretty hard to spot." Molla pointed out, "At least until they start shooting and give their positions away."

"You spotted them by the river." Wolf pointed out.

"Yes but that was because of the effect they had on the ground and water beneath them. The ground here is pretty compacted, they won't be leaving any noticeable footprints."

"Well can we do something about that?" Wolf asked, "What have we got that will make them visible?"

"What is there that makes them visible?" Altman added, both he and Wolf looking at Molla. However, it was Cornellius that answered the question.

"Tau stealth technology replicates what is located on the opposite side of the suit." He explained, "It does this by—"

"Never mind how this xenos technology works. Just tell us what its weaknesses are." Black interrupted.

"Examination of captured examples suggests that it responds poorly to any rapidly shifting background." The techpriest responded.

"A rapidly shifting background? What's that supposed to mean?" Selena asked.

"It's when what's behind it changes quickly." Molla replied and he smiled. Selena frowned.

"Anything that we can do to force the tau to either position themselves in front of such a background or move too rapidly for their own systems to compensate for will reveal them to our troops." Cornellius said, "Of course my own enhanced vision will be more efficient at detecting them than your unaugmented eyes."

"Well we don't have the time to start surgically upgrading our troops even if we had the parts available." Altman said, "So what can we do to create a shifting background?" and for a few moments no one spoke.

"There are two fairly simple sources of disruptive barriers." Cornellius said as he broke the silence, "Smoke and water."

"That's how Sergeant Molla spotted them in the jungle." Wolf responded, "From the disturbance they created in the surface of the river."

"Actually I was thinking of setting up hoses to spray water into the air. As it fell, its path would be disrupted by the presence of the xenos." Cornellius replied, "The problem with that is that we lack the necessary lengths of hose required to protect anything more than a few limited areas."

"Then ignore that for now." Altman said, "What about smoke?"

"I'm guessing that if they pass through a cloud of smoke we'll see the disruption in the cloud." Layne said.

"Correct commissar." Cornellius replied.

"Problem is smoke obscures our line of sight to more distant targets." Wolf pointed out.

"There's a drainage ditch around the perimeter of the camp." Molla said next, "If we block the outflow then we could fill it with promethium and ignite it. Then when the tau pass through we'll know where they're coming from."

"An excellent suggestion sergeant." Cornellius said, "The heat and refractive properties of the cloud will also confuse the tau sensors."

"So they won't be able to see us from a distance you mean?" Altman asked.

"Precisely captain."

Layne grinned.

"So we'll have our own invisibility screen." He said.

"We should break out some of third platoon's heavy bolters." Molla suggested, "Bomber's lot should be able to handle them and it'd be a good idea to have some heavy firepower that we can bring to bear when the tau first come at us."

"Do it." Altman said and Molla nodded before turning to leave. Then the doctor looked at the others, "Okay then, Enginseer Cornellius has plenty to be getting on with and I think Preacher Black should perhaps use his skills to inspire the men."

"I'll help with that as well." Layne commented.

"Actually commissar I'd rather you warned regimental HQ about what's happening and then returned here to advise me. I'm still only a medicae after all." Altman replied, not particularly relishing the thought of having the commissar peering over his shoulder but recognising that he could do more harm than good by lecturing the Catachans right before a battle. Then he looked at Selena, "Go have a word with Fear's engineering team. See what tricks they can offer us."

"Yes captain." Selena replied before she too left the room.

Now there were only Veneel and Wolf without tasks.

"Wolf go check on those conscripts, Split them up into groups of about six or seven and spread them around the camp. Not too close to the fence though." Altman ordered.

"That just leaves me captain." Veneel said.

"I know." Altman replied, "I don't suppose you can detect the tau from their brains or anything can you?"

"Unfortunately not." Veneel told him.

"I thought not. In that case go find the ogyrns. Have them take up a position more central in the camp and plug any gaps. Understood?"

"Yes captain." Veneel answered.

"Then that's everyone." Altman said, "I suggest everyone gets to work."

Outside Molla watched Mayer and another of his squad, a guardsman called Thom setting up a heavy bolter.

"You know I'm not formally rated on these things." Mayer pointed out as he and Thom picked up the heavy weapon and lowered it onto its tripod mounting.

"But you have had the basic course haven't you?" Molla asked in response.

"Well yes. I mean I can fire anything with a trigger anyway, but hitting a target or dealing with a stoppage may be a bit harder." Mayer explained.

"Maybe so, but that's not really what's worrying me right now." Molla said and Mayer frowned.

"Then what is?" Mayer asked.

"Well if we don't deal with these tau damned quick we may have to cancel the barbeque." Molla replied and both men smiled.

4.

"I love the smell of burning promethium." Layne said as he and Altman stood just outside the command tent, "It reminds me of victory."

All around the camp flames could be seen coming from the fuel-filled drainage ditch and above that was the thick cloud of black smoke that the Catachans had been hoping for. Even the supposed kill zone that had been cleared around the camp was no longer visible; let alone the jungle beyond that. Unable to predict just where the tau would attempt to break through the fence the Catachans had been forced to spread out their meagre forces to cover all avenues of approach. The cornerstone of this defence were the three heavy bolters set up to offer the widest fields of fire possible. Unfortunately this also meant that while there were a few areas where the field of fire from two heavy bolters overlapped, there was no where that the firepower of all three of the powerful belt fed weapons and their mass reactive explosive ammunition could be brought to bear together and moving the weapons could be a laborious process. Most of the defence came from riflemen and more than half of these were raw recruits. But if the tau broke through this line there was Khor's ogryn squad and Cornellius and his assistant with the tech priest's five half human half machine servitors, two of which now mounted heavy weapons of their own.

"Let's just hope that the only other things that burn today were built by the tau." Altman replied to the commissar's statement.

"Our defence is sound doctor." Layne said and he drew his bolt pistol and chambered a round, "More to the point we have the Emperor's will behind us. I don't think that the tau even have some primitive alien god to turn to."

"Then let's just hope that Him on Earth is impressed with what we've done here." Altman said, "What did regiment have to say?"

"That the navy are sending a flight of valkyries to provide air cover, but that they won't be available for at least another hour." Layne told him, "Not that they'd do us much good right now anyway. That smoke will obscure their targeting in the same way as the tau's."

Altman was about to agree when all of a sudden a voice cried out.

"Contact! Stand to!"

Both men turned towards the source just in time to see a barrage of las fire strike a disc shaped machine that had just flown through the cloud of smoke surrounding the camp and the machine ploughed into the ground and bounced. The las fire continued as the Catachans on that side of the camp fired their weapons randomly into the smoke, hoping to hit any tau hiding within the cloud. The sound of this was joined by the heavy rhythmic pounding of one of the heavy bolters until Molla called out for its crew to stop.

"Cease fire! Cease fire!" he shouted, waving to the gun crew, "It's just a drone. The tau probably sent it in as a scout."

"Their foul technologies are no match for our righteous zeal!" Black called out.

"Everyone stay alert." Molla called out, "The tau are out there somewhere."

By the command tent Altman looked at Layne.

"I think I'd better head for the medical tent." He said, "We may start getting casualties when the tau attack us properly."

"Of course doctor." Layne replied, "I shall take my place with the men." And the two men darted off in different directions.

Unconcerned by the rapid destruction of their drone the tau soon launched their attack. Unfortunately for them, the Catachan engineering team had correctly guessed that at least some of the alien troops would attempt to break in through the main gate. Here there was a bridge over the burning ditch and the cloud of smoke above it was not quite so thick. Although this did not allow the tau to see through it, it did reveal the existence of a crossing point and half the remaining aliens made to break through the gate in one go. The air was filled with the sound of a massive explosion and the ground shook as the heavy-duty demolition charge detonated when one of the tau stealth suits broke the trip wire that had been set up at about waist height on a human so that it would be more likely to catch the battlesuits whether they walked or hovered in. The demolition charge was designed to destroy heavily armoured vehicles or structures, so the wearer of the tau battlesuit that was right on top of the charge when it went off stood no chance at all and pieces of charred flesh and twisted alien metal came tumbling down to the ground all around. More than one of the tau were caught up in the explosion though and two more suits were thrown forwards into the camp. The wearer of one of these was already dead; a fluke piece of shrapnel from his comrade who had triggered the charge punched through the rear of his suit and impaled his heart. On the other hand the second suit was merely damaged by the explosion and a large crack ran along the top of its humanoid form. The exposed systems sparked as the pilot struggled to regain some semblance of control, but before he managed this the

Catachans opened fire. The initial volley of las fire was ineffectual, the relatively low powered rounds bouncing off the tough armour. But then a lucky shot found a spot already weakened by both the explosion and previous hits from lasguns and it punched through the armour into the head of its wearer.

"Incoming!" Mayer yelled on the far side of the camp as he saw the cloud of smoke in front of him appear to suddenly expand towards him as more tau and their drones burst through the cloud, their stealth fields still trying to mimic the smoke even when they were clear of it. Seeing this Mayer reacted quickly and in addition to shouting a warning to the camp's other defenders he opened fire with the heavy bolter. At first the kick of the weapon even with its tripod fixed down startled him, but he managed to keep the stream of explosive rounds under control and was rewarded with the sight of several explosions as they struck their targets.

The armour of a tau stealth suit offered reasonable protection against even heavy bolter fire, but the drones accompanying the tau were not so heavily armoured and two more of them fell from the sky, forcing Mayer to cease fire as he and Thom ducked behind the sandbag barrier they were using for cover as one of the disabled machines hit the ground right in front of them and then bounced over their heads.

"Mayer's in trouble!" Wolf exclaimed from the dugout she and Molla were sharing with several conscripts and she bobbed up to fire several shots from her laspistol at where the tau had come through the cloud. Unable to see any of the aliens clearly, all of Wolf's attacks missed but they did bring her to the attention of the aliens and one of their suits was suddenly revealed to be on the ground as it opened fire with the rapid firing pulse weapons mounted under one of its arms, "Oh crap!" Wolf snapped as she ducked back into the dugout and blasts from the tau weapons blew chunks of dirt from around the top of it.

"Looks like you've got their attention lieutenant." Molla said with a frown as he too ducked after beginning to try and stand up to take a shot himself.

One of the conscripts sharing the dugout with them decided to try and return fire despite the barrage of energy blasts and the young Catachan man was able to get off two poorly aimed shots before the alien shifted his aim and blew a large hole in the man's throat. Wolf squealed as the body almost landed on top of her.

"Here goes nothing." Molla said and he plucked a grenade from his webbing and pulled out the pin, "Fire in the hole!" he yelled as he threw the grenade blindly and seconds later there was an explosion and the pulse fire ceased.

"Did you get him?" Wolf asked and Molla shrugged.

"On one way to find out." He said and he slowly began to stand up. However, there was another sudden burst of pulse fire and he ducked again, "It appears not." He said.

Then there was the sound a heavy footfall and the occupants of the dugout looked up to see the blurred outline of the tau battlesuit looming over the top of the dugout, its weapon arm pointing down towards them. Both Molla and Wolf were about to raise their laspistols when all of a sudden the tau's stealth field began to fail as lightning cascaded over its exterior. At the same time the bulky suit appeared to convulse and there was a distorted shrieking sound, the product of alien vocal chords crying out through a malfunctioning external vox system. Then the stealth suit simply exploded.

"Golden throne!" Wolf exclaimed as debris showered down into the dugout.

Then there was a deep, booming voice that spoken in crude Gothic.

"Ogryns charge!" Khor bellowed as he led his squad of abhumans forwards and then the air was filled with the sound of gunfire as the ogryns opened fire with their ripper guns. The ogryns knew even less what to look for than the Catachans did when it came to seeking out the attacking tau, but they knew enough to fire at the locations being targeted by lasguns and heavy bolters and under this combined fusillade of fire another figure suddenly appeared as it's stealth system was rendered inoperable just moments before the battlesuit's wearer fell dead.

"Say what you will about that bolt magnet," Molla said as he saw Veneel approaching behind the ogryns, "but he sure has excellent timing."

"Mayer still needs our help." Wolf reminded him and she and Molla began to climb out of the dugout. Turning around briefly Molla saw that the remaining conscripts were still cowering at the bottom of the dugout and he snarled at them.

"Move!" he hissed, "Or if Layne finds you, you won't need the tau to shoot you." And at the reminder of the penalties for anything even resembling cowardice they got up and began to follow Molla and Wolf.

Ahead of them it appeared that a pair of battlesuits were moving back and forth and firing continuously at Mayer's position. Fortunately the heavy bolter was well dug in and he and Thom were returning fire with their personal weapons instead, holding them over the barrier without exposing themselves just long enough to fire a few shots blindly before pulling them back down out of harms way. Unfortunately this method meant that they had yet to hit anything. However, it did seem to be keeping both tau focused on them and they did not initially react to the approach of more human troops.

Wolf paused and fired at a muzzle flash, expecting to see the energy blast absorbed by a battlesuit's armour but instead she discovered that Mayer's position was being attacked by only one stealth suit, the second disturbance being the last of the tau drones. More lightly armoured than even the relatively lightweight stealth

suits the drone jerked suddenly as Wolf's shot struck it centrally and then it just burst into flames and fell out of the air.

Watching the perimeter near the gate Selena shared a dugout with the engineering team whose demolition charge had been responsible at least in part for the destruction of three tau battlesuits and all of them waited nervously for any signs that more tau were heading their way. Then a flash of light from within the cloud a short distance away attracted Selena's attention.

"Over there!" she shouted, pointing to where a section of the perimeter fence had ceased to exist, the coiled razorwire now coming to an abrupt halt where it had been melted away to nothing.

"Looks like a melta hit." One of the engineers commented as he raised his lasgun and took aim, expecting to see a distortion appear in the smoke at any moment. Three more of the engineers joined him, aiming at the hole in the fence. Then they saw it, the smoke appeared to suddenly billow out as the battlesuits emerged and the engineers fired, their lasguns set to semi automatic only. Several of the shots struck the battlesuits, but none appeared to inflict any damage on them. Instead the distortions turned and both began to charge. "They're coming lieutenant." One of the engineers said as all four ducked back down into the dugout. All they had wanted to do was lure the tau into charging them.

The two battlesuits ran forwards, not bothering to use their jetpacks to cross such a short distance. But as they ran they failed to notice the fine wire that the engineers had strung up around the dugout until it had already snagged on their suits. No explosives were attached to these wires, instead a variety of empty food and drink containers taken from the mess hall's garbage was dragged across the ground to produce a loud rattle that let the occupants of the dugout know just how close the tau were.

"Torch them!" Selena yelled and two engineers that had not fired lasguns leapt up, each one clutching a bulky rifle sized weapon fed from a cylinder mounted at an angle beneath them.

The flamers screeched as jets of fire erupted from their muzzles and arced out in front of the Catachans as they moved their weapons back and forth. The cones of flames did not need the engineers to aim accurately, instead creating a sheet of burning liquid that stuck to whatever it touched. Including the tau stealth suits. Now both burning uncontrollably, the wearers of the battlesuits at first put their trust in the ability of their armour to keep the flames away from them but it rapidly became obvious to them both that this was a forlorn hope. The backpack mounted power plant of one suit equipped with the powerful energy weapon that had been used to breach the perimeter fence exploded as the flames found their way inside and the suit toppled forwards, now immobile. The other suit turned and ran, charging right through a nearby tent that promptly burst into flames. On the other side the tau inside the suit dropped to his knees and activated the emergency release system. In an instant the battlesuit opened up and the alien crawled out. His shoulder came too close to the flames and the simple coverall he wore inside his battlesuit ignited. Panicking he rolled on the ground until they were extinguished and then he reached for the sidearm carried as a weapon of last resort for situations just like this one. But before the alien could draw the weapon there was a sudden yell.

"Purge the alien!" Black bellowed as he charged.

Though the tau did not understand the words he understood the implication and drawing his pulse pistol he pointed it at the running Catachan. But he was just a moment too late and as Preacher Black got within arms reach he swung his traditional half metre long Catachan blade out and took off the tau's gun hand. The alien screamed, clutching at the stump of his arm before a shot from Black's laspistol to his head finished him off.

Back near Mayer's position another tau was able to move around to the side of a dugout manned only by a team of six conscripts and the alien fired his burst cannon along its length. The conscripts cried out as the energy blasts struck them but while the tau's attention was focused on them he briefly lost track of where the other nearby Imperial forces were.

Khor could not make out anything more than the muzzle of the tau burst cannon as it fired, but that at least gave him something to aim for and he fired as he ran. The shots from his ripper gun went wide, aimed just in front of the tau thanks to the burst cannon being held out but as he kept running he slammed right into the battlesuit. The tau spun around under the impact, still firing as he turned and the stream of energy bolts struck one of the ogyrns with a blast that would have killed a normal human being but given the bulk of the abhuman it only wounded him. Khor ignored the fact that one of his squad had just fallen and reached out and grabbed hold of the burst cannon by the shielding around its multiple barrels. The sustained fire of this weapon had heated the shielding to a point where Khor felt it burning his skin but he kept his grip and swung his ripper gun like a club. The ogryn roared as the blow struck home even though it failed to crack open the battlesuit. But he was not alone and the rest of his squad rushed up join in the beating, also using their ripper guns as clubs. The tau tried desperately to escape, firing his jetpack. But Khor retained his grip and all that happened was that the suit flew in a very short arc before crashing back to the ground. Then a heavy ogryn boot came down on the tau's leg and the alien screamed as it was broken at the knee.

"Arms and legs!" Khor yelled when he saw this, "Rip 'em off!"

Dropping their ripper guns the ogryns all took hold of the battlesuit, grabbing it by its limbs and together they all pulled in different directions. There was a screeching sound as the joints of the battlesuit tried to hold together, but the combined strength of the ogryns was too great and almost in unison the remaining undamaged limbs all tore free and took with them the limbs of the tau inside the suit. Khor roared as he held the severed limb and its attached burst cannon above his head and swung it around. "For the Emperor!" he yelled in exhilaration. Then the camp fell mysteriously quiet as all the gunfire ceased. "Is that them all?" Layne called out as he climbed up from a dugout. "I don't know." Wolf replied from close by, "Would the tau just retreat?" "They are aliens." Layne replied, "They have no courage and no souls." Molla reached for the activation stud of his microbead. "Sound off." He said, "I need a body count on the tau." "Three dead at the gate and two burned." Selena replied first. "I got a drone," Wolf added, "and Veneel fried that one." "Two drones." Mayer said simply as he looked around. "First drone hit near the fence." Another Catachan added. "That's all the drones then." Molla said, "But what about the tau themselves? We're still short." "One was brought down by gunfire over there." Wolf replied, pointing to the wreckage of a battlesuit. "And the ogryns just ripped one apart." Molla said, nodding, "But from the numbers Rull gave us that still leaves two." "Be alert!" Layne yelled, "There may yet be more!" and he looked around, his bolt pistol ready to fire.

Unlike the camp's other tented structures, the vehicle hangar and associated workshop was made from prefabricated metal sections fixed together and as such it stuck out amongst the tents. This made it an obvious target for the remaining tau who had managed to slip by the Catachans defending their perimeter. The main doors to the hangar were open as if inviting the tau to enter but the aliens halted a short distance away and studied their target closely. Inside they could see several lightweight wheeled utility and transport vehicles, though none of the tracked armoured fighting vehicles that some regiments of the Imperial Guard deployed in massive numbers. In addition to these there was a row of four lightweight bipedal walking machines. These appeared spindly and fragile and by the standards of human vehicles that was exactly what they were, but when compared to tau battlesuits they possessed physical armour roughly equivalent to even the largest riptide battlesuits. For this reason the tau waited further while they tried to ascertain whether they were operational or not. The tau's intelligence had suggested that the camp was almost abandoned, but the battle so far had demonstrated that the humans had been expecting them and were well able to defend themselves.

A movement caught the attention of the tau and they saw one of the cyborg slave beings known as servitors as it walked between two of the stationary walkers. It paused and began to check the leg joints of one of them, suggesting that they were undergoing maintenance rather than being ready for use and the tau moved closer, still protected by their stealth shields.

The cybernetic alterations that Cornelliuss had undergone included an optic system that was among the best that the tech priests of Mars could produce. That meant that even in an age where so much knowledge had been lost it was thousands of years beyond what the tau could produce and Cornelliuss saw the two battlesuits approaching quite clearly.

"Stand by." He told the Catachan that served as his assistant, "Range twenty metres." At the same time two servitors stood close by raised the heavy weapons that had replaced their right arms. One of these was a heavy bolter almost identical to the type used by Mayer's squad but designed to be carried by single servitor rather than fired from a fixed mount. On the other hand the second heavy weapon was a multimelta, an incredibly powerful energy weapon that could blast through even the thickest of armour.

The Catachan activated his microbead.

"Enemy sighted approaching vehicle hangar." He signalled.

"Understood Cogboy." Molla replied, "We're moving in."

There was a brief whine of moving gears as the two gun servitors took aim, guided by a direct feed from Cornelliuss and at that instant the tau turned towards them. Both servitors fired at the same time, each focusing on a different tau. The one targeted by the heavy bolter staggered backwards under the carefully targeted onslaught while the second was simply vaporised by the incredible heat of the multimelta fired at close range.

Even under fire from the heavy bolter the last remaining tau was able to bring up his burst cannon and opened fire, targeting the servitor armed with the multimelta first and then swinging round to the heavy bolter armed one and both cyborgs crumpled and fell.

Cornellius strode forwards, heading directly for the tau. In one hand he held a laspistol identical to those carried by the Catachans while in the other he carried a large axe with a blade that crackled with power. Meanwhile the large servo arm built into the backpack mounted power supply for the powered armour he wore under his cloak flexed. Cornellius fired his laspistol, the shots bouncing off the alien's armour and in return the tau fired his burst cannon at the tech priest. But the Imperium's powered armour was just as resilient as most tau battlesuits, despite being significantly more compact and the volley of returned fire also failed to wound its target.

The tech priest broke into a sudden run that startled the tau and he tried to bring his burst cannon to bear for another volley. But Cornellius was upon the tau before he could fire and the servo arm grabbed hold of the burst cannon's cover and tore the weapon away from the battlesuit. Before the tau could react Cornellius struck with his axe and there was a flash as the energised blade struck the battlesuit and split it wide open. The battlesuit twisted under the force of the blow and fell, its occupant dead before he hit the floor of the hangar.

"This is Enginseer Cornellius. Enemy eliminated." He broadcast over the Catachan frequency.

5.

"Captain!"

Captain Hal Fear, commanding officer of fourth company's first platoon turned to see who was calling out to him and he saw three Catachans rushing towards him, pushing their way past the staff of the nineteenth regiment's headquarters. He recognised all three instantly, having served in the same company as them for almost twenty years. They were not part of his platoon though; instead they were three of second platoon's sergeants including Platoon Sergeant Vance. The other two men were Sergeant Grey of the platoon's second squad and Quinn of the veteran squad.

"Captain!" Vance called out again as the drew closer, "What's going on?"

"I'm not sure." Fear answered, "All I know is that the tau have hit our camp. I was just on my way to a briefing."

"Mind if we join you?" Quinn asked.

"Sorry, but that's not possible." Fear replied, "It's not just Colonel Shryke that's called it, it's General Fortnam."

"Fortnam? Feth." Vance commented, "This must be big."

"Precisely." Fear said, "Now go find your men and prepare them for deployment."

"Yes sir." Vance replied with a nod and the three sergeants turned and walked away.

Fear then continued on his way to the briefing chamber where he found several other officers from both the Imperial Guard and Imperial Navy. Aside from the nineteenth regiment's commissar the guard officers were all Catachans whereas none of the navy men were. Seeing Major Trent, fourth company's commanding officer Fear made his way to him.

"Any further word?" he whispered.

"None." Major Trent replied, "There's some sort of localised jamming that the damned cogboys can't get through."

"What about the navy?" Fear asked and Trent shook his head.

"On their way, but there's no confirmation."

"Your attention please." General Fortnam called out, though well over a hundred years old the general appeared only around half that age thanks to the numerous juvenat treatments he had been afforded for his service. Around the room the other officers present ceased the various discussions they had been having and focused on him, "I'm sure that you're all already aware that the tau have struck at one of our positions." The general began to explain and in the centre of the room a large holographic map appeared, projected by a servitor that had until then remained out of the way, "The nineteenth regiment's fourth company is based here, but at present most of its personnel are here at the starport or in its surrounding facilities on leave."

"What sort of tau force are we talking about general?" another Catachan officer asked.

"Colonel?" Fortnam said, looking around at the nineteenth regiment's commander.

"It looks like a small scouting party." The colonel said, "But it's equipped with some of the smaller suits of powered armour they're keen on. Unfortunately there's been no word from the camp since the initial warning."

"We believe that the tau are responsible." Fortnam explained, "The navy has despatched a flight of valkyries but-" then he was interrupted by a Catachan that slipped into the room and walked over to him. The trooper whispered in the general's ear and Fortnam frowned before he looked back around the room at the gathered officers, "The valkyries have made visual contact with the camp." He said sternly, "According to their initial observations the whole place is on fire."

The sound of aircraft engines warned the defenders of fourth company's camp of the approaching valkyries before they became visible. Flooding the drainage ditch with promethium and igniting it had proven to be much easier than extinguishing the flames was.

"To arms!" Layne yelled, drawing his bolt pistol just moments before a valkyrie burst through the clouds of smoke before coming to a sudden halt and hovering above the camp. The down blast from the aircraft's engines blew the smoke in all directions. In the side doors naval gunners could be seen clutching heavy bolters while a ramp to the rear of the valkyrie opened as it slowly descended onto the parade ground, the only area of the camp large enough to allow it land. The moment it touched down a squad of Catachans rushed out to form an arc behind the heavily armed transport, their weapons raised to their shoulders ready for use.

"Stand down!" Molla yelled as he strode towards the newly arrived guardsmen, pulling down the scarf he had been using as a simple mask against the smoke while he attempted to help put out the fire, "Who are you?"

"Twelfth regiment!" the squads sergeant shouted, "What about you?"

"Sergeant Molla. Nineteenth regiment, fourth company." Molla replied, "This is our camp. Didn't they tell you that?"

"Forgive me sergeant but there are still some traitors from the planetary defence forces on the loose." The other sergeant replied. Then he looked at his men, "Stand down." He said, "They're Catachans."

"Sergeant Molla." Wolf then called out as she approached from the command tent and some of the newly arrived guardsmen raised their lasguns again when they heard her distinctively non-Catachan accent. Wolf came to a sudden halt and gasped.

"It's alright." Molla said, "She is actually one of us." And the other sergeant smiled.

"Ah, so this is the outsider we've heard about." He said, "Sorry about that." And Wolf's face fell.

"Sergeant are there any more of you?" she asked, but he did not reply.

"Just tell her." Molla said.

"Another infantry squad and our platoon command section." He said, looking at Molla rather than Wolf.

"Well we need them down here to help put out the fire." Wolf said.

"And then we need your pilots to take a message back to headquarters." Layne added as he too approached, "Unfortunately our people haven't been able to locate the jamming device that is blocking our vox signals yet."

"What's the message?" the sergeant asked.

"He is to tell them that Adept Cornellius has vital information for him." The commissar told him.

By the time the next flight of valkyries arrived the fires were out and these aircraft set down just beyond the perimeter fence in the kill zone surrounding the camp. As the rear ramps dropped open the passengers disembarked and were met by the members of second platoon who had not gone on leave with the exception of Rull.

"Ogryns! Attention!" Khor yelled and the ogryn squad snapped to attention, shouldering their ripper guns and saluting as various officers exited the valkyries. The first of these was Major Trent along with his company command squad while from the other two aircraft Colonel Shrike and General Fortnam appeared. The Colonel was accompanied by the nineteenth regiment's regimental commissar, the regiment's representative from the Departamento Munitorum and a senior member of the Adeptus Mechanicus who had been even more extensively modified than Cornellius appeared to be. On the other hand General Fortnam was instead just accompanied by a personal security detail. These hardened veterans of many campaigns wore enhanced carapace armour plates and carried enhanced lasguns known as hellguns that possessed superior armour piercing capabilities.

The officers returned the salute, knowing that if they did not then the ogryns were likely to remain standing at attention indefinitely.

"Report lieutenant." Trent said to Wolf, "What did we lose?"

"Eight dead and fourteen wounded sir." Wolf replied, "Mainly from among the conscripts, but we lost one of Lieutenant Selena's support staff as well."

She made no mention of the lost servitors. Though they may once have been human they now were mindless drones that relied on Enginseer Cornellius for direction.

"Where is your tech priest?" Fortnam asked, coming straight to the point, "We were informed that he had vital information for us."

"In the vehicle hangar sir." Wolf told him.

"Then led the way lieutenant." Major Trent ordered.

Cornellius detected the presence of his superior in the Adeptus Mechanicus, a magos identified as UVR-997 but known to the Catachans as Serett well before he saw any of the approaching group.

Magos. Cornellius uploaded into the noosphere, the medium of information exchange used by the Mechanicus.

B5T-RD-3X. Serett responded in the same way. *Report your findings.*

Examination of xenos artefacts has revealed location of enemy position to within ten thousand metres range.

Insufficient. Serett replied. *Explain the inaccuracy.*

Lack of hard data regarding path taken by enemy to reach this position combined with variations in variable duration of combat. Cornellius answered.

Acceptable. Transfer full methodology and results data to me immediately for confirmation. Be prepared to provide findings directly to Imperial Guard personnel in two minutes.

The exchange lasted a fraction of a second, conducted at a rate impossible for two individuals speaking to one another normally and by the time that Wolf led the others to the vehicle hangar Serett had already reviewed the data gathered by Cornellius following examination of the wreckage of several tau battlesuits and confirmed its accuracy.

"Nathin where is Cornelius?" Wolf asked the engineer's Catachan assistant as she entered the hangar. "I am here Lieutenant Wolf." Cornelius spoke, stepping into view from behind a large truck with a canvas covered rear section. Then he looked at the other officers and added, "Accompany me and I will show you what I have discovered." Before he turned around and walked out of sight behind the truck again. The Imperial Guard officers began to follow him. Along the way Major Trent paused beside Nathin. "Is this any good cogboy?" he asked quietly and Nathin smiled in return, glancing at Wolf. "Oh yes major. You'll like this." He replied.

On the far side of the truck the remains of four of the tau battlesuits were laid out on the floor. All of them had been opened up and corpses of their alien operators removed to be disposed of. All that had interested Cornelius was the suits themselves. Stood just beyond the suits were Preacher Black and Commissar Layne.

"So this is what they hit you with." Fortnam commented as he looked down at the wreckage. "Yes sir." Wolf replied, "All these belonged to xenos troops killed here at the camp but there may be two more salvageable in the jungle."

"I'm impressed that you were able to take them out." Shryke said, crouching down and laying a hand on one of the wrecked suits, "These things are like ghosts on the battlefield."

"Our faith was strong." Black replied, "Against that the xenos could not stand."

"We were able to devise a strategy to render the tau's stealth technology useless." Layne replied. "Ah yes, the fires." The woman from the Departamento Munitorum said and she held up her dataslate, "Would that be why your company supply officer has forwarded a request for urgent replacement of fuel?" Layne looked to the regimental commissar.

"Commissar Garratt," he said, "in my opinion the expenditure of the promethium was essential to the defence of this position."

"There is no need to explain yourself." Garratt replied, "You won after all. These came from xenos troops after all, not yours." And he pointed to the battlesuits.

"Indeed." General Fortnam added, "The Departamento Munitorum will replace the lost fuel."

"Err general if I might-" the female adept began.

"No Adept Clay you may not." Fortnam interrupted her, "I allowed your presence here as a courtesy. But this is war and I expect my division to be fully supplied. Do I make myself clear?"

"Of course general. I will see that the request is dealt with." Clay replied.

"Yes you will." Fortnam said and then he turned to Cornelius, "Now what can you tell us?" he asked.

"By examining the remaining fuel levels of these devices I have calculated how far they travelled to get to this location." Cornelius replied.

"How?" Shryke asked.

"Colonel the tau's inferior copies of our own powered armour have been extensively studied by the Mechanicus." Serett said, "This includes data obtained from a handful of rebuilt examples and some that were able to be taken intact. Our data is accurate to within acceptable levels of certainty."

"Well don't keep us in suspense. Where are they based?" Trent said.

"I have calculated a distance of between thirty and forty kilometres from this location." Cornelius replied and the newly arrived Imperial Guard officers all frowned.

"That's it? No co-ordinates for an air strike?" Fortnam asked.

"Precise co-ordinates would require knowledge of the exact route taken and if that information is contained within these devices I have yet to uncover it." Cornelius said.

"B5T-RD-3X's data is sound." Serett added, "I have confirmed his findings."

"So we need to search the jungle all around the camp at that distance?" Shryke asked, "That's a tall order."

"Actually colonel we have a known point from which to start the search." Layne said and he looked at Wolf, "Lieutenant Wolf and Sergeant Molla encountered the tau while conducting a jungle exercise."

Fortnam looked at Trent.

"Major, you'll have to start the search without the rest of us." He said, "As soon as your people get back here I want you to deploy them to locate the tau base. This mission is absolutely vital, do you understand?"

"Yes general." Trent replied.

"Excuse me general, but I thought that we'd beaten the tau and were just mopping up." Wolf said.

"The situation has changed lieutenant." Fortnam replied, "Governor Brecht has yet to be caught and it is believed that he is likely hiding out with the tau who, although their numbers are limited for now, may be about to receive reinforcements."

"Reinforcements?" Wolf repeated.

"Yes lieutenant. The *Fury of Man* has detected an unidentified presence in the outer system. It could be a tau starship bringing in new troops. Combine those with whatever treasonous scum Brecht can rally to his cause and we could be in a worse position here than ever." The general explained. The *Fury of Man* that he referred to was an Imperial Navy cruiser. One on one it was likely a match for most tau starships, but if more tau vessels arrived then even with superior firepower it could only be in one place at once and the aliens

could slip by to land extra troops, “Now if we can take the tau base then we ought to be able to wrap up all of their operations here on Par Shallon and convince those tau reinforcements to pack up and leave without the navy having to fire a shot.”

6.

Governor Brecht was not a happy man. He was used to being the centre of attention wherever he went, as the ruler of a world of the Imperium he was entitled to know everything happening on his world. Or at least that was how he saw it.

However, the tau that had promised him so much now seemed to have no interest in keeping him up to date with events. He had been forced to flee from his palace in the capital when the Imperial Guard had been about to over run it. Brought to the facility that had originally been intended as the new planetary defence headquarters when Par Shallon formerly became part of the tau empire, he now found himself being kept out of every briefing and away from areas that the aliens were now referring to as 'classified.'

Governor Brecht wanted answers and he knew where he could find them.

"Por'Vre'Lem!" he yelled down the corridor when he caught sight of the tau diplomat who had undertaken the negotiations that had led to his decision to join with them.

"Mister Brecht." The alien replied, coming to a halt and turning to face Brecht.

"Governor." Brecht said, frowning when the tau forgot to use what he saw as his proper title.

"Of course, governor." Vre'Lem said and he smiled. It suddenly occurred to Brecht that he had no idea whether or not the aliens smiled as an expression of friendship and pleasure or if it was done purely for his benefit. But then he set that thought aside.

"Why have I been left out of the recent strategic briefings?" he asked.

"Shas'O'Vorthan does not include me in his meetings either governor." Vre'Lem told him, "The Fire Caste operates according to its own methods."

"I thought you were all one people." Brecht replied, "Isn't that what you told me? Four castes all working together for the Greater Good?"

"So we are." Vre'Lem answered, "But part of that is allowing each caste the autonomy it needs to complete its tasks."

"You brought O'Vorthan to my palace." Brecht pointed out, remembering the tau commander's stern demeanour. Brecht and the commander had not exchanged a single word during their sole meeting however, as far as Brecht knew O'Vorthan did not speak a word of Gothic. Unlike the Water Caste diplomat of course, who was fluent in the human language.

"You requested his presence and he agreed that it would be wise to evaluate the strategic value of the building. Fortunate as it seems, since that is what allowed his troops to evacuate us when our enemies were closing in."

"Well perhaps you ought to suggest to him that having me in his briefings would allow me to provide information regarding this world that he does not have." Brecht said.

"The commander believes he has all the information he needs." Vre'Lem replied.

"Oh really?" Brecht asked rhetorically, "So he knows which settlements are likely to be most co-operative does he? Perhaps he's also so familiar with my planet itself that he does not need any advice regarding unusual features of the terrain? Just in case you have forgotten, the Imperial Guard we are facing are expert jungle fighters. Only by exploiting my personal knowledge of the jungle can O'Vorthan hope to beat them. From what I hear his elite troops didn't fare too well when they tried storming an Imperial camp."

The tau diplomat paused for thought.

"Come with me." He said, pointing down the corridor.

"Where are we going?" Brecht asked.

"O'Vorthan is conducting a briefing at this moment. I think that we should both attend."

The returning troops of fourth company remained at their camp only long enough to collect weaponry and be briefed on their assignment. They would be acting as the advanced force in this mission, sweeping the jungles for any signs of tau activity. The navy acted to deploy the Catachan forces into the jungle, several squadrons of heavily armed valkyries depositing them into a large clearing just beyond the river where Molla and Wolf had first seen the tau stealth suits. All three infantry platoons were deployed for this mission, along with the company's attached sentinel squadron that was carried by a pair of valkyries specially adapted to carry them and when they had established a perimeter another valkyrie descended to deploy Major Trent and his command section along with Preacher Black, Commissar Layne and Veneel.

"Be careful disembarking commissar." Veneel said as the valkyrie hovered just above the ground and Layne stood by one of the side hatches, but the commissar just frowned.

"Yes I am familiar with how to deploy from a valkyrie." He responded, but as he spoke his attention was focused on the psyker and he did not notice the Catachan trooper from Trent's command squad take a step backwards that caused him to collide with Layne and knock him backwards through the hatch.

Layne cried out as he landed in a heap and he clutched at his knee.
“Medicae!” Trent shouted as he jumped down from the transport, followed by his company sergeant and medic. All three men stood over the commissar and Trent held out his hand to help him up.
“That man assaulted me!” Layne snapped, glaring at the trooper now disembarking from the valkyrie.
“I didn’t see him.” the trooper replied.
“Valkyries are somewhat cramped commissar.” Trent pointed out, “I’ve bumped into plenty of people inside them in my time.”
Layne maintained his frown.
“I don’t like the look of this.” The medic said as he crouched down and inspected the commissar’s knee.
“Don’t be ridiculous.” Layne said, “I’ll be fine.”
“I’m not so sure, there’s swelling.” The medic replied.
“That’s it then.” Trent said, “Commissar you’ll have to get back aboard the valkyrie. If you keep walking on an injured leg you’ll only make it worse and that will slow us down.” Then he waved to the naval door gunner who extended his hand to help Layne back into the valkyrie and as the commissar embarked on it once more Trent looked at his company sergeant, “Sergeant Stubbs, please remind the guardsman about correct protocol regarding moving about inside a transport.” he added.
“Of course sir.” Stubbs replied and he took the guardsman aside, “Well done.” He said quietly enough that Layne would not hear and he slipped several Imperial Guard pay vouchers from his pocket and handed them to the guardsman.
With Commissar Layne dealt with, Major Trent turned his attention to his troops and waved the command sections of each platoon over to him.
“Okay you all know why we’re here.” He said as they gathered around, raising his voice so that he could be heard over the sound of the valkyries that had brought them here ascending into the air, “Now the navy will be flying cover and looking out for anything odd, but we all know that it’s up to us to locate this tau base.”
“So are we at least going to wait for the navy to give us a bearing to follow?” Wolf asked and behind her Vance shook his head.
“No lieutenant we are not.” Trent replied, “We are going to commence searching now. Each platoon will head in a different direction along this arc.” And he held out a map and moved his hand across it, spreading out his fingers to represent the platoons moving further apart as they travelled. Then he looked at Captain Fear, “Fear, I’ll accompany your platoon,” He said and then he turned to Lieutenant Lore of third platoon, “and I’m sending Sergeant Gant’s sentinels with you.” He added, “That just leaves Black and Veneel to go with second platoon.”
“Oh great.” Vance commented, looking at Wolf, “The Emperor botherer and the bolt magnet.”
“The major knows what he’s doing.” Stubbs said sternly.
“At least we’ve worked with them both before on a patrol.” Wolf said, trying to sound positive, but Vance did not reply.
“Okay. I want first platoon to head directly away from the river.” Trent said, pointing into the jungle, “While second and third platoons will head off at thirty degree bearings either side. Second platoon will head to the east and third to the west. Any questions?”
“None.” Lore said while both Fear and Wolf remained silent.
“Then I suggest we get moving.” Trent said.
“And good hunting.” Stubbs added.

In the short time that she had been in command of second platoon Wolf had come to recognise the skills of the squad leaders in jungle warfare and she often relied on them for advice. When it came to deploying the platoon for advancing through the jungle she found that the Catachans already knew exactly what to do and she let them get on with it. Only the ogyrns needed to be told what to do and as it happened this was the only squad that she could be one hundred percent certain would follow any order she gave.
The three main infantry squads spread out form a wide line that would sweep a wide path through the jungle. Wolf’s command section followed behind this line and was accompanied not only by Black and Veneel but also Khor’s ogyrns who walked just in front of the command section. Finally Mayer’s mortar squad brought up the rear from where they could not only deploy their weapons to fire over the rest of the platoon but also keep an eye out for any signs that they were being followed.
As usual Rull did not join any part of the formation. Instead he moved on his own, remaining beyond visual range of the platoon as he attempted to track the tau.
The Catachans spoke little amongst themselves, instead focusing their attention on the jungle. Despite their ability to hover above the ground, a dozen tau stealth suits would have left some evidence of their passing and so far all that the platoon had discovered was a handful of tracks left by the local wildlife. Wolf was reluctant to distract her troops while they searched the jungle, well aware that they would not appreciate it. The problem with this was that boredom was starting to set in with her and she needed something to break the monotony. There was always the option of trying to talk to Veneel, but Wolf shared the same distrust of

psykers of the vast majority of humans and she decided that she needed to look like she was taking more of an interest in what the platoon was doing.

"I'm just going to confirm our location." She said as she unfolded a map.

"Pass that here." Vance replied, "I can tell you exactly where we are."

"I know, but I want to hear it from the squads up front." Wolf told him, "I'm sorry to say it but the ogyrns are flattening everything before I get to see it and I'd like to know if there's anything I'm missing." And then she began to walk towards Quinn's veteran squad.

"What's she really up to sergeant?" the command squad's medic asked Vance as Wolf got further away.

"Well from what Molla's said she'd have trouble tracking ogyrns let alone tau stealth suits so I doubt she's really interested in what we're doing here. She's probably just looking for something to distract her." Vance answered.

"The warp finds work for idle hands." Black added, overhearing the exchange.

Wolf had a good reason to pick Quinn to speak to. Grey remained openly hostile to her much of the time, while she was concerned that if she spoke to Molla he would try to use it as an excuse to get her to demonstrate what she had learnt from him that morning and that carried the risk of embarrassing herself in front of the entire platoon. On the other hand Quinn had previously indicated that he was somewhat grateful for her arrival with the platoon. Because of the way that Catachans voted for their officers, it had been likely that Quinn would have been elected the new platoon leader after the previous one, a lieutenant by the name of Silt had been killed. He had no wish to lead the platoon and so Wolf's appointment, as unconventional as it had been had saved him from having to do this.

"Sergeant Quinn." She called out as she neared the veteran squad and he looked around briefly.

"Lieutenant." He replied simply, balancing his shotgun on his hip. Most of his squad were armed with such weapons rather than the standard issue lasguns. In addition to these simple firearms two squad members also carried bulky flamethrowers while a third had a powerful meltagun, "What can I do for you?"

"I'd just like an update." Wolf replied, "How far do you think we've travelled?"

"I'd say about two and half to three thousand metres." Quinn replied.

"Is that all? But we've been walking for well over an hour." Wolf said.

"Lieutenant in jungle terrain three thousand metres isn't bad going." Quinn told her, "We're not even having to clear any of the undergrowth. If we were then we could easily be measuring daily travel in metres, not kilometres." And Wolf sighed.

"I'm sorry about your leave being cut short by the way." She added.

"Oh there wasn't much going on this time around anyway." Quinn replied, "This probably stopped me losing too much money."

"What? Weren't you spending time with your family?" Wolf asked.

"What family?" Quinn replied, "Grey and Vance are the family men."

"A girlfriend then?" Wolf asked and Quinn shook his head.

"No time." He replied, "Following you around the jungle is a full time job."

"But aren't you lonely?" Wolf asked.

"Oh hell no. I had women all around me. I had just been paid after all."

Wolf frowned.

"You mean they were-" she began.

"Joy girls? Of course." Quinn replied with a grin, "Grey and Vance have their wives while Molla has been able to talk any woman out of her underwear in twenty minutes or less since he was seducing the daughters of the rich tourists his father guided round Catachan. I prefer just to pay them for their company and then I can get back to my job without worrying about who'll get left behind when I die out here."

For a moment Wolf did not know what to say.

"Well let me tell you Sergeant Quinn, there is no chance of Sergeant Molla talking me out of my clothes. Let alone in twenty minutes."

"We all reckoned ten for you." Quinn replied and Wolf thought she heard a brief laugh from one of his squad, "That was when we first met though, before you got made our lieutenant."

Wolf frowned. All of a sudden the Catachans came to halt as Grey raised a hand in a clenched fist and Wolf almost tripped over Quinn.

"What is it?" she hissed at Quinn as they waited but before Quinn could reply Sergeant Grey used his microbead to signal the entire platoon.

"There's something in the bushes up ahead." He told them.

"Can you be more specific about that?" Quinn replied as he glanced at his shotgun to double check that it had a round chambered.

"I can see something bright red poking out the top of one of the bushes." Grey said, "It doesn't look like an animal."

"Take your squad and check it out." Wolf ordered, "Everyone else hold position."

"Lieutenant, actually I think that I ought to-" Molla then began.

"Grey saw it." Wolf interrupted, "His squad will check it out while we cover them. Have your men set up their heavy bolter just in case this is an ambush."

"As you wish lieutenant." Molla replied, "Though this isn't an ambush, you have my word on it."

Wolf looked at Quinn.

"What's wrong with him?" she asked and Quinn shrugged, knowing that Molla obviously knew more than he was willing to broadcast over the platoon's communication net.

Meanwhile Grey and his squad advanced cautiously. Just a few flecks of bright red amongst the various shades of brown and green that made up the jungle had caught his attention, but he had been unable to identify them. That was until he got close and a wide smile spread across his face.

"I don't believe it." He muttered and he drew his knife. Then he slowly pushed the tip of the blade into the bush and used it to lift out what he found there, "I've got it." He signalled, "Stand down."

"Sergeant what is it?" Wolf asked.

"I think I'd better show you." Grey replied and he turned around, "Wait here." He told his squad, "This won't take long." and he strode back through the jungle to where Wolf and Quinn waited to see what he had found.

"So what was it Tyler?" Quinn asked, seeing the grin on Grey's face.

"Yes what was it?" Wolf added.

"Lose something lieutenant?" Grey replied as he held up a set of underwear, "It's got your name in it." And Wolf winced as she recognised some of the garments she had hung on the bush that Rull had rigged into a catapult.

"What was that you were saying about Molla?" Quinn asked.

"Oh shut up!" Wolf snapped as she snatched back her clothing and tucked it into a pocket.

"Red. Very nice." Grey commented, "Though perhaps not the best choice for jungle warfare."

It was then that Molla came walking over to join them.

"Sorry lieutenant." He said, "But I did try to warn you."

"You knew what it was?" Grey asked.

"Oh sure. Though I am surprised that they got this far. Some animal must have brought them most of the way."

"Look, can we just forget about this?" Wolf asked and all three Catachan squad leaders snorted and laughed.

Wolf frowned, "Just when I thought I was starting to fit in more as well." She muttered.

"What's going on over here?" Vance demanded as he too approached, a stern expression on his face.

"False alarm." Grey replied.

"Oh yeah? Well Rull just checked in and I don't think that what he's found is a false alarm." Vance said.

7.

A lot of people had come along the narrow trail through the jungle recently and behind them they had left footprints in the ground. Wolf's command section along with the leaders of second platoon's other squads apart from Khor now all studied them carefully to try and determine what the footprints could tell them. "These aren't tau are they?" Wolf asked as she studied the footprints. The feet of the tau ended in animal-like cloven hooves that left very distinctive tracks, but these were unmistakably human in origin. "No they aren't." Vance replied. "The tread pattern's not ours though." Grey pointed out. "Is it traitors?" Wolf asked, referring to the large number of members of the planetary defence forces that had sided with the tau rather than remain loyal to the Imperium of Man. "It's the twenty-fifth." Molla said, "They've got boots with that tread. I remember one of them trying to trade me for a case of chocolate." "The twenty-fifth regiment is nowhere near here." Quinn said. "Well some of them are." Molla replied and he began to walk along the trail, following the tracks and looking for anything that would give him more information, "Over here!" he suddenly called out and the others rushed to his side. There he pointed to a cloven footprint that had obviously been made by a tau at the side of the trail. "Looks like there was at least one alien with them then." Vance commented. "And some other human that wasn't one of us." Quinn added as he found another footprint out of place. Like the majority of the prints this was human in origin, but the tread pattern was significantly different. "Perhaps this is significant." Black said and he crouched down and pointed to one of the Catachan footprints in particular. This print was from a boot that had been damaged at some point with the effect of leaving a print that had a definite notch at one side, "Look, there it is again." He added, pointing to another print that obviously came from the same boot. "Too close." Quinn said. "What if they were walking backwards?" Wolf asked and Molla shook his head. "Not this time lieutenant." He said. "Then maybe a woman?" Wolf suggested, "My footprints are closer together than yours are." "Short-arse Selena aside, Catachan women tend to be relatively tall." Vance reminded her. "Then what-" Wolf began. "They were bound." Molla interrupted, "The tracks are close together because very one of these Catachans had their legs bound. Not tight enough to stop them from walking, but enough to stop them escaping." "POWs." Grey said and he stared at Wolf, "Lieutenant we have to rescue them." "He's right." Quinn added. "I know that." Wolf replied, "I was a prisoner before Khor's squad rescued me remember? I'm not leaving anyone in that situation. But how much of a head start do they have on us?" "Probably a couple of hours." Molla replied, "But the good news is that they won't be moving very fast." "How do you know?" Wolf asked. "Because even if they weren't bound then few prisoners of war are ever in a hurry to get anywhere." Vance told her. Wolf looked at Quinn. "Sergeant." She said to him, "I want you to take your squad and go on ahead of us. Try to catch up with the prisoners and their escort and let us know what the situation is. Take Rull with you as well. Do not engage unless absolutely necessary. Understood?" "Yes lieutenant." Quinn replied and he looked towards his squad, "Okay let's move out." He called out to them, "Our fellow Catachans need us."

Half a dozen tau fire warriors and two drones accompanied the column of prisoners, along with a pair of male humans from the planetary defence force. These ten guards were outnumbered more than five to one by their Catachan captives. However, they also had two clear advantages over their prisoners. Firstly each of the guards was armed, the tau carried their long barrelled pulse rifles, while the two humans made do with rapid firing automatic pistols and power mauls that could be used to inflict pain or lethal injuries. Secondly and perhaps more importantly each of the Catachans was securely bound. Manacles attached to their ankles limited how far apart their could get their legs and thus how fast they could move, while their arms were chained to metal bars balanced across their shoulders that kept their arms held out uncomfortably to their sides.

The tau paid little attention to the prisoners individually; all they cared about was delivering them to their destination. On the other hand the two humans had spent the journey picking out specific prisoners for abuse. Mostly this consisted of beatings or shocks from their power mauls, but they also made clear their plans for some of the female prisoners and all of these watched their human captors fearfully. Of course, none of the prisoners suspected that the guards watching over them were themselves being watched closely.

"Wait up Broker!" one of the two human guards yelled.

"What's up Grove?" his human companion asked, his hand hovering over his pistol just in case Grove had spotted an ambush.

"I got to take a piss." Grove replied.

"We better take a break." Broker said to the fire warrior stood beside him, but it as impossible to gauge the alien's reaction because of the all-enclosing helmet, "Take five. Understand?" Broke then said, holding up one hand with his fingers spread wide and the alien nodded before signalling the other tau, "Sit down!" Broker yelled at the prisoners, "No talking." Then he looked back at Grove, "Hurry up." He said. As Grove began to walk away Broker then smiled at one of the prisoners, a dark haired woman and he wandered up to her and stroked her cheek, "Don't worry darling." He said, "This isn't going to delay our date tonight." Grove left the trail, walking a short distance until he was certain that he was out of sight of the column. Then he picked a large tree to stand beside and began to open up his uniform. All of a sudden a hand was clamped over his mouth and he felt cold metal between his legs.

"Make a sound and I'll raise your voice an octave or two." Quinn hissed. Then he looked round, "Okay Downs, get his gun and baton." He added softly and while he kept Grove in place the other veteran disarmed the man.

"Just him sergeant." Another of the veterans told Quinn, "Looks like the rest of the security detail are staying put."

"What about the drones?" Quinn asked.

"Holding just ahead of the column." A third veteran answered, "Along with one of the aliens."

"Probably their leader." Quinn said and he activated his microbead, "Rull it looks like the leader is up front with two drones. They're yours." Then he turned to the rest of his men and added, "And we'll start from the rear."

A sharp 'snap!' from the undergrowth attracted the attention of the fire warrior bringing up the rear of the column and the alien spun around, bringing his long barrelled rifle up to his shoulder. Such sounds had been common on the march here so far as examples of the local wildlife approached the column and so he did not report the sound to the other tau. However, since the column was currently halted he did edge closer to the source of the sound, keeping his rifle aimed into the undergrowth. The problem with the tau pulse rifle was that it was too long for warfare conducted at ranges as close as it was here in the jungle and when the fire warrior was stood right up against the vegetation his weapon was extended more than a metre over it. Far enough that the Catachan hiding in the bush right in front of the alien was able to reach up and grab it by the muzzle and use it as leverage as he pulled the tau closer, close enough that he could drive his large knife into the alien warrior's throat between his armoured chest plate and helmet. There was an odd gurgling sound as the tau began choking on his own blood, but this soon ceased as he died without being able to get off a warning.

"Rear guard down." The Catachan whispered into his microbead.

The leader of the fire warriors was indeed the tau positioned at the head of the column and was currently just out of sight of the rest of it. From here he was making use of his gun drones to scout a short distance ahead without putting himself or any of his men at risk. Or so he thought.

There was no noticeable sound as Rull took his shot, only a 'crack' as the silenced bullet pierced the single optical lens on the tau's helmet. Penetrating right through the helmet and the alien's skull, the tau shas'ui became the second of his squad to die without being able to warn the others and with his personal drone controller no longer sending new orders the two gun drones came to a complete halt further along the trail.

The fact that the remaining four tau were deployed either side of the Catachan prisoners presented Quinn's squad with a problem. Despite currently being stationary the prisoners were still being required to stand which meant that they were in the line of fire. Quinn knew that Rull could take out any of the aliens without hitting their prisoners, but he could not hope to repeat this another three times without the tau realising that something was amiss. Obviously the time for stealth was over. Now Quinn's squad would strike hard and fast, overwhelming the tau as fast as possible.

Leaving one of his men to watch over Grove, Quinn split his squad into two roughly equal halves and had them take up positions on both sides of the column. Since the terrain here was fairly level this made the

issue of obstructed lines of fire even more problematic since stray shots could potentially hit the veterans on the other side. However, Quinn had no intention of going in with guns blazing.

"This is Quinn, I'm in position." He said softly into his microbead.

"Howser in position." Another veteran responded.

"Jackson in position."

"Collen in position."

Quinn smiled as he pulled a smoke grenade from his webbing and then pulled out the pin.

"Ready." He signalled, "Three. Two. One. Now!" and he hurled the grenade towards the trail. At the same time the three other Catachan veterans did the same and the four grenades landed at various points along the trail.

"Grenade!" one of the captives yelled as he saw the compact explosive and regardless of what they had been told the captives dived for cover.

The tau also spotted the grenades and moved into cover, but when they went off none of them produced and fragmentation. Instead a thick cloud of white smoke began to form along the trail, obscuring the view of those along it. Loud booms were then heard as Quinn's squad opened fire with their shotguns. But the blasts were not directed at the tau but into the undergrowth. The intention was to give the tau something to worry about and sure enough they opened fire, sending bursts of powerful energy blasts into the jungle on either side of the trail that could blast through narrow tree trunks with a single shot. Even through the smoke, these energy blasts were highly visible and they told the Catachans exactly where their enemies were located and while two of the Catachans stayed back and continued to fire their shotguns into the ground to draw fire the rest crawled forwards.

Quinn was first to reach the trail, just as the tau closest to him was pausing to reload his cumbersome weapon.

"Die alien!" Quinn snapped as he leapt out of the undergrowth and tackled the tau. The alien warrior tried to push him back with his rifle, but Quinn grabbed hold of the rifle and twisted it free of the tau's grip. Then before the tau could try and recover it Quinn slit his throat.

On the other side of the column another of the veterans tried the same thing as Quinn, charging into one of the tau with his blade at the ready. But as chance would have it the smoke cleared just enough for the alien to see the Catachan coming and there was a sudden flash as the tau sent an energy blast straight into the Catachan's chest, his flak jacket offering no protection at all.

"Rayner's down!" another of the squad signalled. However, the alien was now in a more exposed position than it had been, standing up while everyone around him was lying on the ground and as the Catachan yelled the warning he also unslung his shotgun and aimed it upwards at the tau's chest. The weapon boomed as the Catachan fired it and the alien staggered backwards, his tough body armour blocking the shot but not absorbing quite all of the physical impact. Seeing this one of the prisoners sensed an opportunity and he swung his legs around to trip the tau and the alien fell. This was followed by a two-footed kick from the prisoner to the tau's head that knocked him out.

Quinn rolled as an energy blast was aimed towards him, but while the tau's attention was focused on him another of his squad burst out of the undergrowth and struck. The Catachan's initial strike was aimed for the back of the tau's leg, slicing through the muscle to bring the alien to his knees before the blade was then driven into his chest from just under where his armour ended and directed upwards.

The final tau was set upon by two Catachans at the same time, one of them wrestling with the alien for control of his rifle while the second burst from the jungle and wedged the muzzle of his shotgun under the tau's chin before pulling the trigger.

Throughout all of this Broker had just lay on the ground covering his head with his hands. But when the sounds of battle suddenly ceased he determined that it was time for him to leave and staying low he began to crawl into the jungle. But in doing so he placed himself in the Catachans' favoured ground and it did not take long for him to come to the attention of Rull.

"Copy that Rull, I'm heading after him." Quinn said as Rull informed him over his microbead of the man attempting to escape, "Reese!" Quinn yelled at his squad's vox operator as he unslung his shotgun, "Let the lieutenant know what's happened here. Everyone else free these prisoners while I go after the guard." And then he ran into the jungle after Broker.

With Quinn making no effort to move in a stealthy way, Broker heard him coming and got up and dived behind a nearby tree, clutching his power maul. As the sound of Quinn's footsteps came closer he thumbed the activation switch and the weapon crackled as the energy field surrounded its tip. Quinn slid to a halt when he heard this sound and he aimed his shotgun at the tree.

"Come on out and this'll go a lot easier on you." Quinn said out loud and he crept forwards.

Broker suddenly burst out from behind the tree, moving low so that Quinn's shotgun was pointed over his head and he lashed out with the power maul. Fortunately Quinn was still too far back for the weapon to strike him directly, but as Broker swung it upwards the tip did catch the barrel of Quinn's shotgun. The Catachan

gave out a sudden cry as the energy discharge flowed into his hands and his finger tightened on the trigger, firing a shot into nothing just before the weapon slipped from Quinn's grasp.

"Now who's going to go easy on who?" Broker asked, grinning as he waved the power maul out in front of him. But Quinn noticed a tiny red dot on Broker's hand that quivered slightly as the weapon was moved and he too grinned. Broker frowned, not expecting this reaction. But then he noticed that Quinn was staring at his hand and he looked down to see the dot as well. Broker gasped and was about to pull the power maul back towards him when Rull fired. The single bullet tore the fingers from Broker's hand and he screamed in pain as his power maul fell to the ground. Then he dropped to his knees, clutching at the ruined flesh of his hand and he looked up at Quinn who looked back down and smiled at him.

"You should have just come out from behind that tree." The Catachan said.

"Jenno, see to these people." Vance ordered the command section's medic when the rest of the platoon caught up with Quinn's squad. In the time it had taken second platoon to reach them Quinn's squad had released all of the captive Catachans and given them what they had in the way of rations and water, all of which was eagerly accepted.

"I think I may be able to help as well." Black commented, "They may be in need of spiritual as well as medical assistance."

"Okay go." Vance said and both the medic and the priest headed for the released captives.

"How many are there?" Wolf asked as Quinn walked over to meet her, his shotgun resting on his shoulder.

"Thirty six." Quinn replied, "Twenty eight men and eight women. All from the twenty-fifth. Apparently they were captured when the revolt first began and the tau have been marching them through the jungle ever since they lost their communication hub in the capital. One of them is a medicae, so she's been able to give them a brief check and she'll be able to point out to Jenno who's most in need of his attention."

"I'd like to speak with them." Wolf said and Quinn and Vance exchanged glances.

"Err, maybe that's not such a good idea." Vance suggested.

"Why not?" Wolf asked.

"Well because you're—" Vance began.

"What? An outsider?" Wolf interrupted, "Well don't forget sergeant, I was held prisoner by tau forces for a time. I can relate to what these people have been through." And with that she pushed her way past Quinn and headed for where the released captives were now gathered together. Quinn and Vance watched her go.

"Do you think we should follow her?" Vance asked.

"Oh definitely." Quinn replied, "We'll get a better look at what happens."

Walking up behind Wolf, the two sergeants were in position to hear her introduce herself to the assortment of Catachan troops freed from the tau. Most of these now sat on the ground while Black, Jenno and a female Catachan who had been amongst the prisoners saw to the injured.

"Hi, I'm Lieutenant Wolf and I'm in command of this platoon." Wolf announced in a friendly manner, "Can any of you tell me what happened to you?"

The former prisoners looked at one another, hardly able to believe that a non-Catachan was responsible for their rescue.

"Really?" the female medic said to Jenno, "You take orders from that outsider?"

"Afraid so." He responded.

Wolf rounded on the woman.

"Who are you trooper?" she asked.

"It's specialist actually." The Catachan woman replied, folding her arms, "Specialist Guardswoman Torrent. Medicae, third platoon, sixth company, twenty-fifth Catachan regiment."

"Well specialist, you'd do well to remember that I am in command here." Wolf said and Torrent just glared at her, "You may also be interested to hear that I was once captured by kroot working for the tau. That's how I came to be a part of the Catachan nineteenth. They rescued me and I was given command of this platoon. So I do know how you feel."

"With respect lieutenant I don't think you do." Torrent replied sternly, "Not unless you got to watch while your friends got abused and tortured while you were made to watch. There were a dozen women in our group when we started out. Then after those two fething perverts had finished having their fun each night they slit their throats and started telling another one of us that she'd be next. Tonight was to be my turn."

"Lieutenant perhaps we should let Jenno and Torrent see to the others." Quinn suggested, leaning closer, "We have prisoners of our own that you ought to see."

"Yes sergeant, of course." Wolf replied, "Please lead the way." Then she looked around for Veneel. The psyker was stood some distance away, seemingly watching everything going on around him, "Mister Veneel, with me if you please." She called out and he nodded slowly.

As Quinn led Vance and Wolf away Torrent turned to Jenno.

"Throne, how long are you going to be stuck with that outsider?" she asked and Jenno shrugged.

"It's permanent I think." He replied.

“Rather you than me.” Torrent said.

8.

Broker, Grove and the single fire warrior that Quinn's squad had taken prisoner were being kept away from the freed Catachans and a pair of his veterans were standing watch. All three prisoners had been made to kneel before having their arms bound behind their backs and all three stared at Wolf as she approached. The tau fire warrior's helmet had been removed and Wolf wondered what the alien was thinking at it stared at her.

"So these are the traitors then?" Wolf said, looking at Quinn.

"Yes lieutenant. Well, two traitors and one xenos." He replied.

"Have they said anything yet?" Vance asked, looking at the pair of Catachan guards.

"Plenty." One of the Catachans replied.

"At least these two traitors have been." The other added, "The tau's been quieter though."

Wolf looked at the prisoners.

"So what do you have to say for yourselves?" she asked and Broker grinned.

"You're not one of them." He replied, "I can tell by the way you talk. What are you? Some sort of pet? I know they don't like anyone who isn't one of them so what do you do for them? Any chance you'd do the same for me tonight?"

Quinn nodded at the Catachan closest to Broker and the trooper struck him with the butt of his shotgun.

"Be respectful to the lady." Quinn told Broker, "If it were up to me I'd have already handed you over to the women you were threatening to rape."

Broker snarled.

"This isn't your world." Grove said.

"No, it's the Emperor's." Veneel replied calmly.

"That's right." Wolf agreed, "Not yours to give away to them." And she looked at the tau fire warrior, "Can he even understand me?" she asked out loud.

"Let's find out." Vance said, "Quinn have one of your men pretend to be about to shoot him."

"Do it Jackson." Quinn said and the guardsman pressed the muzzle of his shotgun to the back of the alien's head. Instantly the tau flinched, jerking his head out of the way.

"Doesn't look like he understood what we were saying then." Vance commented.

"So that means there's not point in questioning him." Wolf said, "Am I right in thinking that there aren't any clearings around here big enough to take a valkyrie?"

"That's right lieutenant." Quinn replied, "Rull's scouted around and there are a few small clearings we can use for resupply by drops from hovering aircraft, but nowhere big enough for one to set down without us clearing it ourselves."

Wolf nodded.

"So we can't question him ourselves and we can't have someone fly in to pick him up and deliver him to someone who can." She said and then in a single smooth action she drew her laspistol and shot the tau between the eyes. Then she swung it to point at Grove, "So can you think of a reason to keep you alive?" she asked as the lifeless body of the tau fell forwards.

Grove's bottom lip quivered and he closed his eyes.

"Tell her where the tau are based." Veneel said.

"I don't know! Honest, I don't know!" Grove yelled.

"Not much point in keeping him alive then." Quinn said and he racked the slide of his shotgun to chamber a round.

"No wait!" Grove exclaimed and he looked at Broker, "He knows where they are."

"You fething idiot!" Broker hissed, "Why couldn't you just keep your fething mouth shut?"

"I'm not getting killed for you." Grove replied.

"Want to bet? You've just told them that you don't know anything." Broker said.

"Actually, he's just told us that you know what we want to know right now." Vance pointed out, "So he's being co-operative. Perhaps you ought to follow his example."

"Never." Broker replied, "The tau will free this world. You lot don't scare me, shooting an alien's one thing but that little girl you follow just doesn't look like she's got it in her to do what's needed to make me talk."

"Oh really?" Wolf replied, "Why would you say that?"

"Because you'd have shot him when he told you he didn't know anything if you had." Broker replied, looking at Grove.

"I guess you're right." Wolf replied and she holstered her laspistol, "Platoon Sergeant Vance." She said clearly.

"Yes lieutenant?" he replied.

"Go back to the troops these traitors were holding captive. Bring all the women here." She ordered.

"Yes lieutenant." Vance said and he headed back to the rest of the Catachans.

"Lieutenant are you sure you know what you're doing?" Quinn whispered to Wolf, "Just let me and my men loose on him for an hour or two. He'll talk."

"Yes I'm sure he will." Wolf replied, "But I want answers quicker than that."

Vance then reappeared with the eight female members of the twenty-fifth regiment who had been captured by troops loyal to the tau and Wolf smiled. Then she unclipped the large Catachan style knife from her belt and walked up to Torrent.

"Here you go specialist." She said to the woman handing over the knife and a map before looking around at Broker, "He knows where the tau are based and I want that information. You are to leave enough to walk and talk, but the rest is yours. All of yours." And she looked around at the other women, "I take it you all know what you're doing?" and the Catachan women glared at Broker.

"Hey wait no." the man protested, "You can't-"

"Mister Veneel, Sergeant Quinn and Sergeant Vance with me. Jackson and Moss as well." Wolf said, ignoring Broker, "Let's leave these ladies to their work." And Wolf began to head back to the rest of the Catachans with the others following her. Almost as soon as they were out of sight of the two prisoners and their former captives there was a sudden, prolonged shriek.

"They're here." Torrent said, pointing to the map as Wolf and her squad leaders looked on. The spot she pointed to was stained with blood.

"You're certain he was telling the truth?" Grey asked.

"If we get there and find out he was lying then he's still got a few more fingers left." Torrent replied, "Plus half the one he pointed that place out with."

"That's about five kilometres from here through the jungle." Molla said.

"According to this map, this trail leads straight there though." Wolf pointed out.

"Yes but it's not a direct path." Vance said and he moved his finger along the line representing the trail on the map, "We'll get there quicker through the jungle."

Wolf frowned, having hoped that for once they could have taken the easy path. Then she looked to where most of the Catachans from the twenty-fifth regiment were still gathered together.

"What about them?" she asked, "How do we get them out of here?"

"What do you mean?" Torrent asked, "We're all fit for duty."

"But you were just held prisoner." Wolf said, "You should be examined by-"

"Look," Torrent snapped, "I realise that you're just an outsider but you ought to know that we aren't as helpless as you may have been after you were rescued. All we need is some gear and we're ready to go."

"There's a small clearing here along the way." Grey said, pointing to a point on the map between their current location and the presumed location of the tau base, "We can arrange for an air drop there."

Molla nodded.

"Yeah, three dozen lasguns and sets of general issue kit." He said.

"Plus another medical kit for me." Torrent added.

Wolf frowned; annoyed at the way both Grey and Molla had not bothered to wait for her to give her approval for keeping the freed prisoners with them.

"I'll call in a request." She said, "Full equipment for thirty-six. Do we have a list of serial numbers that I can give so headquarters know these people are alive?"

"We'll get you one." Vance replied.

"Good." Wolf said. Then she looked at Torrent, "Oh and specialist I'd like my knife back." And she held out her hand, Smiling, Torrent returned the blade.

"That's a real Catachan's knife you know." She said as Wolf clipped it back to her belt, "Be careful your don't hurt yourself with it."

As the group broke up Torrent approached Grey.

"I hear you're not happy about being stuck with that outsider." She said softly, glancing over her shoulder towards Wolf and Grey snorted.

"We're stuck with her though." He replied.

"Really? So she's not about to have an accident?" Torrent asked. Then Grey grabbed her and pulled her behind a dense clump of vegetation that shielded them from view.

"Look here specialist." he hissed, "Be careful saying things like that. Molla, Quinn and Vance all reckon that they can turn her into someone competent to lead us. They're fething nuts if you ask me, but for now we're going with their plan. So if you know what's good for you, you won't let any of them hear you saying anything like that or you'll be the one looking over your shoulder. Not the lieutenant. Understood?"

"Yeah I get it." Torrent answered with a scowl.

"Shas'O!"

O'Vorthan looked up from his console to see one of the base's technical staff approaching.

"What is it Fio'La?" O'Vorthan asked the earth caste technician.

"Shas'O our sensors have detected a gue'la transmission within ten thousand metres of our location." The technician replied and he handed the fire caste commander a dataslate.

"Have you translated it?" he asked.

"No Shas'O. It is a military transmission that is encrypted."

This concerned O'Vorthan. The ruler of this world had provided the tau with full details of his defence force's communications, meaning that even those that had not seen fit to ally themselves with the forces of the Greater Good could not send any messages that the tau could not listen in on. But the Imperial Guard units were a different matter, their communications remained secure and the presence of a force close by was a threat that he could not ignore. Ideally O'Vorthan would have despatched a mobile force in devilfish transports and supported by hammerheads to destroy them, bringing back any survivors to be interrogated. But the humans had wiped out almost all of his force's supply of vehicles before the local humans' uprising had even begun with an orbital strike that had also claimed the life of the tau ethereal assigned to this mission. He still had several crisis teams remaining, but was loath to waste them as scouts against an enemy force of unknown size and composition. What he needed was more information.

"What of the gue'la air patrols?" O'Vorthan asked, well aware that the Imperial Navy had been patrolling the skies close by.

"Their flight patterns are unchanged Shas'O. They have yet to detect us." The technician replied. This was unsurprising. The best stealth technology of the tau had gone into constructing this bunker complex and O'Vorthan would have been horrified if the humans had been able to penetrate it from a distance. "However," the technician continued and O'Vorthan glared at him, "another group of aircraft has just left the spaceport and is headed towards the source of the transmission."

"Not here?" O'Vorthan asked.

"It does not appear so Shas'O." the technician said, "But there is the matter of Ui'Tortan's unit."

"Ui'Tortan?" O'Vorthan asked.

"Yes Shas'O. His squad was escorting prisoners here for interrogation but it has not checked in for some time. We considered the possibility of a communications fault, but the transmission came from within a thousand metres of their estimated position."

"So the gue'la have been releasing captives have they?" O'Vorthan said to himself, suddenly irritated as he remembered how reports had stated that so far none of the Imperial Guard troops captured had shown the slightest signs of being willing to defect. He activated the communicator built into his desk,

"Shas'Ui'Gueth." He said and he waited for a response.

"Yes Shas'O?" a voice replied a few moments later.

"Shas'Ui you are to take your troops and move on a heading of one six four. There may be a gue'la force in that direction and I wish to know as much about them as possible. If you feel that it is appropriate you may mark them for a missile strike." O'Vorthan told the other tau warrior.

"Yes Shas'O. For the Greater Good."

"For the Greater Good." O'Vorthan said and the communication line went dead.

The three valkyries neared the rendezvous point and their pilots watched for the signal from the ground. Then the lead pilot spotted what he was looking for, a plume of red smoke rising up from the ground in a small clearing.

"I have red smoke at ten degrees to port." He broadcast to the other two aircraft in his flight, "Follow me in and standby to deploy cargo."

Each of the three valkyries carried a drop canister in its hold. These were multipurpose containers designed to be deployed from the air to troops on the ground. They could be used to carry almost anything and on this occasion they had been filled with the general equipment that was issued to all Imperial Guardsmen.

The first valkyrie flew in low and came to a stop above the clearing marked with smoke while the other two circled the area. The gap in the trees was obviously too small to allow the aircraft to land safely so as it hovered above the ramp to the rear of its cargo compartment opened up. Then, with the two gunners in the rear of the valkyrie strapped in to make sure that they did not fall out the pilot lifted the nose of his craft until it pointed almost straight up and the container simply dropped out of the back of the aircraft.

"That's one." Vance commented as the container dropped to the ground and the valkyrie moved off, allowing the second aircraft to approach while the first took its place in the holding pattern. This repeated the manoeuvre, tilting upwards to allow the cargo to just drop out without any need for the door gunners to do anything. Then it too moved off and the final aircraft approached. This valkyrie had just begun to lift its nose when there was a sudden 'whoosh' followed by an explosion and one of the aircraft's twin tails was torn free. Smoke began to fill the inside of the valkyrie and alarms sounded throughout its cockpit.

"Three to leader, we're going down!" the pilot exclaimed.

Meanwhile on the ground the Wolf watched in horror as the valkyrie began to spin uncontrollably, flames pouring from it.

"What happened?" she yelled.

"Missile strike." Vance replied and he activated his microbead, "Eyes open, with tau in the vicinity. Rull, can you see them?"

There was an almighty 'crash!' as the damaged valkyrie ploughed into the jungle, tearing through trees and bushes alike until it finally came to a halt.

"We need to go and help them." Wolf said and she activated her microbead, "Sergeants Quinn and Khor, have your men head to the crash site with us. Grey, Molla and Mayer provide cover for the personnel from the twenty-fifth while they recover the supplies."

"This is Quinn, copy that, we're on the move."

The Catachans began to move, either heading towards the downed navy valkyrie or heading for the two cargo containers dropped into the clearing and it was then that the tau revealed themselves. A bright flash of light struck one of the Catachans from the twenty-fifth as he ran and he tumbled to the ground.

"Over there!" Molla shouted as the others dived for cover and then to the gunner of his squad's heavy bolter team he added, "Young, fire!" and the weapon came to life, sending a stream of explosive projectiles across the clearing that ripped through the jungle on the far side. At the same time the two remaining valkyries opened fire. Each of them carried a rapid firing multilaser in its nose along with a pair of door mounted heavy bolters and missile pods beneath their wings. They swooped in low towards the source of the tau attack and despite not being able to see any of the aliens they opened fire in the hope that it would keep them from pressing their own attack on the Catachans.

The Catachans from the twenty-fifth continued to head for the containers, but now crawling along the ground to avoid not only the tau but also the fire from their own side that was passing overhead at an uncomfortably close distance. When the first container was reached the Catachans clawed open the seals to remove the cover.

"Uniforms?" the first Catachan to look inside exclaimed in anger. Having been wearing the same clothing for several days the former prisoners from the twenty-fifth were eager to obtain fresh uniforms, but while coming under enemy fire they were hoping for something of more immediate use. Then the second container was reached and it's contents proved to be little better.

"It's the damned carrying kit!" the first to examine the contents yelled. Yet again this was something important in the long run, but of no immediate use.

"Where are the damned weapons?" another yelled.

"They must be in the other container. The one that went down in the crash." Came the reply.

The first navy crewman that Wolf saw was obviously dead. He had been thrown clear of the valkyrie as it crashed and impaled through the throat by a branch. Now he hung limply from a tree.

"Cut him down someone." She ordered as she continued to head for the valkyrie just ahead of them. One wing had been torn off completely and the aircraft had come to a stop on it's side and the engine now facing upwards was burning brightly, "Jenno, check the flight crew." She ordered as she headed for the cargo compartment. There she saw the final drop container had broken open and the lasguns, power cells and knives that it contained had spilled out onto the ground. Meanwhile the other door gunner was still strapped into his safety harness and a groan told her that he was still alive, "Give me a hand with him." she said to Vance and they both climbed through the wreckage to the gunner.

Outside the valkyrie Jenno clambered over several fallen branches to reach the cockpit. Though the armoured canopy had been cracked by the impact it remained in one piece and so he searched for the emergency release. Unfortunately this was located on the side of the valkyrie and now faced upwards, forcing him to climb up onto the aircraft.

"Stand clear!" he shouted to the other Catachans closing in as he reached down and grabbed hold of the release lever. But before he could pull it there was a flash of light and an energy blast from a tau pulse weapon struck him in the chest and sent him falling backwards.

"Jenno's down!" the command squad's vox operator called out while beside him the trooper armed with a grenade launcher fire two fragmentation grenades in the direction of the attack, hoping to catch something in the blast.

"Oh feth." Vance exclaimed as he and Wolf tried to release the gunner's harness, "Orthan, see if you can get that Torrent over here."

"Yes sergeant." The vox operator replied.

As Quinn and Khor approached the wreck they saw Orthan and the command squad's grenade launcher operator taking cover beside it while the others were all out of sight. Then Quinn noticed Jenno's body lying on the ground close by and realised what had happened.

"Ambush." He said and he raised his shotgun. Determining that the tau were off to the right of the valkyrie from his point of view Quinn waved his men in that direction and sure enough a pulse round came flying from

the undergrowth towards them. The blast missed his squad though, instead clipping Khor's arm and producing an angry roar.

"Ogryns!" Khor bellowed, raising his ripper gun above his head, "Charge!" and the ogryns all roared as they charged forwards.

"Get after them!" Quinn ordered, knowing that if the tau were able to slip past them, the ogryns were likely to just keep on running. On the other hand his squad would be more able to notice when they had gone too far and call the ogryns back.

There was another volley of pulse fire as the tau sought to cover their withdrawal, but again they failed to fell a single ogryn, the hits they scored only serving to enrage the massive abhumans. The ogryns smashed into the undergrowth that the tau had been using for cover and tore right through it.

"Ogryns fire!" Khor yelled as he saw the tau right in front of him, trying to fall back and there was the roaring sound of seven ripper guns being fired in unison. The tau wore body armour and ripper guns had very little penetrating power, but the spread pattern of the shots meant that at least some of the projectiles found vulnerable points where their armour could not protect them and several fell. These were the ones that the ogryns set upon. Though injured, most remained alive and Khor and his troops sought to change that, raining down blows from the butts of the ripper guns as well as from their fists and feet.

Meanwhile Quinn led his squad after the tau that had been able to escape Khor's squad. One of the aliens attempted to take cover behind a tree, but the member of Quinn's squad armed with a meltagun fired the powerful weapon at the tree itself. There was a brief hum that built into a roar as the weapon discharged, producing a brilliant white beam of energy that blasted right through both the tree trunk and the tau trying to use it for cover. The Catachan shut off the beam as what remained of the tau fell from behind the trunk, but the damage to the tree was already done and unable to support its own weight the tree came crashing down in the path of the fleeing aliens.

"Take cover!" Quinn yelled as the tau turned to face their pursuers and by the time they opened fire the Catachans had vanished from view, "Collen! Porsell! Light them up." Quinn snapped and the two members of his squad equipped with flamethrowers angled their weapons upwards. There was a sudden roaring as the weapons were discharged, sending jets of flame in arcs towards where the tau had taken cover. The flames flowed around and through the vegetation, igniting it as well as the tau it then engulfed. The small tanks beneath the flamers held only a limited amount of promethium fuel and the jets of flame soon ceased. But by that time the weapons had done their job and all that remained of the tau was burning corpses.

9.

Almost a dozen tau corpses were lined up on the ground, about half of them badly charred from being burned by flamers. The armour they wore was clearly of the same style as that worn by standard fire warriors, but it covered less of their bodies. Mayer's squad had gathered up the bodies and then Wolf and the other squad leaders had gathered to inspect them.

"Rull reckons a couple got away." Molla explained, "He's tracking them now."

"Look like pathfinders." Mayer said and he held out one of the weapons that the tau had been carrying for Wolf to see. This was shorter but bulkier than the standard long barrelled pulse rifle. Beneath the barrel of the weapon was what looked like a grenade launcher, while a secondary beam emitter was mounted above it.

"What's this?" Wolf asked, tapping the emitter.

"It's a laser." Grey replied, "For marking out targets. That's how they brought down the valkyrie. It was marked and the tau fired a missile from long range."

"Then the launcher must have been pretty close." Wolf said.

"Maybe." Grey said, "But we've seen no sign of it so I'd say it's more likely that they targeted the first valkyrie and by the time the missile got here the third was the one in the line of fire."

Wolf looked at Vance.

"What about us?" she asked, "How many did we lose?"

"The pilot and co-pilot of the valkyrie were both dead." He replied, "That makes three navy crew. Five of the troops from the twenty fifth were hit as well and of course we lost Jenno."

Wolf sighed.

"We need a medicae." She said, "What about Black? Can he fill in until we get back to camp and get a more permanent replacement?"

"He's no formal medicae training." Molla pointed out.

"There is an obvious replacement available." Quinn said and Wolf frowned.

"But she's part of the twenty-fifth." She said.

"Maybe, but right now she's here and we need a medicae." Vance pointed out.

"Besides," Quinn added with a smile, "I think we've had good luck in recruiting from prisoners rescued from the tau." And the other squad leaders all stared at him.

"Speak for yourself." Grey said.

"I'll go and give her the good news." Vance said.

"Good, you do that." Wolf replied and then she looked at Molla, "So how much further?" she asked him.

"About six thousand metres." He replied.

"And through some pretty rugged terrain." Grey added.

"Yeah," Quinn said, "You'd think that the tau wanted this place to be difficult to reach."

"Well there's no time like the present to get going." Wolf said, "We'll keep the troops from the twenty-fifth together as one large squad for now. Have them pick their own leader like you normally do. Then tell them to bring up the rear with Corporal Mayer's mortar squad."

"You are all that is left?" O'Vorthan asked as he looked at the trio of pathfinders as they entered the base.

"We are Shas'O. The rest gave their lives for the Greater Good." Ui'Gueth answered.

"And what did you discover?" O'Vorthan then asked him.

"The gue'la have a small force nearby. It seems that a smaller force of them was able to ambush Ui'Tortan's unit and released the prisoners they were transporting and these two groups have now joined together. What we witnessed appeared to be a resupply mission."

O'Vorthan frowned.

"Were there any signs of the fire warriors from Ui'Tortan's squad?"

"None Shas'O. But the two gue'vesa who had been assigned to watch over the prisoners as well were captives of the gue'la force."

"Return to your barracks and get some rest." O'Vorthan ordered, "You may be called into action again soon and I want every one of us at our best."

"Yes Shas'O." Ui'Gueth replied, nodding, "For the Greater Good."

"For the Greater Good." O'Vorthan repeated. Then as the pathfinders left he too turned to leave and he found himself face to face with Vre'Lem.

"Problem Shas'O?" the diplomat asked.

"Why would you think that?" O'Vorthan asked in reply.

"Because from what I hear you have lost a squad fire warriors and your pathfinders have taken casualties from a gue'la force that is getting worryingly close to this very location."

"Perhaps if the water caste spoke to the gue'la as effectively as it listens to rumours then we would not be in this situation." O'Vorthan answered.

"And what situation would that be Shas'O?"

"One where we are trapped in a half completed bunker complex while a gue'la force gets closer with every passing moment. One where our reinforcements are sitting idle because of a gue'la warship that threatens them if they dare approach this world and one where the gue'la who were supposed to be our allies here have proven inferior to those deployed by our enemies to maintain their control of this world."

"Aun'Lortas would not have been so pessimistic about our situation Shas'O." Vre'Lem said.

"Aun'Lortas is dead." O'Vorthan replied, "Murdered by gue'la that you failed to convert to our cause. But do not mistake my mood for pessimism just yet Por'Vre. We still have powerful weapons at our disposal after all." And then he looked up at a row of massive humanoid mechanical figures stood close by.

Night fell, but the Catachans kept moving through the jungle in the darkness. Every now and again they heard the sound of a navy patrol overhead as the valkyries attempted to locate the tau base from the air. For now at least though, the base remained elusive and without confirmation of its location the rest of fourth company and indeed the other Catachan forces on Par Shallon would not be deployed here.

The first indication that they were on the right track came as a signal from Rull. As usual the sniper was moving on his own, mainly ahead of the rest of the platoon but also watching the flanks as well.

"Rull says there's a structure ahead." Vance said, "Looks tau in origin."

Wolf looked round to where the two prisoners were being dragged along by Khor's ogryns.

"You said the base was further on." She said, "What is this?"

Broker just shrugged.

"Beats me." He said and then he was sent flying as the ogryn stood immediately behind him punched him in the back of the head.

"Well?" Wolf asked Grove, "As you can see my ogryns take things quite literally and I'd hate to accidentally say something that was taken the wrong way."

"I heard Broker talking about some sort of automated defences with our officers." Grove answered, "Some sort of turret that engages anything that comes near."

"The tau are well known for using such heretical devices." Black said.

"Sounds like our tarantula sentry guns to me." Vance commented.

"Well we need to be certain." Wolf said.

"Quinn's squad is on point right now." Vance replied, "They should be able to confirm the presence of a structure."

Quinn would have preferred to have used his magnocular to study the jungle ahead of him, but he was concerned that the light enhancing optics would ruin the natural night vision that he would need if the tau were closer than originally expected.

"Sergeant, over there." Reese the vox operator said softly and he pointed through the undergrowth to a dark shape that sat beneath a hole in the overhead canopy that was letting in what little light there was. The shape was clearly of artificial construction and had the look of a low tower, tapering to a domed top. Significantly it looked to have the same colour scheme that had been used on all of the tau equipment Quinn had seen on Par Shallon so far.

"Looks like they just dropped it in through the trees." Another of the squad commented and Quinn had to agree. There was debris scattered around the structure that looked to have come from the canopy when it had been dropped through from above.

"Tavo. Reckon you can take it out from here?" Quinn asked the meltagun operator, but the man shook his head.

"I need to get closer." He replied.

"I don't like the sound of that." Quinn said and he activated his microbead, "Lieutenant we may have a situation here." He signalled.

"What sort of situation?" Wolf asked.

"We're looking at what looks like some sort of tau structure that has been dropped in from the air." Quinn explained.

"Be careful sergeant. One of our prisoners has suggested the presence of automated turrets." Wolf warned him.

"Well this doesn't have any obvious weapons that I can see. But there could be something hidden inside. Tavo doesn't reckon he can take it out from here and I'd rather not risk getting any closer."

"Understood sergeant. Hold your position and report any change." Wolf instructed him. Then she looked at Vance, "I'm guessing that if we take that thing out then the tau will know about it pretty quickly. Right?"

"Sounds reasonable." Vance answered.

"On the other hand we need to penetrate their defences." Veneel said.

"Still this isn't how I'd expect the tau to operate." Vance said, "From what I've heard they don't like to defend a fixed position if they can help it. They prefer to be able to move around. A fixed turret doesn't fit well with that." And Wolf smiled.

"But maybe it's the answer to our problem." She said and then she activated her microbead and set it to broadcast to the entire force, "Sergeant Grey move your squad forwards to join up with Sergeant Quinn. Corporal Mayer deploy your mortars for use and stand by. Sergeant Molla the same goes for you, find a suitable position and set up your squad's heavy bolter to cover the ground ahead. The twenty-fifth will move to my current position to secure the prisoners and wait for further instructions."

"Mind telling us what you're planning?" Molla responded.

"I'm planning to tell the tau where we are." Wolf said. Then she drew her laspistol, "Okay everyone," she said to her command section, "with me. We're going to hook up with Grey and Quinn." Then she looked round at Khor, "Sergeant Khor, your unit as well. Come with us."

"Ogryns follow." Khor replied and he grinned.

Wolf led her squad and the ogryns forwards to where they met Grey and Quinn.

"So what's your plan lieutenant?" Grey asked.

"Where's the tau structure?" Wolf said, looking at Quinn.

"Right down there." He replied.

"Okay then. Sergeant Grey I want your squad to use your missile launcher to destroy that structure before it can fire on us."

"You do realise that the tau will figure out that we're here don't you?" Vance commented.

"I'm counting on it." Wolf replied, "When that structure is destroyed second squad will wait here while the rest of us advance through the gap it leaves in the tau perimeter. I expect the tau will come out to meet us rather than sit still and try to protect a fixed position and when they do we'll fall back."

"And lead them onto our heavy weapons." Vance added with a smile and he looked at Grey and Quinn, "Well?" he said.

"That's a plan that could actually work." Grey commented.

"What? Using us a bait?" Torrent said.

"If that's what's needed, yes." Wolf replied. Then she looked at Grey, "Sergeant, please have your men destroy that structure."

"Yes lieutenant." He replied, "Baum, Frost, get that launcher set up and take out that target."

The long tub shaped missile launcher was quickly deployed, with Baum lifting it over his shoulder and waiting while Frost inserted a long missile with a shaped charge warhead into the rear.

"Ready." Frost said and he ducked out of the way.

There was a 'whoosh!' as Baum fired the weapon and the missile shot towards the tau structure. As it flew towards its target the dome at the top of the tau structure suddenly popped up and a pair of multi-barrelled cannons emerged, rotating to face the oncoming missile. But despite the automated response the turret was too slow and the missile struck just beneath the opening for the cannons. The blast from the warhead was focused into the turret, punching a hole through its armour plating and then filling the inside with molten metal. The internal power cell of the turret ruptured and there was an explosion that lit up the jungle as the top was blown clear off the turret, flying up through the canopy overhead and then punching another hole in it as it fell back to the ground.

"Well the tau will know we're here now." Wolf said and then in a raised voice she called out, "Advance!"

Alarms from the command centre made O'Vorthan pick up his pace.

"What's happening?" he demanded as he rushed into the room.

"Turret destroyed in sector fourteen." One of the technician's responded.

"What's the position of the gue'la air patrols?" O'Vorthan asked.

"None within twenty kilometres."

"Then their ground forces have found us. Alert all fire warriors to deploy."

10.

The reported location of the tau base was not far ahead now and the Catachans watched the jungle carefully for signs of enemy activity, but when the first signs came they were felt rather than seen.

"What was that?" Wolf asked as the ground beneath her feet shook.

"Nothing good." Vance replied and then there was the sound of breaking wood as a massive version of the normal tau battlesuit strode through the jungle.

"Riptide!" Quinn yelled as he fired his shotgun at the towering machine, but before the rounds could even strike it there was a sparkling effect in the air as the battlesuit's shield blocked them, "Tavo! Nail that thing!" Quinn yelled and Tavo raised his meltagun.

The beam struck the battlesuit and carved a groove in its chest plating, but before Tavo could fire again and try to capitalise on this a second of the massive suits strode into view and raised the multi-barrelled cannon mounted beneath its arm.

The jungle was illuminated by the rapid bursts of energy that erupted from the cannon, tearing through trees and bushes alike as the Catachans scattered. Tavo was the primary focus of this attack, his meltagun presenting the most serious threat to the riptide suits and he died almost instantly. Beside him Porsell was hit as well, a single energy blast ripping open the spare promethium tank he carried for his flamer and he screamed as he was briefly turned into a human fireball.

The other veterans returned fire, peppering the closest suit with shotgun blasts. Though intimidating, the riptide suits were not invulnerable to small arms fire and there was a small explosion from the shoulder of the suit as one of the missiles loaded into a battery on the suit's shoulder detonated prematurely.

"Tully! Krak grenades." Vance snapped and the grenade launcher armed Catachan from the command section lifted his weapon and fired three rounds in rapid succession. One of them sailed right past the closest riptide, while the second impacted only on its shield. But the third round detonated right against its chest and the suit rocked as the pilot attempted to steady it.

"Down!" Wolf shouted as she saw the second suit swing its cannon towards her command squad.

"Ogryns charge!" Khor yelled and his squad ran forwards, heading for the closest of the riptides and as they ran they opened fire, lending the impressive hitting power of their ripper guns to the shotguns of Quinn's squad. Rather than a rapid firing cannon this one was armed with a heavier energy weapon and there was a whine as it powered up.

"Khor get down!" Quinn yelled but the warning came too late and there was a blinding flash of light as the weapon fired. The energy blast engulfed most of the ogryns and there were howls of pain from them. Then when the light faded enough for the Catachans to see only Khor and three others remained, all dazed from the sudden and powerful attack. The riptide prepared to fire again, intending to finish off the ogryns but as the pilot waited for his weapon to reach full power his suit suddenly toppled over, alarms sounding in his armoured compartment.

Rull's shot had blown out the left knee of the riptide, causing it to overbalance. But the suit was still armed and the pilot tried to swing his main gun around towards the ogryns.

Fortunately Quinn reacted quickly and he scooped up the meltagun Tavo had dropped and fired it, aiming not for the vulnerable looking head of the riptide but instead at the centre of its torso. The riptide's shield sparkled for a few moments before the energy beam overpowered it and then the armour plating itself was simply melted away. The tau pilot had just enough time to realise what was happening before the beam burned through into his compartment and he was roasted alive.

The second riptide fired its main gun again; spraying energy blasts between the trees as a third of the towering battlesuits smashed its way towards them.

Veneel scowled at the sight of this additional foe and the psyker took a deep breath as he extended a hand towards it.

"Focus your thoughts well witch." Black said, realising what he was planning and at that moment lightning bolts erupted from the tips of Veneel's fingers.

The psychic strike hit the closest riptide and the suit staggered backwards, colliding with the other one and for a moment neither of them was firing at the Catachans. Veneel attempted to maintain the flow of warp energy, but the effort of keeping it going became too much for him and the lightning ceased. At the same time Veneel began to fall, being caught by Black.

"Fall back!" Wolf yelled.

"Lieutenant this isn't likely to be their main force." Vance pointed out.

"Maybe not, but if we stay here then we're dead." Wolf replied. Then as her small advance force began to fall back towards the rest of the platoon she activated her microbead, "Grey, Mayer, Molla, we're heading back and we're bringing company."

"Can you give me target co-ordinates?" Mayer's voice responded.

"Not really." Wolf replied.

"Send in a smoke round." Vance told him, "We'll spot it and give you an adjustment."

Just then Tully turned to fire off a grenade, hoping to get another shot at one of the riptides to disrupt its own fire. But as he aimed one of the energy blasts struck him in the shoulder and he screamed in pain, dropping the grenade launcher.

Torrent slid to a halt and crouched beside the injured Tully.

"No time to treat him here." Vance said as he grabbed Tully's uninjured shoulder, "Just pick him up and keep moving."

"See what your plan's done? Torrent hissed as she and Vance pulled Tully back to his feet while Wolf scooped up the grenade launcher.

A whistling sound then attracted the attention of the Catachans as the smoke round from Mayer's mortar flew overhead and struck the ground amongst them. Lacking any explosive content, the round caused no injury but the Catachans suddenly found themselves in the midst of an expanding cloud of smoke.

"Bomber!" Quinn snapped using his microbead, "Right on target. Wait twenty seconds and fire for effect."

Then he turned to his squad and yelled, "Move!"

The smoke provided the Catachans with cover as they withdrew and even with the advanced optics available to the tau battlesuit pilots the aliens found themselves unable to target the human troops accurately. Instead they continued to move forwards, hoping to get through the cloud to a point where they could make use of their superior firepower once more. But just as they entered the cloud there was another whistling from overhead as Mayer's mortar rounds descended. The two suits halted as the first rounds landed, one of them striking the lead suit directly on its shoulder. However, the heavily armoured suit remained undamaged. His troops hidden amongst the undergrowth, Grey watched as Wolf's and Quinn's squads headed back towards their position. Then the ground began to shake as the tau riptides advanced out of the smoke behind them.

"Baum." Grey said, "There's your target."

The gunner took careful aim, lining up the missile launcher on what appeared to be an intake vent of some sort. Once fired the missile flew straight towards the vent, but at the last moment it struck the energy shield that surrounded the riptide and detonated prematurely. In an instant the riptide turned towards Grey's position and raised its main weapon. Then a storm of energy blasts erupted from the weapon and began to tear through the vegetation. Caught exposed as they attempted to reload the missile launcher for a second shot both Baum and Frost were torn apart instantly.

"Stay down!" Grey yelled as more energy blasts flew above him and he activated his microbead, "Lieutenant, we are pinned down. I hope you've got something good up your sleeve."

Mayer had his squad cease fire with their mortars as soon as the riptides came striding out of the cloud of smoke, unwilling to risk landing explosive rounds amongst his own troops. Instead the mortar teams prepared their lasguns.

"There are only two of them." One of the Catachans from the twenty-fifth regiment who had been selected as a squad leader said.

"And there are thirty of us." A second squad leader added. Then he turned to his troops, "Lock and load. Follow me and keep low."

"Hey, the lieutenant ordered you to stay put." Mayer called out.

"What would that outsider know?" the first squad leader asked, "This is the jungle corporal. The tau are on our ground." And the other Catachans began to move forwards.

"Lieutenant Wolf," Mayer said, activating his microbead, "we've got a problem."

Vance and Wolf looked at one another wide eyed as Mayer told them what was happening.

"Are they serious?" Wolf asked, turning to Torrent.

"Probably." The medic replied at the same time as she treated Tully's injured shoulder, "They want payback." Wolf activated her own microbead.

"This is Lieutenant Wolf to all units. Hold position. I say again, hold position."

"Too late." Vance added as he saw the other Catachans advancing.

They fired as soon as they saw the riptides, las rounds bouncing off the riptides' shields and armour and both of the massive suits then turned towards them.

"Try and stop them." Wolf exclaimed as she reached for the handset of the vox unit Orthán carried on his back.

"What are you going to be doing?" Vance asked in reply.

"Getting us the firepower to take those battlesuits out." She answered.

"This is Catachan one nine mark four mark two." Wolf broadcast, "Requesting immediate air support. Over."

The navy pilot at his vox console, confirming that the signal was on the correct frequency for the Imperial Guard.

"Catachan one nine mark four mark two, this is vulture six four two." The pilot responded, "State your requirements. Over."

"We are under heavy fire from tau battlesuits. Riptide pattern. Need urgent air support. Our location three, three two by one four seven. Over."

"Copy that Catachan one nine mark four mark two. We are inbound. Duck and cover."

Vance slid to a halt and dragged one of the squad leaders of the twenty-fifth to the ground. Happening to pull him out of the path of another burst of energy blasts from the riptides.

"What the feth are you playing at?" he demanded, "The lieutenant-"

"You think I'm listening to some outsider?" the squad leader snapped back, shoving Vance away from him, "We can take them." And then he aimed his lasgun at the closest riptide and continued to fire at it.

Frustrated, Vance activated his microbead.

"Lieutenant, I don't think that they're going to listen to me." He said, "We're going to need cover."

"Confirmed sergeant." Wolf replied, "This is Lieutenant Wolf to all units. Open fire. I say again open fire.

Direct all fire on those two battlesuits. Take cover if they seem to be targeting you." And then she pointed her laspistol at one of the riptides and began to fire.

All around the two tau battlesuits the Catachans that had been concealed in the undergrowth appeared and opened fire. Las and shotgun blasts, bolter rounds and grenades all flew towards the two gigantic walking machines but despite the sheer volume of fire there was very little to show for it. The suit targeted by Molla's squad and their heavy bolter staggered back under the weight of fire from the heavy automatic weapon, but few shots penetrated its shield and none penetrated its armour. Both suits ceased their fire on the remaining troopers from the twenty-fifth and instead they targeted Molla's squad.

"Get back!" Molla snapped and he and his men scurried backwards just as the tau opened fire, catching two of the squad before they could reach a new position. Unfortunately in order to be able to retreat quickly, the heavy bolter had to be abandoned.

"Molla, can you read me?" Wolf's voice sounded in Molla's ear.

"Right here lieutenant." He replied.

"What's your status?" Wolf asked.

"Two men down. The heavy bolter still looks intact but we can't reach it."

"In that case just stay back and engage with small arms only." Wolf instructed him. But then one of the riptides simply exploded.

Something dark passed overhead as Wolf looked skywards, followed a moment later by a tremendous roaring sound. After this came two more dark shapes moving at supersonic speeds. Despite having the familiar twin-tailed design, Wolf knew instantly that these were not valkyries. Instead they were vulture gunships, dedicated weapons carriers designed specifically for close air support. The first to pass over carried a pair of lascannons beneath its wings and it was with these powerful energy weapons that it had destroyed the riptide. Now as what remained of the tau machine was tumbling to the ground the three vultures of the flight were slowing and banking around for another pass. With this newly arrived threat taking priority the final riptide turned its attention away from the Catachans and raised its weapons skywards. But this turned out to be a fatal mistake.

Still clutching Tavo's meltagun Quinn burst out of his hiding place and ran headlong towards the riptide, coming to a sudden halt just a few metres away from it.

"Burn alien!" he yelled as he lifted the weapon and fired it. The energy beam struck the riptide at the back of its knee. For a moment there was a bright glow as the shield absorbed the energy but it failed before the meltagun's power pack did and the rest of the blast punched right through, the riptide's armour useless against such a powerful attack.

Quinn turned and ran as there was the sound of grinding metal caused by the riptide's own weight tearing through what was left of the joint. The battlesuit twisted as it fell, landing on its side with an almighty 'crash!' before its arms began to flail about as the pilot tried to lift what was left of his battlesuit up into a position from where it could try and defend itself. But before that could be achieved the vultures returned.

The first two gunships engaged the helpless riptide with lascannon fire, the first slicing off the primary weapon arm at the shoulder before the second blasted open the chest plate.

"Now!" Vance yelled at the troops from the twenty-fifth regiment, "You wanted to advance, well here's your chance." And he leapt up and rushed towards the wrecked riptide. The Catachans behind him cheered as they saw this and followed him as he ran right up to the wreck and climbed up on top of it. There he found the alien pilot struggling to climb out of the battlesuit, being forced to use the hole created by the lascannon hit rather than the actual hatch because of the damage inflicted, "Going somewhere?" Vance asked as he pressed the muzzle of his laspistol to the tau's head and then he fired.

O'Vorthan halted as the communication signals from the riptides ended suddenly. He had known the pilots of all three riptides well and now it appeared that all of them were dead. To make matters even worse the final messages from the heavy battlesuits had included a warning that concerned the tau commander.

Aircraft.

He looked around at the force he had with him. Most of the troops were regular fire warriors, many of whom were on their first active tour but there were also a handful of crisis battlesuits. O'Vorthan himself wore armour similar to the fire warriors rather than the elite crisis teams despite being entitled to wear the battlesuits if he so wished. The reports from the riptides had suggested that the human force up ahead outnumbered his own by almost two to one. The riptides had done a fair job in evening up those odds but O'Vorthan still believed the enemy force was larger than his and now they had the advantage of air support. Four of the six crisis suits available to O'Vorthan carried rapid firing burst cannons that could be pressed into an anti-aircraft role in an emergency, but they were short ranged and lacked sufficient targeting ability to rely on anything other than luck in hitting a flying target. Even then he had doubts about their ability to damage a heavily armoured gunship.

However, O'Vorthan still had one thing working in his favour. Himself. He was a skilled commander who was well able to react to rapidly changing tactical situations and right now he intended to use the skills he had built up over many years of service to the Tau Empire to remove the threat of the aircraft.

The terrain for miles around was covered in jungle, meaning that targets the size of tau warriors or even crisis suits could be hidden from the air by the jungle canopy with relative ease. O'Vorthan knew that the human forces would start to advance again now that they had destroyed the riptides, presumably watched over by the circling gunships. The riptides had left a trail behind them that was easy to follow and the humans would undoubtedly use this to track their movement back to the tau headquarters. This meant that O'Vorthan knew exactly what route they would be taking and he took out a dataslate that held an interactive map of the area and began to search for a suitable location from which to ambush the humans.

"We will stage an ambush." He announced, "Firing and then relocating to prevent the gue'la from targeting us from the air."

The location needed to be one that was sheltered enough that even the crisis suits could remain hidden from the air and also allow for the fire warriors to rapidly move to alternate positions before the muzzle flash of their own weapons could give them away to the gunships.

Studying the map O'Vorthan found a suitable location and was about to order his troops to fall back when he noticed a tiny red dot on his chest and he gasped. Instantly realising what the dot was O'Vorthan dropped the dataslate and began to raise his pulse rifle. But before he could even begin to look for a target Rull fired. The suppressed projectile made too little sound for any of the tau to hear it and the first most of them knew of the attack was when O'Vorthan dropped his weapon as well and fell backwards.

"Shas'O!" a nearby fire warrior called out, rushing to see if the tau commander was still alive. But Rull was ready for this and a second shot sent the lifeless body of this alien tumbling to the ground as well.

"Over there." One of the crisis suit pilots called out, raising an arm that mounted a burst cannon in the direction that his suit's systems suggested was the origin of the attack and firing a prolonged burst of pulse fire into the jungle.

Vance came rushing up to Wolf as she stood beside Quinn and inspected the remains of the riptide.

"I bet Cornelius will want to examine this." Wolf was saying when Vance interrupted.

"Lieutenant, Rull's found the main tau force up ahead." He told her, "He's taken out what he thinks was their commander, but there's still a significant number of them left."

"Did he give an estimate?" Wolf asked and Vance nodded.

"He says about thirty infantry and half a dozen light dreadnoughts."

Wolf began to climb down from the riptide.

"Leave the wounded here." She called out, "Corporal Mayer get a target location from Rull and commence fire. Everyone else advance, we're going to finish this."

With O'Vorthan dead it fell to Shas'Vre'Jurret, the leader of one of the two crisis teams to take command of the tau force. Safely enclosed in her battlesuit she chose to follow the riptides towards the humans. Falling back to stage an ambush as O'Vorthan had intended was a futile plan now that the tau knew there was at least one human sniper watching their every move. Therefore attack was the only choice left.

The main problem was that the human sniper was proving remarkably elusive and each time Vre'Jurret began to think that the suppressive fire laid down by the tau had dealt with him there was another silent shot

that ended the life of another fire warrior. So far four tau other than O'Vorthan had fallen victim to this invisible killer. The jungle only made things worse. Normally Vre'Jurret would have split her crisis suits off from the fire warriors to make use of the suits superior speed and manoeuvrability to close with the human force ahead of the fire warriors. But in this terrain the bulky battlesuits' jet packs were useless and using them to get above the trees would mean being exposed to the heavily armed aircraft that could still be heard patrolling the sky above. Hamstrung by these competing factors, Vre'Jurret was left only with the option of having her battlesuits walk through the jungle ahead of the fire warriors in an effort to use their heavier armour as a shield for the lighter infantry.

An explosion close by scattered one of the squads of fire warriors. Only one was killed as the Catachans employed their indirect fire weapons, but the somewhat random nature of the mortars unnerved the tau while the squad leader attempted to rally his troops.

Then there was a crashing sound from ahead and Vre'Jurret saw a group of humans almost as large as her battlesuit as they came charging towards her. For a moment she thought that this was one of the so-called 'space marines' that were the Imperium's genetically altered elite troops, but then she realised that these figures were too large even for marines and that she was instead facing one of the subspecies of human bred for brute strength over intellect.

"Open fire." She ordered as she let loose a volley of missiles that shot towards the ogryns. Only then did Vre'Jurret see the ordinary humans moving ahead of the larger ogryns. Although the abhumans were able to simply trample the undergrowth flat as they charged, the Catachans considered this sort of terrain their natural environment and they knew how to move through it just as easily as they could over open ground. The fire warriors came to a halt and fired their pulse rifles. The long barrelled weapons possessed greater range than Imperial Guard issue lasguns, but thanks to the jungle the humans had already been able to close to a range where they could return fire and there were pulses of light as the humans shot back at the tau.

"Down!" Vance snapped as the first pulse blasts passed close by. His warning came just in time for Khor and his squad to throw themselves to the ground before the missiles exploded above them. One of the ogryns howled in pain as shrapnel cut into him, but the squad was otherwise unharmed.

"So where's our beloved leader?" Torrent asked, taking cover beside Vance and readying her lasgun.

"I'm right here." Wolf responded as she scabbled forwards through the undergrowth and Vance saw that there was a cut running across her forehead.

"Are you hit?" he asked, wondering how a hit from one of the tau weapons would have failed to take her head off.

"No." Wolf said with a frown, "It was a branch. Someone in front of me pushed it aside as they ran past and then let go of it. Now what's our situation?"

"The tau are over there." Vance replied, pointing towards the alien position, "Looks like Bomber's doing what he can but those battlesuits will be a problem."

Wolf reached for the vox handset on Orthan's back.

"Vulture six four two, this is Catachan one nine mark four mark two. Do you have visual on the enemy?"

Over." she transmitted

"Negative Catachan one nine mark four mark two. Xenos are sheltered by the trees. Over."

"Smoke." Vance said, "If Bomber can land a smoke round on target then maybe the navy flyboys can target that."

Wolf nodded.

"Do it." She said and then she spoke into the vox again, "Vulture six four two we are marking the target with smoke. Be advised enemy is mainly infantry. Over."

"Copy that Catachan one nine mark four mark two. Will watch for smoke. Over."

Another mortar round whistled as it flew overhead and then landed amongst the tau. However, this time there was no explosion, instead a cloud of red smoke began to billow out of the ground and rose up into the air.

Above the trees the trio of vulture gunships adjusted their formation as the smoke became visible, with the two armed with lascannons dropping back to allow the third to take the lead. All three gunships carried nose mounted heavy bolters, but in place of the lascannons and air to surface missiles that two of them were armed with the third also carried rapid firing weapons designed for anti-personnel use beneath its wings in the form of a linked pair of punisher cannons. With a rate of fire of around three thousand rounds per minute the sound of the six barrels each weapon possessed rotating was drowned out by the roar produced by their firing and the hail of projectiles ripped apart the jungle as the vulture strafed the area marked by smoke.

The drawback of such a rapid rate of fire was that even with bulky drums of ammunition to feed them, the punisher cannons soon expended all of the rounds available to them.

"Catachan one nine mark four mark two this is vulture six four two delta. Guns dry. Over."

On the ground the effect of this on the tau was devastating. Even without a clear line of sight to the alien troops, the sheer number of projectiles used meant that more than a dozen were hit, including three of the

battlesuits. The tough armour of the suits saved two of them, but the third was ripped apart along with most of the fire warriors that were struck.

“Disperse!” Vre’Jurret ordered, aware that the close formation of the tau was making her troops more vulnerable to air and mortar strikes. She hoped that by extending her line the humans would be less able to inflict casualties on her troops as rapidly as they had been able to do so far.

Both sides were now both exchanging fire from small arms, supported by a handful of more powerful weapons on each side and to Vre’Jurret it looked as if the battle was turning into one of attrition. To her that was a problem, there were more humans than there were tau and if this continued they would be wiped out. They would take much of this human force with them, but the humans here represented only a tiny fraction of those on the planet whereas there was only a handful of other tau remaining. Vre’Jurret needed to change strategy.

Typically the tau preferred to engage targets from a distance, but here this was impossible since any attempt to withdraw risked putting the tau at further risk if the humans chose to pursue them and she came to a reluctant conclusion. She needed to engage the humans at point blank range.

“Fire warriors hold the line.” She ordered, “Crisis teams stand by to engage jet packs. We will take this fight to the gue’la.”

With the vulture gunships still circling overhead using the battlesuits’ jetpacks was risky, but Vre’Jurret hoped that her crisis teams would be able to conduct a short hop above the trees before they could be targeted and she took a deep breath, “For the Greater Good.” She broadcast to her troops and then she triggered her jet pack.

The thrust from the jet pack sent Vre’Jurret upwards at a rate that allowed her to easily punch through the jungle canopy before arcing through the air above it. Immediately threat warnings sounded inside her battlesuit as the human aircraft spotted her and turned to engage. Fortunately for Vre’Jurret the time she spent exposed was only short and before the vultures could shoot at her, her battlesuit plummeted back through the canopy.

Landing amongst the remaining members of the twenty-fifth regiment Vre’Jurret opened fire with both burst cannon and missiles from point blank range, tearing through the startled troops who had not expected the tau to suddenly land in their midst. A moment later she was joined by the other two battlesuits from her crisis team as they too completed their jump above the jungle canopy. However, only one of the remaining two battlesuits made it to the ground intact, landing close to Wolf’s command squad. The second had the misfortune to break through the canopy right into the line of fire of one of the vultures and a sudden blast from a lascannon destroyed it in an instant, leaving only wreckage and the burned flesh of the pilot to fall back to the ground.

Wolf and her command squad fired on the battlesuit that now turned towards them and raised its arms, each of which was tipped with a long cylindrical weapon.

“Down!” Vance yelled before there were two bright flashes of light as the plasma weapons fired together. Streaking over the heads of the Catachans the plasma bolts struck the side of tree and there was a crashing sound as it toppled over, falling into the trees beside it as it came down. Then came a shriek as Collen fired his flamer at the battlesuit from behind. But although the jet of flame would have been lethal to an unprotected human or tau, the battlesuit pilot remained safe inside his armour as the burning promethium just washed over him. However, now alert to Quinn’s veteran squad behind him, the tau pilot turned to engage them instead.

Meanwhile Vre’Jurret was taking fire from the Catachans in front of her. They were armed only with lasguns but it was only a matter of time before one of them found a weak point in her battlesuit. What she needed to do was get even closer to prevent them from accurately aiming their rifle and so she charged, firing her burst cannon as she ran. The Catachans held their ground, responding with a barrage of fire that came close to driving Vre’Jurret back but as her battlesuit smashed into them she swung its arms and the humans closest to her were tossed aside.

A third suit found itself positioned between Grey’s and Molla’s squads. Sometimes having an enemy on each side could be used to prevent either from firing because of the risk of hitting their own troops, but in this case the Catachans had no such worry. The battlesuit was more than twice the height of a man and by keeping low and aiming for it’s head and chest the Catachans knew that any shots that missed their target would pass over the heads of their comrades.

The final battlesuit to make it past the vulture gunships landed just behind Khor’s ogryns and before the pilot could even turn to face them properly Khor swung his ripper gun and clubbed the back of the battlesuit’s head.

“Ogryns smash!” he bellowed and his squad roared as they all swarmed around the lone battlesuit. Two of the massive abhumans took hold of its arms, pulling them out away from the torso and thus rendering the weapons mounted into them useless while they were pointed away from the ogryns. Then Khor used his ripper gun as a club once more, repeatedly driving the butt of the weapon into the battlesuit’s head until there

was a flash and a shower of sparks as it was knocked free and fell to the ground. Believing their opponent to be dead the ogyrns relaxed their grip, but the battlesuit just staggered about wildly as its pilot tried to use what few sensors remained to him to make sense of what was happening around him. Only the targeting sensors mounted to his arms remained active and so to see what was happening the tau pilot had to direct his weapons at what he wanted to see. Right now what interested him was the ogyrns, but even with their limited intelligence they knew enough to keep out of the way of the randomly pointed weapons until Khor stepped forwards and shoved the muzzle of his ripper gun into the hole left where the battlesuit's head had been removed and fired. Without the armour plating surrounding the pilot's compartment to slow down the heavy duty shotgun blasts there was nothing to prevent them from punching a hole right into it where the cloud of projectiles did as the weapon's name suggested and ripped through the pilot, killing him instantly and Khor roared with triumph as it fell forwards and lay still.

Quinn's squad scattered as the battlesuit targeting them fired its plasma rifles again. Collen was the focus of the attack and he gave a brief scream as the plasma bolts struck the fuel tank for his flamer, igniting its entire contents at once and turning him into a torch. The flames spread and both Downs and Reese were splashed by them, causing both to cry out as they dived to the ground while their comrades extinguished the fire. Watching both this and Khor's destruction of a battlesuit gave Wolf an idea.

"Sergeant I need a leg up." She said to Vance.

"What?" he replied and then he smiled as she pulled a grenade from her webbing and removed the safety pin, "Oh. Right." He said and then he leapt to his feet and ran towards the battlesuit.

He skidded to a halt right behind it and as Wolf followed he helped lift her up as she jumped towards the battlesuit's head. As soon as she struck the back of the battlesuit she wrapped one of her arms around it while with the other she reached up and shoved the grenade she held into its neck joint.

"Fire in the hole!" she shouted as she jumped back to the ground and rolled away from the battlesuit. Inside the tau pilot thought that he had dislodged Wolf himself and so did not consider himself in any further danger. But just seconds later the fragmentation grenade went off, sending shrapnel through the battlesuit's head, torso and pilot compartment. This was followed moments later by a second explosion as the battlesuit's power plant was ruptured as a result of the grenade but by this point the tau pilot was already dead.

"Molla, can you distract this thing long enough for me to get closer?" Grey asked using his microbead.

"Distract how?" Molla replied, "We're already shooting at it. It knows we're here."

"What about that heavy bolter? Can you get it firing?"

"Probably. But not reliably." Molla told him.

"Just do it. I've got an idea." Grey said and then the channel went dead.

Molla looked round at his squad.

"Young! O'Brien!" he snapped, "Wedge that heavy bolter against that tree and give me some short bursts. Aim high and see if you can take that thing's head off."

"Yes sergeant!" Young responded and he and his loader dragged the heavy bolter and its ammunition behind a nearby tree that had a trunk that split into two about half a metre off the ground. Forgoing the tripod that the heavy weapon was typically mounted on they lifted it into the 'V' formed where the trunk split apart and inserted a belt of ammunition.

"Firing!" Young shouted and there was the familiar sound of the rocket-assisted projectiles firing in rapid succession.

The impromptu mount proved less stable than a proper tripod and the heavy bolter shook under the recoil of the heavy calibre rounds, but they had the desired effect of focusing the tau battlesuit's attention firmly on first squad. The tau pilot aimed his weapons at the tree and fired, sending two rapid streams of energy blasts towards it. Seeing this the Catachan gun crew ceased fire and ducked, pulling the heavy bolter down with them but avoiding the pulse blasts. Unwilling to let the powerful weapon be deployed behind him again the battlesuit pilot began to stride towards the tree, maintaining a steady suppressive fire pattern.

Seeing this Grey leapt into action, scrabbling to his feet and charging at the battlesuit from behind with his traditional Catachan blade in one hand and his laspistol in the other. He held his fire as he ran, not wanting to alert the tau to his approach. Grey dived forwards and slid between the battlesuit's legs. As he passed through them he pressed his laspistol to the back of one of its knees and fired. At point blank range the shot destroyed the joint and the tau pilot suddenly found his battlesuit collapsing.

"Oh feth!" Grey exclaimed as he rolled out of the way of the falling war machine.

The battlesuit landed on its back and Grey lunged forwards, pressing his laspistol against the split where the front of the torso connected to the rest of its and he fired again, this time repeatedly as he moved the muzzle of his pistol along it. As Grey knew the split was the seam between the torso itself and the hatch that opened to allow the battlesuit's pilot to enter and exit the machine and by shooting into the hairline crack he eventually struck part of the sealing mechanism and there was a sudden 'hiss' as the hatch began to open.

Dropping his laspistol Grey helped it along, pulling the hatch wide open to expose the pilot strapped into the compartment inside. Then before the startled alien could release his harness and draw the sidearm he carried Grey lashed out with his knife and slit the tau's throat.

One by one Vre'Jurret saw the icons representing the other crisis suits disappear from her tactical display. However, although her fellow battlesuit pilots were meeting their ends for the Greater Good her own battlesuit remained operational. The group of humans she had landed beside was large, but they lacked the same fighting ability as the others. To Vre'Jurret they seemed to be a force thrown together recently rather than one that had trained together and their attacks lacked co-ordination.

What she did not see however was Veneel as he turned away from the battlesuit that Vance and Wolf were engaging and darted away from the command squad.

"Come back here witch!" Black hissed, following the psyker, "I should execute you for your cowardice."

"It's not cowardice." Veneel replied, "I'm going to help them." And he pointed to the troops from the twenty-fifth regiment who were losing more of their number to Vre'Jurret.

"Very well, but I'm not letting you out of my sight." Black said, nodding and the pair continued to make their way towards the battlesuit.

Taking cover behind a large tree Veneel peered around to see Vre'Jurret firing her burst cannon again at the Catachans around her. Veneel could see the box-like missile launcher mounted on her other arm, but could not tell if the reason it was not being used was because Vre'Jurret was unable or unwilling to fire it. The psyker gripped his staff tightly and closed his eyes, breathing deeply as he focused his mind on the crystalline core of the staff that was specifically designed to channel his powers.

"Be ready." He said to Black as he opened his eyes, "If I fail it will be up to you." And then he ran out from behind the tree.

At the last moment Vre'Jurret detected Veneel's approach and the battlesuit whirled around to face him. But before the tau could fire on him Veneel thrust his staff out in front of him and struck the burst cannon.

Veneel's eyes glowed bright blue as lightning of the same colour flowed over the battlesuit, concentrating where the burst cannon was mounted.

Inside her pilot's compartment Vre'Jurret gasped. The human's bizarre mind science that enabled some of them to manipulate some mental power was known to the tau but not understood, the species lacking any psykers of their own, but now here was one stood right in front of her and the unexplainable attack had just taken her burst cannon off line. Knowing that the missile pod on her battlesuit's other arm was out of ammunition Vre'Jurret took a step backwards, hoping to be able to deliver a punch from her suit that would deal with this strange human before she would withdraw for repairs. But Veneel ducked and avoided the swung arm and he swung his own weapon back at her. The staff struck the battlesuit's back mounted power plant and there was a flash as the power plant overloaded and burst into flames.

Veneel fell backwards as the battlesuit collapsed in front of him, dazed by the sudden release of energy. As he regained his senses he saw Vre'Jurret crawling from her ruined battlesuit with a pistol in her hand and he realised that he had dropped his staff and his laspistol was still in its holster.

"I will still kill you gue'la." Vre'Jurret said in the tau language and she raised her pulse pistol towards Veneel. Then just as she was about to fire she felt the muzzle of a laspistol being pressed against the side of her head.

"The Emperor protects all his children." Black said as he glared at her, "But you're not one of them." And then he shot her.

12.

The tau fire warriors left behind by Vre'Jurret when she took the crisis suits to engage the Catachans at close range could hear the sounds of fighting as they tried to press forwards themselves. However, although the weapons fire from most of the human force directed towards them had stopped as the Catachans sought to deal with the immediate threat of the battlesuits in their midst, both Mayer's mortar squad and Rull continued to pick them off. But then the shooting from up ahead stopped and no more mortar bombs came raining down from above.

"The gue'la are defeated." One of the tau exclaimed, "Shas'Vre'Jurret has beaten them."

One of the squad leaders looked ahead, using the optics built into his helmet to examine the jungle where the humans had been located, watching for any signs of movement. Seeing nothing he was at first confident that the fire warrior's statement had been correct and that the human force had been beaten. But then he realised that he could see no movement at all, not even from the crisis suits that ought to have been clearly visible. Then he spotted movement in some of the bushes and he turned towards them, expecting to see a battlesuit come striding through it. But it was nothing of tau construction that emerged.

The Catachan force burst out of the jungle as one, yelling and firing as they charged at the much depleted tau force.

To the tau way of thinking close combat was something to be avoided and when forced to fight in hand-to-hand combat their fire warriors performed poorly. This was particularly true when faced with opponents who were used to such a way of fighting. Opponents such as the natives of Catachan. Initially the tau tried to stand their ground, firing their pulse rifles into the charging mass of human troops. But the Catachans knew how to make use of the jungle for cover and they reached the tau in just a few moments, striking at them with rifle butts as well as their vicious blades. The tau tried to respond in kind but their long barrelled rifles were not suited to use as clubs, their excessive lengths making them awkward to swing.

Witnessing his men being slaughtered, the tau squad leader could give only one order.

"Fall back!" he snapped, broadcasting his order to the entire tau force, "Try to get back to the bunker and regroup there." Then he parried a blow from one of the Catachans with his rifle before stepping back just far enough to be able to shoot him in the chest.

Most of the tau were not as fortunate though and many were shot as they tried to back away or stabbed as they turned their backs on the Catachans. A scream from close by attracted the attention of the squad leader as he withdrew and he saw that one of the fire warriors had been knocked to the ground by a group of humans who had abandoned their rifles and knives and were instead raining down blows upon him with their hands and feet. For a split second the tau squad leader considered intervening to help the fire warrior before he realised that to do so would mean delaying his own retreat and that the moment he shot the first human the others would become aware of him. Ignoring the fire warrior's screams the squad leader continued to fall back.

He continued to make his way through the jungle until he stumbled out onto a trail and only then did he stop and turn around again, watching the jungle for the other tau behind him. But he neither saw nor heard anything that indicated their presence.

"Report." He said, activating his helmet's communicator, "Any fire warrior report." But all he got in return was static. All of the others were dead. Lifting his rifle to his shoulder the tau looked down its optical sight, intending to shoot the first human to appear. But as he searched the jungle for a target he suddenly blinked as a red light was shone directly down his sight. Then just as what the light meant sank in the bullet from Rull's rifle blew apart the pulse rifle's sight and punched through the tau's eye socket into his brain.

"What happened?" Brecht asked, looking at Vre'Lem when the command centre fell silent.

"They are gone." The tau diplomat replied.

"What do you mean gone?" Brecht said.

"Dead. All of them. O'Vorthan, the fire warriors, all of them."

"But that means that the Imperial Guard could be here soon." Brecht said, "We need to get out of here. Call in that starship of yours to collect us."

"The Imperium also has a starship in the system." Vre'Lem pointed out, "One that is more than a match for our transport."

"Then what do you propose to do?" Brecht demanded, "You have to have a plan."

"Of course I do." Vre'Lem responded, "I will do what I always do. I will negotiate."

"Negotiate? Are you insane? What makes you think that you can negotiate with the Imperial Guard?" Brecht exclaimed, "They'll just shoot you dead on the spot."

"On the contrary, I believe that they will agree to allow all the remaining tau on the planet safe passage off world if I just offer them something they want." Vre'Lem said and Brecht snorted in contempt.

"But what do we have that they could possibly want?" he asked and Vre'Lem smiled at him.

"Why you of course governor." He said, "From what I understand of your Imperium it does like to be able to deal with those who turn against it."

"What? No, you promised me that I would be allowed to remain in command of this world." Brecht protested as he backed away from the tau diplomat and he looked around at the other tau in the room, "You promised me."

"That was before your forces failed us governor." Vre'Lem said and then he looked at the two fire warriors standing guard by the door, "Seize him." he ordered, reverting back to his own language and the two tau who had been fortunate enough not to be included in O'Vorhan's force rushed forwards and grabbed hold of Brecht, forcing his arms behind his back and binding them.

"No you can't do this to me!" he screamed as the fire warriors dragged him out of the room, "This is my world! Mine! I order you to release me."

"This looks like the place lieutenant." Vance said as he and Wolf studied the entrance to the tau bunker complex in front of them. The structure was partially buried and there was no telling how deep underground it went.

"I agree." Wolf replied, "It looks well hidden from the air, no wonder the navy couldn't find it."

"Movement." Vance said suddenly as the heavy doors to the bunker began to slide open. Then three tau emerged, halting just outside the bunker. Two of them were fire warriors, wearing the standard armour of their caste while the third instead wore flowing robes.

"Is that another of their leaders?" Vance asked, studying this figure, "Like the one Rull killed in the swamp?"

"I don't think so." Wolf replied, "That tau had some sort of crystal embedded in his skull. This one doesn't. This is something new. Or at least new to us."

"Humans!" Vre'Lem shouted in gothic, "I know you are out there. Our sensors monitored your approach from some distance away. My name is Por'Vre'Lem and I wish to negotiate."

"Negotiate?" Vance exclaimed, looking at Wolf, "Is he kidding? Let's take him out."

"Wait." Wolf said, "I want to hear what he's got to say."

"Hear what he's got to say? Lieutenant, are you out of your mind? You don't have the authority to do any deals with xenos scum." Vance reminded her.

"Until a more adequate punishment can be found treason is punishable by death." Black commented.

"I've no intention of doing a deal with him." Wolf said, "I just want to hear him out. What harm can it do?"

"You could be shot for treason." Vance said and Torrent smiled.

"Let her do it." She said and Wolf frowned.

"I urge you to talk." Vre'Lem called out, "If your officer does not trust me then he may be accompanied by as many bodyguards as he wishes." And at that point Wolf turned to where Khor and his ogryns waited further behind her command squad.

"Sergeant Khor, I want your squad to accompany me. But you are not to fire on the tau unless either I order it or they fire first. Understood?"

"Ogryns follow." Khor replied with a grin.

"Yes, ogryns follow." Wolf repeated and then she got to her feet and walked out into the open.

Vre'Lem hesitated when he saw the ogryns following Wolf out of the jungle.

"You are in command?" he called out to Wolf.

"Lieutenant Emilia Wolf, second platoon, fourth company nineteenth Catachan regiment. Now tell me what you want." She replied.

"Lieutenant Wolf, we are willing to withdraw from this world without further conflict." Vre'Lem said, "I am sure you are aware that we have a ship on the outer edges of this system."

"One that can't approach without the Imperial Navy shooting it down." Wolf said and Vre'Lem smiled.

"Indeed." He said, "That is why I would like your ship to stand down while a shuttle can be sent for us."

"And why would I do that?" Wolf asked.

"Because I can give you Governor Brecht." Vre'Lem told her, "He is inside this facility."

"Really?" Wolf responded, "That is interesting."

"Yes, I thought that would appeal to you lieutenant. I will give you Governor Brecht, you will allow us to leave and no one else needs to die today." Vre'Lem said.

"There's just one slight problem." Wolf said.

"Oh? And what is that lieutenant?"

"I don't negotiate with aliens. Sergeant Khor, now."

"Ogryns!" Khor bellowed, "Kill!"

The fire warriors who took Brecht back to his quarters had not bothered to untie him before sealing him inside and he sat on the side of his bed listening to the sounds of battle. Clearly Vre'Lem's efforts at selling him out to the Imperium had failed and now the handful of fire warriors left the bunker were finding the task of defending it more than they could handle. He heard muffled shouts in both gothic and the tau language along with weapons fire that came from a variety of sources. Every so often there was the sound of a distant explosion, suggesting that the Imperial Guard assaulting the bunker were not shy about causing any structural damage.

All of a sudden the gunfire sounded as if it came from just outside the room, the distinctive sound of tau pulse weapons followed by the booming of shotguns. Then Brecht jumped as the door to his quarters slid open suddenly and from the doorway Quinn and Reese aimed their shotguns at him.

"Thank the Emperor!" Brecht exclaimed, struggling to his feet, "The tau have been holding me prisoner here."

"Of course they have governor." Quinn responded with a grin and he walked up to Brecht and took hold of his arm, "Now come along, I know someone who's keen to speak with you."

The two veteran soldiers escorted Brecht from his quarters, taking him through the corridors of the bunker that were now lined with bodies. A handful were human but the vast majority were tau, some fire warriors but mainly the earth caste technicians who had run the bunker. They took him as far as the base canteen, where the Catachans had gathered. Some of them were injured and Torrent was tending to their wounds.

"Lieutenant." Quinn called out, "Look who we found."

Wolf smiled as she turned around, instantly recognising the face of Governor Brecht.

"Why governor, one of your xenos friends told me that I'd find you down here. I was starting to wonder if he was lying." She said.

"They kidnapped me!" he snapped, "When I refused their offer to betray the Imperium they kidnapped me and pretended to be acting in my name."

"A likely story." Grey said, "I say we waste him."

"No you can't." Brecht protested, "I am the governor of this world and I command you to take me to your superiors. They can deal with this."

Wolf looked up at the ceiling then glanced at Vance.

"Those ducts look pretty sound." She said and he nodded.

"I get it." He replied and he approached Brecht, taking up a position behind him.

"Governor Brecht." Wolf announced, "You are guilty of treason, revolt against the Imperium and heresy. You are also guilty of inciting such acts in others. Do you have anything to say?"

"This is ridiculous. I demand to be released." He responded as Vance stood on a chair to pass a length of rope that had been tied off into a noose at one end over one of the duct that ran the length of the ceiling.

"No! You can't do this!" Brecht shouted as the noose was placed around his neck.

"I am a commissioned officer in His Divine Majesty's Imperial Guard." Wolf replied, "I can and I will."

Black calmly walked up to Brecht and smiled as he laid a hand on the former governor's shoulder.

"Your soul is damned." He said, "The Emperor has no forgiveness for traitors."

Meanwhile Vance carried the other end of the rope over to where Khor and his ogyrns were stood and he held it out.

"Take hold of this would you?" he asked and Khor took the rope.

"All ready lieutenant." Vance said.

"Very well." Wolf replied, "Sergeant Khor, pull."

"No! I can-" Brecht began before he was lifted off the floor.

EPILOGUE.

The display showed everything that the crew of the Lar'Shi-class starship knew about the Par Shallon system, from the location of the command and control bunker on the primary planet to the disposition of the human forces.

The air caste tau commanding the ship watched the symbol that indicated the bunker wink out as the automated data feed was cut off.

"They are gone." The figure dressed in flowing robes stood beside his command chair said solemnly.

"Honoured ethereal, we could try to land a force to-" the ship's commander began, but the ethereal cut him off.

"Kor'O'Torsel, we cannot break through the defences of the gue'la without suffering even greater losses than this world has already inflicted upon us. We will return to our territory and allow the gue'la to savour their victory while it lasts."

Wolf gasped as the sides of her tent were suddenly lifted and she frowned as she continued to pack.

"I could have been changing." She said to Vance as he directed the Catachans now folding the tent so that it could be taken to the starship waiting in orbit, "What would you have done then?"

Vance shrugged.

"Carried on probably." He replied, "You're too small for anyone to notice." And Wolf's frown deepened.

"So do you know where we're going next?" she asked.

"No idea." Vance said, "All I know is that a convoy of troop ships is in orbit to drop off four divisions to secure Par Shallon while some bunch of quill pushers reorganises its government and appoints a new governor. Those same transports will then take us to wherever the Imperium decides we're needed."

"So did anyone suggest leaving me behind?" Wolf asked, pausing her packing and turning to face Vance directly.

"It may have come up." He replied, "But the hassle of transferring you was brought up. Same goes for those guys from the twenty-fifth we rescued. They'd all been listed as casualties already, so the nineteenth has got them now."

"I suppose that means Torrent is our new platoon medic." Wolf said and Vance nodded.

"That's right." He said as Wolf sighed.

"She doesn't like me does she?" she said, "And it's all because I'm still seen as an outsider isn't it?"

"Yes it is." Vance answered.

"And how long will this go on sergeant? Will I be an outsider in your minds forever?"

"Yes lieutenant, I'm afraid you will be."