



CATACHAN ONE-NINE MARK FOUR MARK TWO

3.2: LEGION OF THE DEAD

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Stranded on an explored planet the Catachan XIX Regiment now finds itself surrounded as the slowly awakening Necrons move to exterminate them.

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Ancient systems that had not been active in tens of thousands of years were slowly coming back to life as the Necron Overlord Phennett strode through the chambers of the tomb towards its heart. Behind him followed a group of mindless warriors who carried between them the individual who was responsible for waking them from their ancient slumber. When the consciousnesses of the ancient Necrontyr species had been transferred into the machine bodies they now inhabited only a handful of the most powerful such as Phennett himself had retained any form of individuality or personality while the vast legions of the common citizenry had become the automatons that now served as warriors, nothing more than puppets of their masters. The doors ahead of Phennett swung open slowly as he approached, pulled apart by more warriors under the watchful eyes of the triarch praetorians responsible for protecting what lay beyond.

"Halt Phennett." one of the praetorians called out, "The phaeron has not summoned you."

"Nevertheless, I would speak with him." Phennett replied, "Unless you expect the phaeron to wage war without any knowledge of our enemy."

The phaeron's guards considered this and then stepped aside in unison.

"You may pass Overlord Phennett. But make one wrong move and your existence will end."

"I have no doubt." Phennett replied as he advanced between the triarch praetorians to cast his eyes on the figure sat in the throne at the far end of the room. An overlord like himself, the phaeron had once ruled over more than a dozen tomb worlds such as this before the Necrons had been forced into their aeons of slumber by the enslaver plague. Now though there was no way of knowing what fate had befallen those other worlds. They could have been overrun by aliens or taken by a rival phaeron. Alternately they could still be slumbering on, waiting the day when their true master would return to reclaim the legions that lay within and continue the war against flesh.

"Phaeron." Phennett announced and slowly the figure sat in the throne raised its head and from within its eye sockets came a dull red glow.

"Speak Phennett." the phaeron commanded.

"Phaeron I bring you this gift." Phennett said, stepping aside to allow the warriors accompanying him to bring forth what they carried, "This is the one who responded to our beacon and triggered our re-awakening."

The phaeron looked down at the body that the warriors now deposited at his feet. It had the same humanoid form as most intelligent beings had possessed since the Necrontyr had still inhabited flesh and blood bodies but most of the parts visible beneath the red robe it wore had been replaced with cybernetic components as if it had been trying to emulate in some crude way the transfer of the Necrontyrs' essence into their new metal bodies. The level of replacement was such that there was too little left to be able to identify the species and so it was left to Phennett to tell the phaeron what he knew.

"It is of the same species who came here last phaeron." he said, "They have returned in great numbers."

"What of those who escaped us last time?" the phaeron asked.

"They live as vermin." Phennett replied, "What I learned from this one indicated that they will not oppose us. But the newcomers will."

"Then we should exterminate them before they can become aware of us." the phaeron ordered.

"It is too late for that phaeron. They know of our existence. Some of them escaped me."

"Unfortunate." the phaeron said, "But not disastrous. Do you know where these others are?"

"I do. The information was held within this one." Phennett answered and he looked down at the body, "As is much more that may prove useful."

"It lives?" the phaeron asked.

"It does. The machinery built into its form sustains it."

"You have done well Overlord Phennett." the phaeron said, "Therefore I shall entrust you with what needs to be done next. Take as many warriors as you can gather and find these intruders to my world. Then once you know where they are camped you are to exterminate them all. Do this before they can find us here. But remember Phennett, the tomb is not yet fully operational. Without you the army shall crumble and fade so you are to take no unnecessary risks."

"Of course my phaeron. They shall all die."

The XXI Catachan regiment of the Imperial Guard was not supposed to be here. In fact none of them even knew where 'here' was. The merchant ship requisitioned to transport them through the warp to their next deployment zone had been hurled off course by a warp storm that had deposited them beyond the borders of the Imperium. Following this the detection of a mysterious beacon that appeared to be coming from the wreck of starship lost tens of thousands of years earlier during the Dark Age of Technology had caused the regiment's attached tech priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus to insist that the planet be investigated and only

then had their troubles really begun.

Though it looked ideal from space the planet was a deathworld, filled with plants and animals deadly to human life. Many regiments would have lasted only a few hours on the surface but Catachan itself was the deadliest deathworld known to man and so the troops it produced had grown up knowing exactly how to survive. But it was not just the native flora and fauna that posed a threat to the Catachans. The beacon had not been a call for help from the starship that had crashed here so long ago but instead an attempt by the alien Necrons to call out to more of their kind and so now the Catachans were facing more than just the hostile environment of this world.

Lieutenant Emilia Wolf of the XIX Regiment's Fourth Company, Second Platoon was shown into the command post of Colonel Shryke, the regiment's commanding officer. Unlike the vast majority of the regiment, Wolf was not a native of Catachan. Instead she had come to command one of its platoons by accident, having been captured by alien Kroot mercenaries and then rescued by what had become her platoon only after her original regiment had already left the world they had been deployed to at that time. As a non-native of Catachan or 'outsider' as many Catachans referred to her as she was not truly accepted as one of them even after leading her platoon through two campaigns. Much of this lack of acceptance came from her limited knowledge of how to survive on a deathworld and now that the regiment found itself stranded on one much of the goodwill she had been able to garner had vanished as even some of her own platoon suddenly considered her to be a liability. However, her status as an outsider had been considered a positive point when the regiment's techpriests had sought someone they could rely on to scout a path to the wrecked starship and it had been her platoon that was chosen for the task. A mission that had brought them face to face with the Necrons.

In addition to the colonel and his usual command staff, the command post was currently occupied by the regiment's red robed tech priests. This included Enginseer B5T-RD-3X, the tech priest assigned to fourth company who went by the name Cornelius to those outside the Adeptus Mechanicus but was known informally by the Catachans as 'Cornelius the bastard'.

"Ah, Lieutenant Wolf." Colonel Shryke said as she entered the command post itself, "I'm glad you're here. Enginseer Cornelius has informed me of what you found at the target site but I thought I'd get a more military perspective of it from you."

"Me sir?" Wolf asked in response.

"Yes you lieutenant." Shryke answered, "Now get over here and explain what happened. And don't forget to include how come you left camp with two tech priests and yet returned with only one."

Wolf advanced to the large table that the colonel and his senior staff were gathered around. Laid out on top of it was a map compiled from orbital surveys conducted by the merchant ship that remained in orbit of the planet and marked on this was the Catachan camp as well as the position of the crashed and buried starship that Wolf's platoon had been sent to clear a path towards.

"We located the starship as ordered colonel." Wolf began, "Assisted in part by members of a native tribe we encountered that appear to be descended from the crew of the ship stranded here when it crashed fifteen thousand years ago."

"Ah yes, the natives that appeared to worship members of the Adeptus Mechanicus." Shryke commented, "But do continue lieutenant."

"Well sir, a team consisting of my veteran squad under Sergeant Quinn, my ogryn squad under Sergeant Khor and Magos Serett entered the vessel and it was then that it was discovered that the beacon that first attracted the attention of our Adeptus Mechanicus contingent was in fact being broadcast by a hostile form of xenos. Furthermore while the advance party was inside the starship the rest of us were attacked by several large xenos constructions, resulting in the loss of the sentinel squadron despatched with us. Sergeant Gant was the only one of the pilots to survive, the rest of her men being killed when their walkers were destroyed. Seeing that our position was untenable I gave the order to withdraw into the starship."

"You retreated lieutenant?" one of the other men standing around the table said in an accusing manner. From his accent it was easy to tell that he was not a native of Catachan and the long black coat he wore marked him out as a commissar, a political officer assigned to the regiment to enforce loyalty and discipline and one of the tasks they were most widely known for was summarily executing guardsmen who ran from battle. Being a commissar deployed to a Catachan force was a dangerous assignment, the notoriously independent Catachans were known to arrange 'accidents' for the officers known as 'leashes'.

"She said the position was untenable Garratt." Shryke said to the commissar, "Perhaps you could let her finish before threatening her with a firing squad." then he nodded at Wolf.

"As we fell back into the ship we encountered the survivors of the advance party and it was then that the decision was taken to procure a shuttle from the ship's hangar with which to escape." she continued to explain, "Then having located a shuttle that remained functional and had enough transport capacity we used it to escape from the starship and picked up my first squad under Sergeant Molla who had been guarding an alternate entrance before heading directly back here."

"Very good lieutenant. Now what about Magos Serett?" Shryke asked, "Why is he not back here with you?"

"Ah." Wolf responded, glancing briefly at Cornelius before turning her attention back to Colonel Shryke, "According to Sergeant Quinn the magos turned on my men after encountering one of the xenos species that Engineer Cornelius labelled a Necron. The magos ordered the native troops with him to attack my men and then acted to prevent Sergeant Quinn's troops from engaging the enemy xenos."

"He was a traitor." Commissar Garratt hissed, scowling.

"Yes sir. It appears so." Wolf agreed.

"Well that seems to fit with what Engineer Cornelius has had to say." Shryke replied, "Though he also indicated that one of your men remained behind to observe the enemy."

"Yes sir." Wolf replied, "Guardsmen Jon Rull, my platoon sniper. He volunteered to remain."

"And in the mean time we appear to be stranded on a planet inhabited by both tribes of hostile natives and a xenos force of unknown strength." Shryke said.

"Colonel," a woman in civilian clothing said in another non-Catachan accent from the far side of the table. This was Adept Clay, a quill-pusher from the Departmento Munitorum and it was her duty to oversee the supply of equipment to the regiment, "perhaps we should consider withdrawing from this planet and returning to Trader Willan's vessel."

"That would be unwise Adept Clay." Cornelius replied, "Until the navigator aboard the transport ship can determine our location and plot a safe passage around the warp storm that brought us here we cannot risk leaving the system and if the Necrons possess any weapons capable of downing a starship then aboard the transport would be the most vulnerable place we could be. At least on the surface we can bring the regiment's full firepower to bear on them."

2.

The ghost arks drifted through the darkness of the jungle with only a few low powered running lights giving away their positions, their advanced anti-gravity engines enabling them to hover above the level of the undergrowth and travel unimpeded by it. The drivers of the alien vehicles sat behind a control console located at the rear of the open topped transports while in front of them stood ten warriors, hunched over and inactive as they were carried towards where they would do battle.

Phennett himself was not aboard one of the arks. Instead he rode aboard his personal catacomb command barge. The small circular craft hovered in the same way as the larger arks but moved significantly faster, allowing Phennett to move up and down his column to continually check on its status. Phennett did not pilot the command barge personally or course, such labour was beneath one of noble stature such as him. Instead two warriors sat at the front of the vehicle to operate its controls while Phennett stood in the centre with a console providing him with real time information on all his forces. By the standards of the Necrons the troops and vehicles provided to Phennett for his assault were of only average quality, with none of their most powerful weapons or skilled troops. But compared to the regiment of Catachans Phennett had been ordered to destroy, he had superior troops and weapons far more advanced than anything they could call on. "Distance to target now six hundred." one of the warriors piloting the command barge announced, responding to an alert that Phennett had requested.

"Disperse the column." he ordered, "Surround the vermin at a distance of four hundred from their perimeter. Take us to the high ground at bearing eighty-four distance five hundred. Keep our altitude low enough that we will not be seen but that I may observe the enemy"

"Confirmed." the warrior replied and the command barge suddenly veered away from the column of ghost arks and sped through the jungle. Phennett had selected a very specific location from which to command the battle. The high ground he had instructed the pilots to take the command barge to overlooked the clearing that the Catachans had created using an orbital bombardment from the merchant ship that had brought them here and even with the camp blacked out Phennett could make out the various tents and prefabricated structures that it consisted of as well as the occasional night sentry patrolling between them. Surrounding these were a number of strong points and trenches that would form the first line of the Catachans' defence and it was these that interested Phennett the most. Though he could make out the size and location of each of these, it was not obvious to Phennett what weapons they held or what their arcs of fire were. Fortunately this was information that he would have before too long.

Looking at the console in front of him, Phennett saw the positions of his forces on the tactical display. Many of the ghost arks were already in position while the remainder would be there soon. The orders Phennett had given placed the ghost arks and the squads of warriors they carried placed them well beyond the kill zone that the Catachans had cleared beyond their camp perimeter that ironically gave Phennett a better view of their position unimpeded by vegetation. He waited while the remaining transports, those that had had furthest to travel in order to get into position to reach their destinations and complete the process of surrounding the Catachans.

"Order first wave forces to advance to positions at range two hundred and disembark." Phennett ordered, his words relayed instantaneously to the drivers of the relevant ghost arks and a fifth of them began to move forwards slowly and quietly, tightening the noose around the unsuspecting Catachans.

Wolf sat down on her bed in the tent she had to herself as commander of Second Platoon. Her predecessor had shared a tent with his sergeants, other than the abhuman Khor. This was not uncommon in Catachan regiments where officers associated with enlisted personnel to a far greater degree than in any others. However, she felt uncomfortable about sharing with three men so instead opted to exercise her right to a private tent under Imperial Guard regulations. She yawned and was just lifted her top up over her head when all of a sudden Sergeant Molla, the leader of First Squad burst in.

"Molla!" she exclaimed, "What the hell are you doing?"

"Lieutenant I think you'd better come quickly." Molla replied.

"Come where?"

"Outside. Rull's just checked in and if he's right we're all fethed." Molla said and Wolf groaned before grabbing the belt that carried her las pistol in a holster as well as a selection of other equipment and exiting the tent.

Outside she found Sergeant Grey of Second Squad, Quinn of her veterans, Platoon Sergeant Vance and Corporal Mayer of Second Platoon's mortar squad all stood in a group apparently searching the jungle with their magnoculars.

"Okay guys, what's going on that can't wait until morning?" she asked.

"Rull sent us a message." Vance replied, "He says the jungle is crawling with those Necron things."
"Come on Bomber." Quinn then said to Mayer, using the nickname that had been applied to him because of his role in the platoon, "Tell us where you'd be."
"I don't know." Mayer replied, "There are a few good spots to locate heavy weapons but hiding an entire army is something altogether different."
"Let me see." Wolf said and she took her own magnoculars from her belt and peered through them. The optical device allowed her to see almost as well in the dark as she could during the day and she could make out the jungle surrounding the camp in great detail. However, even given the lessons she had received from Molla she had nowhere near the level of experience in jungle warfare that her troops had. Even the newest recruits from Catachan had the benefit of growing up on that world.
"I don't see a damned thing." Grey said.
"Rull's never wrong." Wolf said, sighing as she lowered her magnoculars. Then she looked at Molla, "Sergeant send one of your men to alert Major Trent." she ordered, "Tell him that Rull has reported enemy activity beyond the perimeter and that I'm having Second Platoon stand to."
"Yes lieutenant." Molla replied before rushing to the tent where the rest of his squad slept.
"Everyone else go make sure everyone's awake. We're standing to." Wolf added.
It took only a short time for Second Platoon to reach the positions assigned to them on the perimeter, consisting of one long trench on the front line for most of her squads plus a dugout further back where Mayer's squad had already set up their mortars ready for use. Behind them shouted orders could be heard drifting through the darkness as not only the rest of Fourth Company but the entire XIX Regiment prepared for action on her word.
"Fourth Company sound off. Over." the voice of Company Colour Sergeant Stubbs broadcast, indicating that the entire company was now in position and their commanding officer Major Trent wanted to know why he was stood to in a dugout rather than asleep in his bed.
"First Platoon no sighting. Over." Captain Fear reported in first.
"Second Platoon no sighting. Over." Wolf added as she continued to peer into the darkness outside the perimeter.
"Third Platoon no sighting. Over." Lieutenant Lore reported finally.
"They must be out there somewhere." Wolf commented and she looked at Vance, "Right?"
"Like you say, Rull's never wrong." he replied.
"Maybe not." the platoon's medic, Guardswoman Torrent added, "But he does have a vicious sense of humour."
"Rull wouldn't pull a joke like this." Vance said and Wolf frowned.
"Time to shed some light on this." she said as she activated her microbead headset, "Corporal Mayer," she transmitted, "I want a volley of illumination rounds one hundred metres beyond the tree line. Confirm, over."
"Understood lieutenant." Mayer replied, "Illumination, three round spread one hundred metres beyond kill zone. Ready on your mark. Over."
"Here goes." Wolf said. Then she switched her microbead to transmit again and simply added, "Fire."
There was the echoing sound of three mortars being fired in rapid succession, followed by a whistling as the projectiles passed high overhead in an arc. These began to descend over the jungle until the built in altimeters determined that they were at the optimum altitude and they burst open. Two things happened together as the mortar rounds burst apart. Firstly the pyrotechnic charge they carried burst into flames, spreading a harsh white light all around while in addition a small parachute deployed to keep the burning flares aloft much longer.
Wolf then looked into the jungle once more, where now the light from the flares penetrated the trees in narrow beams and visible within those beams was a mass of silver coloured humanoid figures marching in step towards the Catachan camp and every one of them held a bulky rifle-sized weapon.
"Oh feth." Wolf said as she saw this. Then she reached out to grab hold of the handset to her command squad's vox unit and set it to broadcast to every other vox and microbead in the camp, "Contact! Contact! Contact!"
"Bomber!" Vance snapped, activating his microbead, "Make it rain."
"Copy that sergeant. Fire in the hole." Mayer responded and he and his men instantly set to work loading high explosive rounds into their mortars and launching them into the jungle.
Second Platoon were not the only ones to see the advancing Necrons however, and either side of their position more of Fourth Company's heavy weapons squads opened fire and the sound of mortars was joined by the rhythmic pounding of auto-cannons and the more rapid firing of heavy bolters, their streams of rocket assisted projectiles clearly visible as they tore through the undergrowth and detonated on impact with the Necron warriors.
From elsewhere in the camp more flares were fired following Wolf's warning and in under a minute the jungle all around them was lit up from above and everywhere the story was the same. Marching out of the darkness

came thousands of Necron warriors and in response the Catachans opened fire. While still within the jungle the Necron warriors were out of range of the Catachans' standard issue small arms, leaving only their heavier weapons able to effectively engage the aliens. But the reverse was also true and lacking any heavy weapons of their own the Necron warriors could do nothing but advance through the merciless barrage of fire.

"They're all around us sir." one of Colonel Shryke's staff officers told him. From outside the command post the sounds of firing could be heard, in particular the Hydra anti-aircraft and Wyrvern mortar batteries attached to the XIX Regiment's command group that were now lending their firepower to wherever it appeared to be needed most.

"Casualty reports?" the colonel responded.

"None from our men yet." the officer answered, "But estimates for the enemy are hard to gauge."

"How so?" Commissar Garratt asked, "Don't our men have magnoculars?"

"Yes sir. But it seems that even after taking multiple hits the enemy are still getting back up."

"This is to be expected." a nearby tech priest said, stepping towards the table, "Necron machines often include self repair mechanisms that are beyond our ability to replicate. Warn your men colonel, even a damaged Necron is to be considered an active combatant."

Colonel Shryke looked to the officer who had brought him the report.

"Spread the word." he told him, "Make sure that the enemy is down before moving on to another target." then he looked around towards the row of Catachans operating vox sets, "Signal Captains Lokk and Moore." he said, "I want Sixth Company's armour and Seventh's sentinels ready to move if we see any signs of enemy vehicles."

3.

Despite the continuous barrage of heavy weapons fire directed towards them, the hordes of Necron warriors showed no signs of halting their advance and it was not long before they stepped out of the undergrowth and into the area around the camp perimeter that had been cleared of vegetation.

The kill zone.

Once exposed the Necron warriors were detected by the auspex arrays built into the tarantula sentry guns that surrounded the camp and the automated weapon platforms turned towards the first Necrons to attract their attention and opened fire. Mounting either twin linked heavy bolters intended for use against infantry targets or twin linked las-cannons for use against vehicles the weapon platforms had only infantry targets to engage and they did so with the cold efficiency only a machine spirit could manage. Given time to study the Necrons the heavy bolter equipped tarantulas sprayed their mass reactive ammunition into the densest clusters of enemy troops while the slower rate of fire of the las-cannons meant that they picked off individual targets instead. But it was the tarantulas equipped with las-cannons that took a greater toll on the Necrons. Many of the alien warriors fell under the barrage of bolter shells but as their shattered bodies hit the ground many of them began to pull themselves back together before the eyes of the watching Catachans, only to rise to their feet once more and continue to advance towards the Catachan lines. On the other hand the powerful las-cannons that were designed to be able to penetrate even the thickest armour plate in the galaxy was capable of punching right through a Necron warrior, inflicting enough damage that rather than collapsing and attempting to repair itself the remains of the humanoid machine would simply fade away and leave no trace that it had ever existed.

But even this was not enough to turn back the Necron advance and the warriors continued to march forwards.

"Coming into range now." Wolf announced to her platoon as she peered over the top of her trench. The height of an average Catachan, whether male or female, was significantly greater than that of guardsmen from many other worlds and even among her old regiment Wolf was considered to be short and the only way she was able to see out of the trench was by standing on the firing step on the tips of her toes.

"Present." Vance shouted and to either side of him the members of the platoon armed with lasguns and grenade launchers positioned themselves on the firing step and took aim.

"Now!" Wolf ordered and her men opened fire, flashes of las fire erupting from the trench line accompanied by the distinctive popping sounds of grenade launchers being discharged shortly before their explosive projectiles detonated amongst the enemy.

Though considered effective battlefield weapons, the real strength of a lasgun lay in its ease of manufacture and use and its durability rather than its stopping power and they were far weaker in this respect than any of the other weapons yet turned on the Necrons. However, for all their individual weakness the overall firepower of several hundred being fired at the Necron warriors was immense and struck by multiple shots even the alien machines succumbed eventually, dropping to the ground where not all of them were able to get back up and as happened with the other warriors who had failed in their attempts to repair themselves these Necrons simply faded away into nothing. But the Necrons being in range of the Catachans' lasguns meant that the Catachans were also in range of the strange rifle sized weapons that they carried and all of a sudden the Necrons raised them and took aim.

Like their Imperial Guard opponents, the Necrons were armed with portable energy weapons but the similarity ended there and while the Catachans were forced to rely on getting multiple hits on a Necron to make up for the individual lack of stopping power from a lasgun the Necron weapons were powerful in their own right. The Necron warriors targeted the emplacements that held the tarantula weapons platforms where possible and beams of greenish light erupted from the muzzles of their weapons. Striking the sandbagged strong points where the Catachans' automated defences had been placed the effect was impressive. Holes suddenly appeared in the sandbags, expanding as the beams continued to impact against them but rather than simply allowing the sand to flow out the beams then caused the contents of the bags to vaporise as well. In some cases the impact of multiple weapons caused the entire strong points to collapse under their own weight. But in other cases the energy beams continued to burrow through the sandbags until they had bored holes right through into the interior where in turn they struck the emplaced tarantulas. The armour plating of a tarantula was considered to be sufficient to protect it not only against human small arms but also those of Eldar, Orks, Tau or any of the other 'common' alien species in the galaxy. However, the Necrons were anything but common and their weapons were just as effective against the tarantulas as they had been against the sandbags that were supposed to protect them. First the armour plating itself dissolved and this exposed the inner workings of the weapons, including the stored ammunition and when the alien energy beams struck either the explosive warheads of the heavy bolter rounds or the volatile chemicals used to

create the power packs for the las-cannons the effect was the same.

The tarantulas exploded.

One by one the automated weapons were silenced though the same sandbag defences that had been supposed to protect the tarantulas instead served to protect the Catachans close by from the effects of the explosions as they absorbed the blast waves while producing no fragmentation themselves.

"This is it." Molla said, "With the guns down there's not much to keep them back."

"Fix bayonets!" Vance shouted.

"Well at least we've already got about half of them." Wolf commented as she drew her las pistol and flicked off the safety.

"Want to bet on that lieutenant?" Torrent asked as she looked over the top of the trench to where another wave of Necrons was now striding out of the jungle behind the first.

"Throne!" Grey exclaimed when he saw them, "Where are they all coming from?"

"First Squad, Second Squad, target the reinforcements." Wolf ordered, knowing that their lasguns and support weapons had the range to reach to the tree line, "Everyone else wait for my order and engage the closest Necrons." and then she tried to aim her las pistol over the top of the trench.

"Having trouble there lieutenant?" Torrent asked, smirking at the difficulty Wolf was having with the height of the trench.

"I'll be fine." Wolf replied as she dragged an ammunition case up onto the firing step to use to boost her height just enough to be able to aim her weapon comfortably.

When the perimeter had been set numerous small posts had been set into the ground around it at various distances, marking ranges for anyone not using magnoculars to survey the area and Wolf watched a particular set of markers that she knew represented the effective range of not only her las pistol but also some of the other shorter ranged weapons Second Platoon was equipped with and when she saw the Necrons draw level with them she gave a shout.

"Fire!" she yelled and there was the booming of shotguns as Quinn's veterans opened fire with their projectile weapons, drowning out the sound of the las weapons held by Wolf's own command squad.

But another sound was heard over that of the shotguns, as Sergeant Khor gave the order for his ogryns to join the battle. Large and brutish, the abhumans made excellent shock troops and were equipped accordingly with large bore automatic shotguns known as ripper guns.

"Ogryns fire!" Khor bellowed and even the sound of the shotguns being fired by Quinn's squad was drowned out as the ogryns opened fire as well. Both the rate of fire and stopping power of a ripper gun was roughly equivalent to that of a heavy bolter, though having a much shorter range and so when six ogryns opened fire with them together it was akin to having two full heavy weapon squads joining the fray and the Necrons advancing towards Second Platoon were suddenly halted in their tracks.

Wolf continued to fire her las pistol and she noticed that just as she had seen before the damage Necrons appeared to be repairing themselves and if something was not done to prevent this then many of them would soon be back on their feet again.

"Sergeant Vance we need to do something about those machines repairing themselves." she said.

"What about grenades?" he suggested, "Perhaps if we can spread their parts around a bit they won't be able to put themselves back together as easily." and Wolf nodded.

"Do it." she said.

"We need frags." Vance called out, "Put them where you see those things trying to put themselves back together." and the platoon paused in its fire while its members took grenades from their webbing and primed them.

"Some burning promethium ought to help." Quinn commented and he looked at the member of his squad armed with a flamer, "Get ready to light them up." he added.

"Be careful not to block our line of sight." Wolf warned, aware of how a curtain of flame could cover the enemy advance.

"Short bursts." Quinn told the veteran.

"Now!" Vance yelled when he saw that most members of the platoon were ready and almost in unison the platoon hurled their grenades. At the same time there was a screeching sound as the flamer was discharged and fire washed over several Necrons that had been starting to drag themselves back to their feet. Then the members of the platoon, including the flamer operator ducked down into their trenches as the fragmentation grenades went off in rapid succession and the combined explosions not only tore yet more Necron warriors apart but also scattered the pieces of them and many of the already damaged warriors so far apart that they could not put themselves back together and one by one they faded away.

Second Platoon was then presented with a brief pause in the battle. The Necrons advancing towards their position had been wiped out and their reinforcements were still some distance away. So when Wolf stood back on top of the ammunition case she took the opportunity to study the state of the perimeter elsewhere. As far as she could tell most of the tarantulas had been destroyed but there were still plenty of man portable

heavy weapons being used to defend the camp. These had been joined in places by the limited number of armoured vehicles available to the XIX Regiment. The regiment's entire sixth company was mechanised with its squads transported in Chimera infantry fighting vehicles supported by a squadron of Hellhound flame throwing tanks and two squadrons of Tauros light reconnaissance vehicles. These had responded to support the line where the Necrons had hit hardest and the considerable firepower the vehicles carried was now driving the alien machines back.

But the problem remained of the Necron reinforcements that continued to march out of the jungle. The supply of these replacement troops appeared somewhat haphazard and random but if it continued unabated then eventually the Catachans would be overwhelmed as their ammunition ran out.

Another volley of mortar rounds whistled overhead and Wolf ducked again, realising that these were aimed closer than those that had been bombarding the jungle and seconds later, just as she clamped her hands over her ears she felt the shock wave of their detonation amongst the latest Necron reinforcements.

"Lieutenant!"

Wolf looked up to see Grey looking back down at her and she glanced towards the section of the trench his squad occupied, worried that they had been forced to evacuate. But as far as she could tell all his troops were still in place.

"Sergeant, what's wrong?" she asked.

"I just got a signal from Rull." Grey replied, "It was pretty broken up but the gist of it was that there's a bunch of vehicles out there that look to be teleporting new troops in."

"So that's where all these fething reinforcements are coming from." Vance said, scowling.

Wolf climbed back up onto the ammunition crate again and peered through her magnoculars.

"I don't suppose he gave any hint as to where they are did he?" she asked.

"I could barely read him as it was." Grey replied, "But I'm guessing that means they're over in that direction somewhere."

"Where they'd be closest to your squad." Vance commented, "That's why you were the only one to receive the signal."

"I can't see anything." Wolf said, climbing back down into the trench, "But I better call this in." and without needing to ask she was handed the vox handset, "Catachan One Nine Mark Four this is Catachan One Nine Mark Four Mark Two. Over."

"Copy Wolf. Go ahead. Over." Major Trent's voice replied.

"Sir I have a report of enemy vehicles in the jungle being used to deliver reinforcements. Over."

"Do you have visual contact? Over."

"Negative sir. Just a garbled vox signal. Over."

"Wolf if the enemy has armour out there then we need to know for certain. Take your platoon into the jungle and find out one way or the other. Over." Trent ordered and Wolf sighed, knowing that this meant leaving the relative safety of the trench for the danger presented by the open ground of the killing zone and the jungle beyond it.

"Understood major. Over and out." she replied before returning the vox handset to its operator, "Thanks Turner." she said to the man. Then she looked at Vance and Grey, "You both caught that?" she asked, already knowing that they did and they nodded.

"We'll need Bomber to lay down some smoke for us." Vance said, "And that's going to really mess up the lines of sight for the platoons either side of us."

"Oh sod them." Grey responded, "It's us that's being sent out there and I want to remain as invisible as possible."

"Grey's right." Wolf said, "The other platoons can look after themselves. I just want to worry about us." and then she activated her microbead, setting it to broadcast to the entire platoon, "Second Platoon stand by to advance on my command."

"Advance?" Quinn responded before she could finish, "Lieutenant have you seen what it's like out there?"

"I am aware of the situation sergeant." Wolf replied, "But Major Trent's orders are for us to go into the jungle and confirm the presence of enemy armour. Corporal Mayer, your squad will remain within the perimeter and lay down smoke to cover us."

"Understood lieutenant." Mayer replied, "Switching to smoke now."

"Pass the word." Wolf said out loud, "Get ready to advance and maintain vox silence once we're in the jungle. I wouldn't put it past these xenos to be able to track our signals." and she drew her las pistol and reached up for the top of the trench with her other hand.

More mortar shells flew overhead as Mayer's squad aimed a volley at the tree line and they burst open to release a cloud of thick green smoke that began to expand in all directions. A second volley followed this, landing somewhat closer to the Catachan trenches. Then a third landed even closer, turning the original cloud into a corridor of smoke that drifted all the way back to the trenches and provided a route into the jungle where Second Platoon could advance without being seen.

"Now!" Wolf yelled and she went to pull herself up out of the trench. But her grip gave way and she fell back down, landing flat on her back.

"Ogryns forward!" she heard Khor yell as she got back to her feet as quickly as she could, holstering her las pistol to give her two hands with which to try and climb out of the trench. But it still was not enough and she tried in vain to exit the trench until all of a sudden a hand reached back down and grabbed her by her belt. "Try not to get left behind lieutenant." Vance said as he dragged her upwards, "Now come on. Before the enemy starts wondering why we laid down smoke in just this one area." and he broke into a run through the smoke.

"I'm coming." Wolf replied, doing her best to keep up with Vance, "It's not so easy to run with the galaxy's tightest wedgie up your butt."

From ahead of her wolf saw flashes of light even through the smoke that marked out where her men were encountering Necron warriors coming the other way and firing on them. The the brief flashes were replaced by the sudden roar of ripper guns as Khor's ogryns took the lead and began clearing a path for the rest of the platoon. The flashes of light and noise of firing had the advantage of letting Wolf know that she was heading in the right direction as she soon found herself completely disorientated by the smoke surrounding her. Then she felt something slip beneath her foot as she trod on it and something struck the side of her leg that felt like a hand grabbing hold of.

"Don't look down. Don't look down," she muttered, guessing that she would not like what she saw if she did. Instead she stumbled on until she emerged from the smoke and found herself surrounded by jungle.

"Careful there lieutenant." Molla called out and Wolf ground to a halt just in time to avoid running straight into an insect hive that still managed to remain intact despite the battle raging around it.

"Thanks." she replied, "Now is everyone here?"

"Tucker didn't make it." Grey answered, "One of those Necrons things ran him through with a blade. Must have been not that far in front of you actually." and Wolf winced as she realised that she had been correct in guessing that she had trodden on a body in the smoke.

"Well let's not hang about here." she said, "We need to-" but before she could finish there was the roar heavy of gunfire from behind them and a volley of heavy bolter rounds ripped through the undergrowth close by.

"Feth!" Molla snapped as the platoon dived for cover and he snatched up the handset to his squad's vox, "To whoever is shooting that heavy bolter off in grid nine. Check your fething fire. There are friendlies present." and the heavy bolter fire ceased abruptly.

"Thanks." Wolf said to Molla, "Now lead the way and everyone keep an eye out for these vehicles."

With Molla's squad taking the lead, Second Platoon began to advance through the jungle. Their progress was slower than Wolf had become used to from them due to the darkness combined with the fact that this was a deathworld and anything around them could be deadly. All of a sudden Molla dropped to his knees and held up a hand for the platoon to come to a halt.

"Let's go see what he's found." Wolf whispered and she waved her command squad forwards. When they reached Molla they found him staring ahead through the undergrowth to where a gully ran in the direction of the camp and inside this the glowing lights of Necron eyes were just about visible.

"Looks like the route being taken by the reinforcements lieutenant." Molla said, pointing towards the gully, "Some of them at least."

"A couple of grenades in that would slow them down." Vance commented.

"And give us away." Wolf replied.

"Lieutenant, the enemy is going to figure out we're here sooner or later." Vance told her, "They can't help but notice all that smoke Bomber laid down for us."

"Plus we've already taken out some of them in the smoke." Molla added, "This way at least we get to be the ones striking first."

"Okay then." Wolf replied, "Khor's ogryns?"

"Their grenades are bigger." Vance said, nodding in agreement.

"Then go tell him." Wolf ordered and Vance dashed to where the abhumans waited patiently.

"Khor," he said, "we need your squad to through grenade into that hole over there." and he pointed at the gully.

"Ogryns throw." Khor responded, nodding and pulling a grenade from his webbing. Seeing this the rest of his squad copied and moments later half a dozen explosive charges the size of a human head were hurled towards the gully. One fell short and two flew right over it as the ogryn throwers put too much strength into the throw but this still left three of the oversized grenades that landed close together in the gully and that went off almost simultaneously.

The blast filled the gully with shrapnel that ripped apart several Necron warriors unfortunate enough to be close to the grenades when they detonated. But more importantly the combined explosive power was sufficient to collapse the sides of the gully for a distance of about ten metres in either direction of the blasts and with their path now blocked the Necron warriors caught in the gully behind the blockage were forced to

start climbing out of it in search of an alternate route.

“Quick!” Molla snapped at the two men who made up his squad's heavy weapon team, “Get that bolter up and running.”

Acting quickly the two Catachans unfolded the tripod one carried before placing First Squad's heavy bolter on it and feeding a belt of ammunition into the weapon. Then as soon as it was ready for use they turned it on the Necrons.

A handful of the alien machines had already been able to climb out of the gully and with the Catachans concealed in the undergrowth they had turned to circumvent the blockage and these were now caught out in the open. The powerful explosive rounds made short work of the Necrons, while fire from First Squad's lasguns was aimed into the undergrowth where the warriors fell to make it as hard as possible for them to repair themselves. Then with those machines dealt with the squad turned their weapons on the Necrons still trying to climb out of the gully.

“Can your squad hold them here?” Wolf asked and Molla nodded.

“Should be able to.” he replied, “They're sitting targets trying to climb out of that gully.”

“Good. Then you stay here and cover our retreat while I take the rest of the platoon to find this armour.”

4.

The gully was not the only route being taken by the Necron warriors making their way towards the Catachan lines and as Wolf led her troops forwards they saw the glowing eyes of more of the alien machines in the darkness.

"Tell everyone to spread out." Wolf said softly, "Avoid contact with the enemy. Hopefully with Molla and his men making all that racket behind us this lot will just pass us right by."

The platoon did as it was ordered, even the ogyrns remaining still while the Necron warriors marched past, apparently oblivious to their presence.

"Not too bright are they?" Vance muttered after a warrior came within five metres of him without even turning around.

"And the competition for that is pretty high." Torrent responded, keeping her las pistol pointed towards another nearby warrior but throwing a glance in Wolf's direction.

"I heard that." Wolf replied, "Now let's keep moving. With any luck by tracking these things back the way they came we'll find the vehicles we're hunting."

The cloud of green smoke interested Phennett. It was obviously intended to conceal the activity of the beings in the camp below him but he could not determine exactly what they were up to. The smoke obscured an area of open ground between his prey's outer defensive line and the jungle, suggesting that it was intended to provide cover for a counter attack. However, the cloud was too small to allow more than a handful of troops to leave their trenches without being seen at once and there were no indications of a large scale build up on the other side of the cloud to follow them and although the reports coming in from his warriors indicated that some were suffering damage while still within the cover of the jungle this could easily be explained by the light artillery weapons that the enemy forces had at their disposal. Satisfied that his opponents were not about to launch a counter attack Phennett turned his attention back to other parts of the battle where his warriors were being held back by a group of armoured vehicles mounting heavy firepower.

"Hear that lieutenant?" Quinn asked as he hurried to Wolf's command squad. He had left the rest of his squad where they were, leading Second Platoon's advance now that Molla and his men had remained behind to distract the Necrons.

"Hear what?" Wolf asked. Despite the amount of time she had spent in jungle terrain since joining the XIX Regiment she still had not got used to the idea of being able to instantly tell which sounds were out of place.

"Wait I think I hear it." Vance commented.

"That humming?" Torrent asked and she hummed softly.

"Deeper." Vance replied and he too started to hum.

"Right. Humming." Quinn said and then he began to hum as well.

This prompted Wolf to frown.

"In the name of Him on Earth would you lot stop doing that?" she hissed, "It's damned annoying."

"Of course lieutenant." Quinn said as they all stopped humming.

"So I take it that this humming sound isn't natural then?" Wolf asked and Torrent snorted.

"Fething outsider." she muttered and Wolf glared at her briefly.

"I preferred you when you had your hands tied behind your back and your mouth stuffed full of bandages." she said, referring to an incident not long after the Catachans had arrived on this planet and Wolf had mistakenly believed that Torrent had been about to try and kill her and ambushed and bound the medic instead.

Then she looked back at Quinn, "Right, so what is it and where is it coming from?" she asked him.

"Sounds to me like an anti-grav engine." Quinn told her, "And not the basic thrust vector drives that the Tau used, I'm talking honest to the God-Emperor anti-gravity. Like Eldar or Astartes Land Speeders."

"So it's the armour we're looking for." Wolf said, "Good. Sergeant I want you to take your men and get visual confirmation of the enemy position. Then send someone back for the rest of us."

"Yes lieutenant." Quinn responded before turning around and heading back to his men.

"In the mean time," Wolf said to Vance, "we better spread the word and get Grey's men to unpack their missile launcher. If we have found the enemy armour then I expect we'll be needing it soon."

Including Quinn, there were only six members of Second Platoon's veteran squad left following the losses they had suffered at the site of the wrecked starship, barely more than half of the squad's full strength. But this small number was enough for them to be able to maintain a watch all around them as they crept forwards through the jungle undergrowth while also making it easier for them to avoid detection. Following the sound of the anti-grav engine they soon found themselves on the edge of an area of boggy ground,

looking out at the mud and grass that it consisted of. But rather than the terrain ahead, Quinn and his men were more interested in the strange alien vehicle that hovered above it. Looking something like the ribcage of some massive alien beast, the vehicle had a single pilot located at the rear beneath a forward facing arch and was surrounded by hundreds of tiny insect-like machines. But the most glaring feature of the machine was what it contained within the structure. Standing in two rows were the incomplete bodies of Necron warriors and while Quinn and his men watched the machine insect swarm proceeded to add the parts needed to complete them.

"Downs, get back to the lieutenant and bring her here as quick as you can. She needs to see this." Quinn said and one of his men nodded and started to run back the way the squad had come.

It took just a few minutes for the rest of the platoon to arrive and along with Grey, Wolf's command squad joined Quinn's veterans in staring at the Necron vehicle. They were just in time to see some of the Necron warriors under construction be completed and be lowered to the ground where they waded through the bog and began to march in the direction of the Catachan camp.

"What is that thing?" Wolf said softly as she studied it through her magnoculars.

"It's surrounded by those things Cornelius the Bastard called 'scarabs'." Quinn replied, "I reckon that they're making new troops."

"So where are they getting the resources from?" Vance asked.

"How should I know?" Quinn asked in reply, "Do I look like a cogboy?"

"Oh no." Wolf said, lowering her magnoculars, "I don't think that they're making new soldiers at all. Look." and she pointed to what passed for the floor of the Necron vehicle where new warriors were taking shape.

"What am I looking for?" Grey asked as he too looked through his magnoculars, "Oh wait, I see it. That green glow that leaves behind a pile of parts."

"So that's it." Vance said, "They're teleporting the parts needed for making more of themselves from some central location."

"I don't think so." Wolf replied, "Take a look at those parts being brought in."

"They look like they've taken a beating." Grey said.

"Exactly." Wolf agreed. Then she looked at the sergeants surrounding her, "Look, whenever we've seen any of these things destroyed they just vanish right?"

"Yeah, they into thin air like they never existed." Quinn agreed.

"Oh feth." Vance added, "I think I see where she's going with this."

"Well how about she let's the rest of us mere mortals in on her amazing outsider knowledge." Torrent commented from behind him.

"I will if you give me a chance." Wolf said, "The way I see it is this. When we see destroyed Necrons vanish they have to be going somewhere and I think that they're going somewhere like this. This thing isn't building new Necrons at all, it's repairing the ones we've destroyed."

"So every time one of our lads takes out a Necron it just pops up back here, gets fixed and marches right back to camp?" Quinn said.

"Exactly." Wolf said, "Which means that even if a certain percentage can't be fixed we'll still have to keep destroying the same Necrons over and over again."

"Not if we blow that thing up I'll bet." Grey said.

"My thoughts exactly sergeant." Wolf replied, "Now have your men bring up their missile launcher. That vehicle doesn't have much in the way of armour so it should be easy to take out."

"Dean. Michaels." Grey snapped, waving his men forwards, "Bring that missile launcher up here now and get it set up."

The two men from Second Squad hurried forwards, keeping low to avoid being seen by the Necrons ahead of them and Dean knelt down with the long tubular missile launcher over his shoulder. Then as he lined it up on the Necron ghost ark Michaels slid an armour penetrating krak missile into the weapon.

"Clear." Michaels said, checking the area immediately behind Dean to make sure that no-one would get caught in the back blast of the missile when it was fired.

"Target acquired." Dean added and Grey smiled.

"Fire." he ordered.

There was a flash from both ends of the missile launcher and a sudden 'Whoosh!' as the missile shot out of the front end while a jet of smoke and flame shot out of the back. The missile promptly sped straight towards the ghost ark, watched eagerly by Wolf and the Catachans. But just as it looked like the powerful weapon, designed to be capable of at least damaging even the most heavily armoured targets known to the Imperium was going to smash into the control station at the back of the ghost ark it instead struck an invisible barrier that surrounded it and the warhead detonated early and what should have been a jet of molten metal hurtling forwards to punch its way through whatever armour protection the Necron vehicle possessed instead turned into an expanding disc that spread across the barrier before falling to the ground along with the fragments of the missile itself.

"Throne!" Wolf exclaimed, "It's got void shields."

"How can something that size have void shields?" Vance replied.

"It can't." Grey said and he looked at the missile launcher crew, "Hit it again!" he ordered.

"No!" Wolf yelled as the pitch of the ghost ark's engines changed and she saw it begin to turn, "Fall back!"

"What?" Grey responded, "We can-"

"No time." Vance interrupted, "We need to pull back."

"Feth it!" Grey exclaimed, "Fall back."

Behind them the ghost ark continued to drift towards Second Platoon and a storm of green energy beams reminiscent of the beams fired by the Necron warriors' energy rifles erupted from what looked ominously like larger versions of the Necron rifles mounted along each side of the vehicle. Wherever these beams of energy touched the vegetation it dissolved just as the Catachans' strong points had done under the same fire and, looking briefly over his shoulder, Quinn quickly realised what the vehicle's driver was planning.

"He's going to charge that thing right through us!" he called out.

"Scatter!" Vance yelled, "It can't follow us all."

"Oh great." Grey said, "So only some of us die."

The platoon began to spread out as they ran, all except for Khor's ogryns. Though physically strong the abhumans' mental faculties were extremely poor and it was only Khor himself that, thanks to the cybernetic enhancements made to his brain, that possessed any reasonable degree of intelligence. But this was not enough for him to be able to get the members of his squad to split up so that they presented less of an obvious target. Therefore, given that the ogryns remained clustered together, along with the fact that they were making by far the most commotion as they ran through the jungle made the Necron pilot turn his vehicle towards them and it bore down on them with the storm of energy still blasted to either side of it. Seeing this, Wolf defiantly came to a halt and aimed her las pistol at the driver where he sat exposed at the rear of the vehicle and she fired repeatedly, hoping that she might be able to destroy him and thus bring the ghost ark to a halt. But the same shield that had absorbed the hit from the krak missile in the ghost ark's front arc also extended around the sides of the vehicle and each of the puny shots was stopped in its path before getting anywhere near the driver.

But seeing how the Necron driver ignored Wolf altogether as it continued to glide towards the fleeing ogryns gave Quinn an idea.

"Jackson!" he yelled, "Get that meltagun over here!" and he waved to the veteran armed with a meltagun.

A meltagun was a short ranged but incredibly powerful weapon, more powerful even than a krak missile at close range and as Jackson ran to Quinn, the sergeant in turn dragged him closer to the ghost ark. By moving in from behind the alien vehicle they were able to avoid the energy beams as well as taking full advantage of the destruction left in its wake to move faster.

"Go!" Quinn yelled and Jackson ground to a halt and raised his weapon, aiming it at the rear of the ghost ark. When he pulled the trigger there was a faint blur from the meltagun's muzzle that turned into a glowing white hot beam of energy as the air between it and its target was superheated by the discharge. Quinn expected to see the flicker of the energy shield that had stopped the missile attack dead in its tracks, but it appeared that this did not extend all the way around the vehicle and the beam from the meltagun struck the ghost ark below where the driver was sat in what Quinn took to be its engine.

The effect of this was immediate and catastrophic. There was a sudden explosion and flames erupted from the cluster of exhaust vents at the back of the vehicle. At the same time the humming sound ceased and the front of the ghost ark dipped before it ploughed into the ground that had just been cleared of its undergrowth. The impact shook the rows of partially repaired Necron warriors while the driver fell forwards across his control console.

Upon hearing the sound of the crash Khor turned around to see what had happened and he saw the now immobilised ghost ark pointing nose down into the ground and its weapons silent and dark now that the engine that had been providing them with power was destroyed. The driver however, was still moving. But Khor knew how to deal with that.

"Ogryns!" he bellowed, raising his ripper gun into the air, "Charge!"

The other ogryns promptly halted their flight and turned around. Then they roared as they charged forwards towards the wrecked ghost ark, firing their rippers guns as they went. The heavy shotgun blasts ripped apart the already badly damaged Necron warriors carried by the ghost ark and scattered the cloud of scarabs attempting to repair them. Some of the ripper gun fire got past the scarabs and rows of warriors and struck the driver, causing its body to jerk under each impact as it struggled to climb free of the wrecked vehicle. Khor was the first of his squad to reach the ghost ark and he leapt up onto it where it was sticking out of the ground, putting him at the front of the troop carrying and repair section. Using both his free hand and his ripper gun to bash the damaged Necron warriors out of the way he hurried along its length until the driver was within reach and then he roared again as he reached out and dragged the driver free of its control station and tossed it onto the deck beneath his feet. The other ogryns followed close behind Khor and within

moments all of them were gathered close around the now helpless Necron, beating and stamping on it furiously. Even the mysterious alien material of which the Necrons were made was unable to withstand that sort of punishment for long and despite its best efforts to repair itself the Necron was disabled when its head casing was split wide open following a blow delivered by the butt of an ogryn's ripper gun and just as the Catachans had seen so many Necrons do before, it faded away into nothing.

"Metal man gone." Khor said, looking towards Wolf.

"Yes, well done sergeant." she replied and Khor grinned and looked round at his squad.

"So you think that thing's just appeared on another of these mobile repair shops?" Grey asked.

"You think there's more?" Torrent responded.

"There has to be." Vance answered, "This thing looks like it'll only hold ten at a time and you saw how many were attacking the camp."

"I'd say they'd need between fifty and a hundred of these things to carry that many troops lieutenant." Quinn added.

"All spread out around us." Grey said, looking around but seeing no signs of any further ghost arks.

"Turner come here." Wolf said, waving her squad's vox operator closer.

"You're breaking vox silence then?" Vance said.

"If the Necrons' don't already know where we are then I doubt that a vox transmission will attract them either." Wolf replied, "The major did want us to find the enemy armour and I'd say we've found it. He needs to know."

5.

The sounds of battle could be heard clearly inside Major Trent's command post and he had to hold the vox handset close to his ear to be able to make out what Wolf was saying.

"Confirm that last statement lieutenant." he said, "Did you say fifty to a hundred? Over."

"That's our best estimate sir." Wolf replied, "Based on the capacity of the vehicle we destroyed. But it definitely looks as if they are being used to repair troops disabled by our fire. Over."

Trent looked around at where Cornelliuss stood close by, listening in on the transmission without needing a handset of his own.

"There have been reports of such vehicles, gathering up the parts of damaged warriors and repairing them." the tech priest said, "Though as with most information about the Necrons it is patchy at best."

Trent sighed and then switched his handset back to transmit.

"Lieutenant Wolf I want Second Platoon to look around some more and see if you can find any more of these vehicles. You are authorised to engage if the odds look good but for now all I'm after is information. Do you understand? Over."

"Yes sir. Will check in in one zero minutes if nothing is found. Over and out." Wolf said before the channel went dead.

Immediately Trent began to make notes on a data slate.

"Stubbs." he said to his company sergeant.

"Yes sir?" Stubbs responded.

"I need you to keep an eye on things here. I'm going to discuss this with Colonel Shryke." Trent told him,

"Enginseer Cornelliuss, you're with me."

"Don't worry major." Fourth Company's commissar said suddenly as he stepped away from the vision slit of the dugout that he had been using to observe the actions of the company, watching as always for any signs of cowardice or desertion, "Your command will be in good hands while you're gone."

"Yes Mister Layne," Trent said, still looking at Stubbs rather than the commissar, "I know it will be."

Normally when moving between bunkers during a battle Trent would dash from one piece of cover to another, doing his best to avoid looking too much like a target. But on this occasion and despite the noise of fighting coming from all around the interior of the Catachan camp remained eerily calm. The Necrons had yet to deploy any weapons other than their standard rifles and although these had demonstrated themselves to have incredible power behind them they lacked the range to threaten anything but the camp's outermost defensive lines, allowing Trent and Cornelliuss to simply walk briskly from Fourth Company's command post to that of Colonel Shryke himself.

"I take it that you have a good reason for abandoning your post major." Commissar Garratt said as soon as Trent entered the command post where he was watching Colonel Shryke direct the camp's defence.

"A report made in person to a superior is not an abandonment of one's post according to regulation-"

Cornelliuss began and Garratt scowled.

"I think the commissar is aware of regulations." Shryke said. Then he looked at Trent, "So what brings you here in person Xavier?" he asked, using Major Trent's first name knowing that the informality in the midst of battle would irritate Garratt.

"Colonel as I'm sure you're aware I sent a platoon into the jungle to investigate a report of enemy vehicle units hidden there."

"Yes, Second Platoon under that outsider yes?" Shryke responded, again knowing that his use of the word 'outsider' would annoy the commissar.

"Yes sir." Trent replied, "Well Lieutenant Wolf just checked in and she reported engaging and destroying an enemy vehicle that was being used to repair damaged Necron troops at about this location here." and he pointed to the map laid out on the table to indicate where Second Platoon had destroyed the ghost ark, "She reported that appeared capable of carrying a single squad of enemy troops and judging by the numbers witnessed attacking us there could be upwards of fifty of them out there."

"Fifty?" Garratt exclaimed, "Tell me major, if the enemy has fifty fighting vehicles out there then why assault with nothing but infantry?"

"Because that's all they need." Shryke said, "Plus if these vehicles are intended to repair the enemy troops then bringing them into battle would have cost them the advantage of unending reinforcements. When this battle began we had multiple las cannon armed tarantulas well dug in that can take out even the heaviest armour in the galaxy given enough time. So they sent in their expendable and replaceable infantry instead to clear out these defences and now that the tarantulas are gone they can't bring in their armour to engage us because their own troops are too close to ours and any supporting fire given by vehicle mounted weaponry would risk hitting them rather than us. No, all they need to do is sit out there and keep sending wave after

wave of soldiers at us until they break through or we just run out of ammunition.”

“Then it is essential that we find and destroy these vehicles colonel.” Garratt said.

“Indeed it is. But the question remains what forces we can spare to send hunting for them.”

“Our infantry's barely holding the line as it is.” Trent commented.

“And Sixth Company's armour is currently engaged as well.” Shryke added, “But that still leaves Seventh and Eighth Companies. Both are fast moving and currently held in reserve.”

“If you're sending out Seventh Company then what about reinforcing it with Sentinel units from the other companies?” Garratt suggested and Shryke nodded.

“That makes sense.” he said, “Those units aren't doing much good spread out like they are. But together they'd more than double Seventh Company's strength.”

“We've more than enough mortars to lay down smoke to cover them as far as the tree line.” Trent said, “I'd suggest right here, following the same path that my second platoon took.”

“I think so, yes.” Shryke replied, nodding, “That way they can hook up with Second Platoon.”

“Sergeant Molla, what's your status?” Wolf called out as she led the rest of Second Platoon back towards where he had remained with his squad.

“Just the one casualty lieutenant.” he replied, “But the Necrons suddenly stopped coming so whatever you did I guess it worked.”

“That's odd.” Vance commented, “That one transport couldn't have been sending out all of the machines we saw coming down that gully.”

“Then they've figured out we're here and have either found a new way around or are getting ready for a bigger strike.” Wolf said and she looked around, searching the jungle for any signs of more Necrons even though it was unlikely that she would notice anything amiss before the native Catachans under her command managed to.

“What are you thinking about lieutenant?” Vance asked.

“Digging in.” Wolf replied.

“The major ordered us to keep searching for more enemy armour.” Grey pointed out.

“Yes and Sergeant Quinn's squad and Rull can do just that. But the rest of us will do much better against the enemy if we can have our heavy weapons set up and waiting. Now where's the best spot to defend around here?”

“That rise over there.” Molla replied, pointing to an area of higher ground behind them, “It's rocky and that may give us some extra cover and the enemy will have to come up hill to get at us.”

“I'd booby trap that gully if I were you though.” Quinn suggested.

“You mean grenades with their pins pulled and levers wedged by something connected to a wire?” Wolf asked and Quinn nodded.

“Adjust the fuses for the shortest possible delay as well.” he said.

“Okay that's what we'll do.” Wolf replied, “Sergeant Quinn I want you to take your men and hook up with Rull. Do what you can to locate the enemy but avoid engagement where possible. In the mean time we'll set up on the high ground and wait for reinforcements.”

6.

The loss of a ghost ark was enough to attract Phennett's attention and now the Necron overlord reviewed the data he had received on what forces had been lost and where. In one particular area of the jungle the losses among his warriors had been higher than could be accounted for by the mortar fire that had been harassing them all around the perimeter and it was in this area that the lost ghost ark had been deployed. It was also the area where the Catachans had deployed a smoke screen between their lines and the jungle and now this made sense. Using the smoke screen the Catachans had been able to infiltrate a raiding force that had been able to locate and destroy one of the ghost arks. But raiding parties were invariably of limited size and that made them vulnerable to being cut off, surrounded and then destroyed.

Quickly Phennett formulated a plan and was about to send his orders to his troops when all of a sudden there was another barrage of smoke shells from within the camp and this time it was clear to see that a larger force was preparing to move out. As was fitting for an army of such primitive creatures, the bulk of this force consisted of troops mounted on reptilian riding beasts, with a handful of these mounts being much larger than the others that were organised into packs. However, there was also a number of mechanised walking machines. These looked lightweight and primitive compared to Necron technology but each one carried a heavy weapon that would boost the fire power of this force significantly.

The key to defeating this force would be preventing them from linking up with the raiding party already in the jungle that would have had the chance to monitor the Necron positions and with this in mind Phennett ordered his troops into action.

With additional cover improvised by hacking branches from nearby trees and wedging them between the rocks Second Platoon was able to rapidly create what they hoped would be a defensible position against the Necrons. The aliens' weapons had proven quite capable of penetrating even more formal defences than this but at least they still gave the Catachans something to hide behind. The platoon was deployed with First and Second Squads formed into semi circles facing in opposite directions to completely surround Wolf's command squad and Khor's ogryns who were being held as a reserve assault force, ready to either exploit any weakness in an enemy assault or to plug any gaps that opened up in their own limited perimeter.

The first indication of what was coming came in the form of a distant explosion from the direction of the gully. "That was one of the grenades." Vance said before there was a second explosion from the same direction.

"Okay this is it. Keep your eyes peeled, I doubt they'll come from just one direction." Wolf said, wishing that they also had the support of Mayer's mortar squad even if they would have only been able to contribute another half a dozen lasguns to the defence once the Necrons got too close to risk firing mortars at. Then she looked up at the tree her squad was huddled close to, "I want to get up there and take a look." she said.

"Take a look at what?" Vance replied, frowning.

"Anything I can see. Now help me up." Wolf ordered.

"Are you saying you can't even climb a tree by yourself?" Grey commented and he shook his head in disgust.

"Never mind that. I just need a hand." Wolf said and Vance and Turner helped her up the trunk of the tree until she was able to reach a branch that appeared strong enough to take her weight and she clambered onto it. Then perched on this branch with one leg either side of it she began to pull herself along it as it angled upwards.

"You know," Torrent said to Vance as they both watched Wolf pulling herself along the branch up into the jungle canopy, "I once tried something like that back home."

"Really?" Vance replied, "What happened?"

"Oh the tree reacted by releasing sticky sap that soaked through my clothes and stuck to my skin. I tell you what sergeant, jumping down from that tree gave me a waxing I'll never forget." Torrent said and Vance and the other nearby Catachans all winced at the thought of what she was describing, "Plus I had to walk back to my camp with a towel around my waist to make up for the clothes still stuck to the tree." she said before sighing, "Molla's smirking isn't he?" she asked.

"Oh yes." Vance said before there was the sound of a lasgun shot.

"Contact!" one of the Catachans yelled and as silver coloured Necron warriors came marching out of the jungle they were met by a barrage of las and bolter fire as well as grenades fired as rapidly as the three launchers available to Second Platoon could manage.

In the cover of the branches above Wolf took out her magnoculars and began to search the jungle for some indication of what they were facing. Here and there she could see small openings in the vegetation that allowed her to see what was going on beneath but from this distance and angle she was unable to make out anything of importance. But then she spotted something far off in the distance where there was a break in the jungle and a grassy hill rose up out of the trees. Located on that hill was a small Necron vehicle, alone

and immobile. Wolf peered through her magnoculars at it, adjusting the magnification to maximum. Now she could make out the circular shape of the vehicle and the single figure stood roughly in the middle beneath a forward pointing arch and the two seated crew members located at the front sat so that their legs hung down beneath it. Like the ghost ark that Second Platoon had already faced this new Necron vehicle appeared to be propelled by some sort of advanced anti-gravity engine that allowed it to float above the ground, though why it had taken up the position it had was a mystery to Wolf. Or at least it was until she realised in which direction the figure stood in the middle of it was facing.

Right towards the XIX Regiment's camp.

Panning her magnoculars around Wolf saw that the figure probably had a direct line of sight to the camp and had most likely been observing the assault from the very beginning. Combined with the more imposing and ornate design of the watching figure Wolf guessed that this was some sort of commander who in addition to observing the assault had also been directing it.

All of a sudden the tree shuddered as a blast from a Necron weapon struck the trunk and part of it promptly dissolved into nothing, causing the tree to tilt under its own weight.

"Whoa!" Wolf exclaimed and she lowered her magnoculars so that she could wrap her arms around the branch to stabilise herself.

Then came a flash and a beam of green light angled upwards as one of Necron warriors below discharged its weapon as it fell backwards under a hail of concentrated lasgun fire. The beam clipped the branch Wolf was hanging onto and her eyes widened as she heard a creaking sound.

"Oh Emperor no." she said, not daring to look around at the branch behind her.

Then all of a sudden the creaking sound became a loud 'Snap!' and the branch gave way. Wolf now found herself plummeting towards the ground and she screamed as she fell. Fortunately the ground she landed on was fairly soft, being just outside the defensive position that Second Platoon had set up within the rocks.

However, it was also on the sloping ground so although she was not injured in the fall Wolf immediately began to roll down the hill as the Necrons were advancing up it and gunfire passed over her head in both directions. Wolf finally came to a halt face down at the bottom of the hill, stopping when she struck a bush thick enough to stop her motion and she groaned as she lifted her head out of the mud.

Right as a Necron foot came down in front of her.

"Throne!" she exclaimed, looking up as she reached for her las pistol in its holster. At the same time as Wolf looked up not one but two Necron warriors looked back down at her with emotionless metal faces. One raised its rifle and Wolf could tell it was about to swing it back down and strike at her with the combat blade built into it. However, before it could land the blow the Necron's chest exploded outwards as what looked like a spear tip burst through it. The Necron then faded away to nothing, its internal repair systems unable to cope with such traumatic damage and behind it wolf saw the form of a Catachan rough rider mounted on one of the vicious reptiles native to Catachan that they used as mounts instead of the more traditional horses that did not exist on their home world. The mount let out a loud hiss as it snapped at the second Necron warrior in front of Wolf and the beast wrapped its jaws around the Necron's head before lifting it up off the ground and shaking it so violently that its head was ripped free. As the headless body flew through the air both it and the head still lodged between the reptile's jaws faded away, causing the beast's jaws to snap shut unexpectedly and it growled.

"Captain Muller." the rider of the beast announced, looking down at Wolf, "Eighth Company." and then he tossed aside the lance that was useless now that the explosive charge built into its tip had been expended and instead drew a chainsword from a scabbard built into his saddle.

"Lieutenant Wolf. Second Platoon, Fourth Company." Wolf replied.

"Well I suggest you get on your feet lieutenant." Muller said, "Can't you see there's a battle going on around here." and Wolf looked from side to side and saw that there were cavalymen on reptiles like the raptor Muller rode as well as a small number on the much larger carnosaurus that were powerful enough to smash their way through entire squads of Necrons. A mechanical clanking sound told wolf that the rough riders of Eighth Company had not come here alone either and several sentinel scout walkers strode into view through the jungle, firing the heavy weapons they mounted beside their cockpits as they advanced.

Now the Necron warriors that had been steadily closing in around Second Platoon as they fought to defend their position suddenly found themselves on the back foot as a well armed and highly mobile force arrived and launched straight into a counter attack. The explosive tipped hunting lances of the rough riders, though usable only once, were more than capable of splitting the chassis of a Necron warrior wide open while the Sentinel scout walkers not only mounted heavy firepower but could also trample the Necrons underfoot. The engagement was not all one sided however, and here and there Wolf saw rough riders fall from their mounts as their flesh was dissolved by a hit from one of the Necrons' mysterious weapons. Even the Sentinels proved not to be immune to this and the sound of an explosion filled the air as one of them that had been armed with a heavy flamer exploded in a ball of flame as a Necron weapon ruptured the fuel storage tanks for the weapon and the volatile contents came into contact with a spark from elsewhere within the damaged

vehicle.

Getting back to her feet, Wolf hurried back up the hill towards Second Platoon's position and took cover there. She was relieved to see that most of the Catachans under her command were still right where they had been before she climbed the tree. But the remains of two bodies that had been dragged away from the firing line indicated that both Grey's and Molla's squads had taken casualties.

"See anything form up there lieutenant?" Vance asked.

"As a matter of fact yes. Possibly something very important." Wolf replied, "But right now we can't leave them to do everything." and she pointed to where the rough riders and Sentinels were engaging the Necron forces, "First and Second Squads will hold this position and provide fire support. Sergeant Khor, your squad will accompany mine. We're go to attack."

"Ogryns!" Khor bellowed loud enough to make Wolf flinch as he stood up and raised his ripper gun above his head, "Attack!" and this was followed by a roar from all of the ogryns as they too leapt up and leapt over the improvised defensive barrier before charging down the hill, firing their ripper guns as they went.

"So much for them coming with us." Wolf muttered, "Let's go." and then her squad headed down the hill after the ogryns.

Having at their disposal a full company of rough riders, along with more than twenty Sentinel walkers had enabled the Catachans to surround the Necron warriors already committed to the battle for the rough riders to pick off with hunting lances, chainswords and even well angled swipes from the traditional knives carried by every single native of Catachan whether soldier or civilian that cut through exposed power and control cables. Wolf paused briefly as she ran down the hill again to line her las pistol up on a Necron warrior that was just in the process of repairing itself, standing upright but with its weapon still hanging down by its side and gripped in just one hand. She fired two shots, both aimed at the Necron's head and both found their mark. The first ripped away part of what could only loosely be termed the Necron's jaw while the second punched through an eye socket and the glow from within the other faded away. The Necron then began to collapse, but before it could land on the ground beneath it began to fade and was gone in moments.

Beside her the guardsman who carried her squad's grenade launcher discharged it, firing an anti-armour krak round. Though not as powerful as the version fitted as the warheads of anti-armour missiles a krak grenade was still considered capable of taking out many armoured vehicles if a vulnerable spot could be found and so against the Necron warriors it was devastatingly effective. Detonating on impact with the chest of a Necron warrior the explosive charge tore the humanoid machine apart, sending limbs and its head flying in all directions. The Necron's auto-repair systems did not even attempt to fix this damage and the various components vanished as they flew through the air.

Unsurprisingly though, it was the ogryns that made most contribution from Second Platoon. Their powerful, rapid firing ripper guns were able to tear through the Necron warriors before the ogryns themselves smashed into them while they were still attempting to repair the damage inflicted, scattering severed parts too far for the repair systems to be able to retrieve them and causing yet more to fade out. One ogryn howled in pain as a blast from a Necron warrior struck his arm and the skin and muscle as far down as the bone between his shoulder and elbow was disintegrated.

"Torrent!" Vance called out, "See what you can do for him." and she nodded before breaking from the rest of the squad to tend to the injured abhuman while the others continued to rampage through the ranks of the Necron warriors.

Though considered mindless by the higher echelons of Necron civilisation, Necron warriors still retained some semblance of self preservation and suffering from such heavy loses the remainder began to fall back, all of which was reported to Phennett on his command barge. The enemy forces had been able to penetrate the jungle much faster than the overlord had anticipated, reaching the raiding party only just after the warriors under his command had been able to. Phennett could always just order more troops into battle of course, but destroying this force would be a distraction from the assault on their camp while leaving it or the camp alone for long enough to deal was fraught with risk. Pressing on with the attack on the camp would leave the force now at large in the jungle free to attack more of the ghost arks while concentrating on them at the expense of the camp would allow the much larger force still there the chance to regroup and send out further raiding parties.

However, this attack had never been intended to be the final blow against the army that had invaded the tomb world to plunder its secrets and the sole aim of the assault had in fact been achieved in the opening minutes. Therefore, Phennett had one other option open to him that would preserve his forces as well as allowing him to focus on his longer term strategy of carrying out the phaeron's orders to destroy the invaders. He would order his troops involved in the assault to withdraw.

Quinn and his men crept forwards through the jungle. Moving ahead of them, Rull had marked the positions of each ghost ark he located before moving around it and proceeding on to the next. So far their deployment

had confirmed what Quinn had suspected, that the mobile repair and transport vehicles had been deployed in a circular pattern and equally spaced with machine precision around the XIX Regiment's camp. Quinn had hoped that there would be the opportunity to try and destroy a few more of the ghost arks but so far each one they had encountered had been positioned in a way that made approaching it with just the remnants of his squad far too risky to attempt. Instead he would just use a dataslate to record the position of the enemy vehicle, the information being copied to Wolf's dataslate automatically so that a stronger force could be sent to destroy it. But as he led his men towards the location of the next ghost ark found by Rull he discovered something was amiss.

The first indication that all was not as it should be as when Quinn realised that he could not hear the characteristic hum from the alien vehicle's engines as he drew closer to its recorded location.

"Look alive." he said softly to his men, "Something's not right and these xenos machines could be up to something."

Continuing to creep forwards, Quinn lifted his shotgun to his shoulder, ready to fire it at the first sign of Necron activity. But as he reached a position where he should have been able to see the ghost ark Rull had reported finding he discovered that it was not there. Quinn's first instinct was to double check his position. Though he was an expert at jungle navigation Rull was far better and it was more likely that Quinn would make a mistake than the platoon's sniper would. But Quinn's position was correct which could only mean that the ghost ark had moved, potentially in one of two directions. Firstly it could have moved closer to join the assault on the camp, though this would mark a distinct change in Necron strategy or alternately it could have been withdrawn.

"Reese bring me that vox." he ordered his squad's vox operator and the guardsman brought it to him, passing him the handset, "Lieutenant Wolf are you there? Over." he transmitted, "Lieutenant Wolf respond please. Over."

"Wolf here." Wolf's voice answered after a brief pause, "Go ahead sergeant. Over."

"Lieutenant we've just reached the location of one of the enemy vehicles pinpointed by Rull and there's no sign of it. Over."

"Hang on sergeant. Hold your position and I'll be back in touch. Over and out." Wolf said and the channel was shut off.

"Hang on she'll be back in touch." Quinn muttered, "It's not like I'm standing here waiting to hitch a ride."

7.

Back where the bulk of Second Platoon had dug in, Wolf approached Captain Muller. His rough riders, along with the Sentinels had been circling the area to make certain that after the Necron warriors had abruptly turned around and withdrawn back into the jungle they had not left any nasty surprises for the Catachans.

"Captain." she called out, waving.

"Yes lieutenant. What is it?" Muller replied from atop his mount and Wolf stepped back as the vicious reptile turned its head towards her and let out a long hiss at her.

"Captain one of my men reports that an enemy vehicle is no longer at its last known position, as recorded by my platoon's sniper. I was wondering whether the enemy withdrawal from here could be part of a larger retreat."

"That's a possibility." Muller replied and he raised a hand to his microbead, "Sentinel Squadrons One and Two." he signalled to the two groups of Sentinels that were a permanent part of his rough rider company, attached to provide heavy weapon support for the cavalry troops, "I want you to head east eight hundred metres. Report any enemy presence you detect but do not engage. I say again, do not engage. This is observation only."

"Roger that captain." one of the sentinel pilots replied and wolf saw half a dozen of the machines break from the formation drawn from all across the regiment and stride off into the jungle, heading for the location of the next ghost ark in the ring. While they waited, Muller climbed down from his saddle and he was just about to speak when Wolf noticed one of the ogyrn was sat beside a tree holding something that reflected what light penetrated the jungle canopy.

"What's that ogyrn got in his hands?" she said and Muller turned and looked as well.

"I don't know. Shrapnel perhaps?" he said.

"No. Shrapnel would be tarnished from the blast." Wolf pointed out and she walked towards the ogyrn, "You there." she called out and the ogyrn looked up at her. Recognising both her and Muller as officers the ogyrn leapt to his feet, snapped to attention and saluted, holding position until both Muller and Wolf returned the salute, something that Muller looked less than comfortable doing, "At ease." Wolf said, "Now what do you have there?" she asked.

"Shiny." the ogyrn answered and he held up what he had in his hands. There Wolf saw a small piece of metal that did not look to have to come from any Imperial equipment that she knew of. Therefore, since metal was not to be found just lying around in jungle environments there was only one place it could have come from. A Necron warrior.

"May I have that?" she asked and the ogyrn smiled as he handed it over, "Very good work." she added, "well done soldier. The Emperor will be most pleased."

"Emperor happy?" the ogyrn asked.

"Yes, very happy," Wolf said.

"What the hell is that?" Muller asked as he peered at the piece metal Wolf now held.

"Part of a Necron would be my guess." Wolf replied, "Presumably a small part that didn't get caught up in whatever device teleported the rest of the machine away." then she looked around, "We should look around and see if there's any more of it. I'm sure the Adeptus Mechanicus will want to study it."

"So rather than fight a war you want us to crawl around on our hands and knees for the cogboys?" Muller said, "Have your platoon do that if you want but my men have better things to do."

"Sir!" the vox operator from Muller's squad called out as he rode towards him and Wolf, "The Sentinels just checked in, no signs of enemy activity for at least a thousand metres east. Plus we've heard from Colonel Shryke. He says that the enemy force has ceased its attack on the camp and we're to return there immediately."

Muller turned back to Wolf.

"Have fun in the mud lieutenant." he said before walking back towards his own mount.

Though the Necrons assault had ended Colonel Shryke's command post was still a hive of activity as positions all around the perimeter checked in with casualty and damage reports as well as an abundance of requests for resupply. Much of this information was of only passing interest to Colonel Shryke for the time being, for now resupply was instead a matter for the Departamento Munitorum and with that in mind adept Clay had returned to the command post to process them and so it was to her that Colonel Shryke looked to for a summary of the situation.

"Well?" he asked her, "How does it look?"

"We'll need to bring more ammunition down from orbit for the heavy weapons." Clay replied, "Your men expended rather a lot of it."

"Firing automatic weapons constantly does tend to drain reserves Miss Clay." Commissar Garratt commented, "And since they do so in service of the Emperor perhaps you ought to think about maintaining a larger supply down here with us."

"What about casualties?" Shryke asked.

"Remarkably light I'd say from experience of other such engagements." Clay answered, "The enemy seemed keenest on knocking out our heavy defences."

"How many of our tarantulas are still functional?" Garratt asked.

"I don't know." Clay admitted, "The Adeptus Mechanicus are responsible for maintaining them and they haven't reported to me yet."

Shryke sighed.

"This is why I need one of those damned cogboys in here." he said before turning towards the row of vox operators, "Someone get me a tech priest. I don't care which one." then he looked back at the map in front of him, "What the hell made them turn back like that?" he said, directing the question at no-one in particular, "And more importantly how long do we have before they decide to hit us again?"

"An engineeer to see you sir." a guardsman called out from the command post's entrance and Shryke looked around to see one of the red robed figures entering. The tech priest had clearly come directly from tending to one machine or another and he still had the bulky servo-arm attached to his armour's back mounted power plant. Given their habit of replacing body parts with technology it was could sometimes be difficult to tell one tech priest from another but Shryke thought he recognised this one.

"Lazas isn't it?" he asked.

"I am Engineeer Lazas Kay Bee Ell dash Eight One Four." the tech priest answered.

"Of Sixth Company?" Shryke said.

"Correct colonel." Lazas answered. The colonel knew that Lazas was the most senior of the tech priests assigned to Sixth Company and given that that was the XIX Regiment's mechanised infantry company it made him the most senior tech priest remaining in the regiment since the loss of Magos Serett.

"Engineeer I need to know the state of our defences." Shryke said.

"Specifically the automated sentry guns." Garratt added.

"Losses of tarantulas deployed in defence of the perimeter are counted as ninety-six point two percent at present colonel." Lazas told him.

"At present?" Clay responded, "I need precise figures for my reports engineeer. Do you expect them to vary?"

"Inevitably Adept Clay." Lazas said.

"How?" Garratt asked.

"Of the seventy-nine tarantulas deployed only three remain operational. However, there are some among the none-functional weapons that I expect to be returned to operation. Seven suffered only minor damage that requires newly consecrated parts and re-blessing of the machine spirit to rectify while a further four report their status as intact but are none-functional due to the collapse of the fortifications in which they were deployed. Once servitors can be spared to excavate them and their machine spirits re-initialised they can be returned to service also."

"Leaving us with just fourteen to defend the entire perimeter." Shryke said.

"What about longer term?" Garratt asked Lazas, "Can you take parts from one damaged gun to fix another?"

"It is possible." Lazas replied, "But each part would need to be inspected to prevent corruption of the receiving machine spirit due to code infection." Garratt and Shryke exchanged glances, neither entirely certain of what the tech priest was trying to say, "However," Lazas went on, "if the manufacturing facilities aboard the orbiting transport ship could be made available to us then freshly sanctified parts could be supplied."

"Bringing down ammunition and replacement parts?" Shryke said, "Those shuttles are going to be busy."

8.

"Where the hell have you been?" Lieutenant Lucien Lore, the officer in command of Fourth Company's Third Platoon asked when he saw Wolf leading Second Platoon back through the perimeter.

"The lieutenant had us rooting through the mud." Grey commented.

"Looks like she brought most of it back with her as well." Lore replied as he stared at Wolf who still had a large amount of mud stuck to her following her fall from the tree.

"Where is Enginseer Cornelliuss?" she asked, "I have something for him to take a look at." and she held out a piece of cloth in which was wrapped the handful of fragments of Necron warriors that had not teleported away with the rest of their damaged bodies.

"The Bastard is currently digging out tarantulas with his servitors and junior cogboy." Lore said and he looked towards one of the collapsed bunkers where Cornelliuss was being helped by several half human servitor cyborgs as well as the Catachan born technician who acted as his assistant with the task of digging out a tarantula that could potentially be repaired.

"Thanks." Wolf said. Then she looked at Vance, "Take everyone else to get something to eat." she told him, "This shouldn't take too long. Then I need to report to Major Trent and you and the others need to organise us some replacements."

Vance nodded and Wolf split off from the rest of the platoon, heading towards Cornelliuss. Nathin noticed her approach and pointed her out to the tech priest who in turn looked towards her.

"Lieutenant Wolf." he said, "How may I assist you?"

"My men and I found these in the jungle following a battle with the Necrons." Wolf replied, holding out the fragments of alien metal.

"Interesting." Cornelliuss said as he picked up one of the larger fragments and examined it closely, "A cursory scan indicates that it matches no known element or alloy. In fact a multi-cycle scan sequence suggests that its structure is flux."

"I've no idea what that means." Wolf admitted, "But I thought it might be important."

"In the long term perhaps." Cornelliuss said, "There is a great deal about the Necrons we do not know and it is that mystery that tempts those such as Magos Serett into embracing heresy in their attempts to unlock their secrets. In the short term however, I doubt that we will be able to learn enough from these samples to assist us here."

"Okay." Wolf said, somewhat disappointed. She had hoped that by examining the fragments Cornelliuss and the other tech priests of the XIX Regiment would be able to find a way of easily defeating the Necrons. But then she remembered the other information she had and decided to raise it with Cornelliuss, "Enginseer," she said, "I observed another Necron while I was outside the perimeter. I think it may have been some sort of commander."

"Where was this?" Cornelliuss asked, leaning closer to Wolf, "Did you engage this individual directly?"

"Oh no." she answered, "I saw it through my magnoculars on some sort of small circular vehicle. It looked like it was just watching the battle from a distance."

"What sort of forces surrounded it?" Cornelliuss said.

"None that I could see. Other than the two other Necrons soldiers who looked like they were controlling the vehicle."

"Have you informed anyone else of this lieutenant?"

"No, not yet. I was about to go and-" Wolf began but before she could finish Cornelliuss grabbed her by the arm and began to pull her towards Fourth Company's command post.

"It is essential that Major Trent hears of this." he said, "He can then take it to Colonel Shryke."

"So it's important then?" Wolf asked as she stumbled along after the tech priest.

"Lieutenant Wolf it is possible that you have found us a way to defeat the force that attacked us should they return." Cornelliuss told her.

With no chance to leave the command post to get a meal while Fourth Company's section of the perimeter still required reorganising to account for the loss of so many of the tarantulas Major Trent was instead eating from a mess tin handed to him by Company Colour Sergeant Stubbs who was also eating from a similar tin. At the same time, Trent read from a dataslate handed to him by a female officer who was much shorter than the other Catachans. This was Lieutenant Anna Selena, Fourth Company's supply officer and commander of its platoon of non-combatant troops. Behind her back she was often known as either 'Short-arse Selena' thanks to her height or 'Anna Ass-wipe' because of her role in supplying amongst other things, toilet paper." "Dig?" Trent said, "Do they seriously want us to dig a bloody great trench all around the perimeter?" "Not us personally sir." Selena replied, "But we would be required to maintain our section of it. The idea is

that a trench three metres wide and deep would make it harder for the Necron footsoldiers to march up to our perimeter."

"As well as giving them somewhere that they can hide while they walk right around it and hit the weakest point while we're trapped inside it." Trent added, "Plus what are the odds of us actually completing the fething thing before those xenos machines attack again? This is it Stubbs, proof that we're desperate if the Colonel agreed to this."

"It could just be something to demonstrate to the men that action is being taken Major." another officer commented. Unlike any of the other Catachans present the only weapon he carried was his traditional knife that remained concealed under the white coat he wore over his combat fatigues that identified him as Fourth Company's medical officer, Doctor Altman.

"Doc if regimental command needs to act like it had a plan then that means it doesn't." Trent replied, "The colonel's stalling for time, mark my words."

"Major, perhaps it would be better if you trusted Colonel Shryke to command the regiment." Layne commented and Trent scowled at the commissar's uninvited intervention. But before he could respond Cornelliuss burst into the command post, still pulling the mud-covered Wolf along behind him.

"Major Trent." the tech priest said, "It is essential that you listen to Lieutenant Wolf's report."

"Oh great, more interruptions to my breakfast." Trent said, setting the mess tin down and looking at Wolf, "Well lieutenant?" he asked her, "What's so important that an engineeer of all people drags you into my command post?"

"Sir as you know while searching for signs of enemy armour Second Platoon was engaged by enemy forces that-" Wolf began before Stubbs interrupted her.

"No need to tell the major what he already knows lieutenant." he said.

"Sergeant you are addressing an officer." Layne said to rebuke Stubbs but the Catachan company sergeant was not intimidated.

"He's just saving me the trouble." Trent replied to Layne. Then he looked at Wolf, "Now get to the point lieutenant." he added.

"Sorry sir." she said, "While outside the perimeter I observed a type of Necron that was not involved directly in the attack. It looked like some sort of leader."

"From the way the lieutenant described this individual I believe that it one of the command units known by the designation of 'overlord'." Cornelliuss added.

"And I'm guessing that's important." Trent replied.

"It has been observed that the Necron warriors such as those used in the recent assault on this position lack the adaptive capabilities of our own troops." Cornelliuss explained, "Therefore, they must be directed by commanders with superior capability."

"An overlord?" Layne asked.

"Amongst others yes commissar." Cornelliuss answered.

"So this one was giving the orders to his troops." Altman said.

"In this case probably more than just commanding the assault." Cornelliuss said.

"He looked like he was watching the camp." Wolf added.

"If the overlord was merely acting in a command and control role then there would have been no need for him to reveal his presence." Cornelliuss explained, "For him to occupy ground where he could observe our actions directly rather than as fed back via his warriors suggests intelligence gathering. He wanted to know how we would react given certain stimuli."

"Stimuli? Those damned machines almost overran our lines." Trent exclaimed.

"We beat them back major." Layne pointed out.

"It is likely that the overlord determined that he had already gathered the information he required and withdrew to prepare his next move." Cornelliuss said.

"Which will be what?" Trent asked.

"Data is lacking major." Cornelliuss told him, "But Lieutenant Wolf indicated to me that the overlord was accompanied by only two other Necrons to pilot his vehicle. If a small force were to be able to assault him directly then it is possible that we could remove the Necron's entire command and control apparatus."

"Which would mean what exactly?" Trent asked.

"That depends on the Necrons' strength on this world major. If there is just a single overlord and his troops then removing the overlord would cripple them until he could be repaired or replaced. On the other hand if there are larger forces present then we will at least drive back this advanced force for a time until others can be reanimated." Cornelliuss explained.

"Either way we get them off our back for a while." Trent said before he turned to his command unit's vox operator, "Tell Colonel Shryke I'm on my way to see him." he said. Then he turned back to Cornelliuss and Wolf, "And you two are coming along as well. If I don't get breakfast then neither do either of you."

"Trust me commissar, every last one of my company commanders will know that hiding us behind a hole in the ground is just trapping us in one place while the enemy gets to control the jungle." Shryke said to Garratt, "We should be sending forces to hunt the enemy down in ground my men are expert at fighting in."

"But how much of our strength would you take from your defences to send on this hunt and what would be the target colonel?" Garratt asked in reply.

"How about one company to take out the enemy's front line commander?" Trent asked as he entered the command post.

"Major Trent. Back so soon?" Garratt responded. Then he frowned when he saw Wolf covered in mud, "And Lieutenant Wolf isn't it? Getting to grips with serving in a Catachan regiment I see."

"Colonel the lieutenant may have identified the enemy commander." Trent said, now ignoring the commissar and focusing on Shryke. Then he glanced at Cornelius, "Explain what you explained to me." he told the tech priest.

"Colonel Shryke, it appears that the Necron assault was directed by a single individual positioned to observe our reactions. By eliminating this individual it my opinion that the attacks will cease." Cornelius said.

"Bee-Five-Tee-Are-Dee-Three-Ex, you speak of an overlord?" Lazas responded.

"Correct. An individual matching the parameters of an overlord was observed by Lieutenant Wolf during the attack." Cornelius replied, "The individual was mounted on a command barge and unaccompanied by other forces."

"Your plan is to sever the flow of command and control data to the warriors?" Lazas asked.

"Cut off the head and the body dies." Shryke added.

"Correct." Cornelius answered and Shryke looked at Garratt.

"That's what I'd send my men after." he said.

"Colonel I'd like to volunteer Fourth Company for the task." Trent said, "We can-"

"An entire infantry company to hunt down and kill one individual?" Garratt interrupted, "Colonel, that would weaken our lines significantly. Perhaps Eight Company would be better suited to this."

"No." Shryke replied, "Rough riders are assault troops, not stealthy hunters. But I agree that an entire company is more than we can spare, especially while we're still trying to replace the tarantulas." then he looked at Wolf, "Lieutenant where was this overlord when you saw it?" he asked.

"Err." Wolf replied as she studied the map on the table in front of her. With the entire camp surrounded by jungle much of it looked the same and she had to try and work out from contour lines where she had been looking whilst up the tree, "Here sir." she said suddenly as she located the area of raised and clear ground and she reached out her arm to point at the exact spot on the map. However, as she extended her arm she shook loose a lump of mud that promptly flew across the table and struck Commissar Garratt, splashing across his face as well as his immaculate uniform, "Throne!" Wolf exclaimed, her eyes widening as she rushed around the table, ready to help wipe the mud off. But given that her hands were also covered in it the result was that as she brushed at Garratt's uniform she just smeared more mud onto it.

"Lieutenant!" he snapped, "That is not necessary." then he looked at Shryke, "Colonel, since Lieutenant Wolf appears to be the only one to have seen this overlord then I suggest that her platoon be despatched to hunt it down. With suitable support from the Commissariat of course."

"Layne?" Trent commented.

"Commissar Layne. Yes." Garratt said, "He can ensure that the lieutenant and her men remember their duty."

"It is known that the Necrons are vulnerable to warp based attacks." Cornelius announced, "Perhaps attaching a sanctioned psyker to Second Platoon would be of benefit."

"I'm sure I can spare Aloysius." Trent said, referring to Aloysius Veneel, the sanctioned psyker permanently attached to Fourth Company.

"Attaching a representative of the Adeptus Mechanicus would be advantageous." Lazas said, "However, given our duties here improving our defences it would not be a wise use of our limited resources. The platoon would therefore, have to undertake this mission without our direct support."

"Magos Serett himself joined Second Platoon to scout out the route to the wrecked starship." Trent pointed out, "Plus he took Cornelius and Nathin as well. He thought sparing the resources was worth it."

"Perhaps so major." Lazas replied, "But unfortunately the magos had been corrupted by the potential rewards of locating functional STC data. He was not thinking logically and was willing to sacrifice everything in order to obtain his personal goals."

"Besides, we weren't under attack then." Garratt added.

"Then that's settled then." Shryke said, "Lieutenant Wolf will take her platoon outside the perimeter, locate and destroy this Necron overlord. Commissar Layne and Adept Veneel will accompany them."

9.

Wolf sighed as she sat down in Fourth Company's mess tent at the same table as her command squad and the leaders of the other squads. Only Khor's ogryns were not present. The eating habits of the abhumans was enough to churn the stomach of even hardened Catachan jungle fighters so they were left to dine in their own barracks.

"I know that look." Vance said, staring at her.

"What look?" Molla asked, "All I see is mud."

"She's just got us talked into a mission that could get us all killed." Vance said to Molla. Then looking back at Wolf he added, "I'm right aren't I?"

"You're right." Wolf replied as she began to pick at her food. Then as she took a mouthful she frowned, "What is this?" she asked.

"It doesn't have a name but there were a bunch of them dug up when the trenches were dug and the medicaes' assure us they aren't toxic." Quinn said.

"Yeah eat up. It's good for you." Grey added, "At least not bad anyway."

"Just remember not to talk with your mouth full while you explain what you've got us into this time." Vance said.

"Ah." Wolf said, "Well you remember when I climbed that tree?" Wolf asked.

"You mean when Sergeant Vance and I helped you climb it?" Torrent asked in reply.

"I wasn't there." Mayer commented.

"I remember you falling out and rolling down the hill." Grey said, "Does that count?"

Wolf paused and took a breath, trying to ignore the comments.

"Just tell us." Quinn said.

"Well while I was up there I saw something." Wolf said, "A Necron standing on some sort of vehicle. He looked different to the ones that attacked us."

"Different how?" Molla asked, suspicious.

"More ornate." Wolf replied and Quinn stopped eating and stared at her.

"You mean like it had a crown built into its head or something?" he asked and Wolf nodded.

"Exactly." she answered.

"I saw one like that in the ship." Quinn said, "It was the thing that lunatic cogboy threw himself in front of to protect it from a melta blast."

"Well Cornelliis and that engineeer from Sixth Company think it's important." Wolf said, "So Colonel Shryke has ordered us to go out and find it."

"And when we do?" Grey asked.

"Destroy it." Wolf told him.

"And who exactly is 'us'?" Torrent enquired.

"Us." Wolf replied, holding out her arms to indicate the rest of the platoon present, "Plus Khor's ogryns of course. Oh and Rull. Where is he anyway?"

"You just missed him." Molla said, "He finished his meal and didn't hang around. Usual Rull."

"So it's Second Platoon then?" Mayer said.

"That is what she just said Bomber." Quinn responded.

"Major Trent wanted to have the whole of Fourth Company go looking." Wolf said, "But Colonel Shryke didn't want to pull so many men from the perimeter. So it's just us plus a couple of others."

Everyone at the table stopped eating and stared at Wolf.

"Who are these 'others' exactly?" Grey asked.

"Well there's Veneel." Wolf said.

"Bolt magnet." Quinn commented.

"And Layne." Wolf then muttered before stuffing a spoonful of her meal into her mouth and starting to chew.

"What was that lieutenant?" Vance asked.

"It sounded a lot like 'Layne' to me." Molla said, "As in Commissar Layne."

"So as well as sticking us with the witch we're also expected to go out with the leash hanging around our necks?" Quinn said.

Torrent looked at Grey.

"I've got admire the major for that." she said, "Lieutenant Wolf, the witch and the leash all out there together. If we get wiped out then he's just rid his entire company of outsiders."

Wolf then looked around at her sergeants.

"So how's recruitment gone?" she asked, "I can still see some empty spaces at these tables."

"Ah." Quinn said, "Well there's a bit of an issue there."

"What sort of issue?" Wolf replied.

"The sort where finding good men to fill vacancies in our platoon is hampered by the fact that they don't want to serve under you." Grey told her and Wolf frowned.

"Conscripts don't get a choice." Wolf said. Like all Imperial Guard regiments, the XIX Catachan Regiment maintained large squads of conscripts that were undergoing the final stages of their training and when replacements were needed to make up for casualties they would be drawn from these squads. In Fourth Company the conscripts were a part of Third Platoon and Wolf knew that there were more than enough potential recruits in it to make up for the losses Second Platoon had suffered.

"Oh mine and Grey's squads are back up to strength. So's Khor's. He went over to Ninth Company to grab one of their ogryns for it." Molla said, "It's Quinn that's coming up short." and Wolf stared at Quinn.

"Lieutenant transferring to a veteran squad is entirely voluntary." he said.

"And no-one wants to volunteer to serve under an outsider who keeps getting sent on missions that get people killed." Torrent added, "Throne knows I wouldn't have joined if I'd been given a choice."

"And if I just pull all four slots I've got left from First and Second Squads then I'll be robbing them both of their best people." Quinn said.

"It was bound to happen eventually." Grey commented.

"Actually I thought she'd be dead before it became an issue." Vance responded.

"You're really saying that soldiers don't want to serve under my command?" Wolf asked.

"They just don't know you like we do." Mayer said.

"Oh I think they do." Grey replied.

"Look, after this is all over I'm sure that there will be platoons that have taken enough losses that their personnel will be split up between others and we can grab the extra personnel we want then." Vance said, "But for now there's no-one willing to volunteer to join our platoon."

"Because of you." Torrent added, smirking. Then Wolf smiled and Torrent's face fell, "She took that better than I'd hoped." she said.

"You and Sergeant Vance just gave me an idea." Wolf said and she hurriedly finished what was left of her breakfast and gulped down her cup of water before getting up, "Sergeant Quinn, do you have a list of the men you tried to recruit from other companies?"

"Sure. Right here." Quinn replied and he slid a notepad across the table with a list of names crossed out written on the exposed page.

"Thanks." Wolf said as she picked up the notebook, "I want everyone ready to move out in an hour." she added, "Hopefully I'll have the recruits Quinn needs by then."

Then as Wolf hurried from the mess tent the others at her table exchanged glances.

"What the feth just happened there?" Molla asked, "Since when did she think she could pick out suitable recruits for a veteran squad?"

Outside the mess tent, Wolf hurried towards the tents used to house Fourth Company. In particular she headed for the tent occupied by the commanding officer of First Platoon, Captain Hal Fear. Captain Fear was effectively the second in command of Fourth Company and it was known that if anything were to happen to Major Trent then the company would vote for Captain Fear to replace him, as was the tradition among Catachan regiments. Wolf had only become a platoon commander by chance. Her predecessor had been killed just before she was transferred to the XIX Regiment and his position was the only vacancy for a lieutenant available. Even if that lieutenant was a non-combatant from a non-Catachan regiment.

"Captain, it's Lieutenant Wolf. May I come in?" Wolf called out from outside the entrance to his tent.

"Can't this wait Wolf?" Fear responded from inside the tent.

"Not really sir." she replied.

"Hang on." Fear said and Wolf thought she heard muttering from not only Captain Fear but also from someone with a much higher pitched, feminine, voice. Then moments later the Captain appeared wearing only his issue trousers, "This had better be good." he said.

"I'm sorry, I didn't know I was disturbing you sir." Wolf said.

"Really? Then get someone to explain to you what that means." Fear said and he pointed down by the entrance to his tent where his traditional Catachan blade was sticking out of the ground in the manner used by members of the regiment to indicate that they were engaged in activities considered private.

"Oh I'm so sorry." Wolf said.

"Just get on with it Wolf." Fear said, frowning.

"Well I need a favour from you sir." Wolf said, "I need some recruits."

"So much for your recruitment drive lieutenant." Grey said as Second Platoon prepared to leave the camp. With their equipment packed and checked there were still four shotguns and ammunition for them laid out on a nearby crate waiting for someone to claim them.

"They'll be here." Wolf said, "I hope."

"Well here come Veneel and the leash." Vance said as he saw Commissar Layne and Veneel walking towards them. There was also a third individual accompanying them, one that carried a traditional Catachan blade but did not wear an Imperial Guard uniform, despite still being dressed for life in the jungle.

"Preacher Black." Wolf said when she saw the priest, "Will you be joining us?" The Adeptus Ministorum priest sometimes known behind his back as 'Emperor Botherer Black' or just 'Botherer Black' had accompanied Second Platoon into battle on several occasions, always when Veneel had been assigned to them beforehand. A devout practitioner of the Imperial Creed, Black viewed the psyker Veneel with even more suspicion than the rest of the company and it was well known that he considered it his sacred duty to take the life of the psyker should he show even the slightest hint of corruption.

"On this occasion lieutenant no. I shall be remaining here to provide the rest of the company with the benefit of my support. I just came to provide blessings before you depart." Black replied.

"Not worried about Veneel going off the deep end then preacher?" Molla asked out loud.

"Oh I think that there are already those here qualified to take action should that happen." Black said, glancing towards Layne and there were swiftly concealed frowns from others in the platoon at the thought of having the commissar watching over them.

Ignoring the looks he observed, Layne pulled Wolf aside.

"This is a vital mission lieutenant." he said, "One we are honoured to undertake on the Emperor's behalf. However, I am aware of the nature of these troops and their attitude towards anyone who is not what they believe to be one of their own. So I'd just like you to know that I shall be keeping an eye on you to make sure you are safe."

"Err, thanks." Wolf replied nervously, already knowing that her platoon was unlikely to try and harm her deliberately. However, she also knew that commissars tended to have far more than their fair share of accidents serving with Catachans and the thought of getting caught up in one such accident was a source of concern to her. Then she saw another group of five men approaching and she smiled, "Ah, the rest of our recruits are here."

"That's Captain Fear." Grey exclaimed, "What's he doing here?"

"And those other four were all on my list." Quinn added.

"Sergeant Quinn with me if you please." Wolf said, waving for him to follow her as she walked towards Fear and the four soldiers accompanying him.

"What's going on here?" one of the other soldiers asked.

"Exactly what I said." Fear replied, "I told you that you were considered veteran grade troops and that Fourth Company required your services. Then you agreed to the transfer with myself as well as your platoon and company commanders."

"Thank for volunteering for Second Platoon gentlemen." Wolf added in the friendliest manner she could manage, "I'm sure you all know Sergeant Quinn. He'll be your squad leader."

"We told Quinn to get stuffed." another of the recruits said, "We signed up for First Platoon."

"Actually I never said anything about my platoon." Fear said, turning towards the soldier, "Or are you calling me a liar in front of a commissar?"

"This isn't-" the soldier began.

"I don't care what it isn't!" Quinn snapped, "What this is is Second Platoon and you four all volunteered whether you like it or not. Now grab a shotgun and ammo each because we head out as soon as you're ready. Any of you don't like it you can beg for a transfer back to your old units when we get back. Assuming you're still alive of course and I'll warn you just once, give me any crap about which platoon you're in and you won't need to wait for Commissar Layne to deal with you because I'll shoot you myself."

"Think we'll have any trouble from them?" Wolf asked Quinn quietly as the four veterans walked over to where the shotguns were lay and one of their new fellow squad members handed them one each.

"I don't think so." Quinn replied, "Supposing they could get a transfer back to their old units what would they say? That they got outsmarted by an outsider?"

"Wow." Wolf commented, "Being hated has its benefits after all." then she turned back to Fear and smiled, "Thanks for your help captain." she said, "I couldn't have done it without you."

"Next time try and pick a better time lieutenant." Fear replied, "Now if you don't mind there's someone waiting for me and she may not be willing to wait much longer."

10.

There was no smoke screen to cover Second Platoon's departure from the camp this time. Instead the small force simply left via the main gate and headed directly for the jungle while other Catachan units were at work reinforcing the perimeter defences and widening the cleared kill zone to give them more chance to shoot at advancing Necrons while they were forced to cross the area of open ground. Their departure was watched by Colonel Shryke from his command post using a set of enlarged magnoculars that were mounted on a stand just inside one of the narrow vision slits that not only provided a view of the outside world but also allowed the occupants of the command post to fire their weapons out of it if the need arose.

"Well the kill team is on its way." he said as he stepped back from the magnoculars. Adept Clay was stood close behind him and she moved out of the colonel's way. However, she was not paying enough attention and she knocked the central table at a point where she had set down a metal plate of food and although the plate was now empty except for a few scraps it fell to the floor with a clatter.

"Throne!" she exclaimed, "I'm so sorry. I'll clean it up."

"Good idea adept." Shryke replied. But then as she crouched down to retrieve the plate Colonel Shryke suddenly reached out and stopped her.

"Wait." he said as he looked down at the upturned plate on the floor. Then he crouched down to pick it up and placed it face down on the table, "I've got an idea." he said.

"What?" Clay asked, "It's just a plate."

"No. It's a landmine." Shryke replied.

"A what?" Clay said.

"Very good colonel." Commissar Garratt said with a smile.

"Would someone care to explain what's going on?" Clay said, looking back and forth between the colonel and the commissar.

"Adept Clay," Garratt began, "the colonel is aware that the camp is being monitored by the enemy. Therefore, any defensive preparations we take will be witnessed and can be countered. However, should the enemy think that we have defences in place that do not genuinely exist then they will seek to avoid them, leading them into stronger points in our line."

"Basically we bury a whole load of these plates just under the surface." Shryke explained, "And we also put a few powerful demo charges under some of the outer ones rigged to detonate by remote. Then when the Necrons return we trigger the charges as they get close. Hopefully that'll leave them thinking that every plate is in fact a powerful mine and they'll attack elsewhere."

"Where we can have our heavy weapons concentrated more strongly now that they do not need to cover the whole perimeter." Garratt added.

"And if the Necrons see through the ruse?" Clay replied and Shryke shrugged.

"Then Sixth, Seventh and Eighth Companies ought to be able to react quickly enough to plug the gap until we can redeploy." he said.

The command barge slid back into a position from where Phennett could observe the Catachan camp. Already the overlord's forces would be moving back into position, the ghost arks ready to deploy their troops. However, this time rather than just committing a third of his troops to a night attack Phennett intended to launch all of his warriors at the Catachans and he would do so in broad daylight, confident that their defences were on the verge of collapse. All that remained was for him to give the order to strike and then he could stand back and watch as the Catachans were overrun.

But something about the activity Phennett could make out around the camp gave him cause for hesitation. The Catachans appeared hard at work building more and higher barriers around their camp, along with digging a large trench around it. None of this worried Phennett though, his warriors' gauss-flayers could penetrate any barrier given time, while although the incomplete trench would slow down his warriors' advance in the sections it covered it would also offer cover in those areas rather than acting as an impenetrable barrier. If necessary Phennett would order enough of his warriors into the trench that they would fill it up and allow those that followed to simply walk across their bodies. What did concern Phennett though was what a third group of Catachans appeared to be doing. Split into small units these soldiers had with them numerous piles of dull metallic disks and one or two from each unit lay flat on their stomachs to place these on the ground before carefully sweeping dirt over the edges. This left the centre of the disks exposed and thanks to this Phennett could see that there was already a large number of these in place further out from the camp and that the Catachans placing them were working their way back towards their own perimeter. The obvious assumption that could be made was that these were some kind of primitive explosive devices that the Catachans hoped would stall the Necron advance along that front, particularly

since the disks had been buried where the Catachans' other defences appeared weakest. But the fact that the Catachans had not deployed these weapons earlier suggested that they had little faith in their power and that this was an act of desperation rather than a demonstration of military might. With this in mind Phennett decided that he would not alter his attack plan because of the presence of the primitive mines, no matter how many of them appeared to have been laid. After all, given that they were visible on the surface he could easily have his warriors avoid them as they advanced.

Satisfied that the Catachans would be powerless to do more than put up token resistance Phennett gave the order for the attack to commence and in the jungle all around the camp Necron warriors stepped down from their ghost arks and began to advance.

A flare shot up into the sky and ignited before floating back down towards the ground when the first Necron warrior triggered one of the many trip wires that had been set in the jungle. Originally such defences had not been considered practical given the size and quantity of native lifeforms that could trigger them but given that the fighting appeared to have either killed or driven away most of the native fauna the Catachans had set as many of the simple traps as they could. Most were just flares to alert the XIX Regiment to the enemy's approach but a handful had been connected to explosives instead and as well as the sudden flurry of flares that shot skywards all around the camp there were several explosions from within the jungle as these were triggered.

But the faint 'Crump' of fragmentation grenades was easily drowned out when the Catachans reacted to the attack and the air was suddenly filled with the sound of mortars, both the lightweight man-portable weapons favoured by the Catachans for their ability to engage targets at long range even within dense jungle terrain and also the rapid firing automatic versions mounted on Wyrvern armoured carriers.

"Stand to! Stand to!" Captain Fear yelled, using his microbead to broadcast the order to his entire platoon at once and the soldiers of First Platoon rushed to their trenches. Fear was scanning the tree line through his magnoculars when all of a sudden Lieutenant Lore jumped down into his trench.

"Captain, are the charges set?" Lore asked and Fear looked to one of his men, a member of the combat engineer squad attached to his platoon. The man nodded and Fear looked back at Lore.

"Set and ready to blow on my command." he said, "Go get back to your men and tell them to be ready for the bang."

Lore smiled and then hurried from the trench, heading for the positions occupied by his own platoon.

Meanwhile Fear turned his attention back to the jungle. He could see no signs of enemy activity just yet but there were explosions coming from within the jungle as mortars laid down fire in hope of taking out some of the Necrons before they appeared. But then a light appeared from within the trees that subsequently split into two lights positioned side by side and Fear recognised them as the glowing eyes of a Necron warrior shortly before the machine itself stepped into view.

"Fear to Trent, I have visual contact with the enemy." Fear signalled with his microbead as more of the alien warriors appeared from within the undergrowth.

"Understood captain." Trent's voice replied, "Hold fire and stand by. Let's see how they like our minefield."

"Get ready." Fear said, glancing at his combat engineers and one of them flipped off the safeties on the dataslate that was acting as a control unit for the demolition charges that had been buried beneath some of the outermost plates that made up the fake minefield.

Steadily the Necron warriors advanced on the camp, approaching from all directions and from elsewhere in the camp Fear heard the sound of heavy weapons opening fire. Behind the 'mines' however, the Catachans just waited.

"Number seven, now!" Fear snapped when he saw the first Necron come close one of the plates that had a demolition charge buried beneath it and as the engineer tapped his dataslate, Fear ducked for cover.

The standard Imperial Guard demolition charge was a large pre-packaged explosive weighing just over two kilograms and had similar destructive power to the main gun of a Leman Russ main battle tank. Therefore, the effect of one being triggered just beneath the surface was dramatic, producing a shock wave that blasted every Necron warrior within ten metres into pieces that faded away to nothing before they even hit the ground while hurling those further away back into those following behind them, tearing many of them apart. Fear quickly looked back out of the trench and watched as the Necrons continued to advance in spite of the losses they had just suffered. Elsewhere there was another massive explosion as another unit triggered a charge and he ducked briefly to try and avoid the worst of the flying debris but the Necrons still continued their advance.

"Three and eight. Quickly." he ordered as he saw the enemy nearing two more of the charges and the ground shook as the engineer triggered both charges together, consigning yet more Necron warriors to oblivion even if it was only temporary.

The apparent destructive power of the mines was far greater than Phennett had counted on and he began to

consider the possibility that although their use by the Catachans was still motivated by desperation the initial refusal to use them had been because they were too valuable to risk wasting on whatever native wildlife happened to come wandering out of the jungle. Now that the only threat to their camp came from his Necron legion however, they were quite willing to use up every weapon they had at their disposal even if that did mean using high powered explosives against infantry.

The irony was that this act of desperation had brought into play weapons that were quite capable of destroying the Necron warriors entirely. The status reports coming in from the ghost arks told him that the majority of those that had teleported back for repair were beyond it, useful only for the materials that could be recovered from their ancient bodies.

Phennett scanned the area of the supposed minefield quickly and he saw that there were hundreds of the metal disks visible through the dirt around them. None of his warriors had stood on any of the mines to trigger them so that meant that they were either detonated remotely or, more likely, when they detected the presence of a suitable target close by. This meant that there was no way for the Necron warriors to advance through the minefield without taking horrific casualties. Casualties that even Phennett balked at despite his troops being nothing but mindless warriors who would ignore such losses if left to themselves. Therefore, Phennett stepped into to modify his plan of attack. The warriors already advancing towards the mines would be withdrawn back into the jungle while those following them would be diverted to attack other sections of the Catachan perimeter. Sections that were not protected by the 'mines'.

Wolf looked over her shoulder as the first sounds of explosions reached Second Platoon while they made their way through the jungle.

"Eyes front lieutenant." Vance said softly, "You never know what you might walk into while you're looking the other way."

"Yeah sure." Wolf replied.

Second Platoon were moving far more cautiously than they had on their previous excursion into the jungle. On that occasion their mission had been just to locate the enemy. But now that they were hunting one very specific individual it was important that the platoon not be noticed by anyone who raise the alarm and this meant every single Necron warrior.

First Squad led the way now, with Sergeant Molla using his superior field craft and tracking skills to pick out areas of Necron activity so that the rest of the platoon could avoid them entirely. They were aided in this by Rull. The sniper had already been able to scout out large areas of jungle and had noted those places that bore the signs of Necron activity from the last attack on the camp and these had been marked. To the Catachans these marks were obvious, but being made from materials that could be found lying around in the jungle Wolf needed them pointing out to her as the platoon passed them. But there were more forces involved in this new assault than had been deployed previously and it was clear that either the Necron overlord had received reinforcements or his initial attack had just been intended to allow him to determine the defensive strategy of the Catachans.

All of a sudden Molla brought his squad to a halt and they ducked down into the undergrowth while signalling for the rest of the platoon to do the same. Crouched down, Wolf took out her magnoculars and was about to lift them to her eye when Vance put his hand on them and shook his head.

"They may reflect light and give us away." he whispered, "Just wait and see what's going on." and Wolf nodded, returning the magnoculars to the pouch on her belt.

It was then that she heard an all too familiar humming sound, only louder than when Second Platoon had previously encountered a ghost ark and it was then that she saw why Molla had called the platoon to a halt. From deeper in the jungle there was not one, but four ghost arks moving towards the Catachan camp. The vehicles were flanked on either side by Necron warriors marching in step while more of their brethren rode motionless and silent aboard the ghost arks.

"Looks like they want their reinforcements closer to the camp this time around." Vance whispered.

"Or maybe they're planning on using those vehicles in the attack." Wolf replied, "Those things would cut our people to shreds at close range. And their void shields could let them get that close as well."

"Don't I know it." Vance said, "If not for those Emperor damned shields we could let Rull take care of this mission all by himself. But if that overlord's vehicle is shielded as well its going to take everything we've got to get through them before he can fly away."

"We can't even warn the regiment what's coming can we? Those Necrons could detect the vox signal." Wolf said and Vance nodded.

"Probably. Don't worry though, I'm sure that the colonel will have something in store for them." he answered. The four ghost arks and their escorting infantry continued to pass right by the concealed Catachans who in turn waited silently. Even the ogyrns made no sound as they watched the alien force move past. At the front of the platoon Molla watched the rear elements of the Necron force as they disappeared out of view and then checked the direction they had come from once more just be certain that there was not another group

following them. Confident that there was no risk of detection Molla then cautiously got back to his feet and began to creep forwards. Then he waved the platoon on and picked up speed.

Once again the Necron warriors fired on the dug in tarantulas. This time the strong points housing the automated sentry guns were tougher, with much of the dirt dug from the half complete defensive trench piled up in front of them. But given that there were far fewer tarantulas available than there had been the first time that the Necrons attacked more warriors were able to concentrate their fire on them and the additional protection did little to offer any more protection to the weapons.

The defending Catachans made good use of the Necron's tactics though, exploiting their targeting priority to position themselves so that they could bring greater firepower to bear on the alien machine warriors and this time thanks to the idea of tricking the Necrons into thinking that a large portion of the perimeter was protected by mines the Catachans found themselves having to defend a much smaller front.

However, this advantage did not last for long as out of the jungle came first one and then more ghost arks. The Catachans quickly reacted by directing their heavy weapons towards the enemy vehicles, hoping that as well as bringing down a vehicle they could also eliminate the Necron warriors they could see being carried within their rib like structure. However, the invisible shields surrounding the ghost arks kicked in with each hit and protected the vehicles from damage.

"Throne!" Shryke exclaimed as he saw a concentrated volley of fire from all three of his regimental command group's Hydra anti-aircraft vehicles fail to inflict any noticeable damage on the closest ghost ark, "What does it take to stop those fething things?"

"If Lieutenant Wolf's report is to be believed then a melta gun should suffice." Garratt responded as he too watched the approaching vehicles through the vision slit.

"And by the time they're close enough for us to use melta guns they'll already be right on top of our positions." Shryke said angrily.

"Colonel," Lazas commented, stepping closer from where he had been standing near to the row of vox units so that he could better monitor all the communications going on, "the shielding of Necron vehicles is impressive but it does not make them invulnerable. Have your troops concentrate their fire as much as possible and the shields will be pierced or overloaded. But use krak missiles and las cannons in preference to auto cannons. Only they are powerful enough to overload the shields."

"Pass the word." Colonel Shryke ordered, looking at the vox operators, "All las cannons and missile launchers to target enemy vehicles. All other weapons maintain fire on infantry targets."

"Colonel I would also suggest that you redeploy Seventh Company to counter those vehicles." Lazas added. "That's only a handful of extra missile launchers." Shryke pointed out.

"Perhaps so." Lazas said, "But have you observed the direction that they are advancing from?"

"The trench." Shryke said as he looked back outside the command post, "That useless damned trench. They'll float right over it and it won't even slow them down like it will the troops on foot." then he hurried to the vox operators and added, "Tell Captain Moore to get his Sentinels moving. If we're going to get any use from that trench we need to stop those transports before they reach it."

From his own vantage point Phennett also watched as the ghost arks drifted from the jungle and towards the Catachan lines. He had committed only a third of his ghost arks to the direct attack, with the rest held back just out of sight of the Catachans where they could repair damaged Necron warriors in safety. Though the Catachans were well equipped with indirect fire weapons all of these were relatively weak anti-infantry weapons that were incapable of damaging the ghost arks. The ghost arks also provided cover for the Necron warriors advancing with them on foot. By positioning themselves behind the ghost arks the warriors gained the benefit of the vehicles' quantum shielding and could cross the kill zone that the Catachans had prepared in relative safety. But that safety depended on the ghost arks themselves surviving the firepower the Catachans had at their disposal.

A sudden flash accompanied by a plume of smoke indicated to Phennett that one of the ghost arks had been destroyed and he saw the vehicle plough into the ground just short of the large trench that had been dug apparently in the hope that it would form a barrier against the advancing warriors. However, the ghost ark did not come to an immediate halt and instead its momentum pushed it onwards, gouging a path through the dirt right up to the trench. It not stop moving there either. The ghost ark slid forwards further, dipping only slightly as its prow was no longer supported by the ground until it collided with the far side of the trench and finally came to a halt there wedged across it.

Had Phennett still possessed the lips of the organic body he had surrendered millions of years earlier for the immortality of machine form he would have smiled at what he now saw. In destroying the ghost ark the Catachans had inadvertently created a bridge right across the trench that was supposed to protect them and now the warriors following behind the ghost ark could march right across the wreck.

"Move!" Lore yelled, waving at the men of two of Third Platoon's heavy weapon squads. Armed with missile launchers and heavy bolters the two squads were perfectly equipped to defend a fixed position like the Catachan camp but first they needed to be properly placed and so in the absence of Necrons trying to cross the fake minefield towards Fourth Company's existing position Lore hurried them to where they could do some good, "Here, this will do." he added when he reached a supply dump, "Get those bolters set up first. I want any Necron trying to cross that wreck filling with holes."

Both heavy weapon squads as well as Lore's command squad co-operated to set up the rapid firing weapons and all three were ready to fire in under a minute. Without waiting for another command the trio of gunners opened fire on the Necrons now crossing the wrecked ghost ark. The wreck provided the Necron warriors with some protection as they clambered across it but given the weight of fire now being directed towards them it was inevitable that some of the mass reactive rounds would find their targets. Powerful enough to punch through the Necrons' armour the heavy bolter round exploded inside their mechanical bodies and even those hits not able to trigger the teleportation system that activated automatically whenever a Necron suffered critical damage were still able to knock them off the ghost ark and send them tumbling into the trench below. As predicted by the Catachan officers, being at the bottom of the trench was insufficient to make the Necrons give up, however and they soon set to work pulling themselves out of it, forcing their hands and feet into the dirt walls as they climbed back to the top.

Second Platoon halted again. But this time it was not because they were at risk of detection if they carried on any further. Instead they were almost at their destination and the time had come to deploy to attack the Necron overlord himself.

"We need to cover all the angles." Wolf said as she opened out a hard copy map of the area while the platoon's leaders gathered around her. Though she could have called up a superior map on her dataslate she was concerned that any activity from the device's machine spirit could tip off the Necron overlord to their presence and allow him to escape, "Sergeant Grey I want Second Squad to stay on this heading until you get within visual range of the target. Then deploy your missile launcher and wait for further orders."

"You're setting up the missile launcher in what is likely to be the front arc of the target's vehicle?" Molla asked and Wolf nodded.

"Yes. I expect the overlord to try and run when we attack and that means Second Squad will get a good shot at the rear of his vehicle, right where its armour will be weakest."

"And if he doesn't?" Grey asked.

"Quinn's veterans are to make their way around here." Wolf replied, pointing to the map on the opposite side of the clearing to the one she had ordered Grey to position his men on, "When we move in they'll have a line of sight to the rear of the vehicle as it is and when they get in close they can take a shot with their melta gun."

"On the other hand if he does turn and run my men will still get their melta shot but from point blank range when it goes past us." Quinn commented, nodding and Wolf smiled.

"See? I'm not just a pretty face." she said and Torrent snorted as other members of the platoon avoid eye contact with Wolf who then frowned, remembering what had been said to her about Catachans considering physical height a key feature of attractiveness.

"Show respect for your officer." Commissar Layne hissed, glaring at Torrent who in turn ignored him and just looked down at the map.

"My men will be pretty exposed if we're the only ones to break from cover though." Quinn then pointed out.

"That's why I want the rest of the platoon to deploy on these two sides of the clearing here and here." Wolf explained, running her fingers along the map, "Sergeant Molla will take First Squad and Corporal Mayer's mortar squad around to the far side here while Sergeant Khor's ogryns remain on this side here with my command squad, Mister Veneel and Commissar Layne."

"I'll chose my own assignment thank you lieutenant." Layne replied, "And I think that my skills would be best utilised with Sergeant Quinn's squad."

"Ah." Wolf said as she noticed Quinn scowl and sought to do something before the commissar noticed his reaction as well, "Well I want to keep Veneel with my squad," she said, thinking quickly, "and I was under the impression that you wanted to keep a close eye on him for signs of corruption."

"It would seem that the lieutenant does not think herself capable of watching both the enemy and myself at the same time." Veneel added, "You on the other hand excel at watching members of our own side." he added, a smile spreading across his face and also of several of the Catachans as they noticed the not so subtle implication that the commissar, like many others of his calling, cared more for shooting members of the Imperial Guard than its enemies.

"Okay now let's go." Wolf ordered and while she folded the map to put it away the others around her all began to get back to their feet.

"We should hurry." Layne added, "From the sounds of things-" and then all of a sudden he stumbled as Grey slipped a foot between the commissar's legs in an attempt to trip him. Layne did fall forwards towards the tree trunk Grey had wanted him to but before he could strike his head against the bark and knock himself out he reached out with his hand and steadied himself. Whirling around he glared at Grey, "You tripped me!" he snapped and his hand went for the bolt pistol at his waist.

"Commissar!" Wolf hissed as she leapt between Layne and Grey, "You will alert the enemy to our presence." Layne scowled.

"That man assaulted me." Layne said.

"Don't now what you're talking about." Grey replied.

"You tripped commissar." Wolf said and then she reached down to the ground and picked up a stick that Layne had crushed underfoot as he stumbled, "On this."

Still glaring at Grey Layne took his hand away from his side arm.

"Very well." he said before turning around and walking away. Meanwhile Wolf turned towards Grey and stared at him.

"No more." she said sternly.

"Don't worry." Vance said, "He's had his go and failed."

"And that applies to everyone else as well." Wolf added, looking at each of her squad leaders in turn, "We're here to fight a Necron." then she too turned away and began to head towards the clearing where the Necron overlord was located.

Before following after Wolf, Torrent leant close to Grey.

"Looks like you owe the outsider your life sergeant." she whispered, "That leash would have shot you dead." Grey snarled.

"Don't remind me." he said.

Third Company was the first to get to grips with the Necrons at close range. Though two more of the alien transports were disabled in the killing zone the remaining ghost arks sailed straight across the unfinished defensive trench and then right up to the Catachan lines. As they drew closer the ghost arks opened fire, their side mounted weapon arrays blasting in all directions with the same sort of energy beams emitted by the rifles carried by their infantry. These beams tore through the Catachan defences and disintegrated whatever they struck. Some of Third Company ducked down into their trenches, hoping that the layers of dirt would provide some protection. But this was not to be and the fire from the ghost arks disintegrated the sides of the trench before stripping away the flesh from the occupants.

It was only after passing over the outer trenches that the ghost arks came to a halt while survivors scattered and reserve units hurried to plug the gap in their lines. Meanwhile the Necron warriors carried by the ghost arks suddenly straightened up in unison, took hold of their gauss-flayers and disembarked for battle.

"Send in Eighth Company." Shryke ordered from his command post, "And have Fourth Company reposition to form a new defensive line between the east munitions store and landing pad." then he drew his las pistol and checked it before looking at Garratt, "Looks like we may be getting a bit more involved in this than usual." he added.

12.

Wolf risked peering out of the undergrowth into the clearing where she saw Phennett standing on his command barge. From this angle it was easier to see that the Necron vehicle was hovering several metres above the ground, well out of reach even to an ogryn. The altitude allowed the Necron overlord to see over the trees between him and the XIX Regiment's camp while concealing him from being seen by the Catachans there in return.

"If not for that shield Rull could end this with one shot." she muttered.

"Where exactly is your sniper lieutenant?" Layne asked.

"Same place as always would be my guess." Vance responded before Wolf could and he smiled, "Right where he needs to be."

Wolf looked at her watch. She had noted the time when the platoon had split up and estimated how long it would take the various units to get into position. Ideally she would have signalled each of them in turn to check that they were in place but on this occasion she decided it was better to trust in their ability to move through the jungle rather than risk having a wireless signal give them away.

"Okay we move on my command." she said, drawing her las pistol, "Is everyone ready?" and she looked around at the rest of her squad as well as Layne and Veneel nodded back at her. Then she looked at Khor, "Are your men ready?" she asked.

"Ogryns ready." Khor replied.

"Then this is it." Wolf said, "Go!"

"Ogryns charge!" Khor yelled.

It was the ogryns that burst from the undergrowth first, roaring as they charged across the relatively open ground of the clearing towards Phennett. As they charged the ogryns fired, sending a storm of projectiles towards him. But despite its fragile appearance the command barge on which Phennett was stood was shielded just as the larger ghost arks were and the ogryns' ripper guns could do nothing to it. Seeing the ogryns break from cover was the signal for most of the rest of the platoon to emerge from hiding as well and they began to converge on Phennett from three sides while Grey's men remained in cover and fired at the Necron with their las guns.

The unexpected attack took Phennett by surprise at first. None of his forces in the jungle had reported any signs of primitive activity and yet this force had been able to not only locate the overlord but make their way to his position undetected. But Phennett was by no means defenceless aboard his command barge and without him even needing to issue an order to the warriors operating the vehicles' controls acted to protect him.

Lightning erupted from the weapons mounted beneath the command barge and shot towards the nearby ogryns. But the energy of the attack did not stop when it struck the closest ogryn, instead it leapt from one to the next engulfing the entire squad in lightning and the massive abhumans dropped to their knees and howled in pain.

But while the Necron warriors focused on what they took to be the greatest threat to Phennett the rest of second platoon was able to rush forwards unopposed, firing on the command barge despite their weapons being too weak to penetrate the shield. Seeing this Grey looked at his missile launcher team. The two Catachans had already loaded a krak missile into the launcher Guardsman Dean held over his shoulder and were waiting for the order to fire. According to Wolf's orders, Grey was to wait for the command barge to turn its rear towards his squad. But it appeared that the Necron overlord not only was willing to stand and fight but was also very well protected.

"Do it now." he ordered, "Michaels have another round ready."

"Firing." Dean responded and there was sudden 'Whoosh!' as the missile flew from the launcher.

Phennett had just enough time to realise that the missile had been fired before it struck the shield around his command barge and detonated. With power being diverted to operate the weapons there was insufficient reserve to maintain the quantum shielding as well and the blast from the krak warhead penetrated it, sending a jet of molten metal into one of the operating warriors and his control console. The command barge suddenly dropped and tilted and Phennett found himself thrown from his position. He grabbed onto the side of the command barge before he could plummet to the ground below but this did not stop the descent of the barge itself and it slammed into the ground moments later, catapulting Phennett from it.

Undamaged by the impact himself the overlord got back to his feet and looked around at the advancing Catachans. Behind him Phennett noticed that one of the two Necron warriors that crewed his command barge was still functional while the second was in the process of trying to repair itself. However, the overlord had no intention of trying to assist them and instead just reached for where his staff had ended up. Raising this staff up high Phennett triggered the particle beam emitter that was embedded within it a beam of white

light fired at Quinn's squad. Anticipating the attack the veterans hurled themselves aside before they could be harmed but the momentum of their charge was lost. Phennett then turned towards Wolf's command squad and stared right at her. But as he raised his staff again, Wolf saw a tiny red dot appear on his head and she smiled.

A moment later there was a gun shot, the noise lessened by the suppressor fitted to Rull's rifle and Phennett's head jerked backwards from the impact. But the round did no more than dent the metal of his skull and Wolf gasped as she saw the damage repair itself in moments.

"Foolish things." Phennett's voice boomed out in Gothic, the language of the Imperium of Man, "I have lived for millions of years and I will still be here for millions more after you are nothing but dust."

This was mainly a boast. Phennett had calculated the strength of his enemies and determined that it was unlikely that he would best them all in combat. However, he would make sure that as many of them as possible died before his body was sent back to the main tomb to be repaired.

But then something changed. Phennett sensed a shift in the barrier that separated dimensions. At first this puzzled him, the phaeron was unlikely to send reinforcements to rescue him and nothing that Phennett had seen had convinced him that the Catachans had teleportation technology in their armoury.

The answer came when a hand suddenly appeared to burst up out of the ground. The hand resembled that of one of any of the other Necrons except that the fingers were tipped with long blades. Following this a hand came and an arm that then pulled what looked to be a Necron warrior draped in the flayed skin of a victim up out of the ground. Phennett knew that this was an illusion, the ground beneath the newly arrive Necron remained intact and the machine had in fact crawled its way out of another dimension. Its barbaric appearance also revealed to Phennett why it had chosen now to arrive.

Even before the Necrons had begun their millions of years of slumber there had been tales of those among them corrupted by a virus unleashed by the C'Tan who had convinced them to give up their biological forms when the Necrons had turned on them. This virus robbed the infected Necrons of what remained of their minds and left them with an insatiable hunger for living flesh. As part of this blood lust the Necrons known as flayed ones abandoned their advanced weapons in favour of long blades that they used to cut the skin from their victims before wearing it as trophy. Exiled from Necron civilisation and attracted by death and battle, flayed ones lurked in pocket dimensions until they could claw their way back into the real world to indulge in their lust for death. But they did not come alone and all around Phennett more flayed ones crawled into existence.

Some Necron commanders attempted to guide the actions of flayed ones when they appeared but right now Phennett cared nothing for how the flayed ones acted just as long as they killed as many of his enemies as they could. Some of the flayed ones advanced towards Wolf's command squad, who came to a halt as they stared at the machines wrapped in skin. Then Veneel stepped forwards and extended an arm towards the Necrons. Without speaking the psyker allowed the energy of the warp into him, channelling it into his fingertips where it burst out as a lightning storm similar to that fired by the wrecked command barge's weapons. This storm of lightning flowed over the advancing Necrons and they stopped and began to shudder as their systems were overloaded by the energy arcing around them. At the same time the flayed skin draped over their shoulders began to smoulder as it was heated.

"Hurry lieutenant." Veneel said as he struggled to maintain the lightning and the Necrons began to overcome its effects.

"Open fire." Wolf ordered, aiming her las pistol at one of the flayed ones and firing repeatedly. The others in her squad joined in the attack, with the pulsing sound of their las weapons joined by the 'pop' of the grenade launcher as its operator used anti-armour rounds to try and take out the flayed ones one at a time as also the loud barking of Layne's bolt pistol. Naturally enough it was the latter two of these weapons that did most damage, the explosive warheads of each proving quite capable of punching holes in the Necrons' armoured bodies. But with the psychic lightning already taking its toll on the Necrons the addition of hits from las pistols was enough to finish them if struck often enough.

In the mean time more of the flayed ones tore their way into the real world and they began spreading around Phennett, all eager to tear the skin from the Catachans. But the horrific appearance of the newly arrived Necrons was not enough to panic the Catachans and despite their initial surprise at their arrival they rushed forward to meet this new enemy.

"Come on." Grey said to his men who still held their position just within the jungle and he drew his knife, "Let's not hang around here while everyone else gets stuck in." and his squad burst out of the jungle, charging towards the flayed ones.

At the same time Khor was dragging himself back to his feet. The attack by the command barge had been painful and his entire squad injured by it, but the missile strike had cut off the flow of energy before any of the ogyrns could be seriously wounded and now Khor was looking to get his own back.

"Ogyrns!" he called out, "Stand." and the rest of his squad got back to their feet, some using their ripper guns to steady themselves, "Ogyrns! Attack." Khor then yelled and once more the abhumans roared as they

rushed forwards.

At the centre of the battle stood Phennett. The area immediately around him was bizarrely calm as the flayed ones spread out to engage the Catachans. Had these been normal Necron warriors then they would have made short work of the Catachans, their gauss-flayers tearing them apart at a molecular level. But the corrupted minds of the flayed ones limited them to the most primitive of weapons themselves and so it was the Catachans who had the advantage in firepower. This was most obvious where the flayed ones attempted to charge Quinn's veterans. The Necrons broke into a sprint as they drew close and the Catachans reacted by grinding to a halt and dropping to their knees with their weapons raised. Armed with rapid firing shotguns they unleashed a barrage of fire against the flayed ones that was nothing compared with what followed.

"Torch them!" Quinn yelled and there was a screeching sound as the two flamers carried by his squad were discharged, spraying burning promethium over the flayed ones. This level of firepower was enough to hold back the flayed ones and those that did not collapse, overwhelmed by the intense heat and multiple shotgun blasts changed direction, heading instead for Khor's ogyrns or Mayer and Molla's squads where they hoped they would find easier prey.

Phennett then realised that he had seen Quinn before. In the ancient starship where Phennett had first awakened Quinn had been among those there and he had given the order to try and destroy the overlord, an order that would have been successfully carried out if not for the intervention of Magos Serett throwing himself between the overlord and the melta gun operator ordered to carry out the task.

"You failed to destroy me primitive." Phennett said, despite Quinn being too far away to hear him even if he could have understood the language, "Now I shall destroy you." and the overlord broke into a run.

Elsewhere Veneel suddenly cried out in pain as he felt something driven through his leg and unable to maintain control, the psychic lightning ceased. Looking down as he collapsed, Veneel saw that one of the flayed ones had been cut in half and its upper body had dragged itself across the ground before driving the blades of one hand into his leg. Veneel reached for the las pistol he had holstered at his waist but as he drew the weapon the flayed one lashed out with its other hand and knocked it from his grip. Dragging itself further up Veneel's body the flayed one raised its clawed hand up high and prepared to strike. But before it could take the life of the psyker Veneel saw the familiar shape of a bolt pistol press against the side of its head and then its skull exploded.

"Commissar Layne." Veneel gasped as the critically damaged flayed one faded away, "You saved my life."

"Your life belongs to the Emperor." Layne replied, "Only he, or anyone acting on his behalf may take it."

"Veneel, are you okay?" Wolf then called out as she found herself not engaged with any Necrons and rushed over to him.

"I am afraid my usefulness to you is at an end for now lieutenant." he replied.

"Torrent!" Wolf called out, "We need you over here." then she looked at Layne, "Commissar can you keep an eye on him?" she asked and Layne nodded.

"I can." he said, "But what about the rest of your squad?"

"I'll leave Torrent with you." Wolf told him, "But the rest of us are going after that overlord."

At that moment Phennett was charging towards Quinn's squad. The veterans saw the overlord coming and realising that their primary target was heading right for them they ceased firing on flayed ones and turned their attention to him.

"Let him come to us lads." Quinn said, "Just like that last lot." and the veterans took aim. But unlike the flayed ones who had been driven back the flames of the veterans' two flamers, Phennett was not limited to hand to hand combat and he raised his staff as he ran and unleashed its power. Two bright white blasts of light burst from the staff, picking out the two members of Quinn's squad armed with flamers. But rather than being aimed for the men holding the weapons the blasts were aimed for the weapons themselves, in particular the bulky tanks on the underside that held the highly volatile promethium mixture. The resulting explosions produced balls of flame and blast waves that hurled the veterans away from their epicentres, leaving them stunned and somewhat singed. The effect on the two veterans holding the flamers was far greater however, with both men being engulfed in flames. Each man screamed for a few brief moments as the flames washed over them until the intense heat burned out their lungs and they died in silence.

Focusing on Quinn himself, Phennett strode through the veterans as they lay helpless on the ground and occasionally lashing out at one that appeared to be regaining his senses until he reached their sergeant.

"Do you remember me?" Phennett asked in Gothic and Quinn stared up at the Necron overlord.

"All you things look alike to me." he replied and Phennett used his staff like a club to strike Quinn.

Then a shot from a las pistol hit Phennett in the arm and although it failed to inflict any damage it did cause the overlord to turn towards the source of the attack and he saw Wolf and her squad minus Torrent rushing towards him and apart from the guardsman armed with the grenade launcher all were firing at him as they ran.

"You really think to defeat me with such primitive weapons?" Phennett said out loud and he raised his staff again, pointing it towards Wolf's squad. But before he could discharge the weapon a tiny red dot appeared

on the hand holding the staff and lost amongst the sounds of battle was another suppressed gunshot as Rull saw his chance. Though the sniper rifle had proven inadequate to destroy Phennett with a head shot, the second bullet was enough to rip off three of the overlord's fingers and all of a sudden he lost his grip on his staff and it fell from what remained of his hand.

For a moment the overlord just stared at his ruined hand, wondering what had happened. But then he remembered the Catachans and he rushed forwards to meet Wolf's command squad in mid charge. Lashing out with each arm in succession he easily knocked the vox operator and grenadier aside, both men being tossed through the air by the strength of the Necron's blows. Vance then stepped forwards and thrust his ls pistol into the overlord's face. But before he could pull the trigger Phennett reached out and grabbed hold of the sergeant's arm, twisting it until Vance cried out in pain and dropped his weapon. Hoping to rescue Vance before the overlord killed him, Wolf fired her own las pistol from point blank range but even this close to the overlord the shots had no effect. In response Phennett lashed out with his damaged hand, striking Wolf on the side of her head hard enough to knock her to the floor. Still maintaining his grip on Vance, Phennett stepped forwards and placed a foot on Wolf's chest before looking down at her.

"See how easily you die?" he asked before the muzzle of a shotgun was pressed to the side of his head.

"Forget about me?" Quinn asked and then he pulled the shotgun's trigger.

The blast wrenched Phennett's head sideways and there were sparks as control and power lines were torn free and the overlord found that he was starting to lose control over his body. As he staggered he let go of Vance, dropping him in a heap on the ground beside Wolf while Quinn racked the slide of his shotgun to chamber another round and he fired again and again, chambering rounds until there were none left in his weapon and watching the overlord stagger back under the impact of each hit. Phennett dropped to his knees following the final shot and watched as Quinn tossed his empty weapon aside and took a krak grenade from his webbing.

"Saw the lieutenant use this trick against someone far bigger and scarier than you." the Catachan hissed before he rammed the grenade up underneath Phennett's jaw, jamming it as tight as he could and pulled out the pin before diving aside. Phennett raised a hand to try and dislodge the grenade but it was only at the last moment that he realised that he had raised his damaged hand and that he could not get a proper grip on the explosive. Then before he could change hands the krak grenade exploded and the blast took his head off. The headless machine corpse toppled forwards, landing what would have been face down before it self repair mechanism came to the conclusion that Phennett could not be repaired in the field and both the body and what little remained of his head faded away.

The effect on the flayed was startling. Although they had not been under Phennett's control they had been aware of his presence and were drawn to this place by the battle he directed. But now that he was gone the flayed ones instincts told them that it was also time for them to withdraw before the Catachans were able to concentrate on them and stepping back from those that they were fighting the flayed ones also faded away as they returned to their own dimension once more.

In the XIX Regiment's camp there was a delay before the defending Catachans realised that something was amiss with their enemy. Acting under the control of Phennett the Necron warriors had penetrated the outer layer of defences and were steadily pushing their way through the camp. But when Phennett was no longer available to give them orders the warriors lacked the ability to carry on on their own. So when each completed his last order he came to a halt and remained where he was, neither moving nor shooting unless fired upon first.

"They've done it." Shryke said as he saw this, "Those things are just standing there."

"Then we need to destroy them before another commander can arrive to take control." Garratt said.

"There may be no need for that commissar." Lazas said as he made his way over to the vision slit and looked out side, "Yes, see? The problem is taking care of itself." and as both Colonel Shryke and Commissar Garratt watched the Necron warriors simply faded away like their damaged brethren had.

<What happened?> Magos Serett asked when he became aware of his surroundings once more. He could sense that the figures around him featured a high degree of bionic modification and so his first attempt at communication was via the noosphere.

"We rebuilt you." a voice said out loud and Serett slowly sat up on the raised block he was lying on and then stood on the floor, wobbling slightly as he did so due to the unfamiliar way in which his own bionics were responding. Looking down Serett saw that his body was far less bulky than it had been and he knew that these bionic components were not of human manufacture.

"Ah yes," the voice said, "we upgraded you with our own technology. I am the phaeron of this dynasty and from now on you will serve me. Overlord Phennett failed in the task that I set him and so now I expect you to succeed where he could not."