



CATACHAN ONE NINE MARK FOUR MARK TWO

NEW WORLD

BY STEPHEN J DUTTON



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5.1 : NEW WORLD

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When settlers start to disappear in the jungles of a newly settled planet the Imperium suspects that their surveys may have been mistaken and the planet is a death world. The Catachan VII Division is sent there to confirm this and to try and find out what happened to the missing colonists...

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In her time with the Catachan XIX Regiment, Lieutenant Emilia Wolf had been deployed to one jungle covered world after another. This was not surprising since Catachan itself was a jungle world but their home world was more than just a world where every land mass was covered by lush vegetation. Catachan was widely known across the Imperium as the most deadly planet, known as a deathworld, in the galaxy. Every native life form on Catachan was potentially life threatening for the humans who called the planet home. This made Catachans a very tough breed of people who made excellent troops for the Emperor's forces. It also made them somewhat distrusting of outsiders who had not been brought up fighting for their lives on a daily basis and even though she had been through several campaigns as a platoon commander with them, Wolf knew that even the Catachans who knew her best still saw her as an outsider whose presence among them threatened their lives because of her lack of death world experience.

Now though Wolf hoped that she had the opportunity to develop more of the experience she needed to fit in with her troops. Though she had tried to learn the skills that Catachans developed from childhood the seemingly unending series of alien assaults that the regiment had been deployed to counter had not allowed a lot of time for Sergeant Molla, the most skilled of her platoon's squad leaders or the even more highly skilled platoon sniper Rull to attempt to teach her. But according to the Adepts of the Departamento Munitorum there were no such aggressive aliens to be dealt with on this occasion. The Catachan XIX Regiment had been removed from its previous deployment to the planet of Valus where the crash of a space hulk had caused massive environmental damage that had killed off most of the jungle and made the Catachans' natural jungle fighting skills of no use and redeployed to a planet so freshly settled that it did not even have a name yet.

THX-1138 as it was labelled by the explorators of the Adeptus Mechanicus had a breathable atmosphere and tropical climate that had made it appear an excellent choice for establishing a new colony to be added to the Imperium of Man and so after careful deliberation the administration had shipped tens of thousands of workers here to settle the planet. Initially the process had gone smoothly and a city had been built close to several veins of valuable ore that the Adeptus Mechanicus had been keen to gain access to. But it was as the colony started to expand, with small groups of settlers heading out of the city into the jungle to set up their own settlements that things had started to go badly. Casualties among the first wave of settlers on any new world were always to be expected but the number of settlers who headed out into the jungle never to be seen again was large enough that the tech priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus took notice and came to the conclusion that THX-1138 met the criteria to be classified as a death world and requested aid from the Imperial Guard, specifically from a force of Catachans.

The mission of the VII Division was therefore, twofold. Firstly they were tasked with assisting the magos biologis of the Adeptus Mechanicus surveying the jungles of THX-1138 to compile as much information as possible about which lifeforms were dangerous and secondly they were to attempt to determine the fate of the vanished settlers.

Wolf was due to take Fourth Company's Second Platoon out on a patrol that day and most of the platoon's strength was gathered in the company mess tent eating breakfast. Only the attached ogryn squad did not dine with the rest of the platoon since the table manners of the massive abhumans were enough to put even Catachans off their food. Wolf sat with the four members of her platoon command squad as well as the sergeants of the platoon's two regular infantry squads and veteran squad. The only human squad leader missing was Corporal 'Bomber' Mayer who commanded the platoon's mortar squad.

"What's up with him?" Wolf asked when Mayer finally walked over to the table, placed his tray down and sat then sat down heavily, staring straight ahead.

"Haven't you heard lieutenant?" Sergeant Grey responded, "Bomber here is about to become a father for the first time."

"Really?" Wolf said, smiling, "Congratulations corporal."

"What?" Mayer said, looking towards her.

"I said congratulations." Wolf repeated.

"Oh, right. Thanks." Mayer replied.

"I guess this wasn't planned." Wolf said, turning to the other people at the table.

"No, but it's about time." Vance, Wolf's platoon sergeant and the Catachan she relied on most for advice in dealing with the rest of the platoon said, "But it's about time. Bomber here is the last of us squad leaders not to have kids."

"I've not got any." Wolf pointed out.

"Ha!" the Catachan woman sat further along the table exclaimed.

"What's that supposed to mean Guardswoman Torrent?" Wolf asked. Torrent was the platoon's medic and despite having served with Wolf for several tours now was still generally hostile towards her presence.

"It means you're an outsider so you don't count." Torrent said, "Besides, even if you were one of us then

you're hardly a prime physical specimen."

This was a comment about Wolf's height. Catachans tended to be taller than average, including their women, whereas Wolf stood barely one and a half metres tall so the rest of her platoon towered over her.

"That's not a problem for some of us." Molla commented.

"You don't count Tari." Grey said with a smile, "You're a pervert."

"That pervert slept with my sister." Wolf pointed out.

"Well that proves it then." Sergeant Quinn of the platoon's veteran squad said.

"Yeah but I'm a successful pervert." Molla replied.

"Not with me you're not." Wolf said.

"You don't know what your missing lieutenant." Molla told her.

"She could always ask her sister." Grey said and Wolf sighed.

All of a sudden an odd hush fell over the mess hall and Wolf and her sergeants looked towards the entrance to the mess where four figures had just appeared. All four wore the red hooded robes of the Adeptus Mechanicus and Wolf recognised one of them as Enginseer Cornelius B5T-RD-3X, the tech priest assigned to Fourth Company to maintain their vehicles and equipment. Accompanying him were a pair of cybernetically enhanced skitarii troops armed with long barrelled galvanic rifles while the final figure remained hidden beneath its cloak.

"Lieutenant Emilia Wolf, this is Magos Biologis Delta One Four Five KP."

"Good morning lieutenant." Delta-154KP said in an oddly feminine voice. In all of her dealings with tech priests Wolf had become used to the odd synthesised voices they possessed. However, it appeared that this particular individual had not had any alterations made to her throat or lungs that had affected the manner in which she spoke.

"Hi." Wolf responded simply, "I take it that you're the tech priest we'll escorting into the jungle."

"Correct. B-five-T-RX-three-X informs me that you are considered an efficient intermediary between Catachan forces and specialists from other bodies."

"I knew it." Grey commented, "We get landed with an outsider as an officer and now we're the first ones to be picked for any mission involving more of them."

"So how many of your troops will be accompanying us, ah – Delta is it?" Wolf asked and she looked at the two skitarii who were now stood close enough that she could easily hear their enhanced breathing and the whirring of various motors built into their torsos as well as smell the lubricants used to keep them moving.

"You may refer to me as Delta should you wish. I understand the limitations of conventional speech in addressing members of our order." the tech priestess answered, "But no skitarii will be joining us. Our mission is to survey the region where many of the disappearances have occurred and catalogue the local indigenous lifeforms. The expertise of Catachan infantry in a jungle environment makes them preferable to skitarii whose presence may be disruptive."

"She means that her cyborgs might scare of the animals she expects us to hunt." Molla commented.

"Most likely because they'll recognise us as something they can eat whereas her troops aren't." Grey added.

"Your sergeants' evaluation is an accurate one Lieutenant Wolf." Delta said.

"Basically we're bait." Quinn said with a smile.

"That is one way of looking at it Sergeant Quinn." Delta responded, looking in the direction of the veteran soldier. Then she looked back at Wolf, "How soon can you have your troops ready for deployment lieutenant?" she asked and Wolf looked at the other Catachans around the table.

"How does an hour sound? We can finish breakfast and gather our equipment." Wolf said.

"Acceptable. Report to the landing field in one hour with full equipment. We will depart then." Delta said and without waiting for a response the tech priestess turned on the spot and walked away, followed by her skitarii bodyguards and Cornelius.

"Did you hear that? She said 'landing field'." Quinn pointed out and Molla nodded.

"Yeah. That means this is a deep penetration mission with no support." he added.

"Good news Bomber." Vance said, smiling at Mayer, "You may be dead before your kid is born."

"Thanks." Mayer replied, obviously not having noticed what had just been said to him.

There was a landing field used by the Imperial Navy aircraft located beside where the XIX Regiment had set up its camp. This had allowed the Catachans to bring a lot of their equipment directly to the camp from the orbiting troops transport rather than making use of the larger starport in the nearby city itself that was being used to bring down the heavier vehicles of the Catachan XIV Armoured Regiment as well as the company of Baneblade super heavy tanks that General Fortnam himself commanded the Catachan VII Division from. Only a few of the Arvus lighters and none of the larger cargo shuttles remained at the landing field which was now populated almost entirely by Valkyrie assault carriers that were being prepared for flight as Second Platoon arrived.

"These are your rides lieutenant." a naval officer told Wolf, pointing to one of the rows of Valkyries and Wolf

frowned.

"Looks like there's one missing." she said, noticing the gap in the formation compared to the row behind it. "Oh number six." the naval officer responded, "That's gone on ahead. One of your men turned up about fifteen minutes ago and said you needed him to check out your landing zone."

Wolf looked at Vance.

"Rull?" she said, already knowing the answer and Vance nodded.

"He's been poking around outside the camp since we landed to try and get the feel of the environment." he said.

"Good. I feel better knowing we're not going to jut drop into a nest of something unpleasant." Wolf replied. Then she looked at her platoon, "Okay everyone," she called out, "get to your transports. I want us ready to leave as soon as that tech priestess arrives."

"Then it looks like you're too late lieutenant." Torrent commented, looking past Wolf to where Delta and her two bodyguards were approaching.

"Your punctuality is commendable Lieutenant Wolf." Delta announced as she came to a halt.

"My platoon sniper has gone on ahead to scout the terrain." Wolf told Delta while the tech priest's hands appeared from under her robe and reached up to lower her hood, offering the Catachans their first proper view of the adept they were to escort. Her hands appeared remarkable human in shape though they, like her arms were obviously cybernetic but when she lowered her hood the reason for her ordinary sounding voice became clear. Delta's shaved head and neck did not appear to have any external modification at all, being entirely human. But when the tech priestess then released the fastening on her robe and removed it she revealed that this was the only visible biological part to her body. From the base of her neck downwards she was entirely cybernetic appearing, though unlike most members of the Adeptus Mechanicus who cared nothing for the aesthetics of their cybernetic components Delta's were shaped to match the outline of a woman's body. In darkness where only her silhouette was visible she would have appeared to be an ordinary woman either clad in sin tight clothing or naked.

"Very well." Delta said, "Let us proceed. I will travel with your command section Lieutenant Wolf."

2.

The Valkyrie that carried Wolf's command section flew at low level with its side hatches open so that the occupants could observe the jungle below more easily than if they were trying to use the tiny viewports built into the hatches. This was often done if there was a ground threat to worry about so that the door gunners could provide cover fire from their heavy bolters if the aircraft came under attack. However, since this was not considered to be a combat mission the two heavy bolters were folded away and not even loaded while their gunners sat at the end of the transport compartment relaxing. Taking advantage of this, Vance was stood just inside one of the hatchways, holding onto a handhold strategically positioned on the ceiling above it.

"Sergeant Vance would you mind stepping back from there?" Wolf said, "You're making me nervous."

"Worried your babysitter may fall out?" Torrent commented as Vance retreated away from the hatchway and sat down beside Wolf.

"Don't worry, I wasn't going to fall. I know what I'm doing." he said.

"Which was what exactly?" Wolf said.

"Taking a look at the jungle of course." Vance replied, "It doesn't add up."

"What do you mean sergeant?" Wolf asked.

"Well the theory is that this is a death world, right?" Vance said and Wolf nodded, "So how come we haven't had any losses yet? By rights even some of us Catachans ought to have had the odd accident if this was a genuine death world, but we haven't. Not even the outsiders in Ninth Company's penal squads have lost anyone."

"All the disappearances have been in remote areas Sergeant Vance." Delta said unexpectedly. Unlike the members of Wolf's command section who sat along the sides of the Valkyrie, the tech priestess was stood in the centre of the compartment using magnetic clamps built into her feet to remain in place as the craft manoeuvred without needing to grab hold of any of the available handholds.

"Exactly." Vance said, "Lifeforms capable of overwhelming small outposts ought not be afraid of coming closer to larger settlements. Somebody ought to have seen them by now."

"That is the purpose of our mission Sergeant Vance." Delta responded, "The initial hypothesis is that there are hostile lifeforms inhabiting areas too distant from the primary colony site for them to have travelled that far since our initial arrival and that we should be prepared to face them at some point in the future. For that we need to know all we can about them."

"So what can you tell us about where we're going?" Wolf asked.

"Great time to ask." Torrent muttered, "Now that we're already on the transports."

"We are heading for a settlement established after a geological survey detected a rich vein of metallic mass in the area." Delta answered, "One hundred and fifty-three settlers, accompanied by five lay members of the Adeptus Mechanicus and two adepts set up the settlement close to a natural water supply in the area and commenced exploratory digging. Then five months ago they became the first of the settlers to disappear. Initially in the lack of any other evidence the disappearance was considered an isolated incident and the area was marked as available for resettlement. However, before this could occur there were further disappearances reported. As the location of the first such event it was considered logical that our investigation should begin there."

"Lieutenant," one of the navy gunners sat at the far end of the compartment said as both men suddenly got to their feet, "the pilot says we're coming up on the landing zone now." and the two gunners released their weapons and started to ready them for action.

"Tell the pilot I want Sergeant Quinn's veterans and Khor's ogryns on the ground first." Wolf said, drawing her las pistol and checking it one last time before they landed.

"Worried about an ambush?" Vance asked as he drew his own weapon as well and Wolf nodded.

"A squadron of Valkyries is hardly subtle." she replied.

"You know even on Catachan wildlife tends not to be armed with surface to air missiles." Torrent commented.

"Lieutenant Wolf's caution is well advised." Delta said, "The cause of the inhabitants' disappearance has yet to be determined and the presence of an armed hostile force cannot be ruled out entirely."

The Valkyrie then began to circle and Wolf had to stretch her arm upwards to be able to reach the handholds provided on the ceiling, something that caused all of her command section except Vance to smile. Through one of the open hatchways Wolf saw the Valkyries transporting Quinn and Khor descend and touch down just long enough for their passengers to disembark. Khor's ogryns did this first, the bulky abhumans disliked being inside cramped spaces such as the insides of Chimera troop carriers or Valkyries and so as soon as they were given clearance to disembark by the navy crewmen they wasted no time in exiting the vehicle.

The seven ogryns rapidly formed a circle, pointing the ripper guns they were armed with outwards to cover all directions while Quinn's veteran squad exited their Valkyrie in a much more orderly fashion.

The Imperial Navy pilots had deposited their passengers in a large open area in the middle of the ring of

structures that made up the settlement and while Khor's ogryns watched over them, Quinn's veterans moved from building to building to check whether they were occupied. They did not perform detailed searches of the structures, instead they just checked for obvious signs that anyone was still living in the settlement.

"Quinn Wolf, are you there lieutenant?" Quinn signalled after several minutes and the command section's vox operator passed Wolf the handset.

"Right here sergeant." she said, "What's your status?"

"Feeling somewhat alone down here lieutenant. It's just like the cog boy – err – cog girl said, everybody's gone. You're clear to land any time you want."

"Understood sergeant, we're on our way down now. Over and out." Wolf replied before giving the vox handset back to the guardsman carrying it on his back. Then she looked at the door gunners, "Tell the pilot that the squadron is clear to descend." she told them and one of the gunners reached for the communicator that kept him in contact with the Valkyrie's pilot.

One by one, the remaining Valkyries in the squadron descended towards the deserted settlement so that the Catachans they carried could disembark. Each one remained on the ground just long enough for the squad it carried to exit the vehicle with their equipment before joining the others circling overhead. Wolf's Valkyrie was the last one to come down to land and by this time most of the other Catachan squads had moved to the outside of the settlement to form a perimeter, leaving only Khor's ogryns and Mayer's mortar squad in the centre.

"Lieutenant." Mayer said, walking up to Wolf as she came down the Valkyrie's ramp, "Molla, Grey and Quinn have deployed to cover the treeline. Rull's reported no signs of any tracks indicating that any creature or swarm large enough to have carried off the settlers has been here."

Wolf nodded and looked around at the ring of building.

"Okay I want this settlement securing properly corporal." she said, "Tell the others to pull back and barricade the gaps between every building so we have a continuous wall. Use whatever's available, crates, drums, sandbags. Cut down trees if there isn't enough material, but I want a defensible perimeter set up before it gets dark. Meanwhile I want you to set up a firing position here in the centre. Leave enough room for aircraft to land, but you should be able to lay down fire in every direction. Do you understand?"

"Yes lieutenant." Mayer replied before turning around and hurrying away.

Wolf then turned towards Delta.

"Which of these structures was the administration building?" she asked.

"According to my records it was that one over there. What is the significance of that Lieutenant Wolf?" the tech priestess answered.

"Looking for a command post?" Vance asked and Wolf smiled.

"The administration building seems like a logical place." she said, "As soon as the perimeter is set up I want to see all squad leaders there for briefing."

The Catachans located a room in the administration building that had been used by the settlers to keep track of local survey missions and mineral claims that was already adorned with numerous maps of the region and was easily converted into a command post with the vox set of Wolf's command section now resting on the large central table next to the biggest of the maps that had been modified by the settlers to give details of their activities and when Second Platoon's squad leaders all arrived together Wolf, Vance and Delta were all examining these notes for any insight that they may offer into the fate of the settlers. Khor was the only leader not present. The prefabricated structures that made up the settlement had been made with doorways intended for ordinary humans and three metre tall ogryns could not get through them without a lot of work. Therefore the Ogryn sergeant, known as a BONEHead thanks to the surgical processes used to increase his meagre intelligence, had remained outside to direct his squad in their labours.

"Reporting as ordered lieutenant." Grey said as he leant against the edge of another table at the side of the room.

"How's work on the fortifications going?" Wolf asked.

"Good." Quinn answered, "There's more than enough stuff lying around that we can use to make them. Of course we're emptying them of anything useful or volatile first and filling them with dirt dug up from around the perimeter."

"The mortars are dug in as well." Mayer added.

"So we're well on our way to being secure then?" Wolf asked, looking at the gathered squad leaders.

"Too secure if you ask me." Molla said.

"An unusual statement Sergeant Molla." Delta responded, "Could you elaborate on it?"

"He means that we've yet to see a single example of hostile animal or plant life." Grey said before Molla could, "I know that it may be odd for outsiders to accept but death worlds are called that for a reason."

"None of us have suffered so much as an insect bite so far lieutenant." Molla added, looking at Wolf, "That means that the repellent we're using is one hundred percent effective."

"I suppose that the settlers were using the same kinds of repellent?" Wolf asked.

"Well we found a bunch of it in their stores." Molla answered, "Whether they were using it or not another matter. But they did have the means to keep local bugs away."

"And Rull's still out there searching for any indications that there are larger lifeforms in the area." Quinn added.

"I suppose he's found nothing then." Wolf commented.

"A few tracks of something. But nothing to suggest a large scale movement of predators to or from here." Quinn told her and she sighed.

"How many men will we need to hold the perimeter?" she asked.

"Depends on what we're facing." Grey replied, "A couple of squads ought to be able to provide a basic defence if we split them up."

"Heavy weapons at vantage points and the remainder divided into fire teams of four?" Vance commented and Grey nodded.

"My squad's missile launcher team can provide cover all around from the top of the water tower and we can set up positions on several rooftops that Molla's heavy bolter team can use." he said.

"So if Bomber's men are providing fire support from their mortars then I guess that leaves mine and Khor's squads providing support where it's needed." Quinn said.

"Perhaps." Wolf replied, "But I was thinking that your men would be the best choice to accompany Adept Delta into the jungle tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" Delta responded, "I see no reason to delay our departure. I am prepared to leave the settlement as soon as Sergeant Quinn's men can be gathered."

"Perhaps, but I'm more concerned with making sure that our position is secure right now," Wolf told the tech priestess, "and that includes seeing whether nightfall has any effect on the local animal life that we need to be aware of. For that I want my entire platoon here ready to defend the settlement if it comes down to it. Setting out at first light will give me longer to assess the risks to my men and you longer to carry out your survey before the sun sets again."

"Lieutenant Wolf, you do realise that I will have to perform at least part of my survey at night don't you?" Delta said, "After all, as you stated yourself the nocturnal life may differ from that during the day."

"Yes and you can carry out that survey after we've had the chance to observe as much of the local life as we can from within our perimeter." Wolf said sternly but her response did not satisfy Delta.

"Sergeant Quinn," she said, looking at the veteran, "prepare your squad for immediate deployment." but Quinn remained where he was and just looked at Wolf before looking back at the tech priestess who suddenly realised that all of the Catachans were staring at her as if waiting to see her next move, "This mission is under Adeptus Mechanicus control. Lieutenant Wolf you will order your men to follow my commands."

Wolf smiled.

"Here's the thing Adept Delta," she replied, "these guys will barely do as I tell them. What chance do you think there is of them following your orders?"

"Any trooper that fails to follow my orders will be subject to discipline by the Adeptus Mechanicus." Delta said, looking around the room, "This will likely involve all such personnel being assigned fort conversion to servitors."

For most people in the Imperium this was a serious threat. The vat grown or mind wiped cyborgs known as servitors were a common sight in human space and the Imperial Guard used billions of them to maintain its equipment. But the threat of being surgically transformed into the mindless automatons did not have the effect on the Catachans that Delta hoped it would as they all remained still.

"I threatened them with court martial when we first met." Wolf commented, "It doesn't work."

"Especially not when the person making the threat hasn't considered how far away the nearest commissar is." Grey added.

"Adept Delta," Wolf continued, "the Adeptus Mechanicus requested a Catachan force because of their expertise in hostile jungle operations and my platoon was picked because I know how to work with Catachans as well as others. So how about you let me do my job and I'll see to it that you're provided with the escort you need once our position is secure?"

"My report will of course detail all of this." Delta said.

"As will mine." Wolf replied, "Now I believe that most of the settlement's equipment is still here, including a number of servitors. Now how about you take a look at them and see if any can be brought on line?"

"Servitors are not my speciality Lieutenant Wolf." Delta responded, "But I will see what I can do." and then she promptly walked out of the room.

"You know, I don't think she likes us." Molla commented when Delta was gone.

"The feeling's mutual." Grey responded.

"The rest of you should get back to building our defences. I also want a list of everything useful that the

settlers left behind." Wolf told her men. Then she looked at Torrent who had watched the gathering from a corner behind Wolf, "Torrent I want you to look at the water supply." she said, "Make sure it's safe to drink. We can't discount the possibility that it was something in the water that killed off the settlers and that insects then devoured the bodies when the insect repellent wore off."

"I'm on it." Torrent replied and then she too left the room with the other squad leaders, leaving Wolf alone with the remainder of her command section.

"I'm impressed lieutenant." Vance said, smiling at Wolf, "Not many outsiders would consider the possibility of insects being able to devour entire corpses after bug juice wore off." and Wolf smiled back at him, "Of course there's still one flaw in that theory." Vance added and Wolf's face fell.

"What?" she asked.

"Some of the settlers were cog boys. Even if insects ate what was left of their real bodies there'd still be all the metal parts left. Still, not bad for an outsider."

3.

As Wolf had hoped, the fortifications were completed before sunset and the gaps between every structure in the settlement were blocked by walls made up of emptied out containers that were then filled with dirt to give them weight and enough strength to resist small arms fire. In addition to these barricades several strong points were established on the roof of some of the structures. These were intended primarily for the belt fed heavy bolter of First Squad, but they could just as easily be used by any other unit that wanted cover while they fought. The search of the settlement also revealed several items that could be of use to the Catachans. The settlers had brought only a few weapons with them and most of these were not types used by the Imperial Guard but the ammunition used for the shotguns could be used in the weapons carried by Quinn's veterans and there were several thousand rounds of pistol ammunition that was compatible with the stub pistols that Second Platoon had acquired as back up weapons. Of more significance though were a pair of flamers that the settlers had brought along for clearing vegetation that the Catachans could make use of if they were needed.

The existence of these weapons raised more questions for the Catachans, however. The continued lack of any significant tracks leading to or from the settlement suggested that no natural hazard had claimed the lives of the settlers, but the fact that there were weapons sitting unused seemed to disprove the suggestion that the settlement had come under attack by a hostile force. Any such attack would have had to have overwhelmed the settlers before any of them could even pick up a weapon.

Removing another possible explanation for the disappearance of the settlers was confirmation by Torrent that the water supply was safe and that the filter system was removing all of the impurities that it was supposed to before it reached the settlement's taps, meaning that the settlers had not all been poisoned. Of course with each possible explanation for the settlers having vanishing being dis-proven the mystery around their fate only deepened further.

The only disappointment in Wolf's opinion was Delta's inability to reactivate any of the servitors. Though the appeared physically sound none of them could be turned back on and while the tech priestess was able to suggest several possible causes for this she was unable to attempt to remedy any of them and so Wolf had to accept that all of the physical work needed would have to be carried out by members of Second Platoon themselves.

With the settlement considered secure sentries were set to keep watch overnight in rotating shifts. As was to be expected all three shifts reported signs of activity beyond the treeline but the only local wildlife that came closer to the settlement than that were groups of flying creatures that flew over it without appearing to bother about the human sentries watching them through weapon sights and by the time that the sun rose the next morning none of the sentries had had any cause to discharge their weapons.

"Well I hope everyone slept well." Wolf said to the platoon when it gathered together in the centre of the settlement after breakfast. The only ones missing from this were her command section's vox operator who was in the command centre sat by the vox set and Rull who Wolf knew better than to try and force to any meetings such as this. Rull had always operated best when left to his own devices and Wolf had rapidly accepted her sergeants' advice to leave him to them, "But today we've got work to do. Sergeant Quinn will take Third Squad out with Adept Delta to survey the area. Sergeant Quinn, I'm sure that the adept will be able to brief you in more detail about what she wants but your squad will need to investigate every local life form you come across for any indication that it is dangerous."

"We're ready when you are adept." Quinn said, looking at the tech priestess after nodding at Wolf.

"But I hope the rest of you don't think that you'll sitting around relaxing while Sergeant Quinn's squad is exploring the jungle. We've established a basic perimeter here but I want it improving. First I want every ground level door and window on the outside blocking up to prevent anyone or anything using them to get inside our defences. Then I want the treeline cutting back, it's currently about five metres from our perimeter at the closest point and I don't want it any closer than twenty."

"You don't expect us to clear that in a day do you?" Grey asked and Wolf smiled.

"Not man enough sergeant?" she responded and Grey snarled at her. Then she smiled and added, "No, I don't expect it doing in a day but I do expect our deployment to last longer than that and we could do with the largest clear field of fire we can get."

"What do we do with the wood lieutenant?" Molla said.

"Check it for signs of contamination and infestation then bring it inside the perimeter once it's been cleared."

Vance told him before Wolf could answer, "We'll use the bigger bits for any more building projects the lieutenant dreams up for us and the rest as fuel."

"Lieutenant Wolf," Delta said suddenly and Wolf looked towards the tech priestess, "I am impatient to begin my survey. You have already given Sergeant Quinn his instructions so I see no reason why we should delay our departure."

"Go." Wolf replied simply, "I'm done here anyway. Everyone knows what I want and they're smart enough to

figure it out for themselves.”

Delta then turned towards Quinn.

“Sergeant Quinn, you and your men will accompany me.” she told him.

As Quinn's men were starting to move off to collect their equipment the vox operator from Wolf's command section leant out of the window of the command post.

“Lieutenant!” he shouted, “I've got regimental command on the line for you.”

“Thanks Kline. I'll be right up.” Wolf replied. Then she looked around at the rest of the platoon, “Okay you've all got work to do,” she told them, “so get to it.”

Wolf then headed directly to the command post where Kline was waiting with the vox handset in his hand.

“What's the signal like?” Wolf asked as she took the handset from him.

“Not bad.” he replied, “We've no orbital relays so I've had to adjust the frequency to bounce a signal off the atmosphere itself. If the weather turns bad we could be cut off.”

“Thanks.” Wolf said and then she raised the handset to her mouth, “This is Catachan One Nine Mark Four Mark Two, state your message. Over.”

“Emilia?” a woman's voice said that even with the distortion of the lower than usual signal strength was easily identified as not having the typical Catachan accent and Wolf smiled.

“Elisa?” she responded, addressing her sister by her first name. Both sisters had served together in the Lyrerian XXXII until Wolf had been separated from them when she was captured by Kroot. More recently and against Wolf's advice Elisa had transferred to the Catachan XIX Regiment following the effective destruction of their old regiment on their last tour, “What are you calling for? Over.”

“Colonel Shryke wants an update on your situation. Or maybe he just wanted me away from him, I can't quite tell. Over.”

“Probably the latter. If he was genuine then he'd have requested an update via Major Trent. I did try and warn you about this Elisa. Catachans don't take to strangers easily. But you can tell him that we've established a camp in the settlement and are working to fortify it further while one of my squads heads out with the tech priestess to survey the area. Over.”

“Okay. Is there anything you need in the way of supplies? Over.” Elisa asked.

“No, we're fine thanks. We have water and power and enough food to last us for a couple of weeks at least. Over.” Wolf answered.

“Okay then. I'll schedule a regular check in every day at noon. But don't hesitate to put in a call if you need support. Over.”

“Understood. I've been warned that we could lose our connection if the weather turns against us though so don't go sending an entire naval air wing along just because we're a bit late. Over.”

“Copy that. We'll investigate if you miss two successive vox checks. Over and out.” Elisa said and then the channel went dead.

“I take it you got that?” Wolf asked as she passed the vox handset back to Kline and the guardsman nodded.

“Vox check every two days.” he said.

“See what you can do to listen in on what's going on back at the landing zone though.” Wolf told him, “I want to know if our ability to communicate with the outside is going to be impeded.”

“Yes lieutenant.” Kline replied, “I'll let you know if we have any disruption.”

4.

Though there had been no signs of any hostile forces or creatures since Second Platoon had been deployed the men of Quinn's squad still moved as if they expected to be attacked at any moment, covering every angle as they advanced slowly through the jungle. They remained alert not only for signs of intelligent life but also for natural hazards and each time an animal was seen the squad was brought to a halt. Delta would then compare the creature with her database of known native lifeforms while the Catachans assessed its behaviour. Raised on a world where identifying the means by which a creature would attempt to kill you was a requirement to survival, it would generally take only a few minutes for the experienced jungle fighters to determine whether or not a creature was a threat. In some cases they could not make a conclusive determination about this, since a solitary creature may behave differently when in groups consisting of thousands or even tens of thousands but nothing that the Catachans encountered appeared to them to be capable of overrunning an entire settlement the size of the one that Second Platoon had set up camp in and so they continued to advance deeper into the jungle.

This pattern of movement interrupted by pauses to examine lifeforms continued until one of Quinn's men suddenly dropped to his knees and raised his fist for the squad to come to a stop. This brought Quinn hurrying to the other Catachan's side.

"What have you got Jackson?" he whispered.

"Looks like something metal." the other Catachan replied, "About twenty metres ahead."

Quinn took out his magnoculars and raised them to his eyes so he could get a magnified view of what the veteran guardsman was looking at through the vegetation. It did not take him long to spot the tell tale glint of sunlight off a metal surface right where the veteran had said it would be and it appeared to Quinn that it was a piece of machinery on the ground. However, from this angle and distance he could not see exactly what it was.

"Is there a problem Sergeant Quinn?" Delta asked as she walked up behind him and Jackson.

"You mean apart from you just striding around and shouting things out while we're all trying to keep a low profile?" Quinn responded.

"There have been no signs of a hostile military presence Sergeant Quinn. Your caution is excessive." Delta said.

"Well there's something made of metal just over there. So unless you can give me an example of any local wildlife that has metal skin then I'd say that this counts as an encounter that could lead to hostility."

Delta looked into the jungle and she too saw the light reflecting off whatever it was that lay ahead of them. Then she too crouched down.

"I cannot detect any noospheric activity from that apparatus." she said.

"Try to imagine that I don't have a clue what you just said." Quinn replied.

"Equipment operated by the Adeptus Mechanicus is configured to allow it to be operated remotely through the noosphere." Delta explained, "However, I cannot make a connection to it in this way. Therefore, it is either faulty or is not designed to be controlled in this manner."

"So it could be alien then?" Quinn asked.

"Correct Sergeant Quinn." Delta answered.

"Okay we do this properly." Quinn said as he put his magnoculars away, "Reese, stay here with Adept Delta and vox the lieutenant if anything goes wrong. I'll go straight on with Jackson and Downs. Howser, Moss and Dolton sweep round to the left. The rest of you sweep right. If there is someone up there we'll take them from all sides at once."

Quinn then began to move forwards cautiously, keeping his shotgun braced against his shoulder and aimed towards the mysterious metal object. Meanwhile the rest of his men did as he had ordered and nine of the squad advanced in three groups of three, ready to attack from multiple directions at once if necessary while the squad's vox operator held back with Delta.

As Quinn got closer to the object he saw that it was in a small clearing in the jungle and that it was not the only thing there. It became apparent that the initial object Jackson had alerted him to was a portable generator while several containers of promethium fuel were lined up close by as well as several other containers and Quinn guessed that this was some sort of camp site. Emerging from the jungle into the clearing Quinn saw that just like the larger settlement, the camp was abandoned and lifeless except for a few small native animals of species that the Catachans had already dismissed as harmless. It was also obvious that whoever had started to set up this camp had not been able to finish before they left. On the far side of the generator lay a stack of metal sheets that Quinn instantly recognised as pieces for a compact prefabricated shelter. Obviously whoever had come here had intended to stay for some time and had wanted something more substantial than a tent to live and work in.

"Hello?" Quinn called out, "Is there anybody here?" and then when there was no response he tried again, "Imperial Guard! I order anyone within the sound of my voice to make themselves known to me." but still

there was no answer and he lowered his shotgun, "Okay adept, you can come take a look at this stuff now." he called out.

Delta emerged from the jungle a few seconds later and she briefly inspected the generator.

"This is a standard ten kilowatt promethium powered field generator." she said.

"Yeah, I've seen plenty of them in my time." Quinn replied, "From the looks of it I'd say it was fairly new."

"I agree." Delta replied, "Though the fuel gauge indicates that it is currently empty."

"Whoever owned all this stuff was probably intending to set up their camp before filling it up." Quinn said,

"But whatever happened to the settlement happened here before they could finish."

"Agreed Sergeant Quinn." Delta said, "Perhaps your men should search the area for clues to who this equipment belonged to."

"And what will you be doing while we're doing that?" Quinn asked.

"I shall survey the surrounding area for clues as to why someone felt it necessary to bring this equipment out here rather than work from the settlement Sergeant Quinn." Delta answered and then the tech priest headed back into the jungle.

"Okay then, you heard the adept." Quinn said to his men, "Let's see if whoever brought all this stuff out here left their name on any of it."

The Catachans spread out around the clearing and began to inspect its contents carefully. Every piece of equipment that had been left here needed to be studied for clues about its owners and their fates. Bringing the entire squad into the clearing, Quinn assigned each member a small area to search. Choosing the generator itself for his own area, the veteran sergeant examined the machine for any signs of damage, pulling away vines that had begun to grow over the machine during the time that it had stood here abandoned in the jungle. Though he was not a tech priest or even a lay member of the Adeptus Mechanicus, promethium powered generators were basic and common enough that most members of the Imperial Guard were familiar with their operation.

The first thing that Quinn checked was the promethium tank itself, first using the gauge on the side and then by opening up the tank and peering inside. Both of these indicated that the tank was empty, meaning that whatever had happened to the people who had brought the equipment here had happened before they had begun to use it. Continuing to inspect the generator, Quinn soon came to the conclusion that despite the amount of time that it must have stood here the generator was functional and was considering the practicality of having his squad transport it back to the settlement. He knew that there were more than enough generators there already to provide an adequate power supply for Second Platoon's needs there was no harm in having extra capacity that Quinn could see. But as he stepped back to examine the structure of the generator for the best way to carry it without the assistance of servitors or load lifters he became aware of a sudden change in the jungle and he unslung his shotgun and span around to face the treeline.

Jungles were noisy places, with the wind passing through vegetation creating an almost continuous sound while the multitude of animal life forms produced sounds that were each unique to their species. Now something had happened that had caused some of these noises to suddenly cease. The presence of Delta and the Catachan squad had not caused this to happen at any point after they had set out from the settlement so it was clear to Quinn that some other factor had suddenly come into play and to him that meant trouble.

Seeing their sergeant react like this alerted the other veterans to there being a problem and their own jungle experience rapidly told them that something was amiss as well. Within seconds the entire squad had formed a circle facing outwards from the clearing as they pointed their weapons into the undergrowth.

"Anybody see anything?" Quinn asked. As far as he could tell the jungle appeared just as it had five minutes earlier, but now it lacked the sounds he had come to associate with it. However, all he received in response to his question were shaking heads and comments that his men saw nothing out of the ordinary.

"Maybe that cog boy – err – cog girl's done something stupid." one of Quinn's men suggested.

"Possibly." Quinn replied and he reached for the microbead communication headset he wore, "Delta this is Quinn, do you read me?"

While Quinn and his men were carrying out their search of the clearing Delta began to circle it, making all the observations she could about the area in terms of its resources. Obviously something had inspired some of the settlers to come all the way out here with the equipment needed to set up a long term camp and to Delta this meant that they had located something of value. This meant inspecting not only the local flora and fauna for species that had not been observed elsewhere but also the ground itself just in case a valuable vein of minerals had been located here. Delta lacked the expertise to identify the nature of any mining operations that were being considered but she knew the signs of test digging when she saw it. But she had seen nothing to suggest that anyone had discovered any significant life forms or carried out any mining operations when Quinn attempted to contact her.

"I read you Sergeant Quinn." she responded. Delta had no need to manually activate any form of communication device, having a wireless transceiver capable of communicating on standard Imperial Guard

frequencies built into her own body, "Have you discovered any useful information?"

"No, but something weird's going on around here. Something's spooked all of the animal life in the area."

Quinn told her and Delta came to a sudden halt and looked around, now aware of the bizarre quiet that did not fit with any of her observations since leaving the settlement.

"I agree with your assessment Sergeant Quinn." Delta said before she became aware of something moving not far from her. Turning around to face the direction of the movement she found that she could see nothing specific, but some of the vegetation ahead of her was rocking back and forth as if it had just been disturbed. Another movement from the corner of her eye made Delta turn for a second time but she found herself too slow to get a good look at whatever it was that was out here in the jungle with her before it vanished again. "Sergeant Quinn," she signalled, switching too purely internal communication so that she had no need to speak out loud and alert whoever it was that she kept glimpsing to what she was saying, "I am thirty metres to the south east of your position. I am not alone."

"We're on our way." Quinn said.

"No. Whoever is out here is well camouflaged and this may be a ploy to lead you into an ambush." Delta told him, "I will be with you-" but before she could finish her sentence something emerged from the jungle beside her and before she could turn her head to get a good look at it she heard the sound of a blade passing through the air and all of a sudden she found herself falling to the ground as one of her legs was sliced off at the hip.

Startled by this sudden viscous assault, Delta lay on the ground while lubricants spurted from the damaged section of her torso. Then she caught a brief glimpse of what looked like a figure that blended in almost perfectly to the jungle background as the blade lashed out again and Delta's other leg was severed.

"Sergeant Quinn," Delta transmitted as she rolled over onto her front and began to drag herself along the ground in the direction of the clearing, "I am under attack. I have sustained severe damage."

All of a sudden she felt the breeze caused by the bladed weapon passing close by her head and she did not have to look to see that one of her arms had just been removed at her shoulder. Then moments later the attack was repeated from the other side, leaving Delta face down on the ground and unable to move. This changed soon after as whatever it was that was attacking the tech priestess acted to flip her over onto her back. Now facing upwards Delta turned her head as she searched for her attacker but she was still unable to see anything clearly even as her unseen assailant plunged the blade into her chest.

"Adept Delta? Can you hear me? Are you there?" Quinn signalled but there was no response, "Feth this, we're going after her." he said and he looked around at the fuel containers for the generator, "Grab those cans and follow me."

With a direction and distance provided by Delta, Quinn knew which way and how far he had to go before he could expect to encounter her and whoever it was that was attacking her. Charging through the jungle, the Catachans came to a rapid halt when they found what remained of Delta lay on the ground in front of them. The tech priestess's limbs were scattered around her while her head and torso twitched uncontrollably as she produced a constant stream of strange stuttering sounds. Added to this her eyes were wide open and staring upwards but it was impossible to tell whether or not she was aware of the Catachans' presence. However, she appeared to still be alive and so Quinn's priority now was to evacuate her back to the settlement for help.

"Quick, rig up something to carry her." he ordered as he searched the jungle for any signs of whoever had been able to do this to the tech priestess without her being able to get off a signal that identified them. Then he held out his hand towards the guardsman carrying the squad's vox set, "Reese, vox." he said and the other Catachan passed him the handset, "This is Quinn." he transmitted, "Lieutenant Wolf can you read me? Over."

"I'm here sergeant." Wolf's distinctive voice responded after a brief pause, "What's your situation? Over."

"Under attack by unknown forces. Adept Delta is down." Quinn replied.

"Down? Is she alive?" Wolf interrupted, "Over."

"Affirmative. But badly injured or damaged or whatever. Whoever did this managed to hack her up in less time than it took me and my men to cover thirty metres and then vanished without a trace. Over."

"Can you make it back here or do you want us to come to you? Over." Wolf asked.

"Stay where you are, don't risk exposing the platoon to an ambush. We'll bring Delta back and hopefully Torrent will be able to patch her up enough to tell us what happened. Over and out." Quinn said and then he tossed the vox handset back to Reese. Seeing that his men had now placed Delta onto an outstretched rain cape that could be carried by four of them, Quinn smiled and turned in the direction of the settlement, "Okay we've got a long way to go." he said, "So let's get a move on."

The squad began to hurry back towards the settlement, moving far quicker than they had done on the journey from it thanks to their not having to stop to examine everything they came across. But Quinn was concerned that the strange quiet in the jungle near the clearing appeared to follow his squad even as they got further away from it and the only conclusion he could draw from this was that whatever had attack Delta

was following them.

"Halt!" he called out suddenly, coming to an abrupt stop.

"What's wrong sarge?" one of his men asked.

"We're being followed." Quinn replied as he searched the jungle, "I think whoever hacked up the adept here is using us to lead them back to the rest of the platoon."

"So what do we do about it?" Reese said.

"We make things a little hotter." Quinn said and he looked at the three Catachans who were carrying the fuel canisters for the generator on their backs, using rifle slings to keep them in place, "Ditch them." he ordered, "One here and then at intervals of about ten metres. Make sure the caps are off and be ready with the flamers."

As ordered to, the Catachans carrying the promethium removed them from their backs and then removed the caps sealing them. One of the containers was dropped where the squad was and it landed on its side to produce a flow of promethium as the contents spilled out.

"Okay let's go." Quinn said and the squad started to move again, dropping the two remaining promethium containers in their tracks. Quinn counted his steps after the last container was dropped until he reached twenty and came to a stop once more, "Flamers now!" he yelled and the two veterans equipped with flamers spun around and unleashed twin jets of liquid fire along the route they had taken. The flames easily reached the spilled contents of the last container to be drop and there was a sudden roar as it ignited, followed by an explosion as the promethium still remaining inside the container caught fire as well. In turn this blast triggered an identical reaction in the promethium spilled from the previous container before the first one was also consumed by the flames. The overall effect of this was to produce a massive blast of flames that engulfed a large area of the jungle behind the squad. Among the roar of the flames Quinn was certain that he also heard a sudden inhuman shriek. However, there was no time for his men to stop to evaluate the effects of what they had just done and without Quinn needing to give the order to do so they set off again, moving as quickly as they could while the jungle behind them continued to burn. Unfortunately the explosion and subsequent flames had the effect of scaring off all the local wildlife and so there was nothing left that Quinn could use to determine whether or not his plan had had the desired effect and blocked any further pursuit of his men.

5.

"Stand to!" Wolf yelled as she rushed out of the building that housed the command post, "Everyone to the barricades. Sergeant Quinn is coming back and he may be bringing company."

"Who's attacking him?" Grey asked as he drew his las pistol and rushed to the nearest wall blocking the gap between two structures.

"He doesn't know. They've kept out of sight so far but Adept Delta is badly injured. I want everyone ready just in case Quinn's squad aren't the only ones on their way here." Wolf said.

As they had planned, most of First and Second Squads split into pairs and positioned themselves behind the walls they had set up to form their outer perimeter while their heavy weapon teams climbed the water tower and onto the roof of a building that faced the way Quinn's squad had gone into the jungle that morning.

Meanwhile Wolf's own command section took up a position beside the dugout that had been created for Mayer's three mortars before being joined there by Khor and his seven strong squad of ogyrns.

"Ogyrns ready." Khor announced with a grin.

"Everyone hold position." Wolf said, "And remember that we're expecting friendlies first so don't fire until you can confirm your target visually."

The Catachans prepared themselves to fight, opening pouches that held spare power cells for their las guns to save vital seconds if they needed to reload rapidly as they waited. All of a sudden Quinn burst out of the jungle, leading his men across the open ground between the treeline and the settlement. In the centre of the group were the four veterans carrying Delta on the rain cape.

"Contact! Friendlies!" a member of Molla's squad shouted out when she saw the approaching veterans and Wolf turned to Torrent.

"Come on," she said, "Adept Delta will need your help." and the two women, accompanied by Vance ran towards the woman who had called out.

They reached the perimeter just as Quinn's men did and as the veterans were lifting the badly injured Delta over the barricade Wolf peered at the tech priestess lay on the cape.

"Him on Earth!" she exclaimed, "What happened out there sergeant?"

"I don't know exactly. She split off from the rest of us to survey the area around a camp we found in a clearing and was attacked.

"Attacked? By what?" Vance asked when he saw the extent of Delta's injuries.

"I don't know. We didn't see anything. But I'm pretty sure they were trying to follow us back here." Quinn replied.

"Will she make it?" Wolf asked, looking at Torrent. The platoon medic was knelt by Delta's side and trying to examine the places where she had been struck by the mysterious bladed weapon.

"How should I know? I'm a medicae, not a cog boy. Look, all of this damage is to her machine parts. She's not losing blood, she's losing lubricants or coolant or whatever she's got pumping through the pipes she replaced all her blood vessels with. I'm not qualified to fix any of it." she replied.

"Then what can you do?" Vance asked.

"Maybe I can do something to stop the fluid loss. Maybe doing something about the loss of pressure in the system will help stabilise her. But we need to get her inside." Torrent told him.

"Okay you heard the medicae, let's pick her up." Quinn said to his men.

"No" Wolf said before the veterans could act, "Platoon Sergeant Vance and I can carry her to the infirmary. Sergeant Quinn I want you to take command out here and watch for any signs that you were successfully followed. Don't hesitate to open fire if you see anything."

"Yes lieutenant." Quinn responded and then Wolf and Vance bent down to pick up the ends of the rain cape and began to carry Delta towards the settlement's small infirmary. Torrent had confirmed that most of the equipment in here remained usable, though a prolonged loss of power had resulted in some of the medications being spoiled and rendered unsafe. But combined with what Second Platoon had brought with them both in Torrent's personal medical kit and the supplies air lifted in aboard the Valkyries the platoon had a good supply of their own medicines.

Inside the infirmary, Wolf and Vance lifted Delta up onto an examination table and stepped back to let Torrent get to work. Among the infirmary supplies still usable was a quantity of medical bonding compound meant for sealing even relatively large cuts or surgical incisions and Torrent tipped a quantity of the base powder into bowl and mixed it with water to form a paste that she started to apply to everywhere on Delta that there was fluid spurting out.

"Hold her still." Torrent said as Delta continued to convulse and Wolf and Vance pressed down on the tech priestess in an attempt to stop the uncontrolled movements while Torrent continued to try and seal the damaged parts of her cybernetics.

While she was applying the paste to a tube in Delta's hip, Torrent noticed a drop of yellowish liquid at the edge of the damaged joint and frowned, realising that it was not something that matched any of the fluids

that had been leaking out of the tech priestess's body.

"What's that?" she commented and she reached out with a gloved hand to wipe it away. But as she ran her fingers across the edge of the damaged joint she discovered that the metal of Delta's body had been left sharp here by the passing blade and it sliced through the material of her glove and also the skin of her finger, permitting the tiny drop of liquid to enter her bloodstream.

Torrent screamed and leapt backwards, clutching at her hand as an agonising burning sensation filled it before she collapsed to the floor and vomited as she began to convulse.

"Grab her!" Vance snapped, realising instantly that she had been poisoned and he and Wolf let go of Delta and instead rushed to Torrent's side, pinning her to the floor as they grabbed hold of her arms.

Torrent screamed loudly and coughed up a spurt of blood that struck Wolf on her vest.

"Quick, get that cleaned off." Vance told her, "But don't touch it. I'll hold her."

"We need some help in here!" Wolf yelled as she ripped her vest off before the blood splatter could soak through and tossed it aside. She was just about to go back to helping Vance hold Torrent down when Mayer and one of his men appeared in the doorway of the infirmary.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"Bomber give me a hand here." Vance replied, "Torrent's been poisoned. Hold her other arm while Thom grabs her legs."

"What should I do?" Wolf asked.

"Get something to jam in her mouth before she bites her own tongue off." Vance replied and Wolf nodded and looked around. There was a row of medical instruments nearby that Wolf had no idea of the function of. But the size and shape of some was just right for them to be forced between Torrent's teeth to keep them apart and she grabbed hold of one and took it to Vance.

"Will this do?" she said and he nodded.

"Get it in there." he told her and Wolf pushed the padded grip of the device into Torrent's mouth so that she bit down on it, "Good, now check her medical kit." Vance added.

"For what?" Wolf replied.

"Muscle relaxant." Vance said. Then he noticed that blood was coming from the palms of Torrent's hands where she had clenched them into fists so tightly that her nails had dug into her own flesh, "And hurry." Wolf rushed to where Torrent had set down her medical kit and began to go through the contents. The problem was that she did not know the function of the medications by sight and needed to check the labels on each vial as she went until she came across one that read 'MUSCLE RELAXANT - INTRAVENOUS DELIVERY ONLY'.

"Okay I've got it." Wolf said, loading the vial into an injector.

"Good. Then use it." Mayer replied as he fought to keep hold of Torrent's arm.

"Where?" Wolf asked.

"Anywhere. Just hurry." Vance told her.

Wolf hurried back to Torrent's side and pressed the injector to the Catachan woman's stomach before triggering it. The drug had no immediate effect so Wolf triggered the device again repeatedly, injecting Torrent with multiple doses of the drug until her body stopped convulsing and became limp. In addition at this point there was a sudden strong smell as the relaxant Wolf had injected Torrent with affected her digestive system as well.

"Throne that's bad." Vance said, letting go of Torrent's arm and covering his nose and mouth.

"I think you used too much lieutenant." Mayer added while Thom just coughed and retched.

"So do I." Wolf agreed, wincing at the smell that now filled the infirmary.

"I think maybe we should get some of the other women in the platoon in here to clean her up." Vance suggested, "I don't think she'd appreciate you being around when those injections wear off."

"Will she be okay now?" Wolf asked and Vance shrugged.

"Depends on the toxin." he said, "But if it was something that was going to shut down her breathing then I doubt it would have caused what we saw. Just the opposite in fact. Hopefully her own immune system will be able to break it down but I think it might be a good idea to call in a medevac for her and the adept. None of the rest of us are qualified to treat either of them."

Wolf nodded.

"Okay I'll go and make the call. Now that we can assume that the disappearances are down to hostile action rather than a natural hazard I think we can call our mission complete anyway. I'll tell headquarters that we need pulling out so that a proper search and destroy mission can be organised to find whoever's responsible." she said.

Exiting the infirmary wearing Vance's shirt in place of her vest, Wolf made her way to where Kline stood with the command section's vox set and took hold of the handset without bothering to ask him for it.

"This is Catachan one nine mark four mark-" she began before all of a sudden the channel was flooded with the sound of screaming and Wolf flinched, dropping the handset while Kline ripped the headset he wore from

his head as the sound continued. Worryingly it did not seem to repeat as if it was a recording on a loop, instead it just continued as if somewhere people were being tortured and their screams broadcast live. But the disturbing signal was not limited to the command section's vox and every other vox operator in the platoon pulled off their headsets while the others in the platoon ripped the microbead headsets from their ears as the sounds of screaming flooded through them.

Vance promptly came rushing out of the infirmary as well with his microbead in his hand rather than his ear. "What's going on?" he asked and Wolf sighed, looking at the vox set on Kline's back that was still producing the screaming sound.

"I think we're being jammed." she replied, "So I don't think we'll be getting an evacuation any time soon."

Wolf gathered her squad leaders together in the command post again where they stood around the central table with the large map laid out on it. Now the map had been amended to show the clearing where Quinn's squad had encountered their mysterious enemy but so far Second Platoon still had no idea who they were. "I don't suppose anyone has any good news do they?" she asked, looking at the men gathered around her. "I don't think we have any news at all lieutenant." Molla answered, "We've still not seen any signs of an enemy. Even Rull's drawn a blank."

"Why does that make me so nervous?" Wolf commented.

"Because it should." Grey replied, "Even an outsider like you knows that Rull's the best of us. So far all we know about our enemy is that they can get right up close without us seeing them and they've got the ability to disable our ability to call for an evacuation."

"Rull's not giving up yet." Molla pointed out.

"I'd feel better if he did." Wolf replied, "I don't like the idea of him being out there alone. If he was here with us inside the perimeter then-"

"Then you'd have taken him out of the terrain where he can do the most good." Vance interrupted.

"I know. But I'm more worried about how vulnerable he is to being ambushed." Wolf said.

"I wouldn't let Rull hear you saying that lieutenant." Molla said, "He's likely to take offence and you know what that means."

"Yes, I know what offending Rull means." Wolf answered, "Now does anyone have any ideas on how to deal with this situation? We've got to hold out for two days. Then we'll have missed two scheduled check ins and a relief mission will be sent to check up on us. Aren't your settlements on Catachan like this one?"

Fortifications in the jungle?"

"This settlement wouldn't last two hours on Catachan, let alone two days." Vance said.

"On Catachan we know what we're facing." Mayer added, "Here we don't have a clue."

"Which makes it kind of difficult to know how to organise a proper defence." Quinn added.

"Okay so about our defences, is there anything we can do to improve them?" Wolf asked.

"Plenty." Quinn answered, "We can set up snare mines and traps all around our perimeter as well as getting on with pushing the treeline back to twenty metres like you said. The problem is that all of that requires us to be outside the perimeter near the undergrowth. If there is anyone out there waiting for us we'd be sitting ducks. The best we could do is have the ogyrns clearing trees while my men cover them and everyone else sits inside the perimeter but it'd probably take more than the two days you say we're going to be here to get the clearing done with just seven ogyrns. We just don't have the men to do everything necessary."

"And how long would it take a single squad to rig snare mines around the entire treeline?" Wolf asked.

"About half a day." Vance answered.

"Problem is we don't have enough snare mines for that." Molla added.

"We don't need that many. In fact we don't need any at all." Wolf responded and the sergeants looked at her with confused expressions on their faces, "I'm assuming that the enemy is aware of our location and is keeping us under observation. That's how come they knew the exact moment I was about to send for an evac to trigger their jamming signal. So if we lay snare mines around the treeline they'll know to avoid them. But we've found plenty of reels of wire in the settlement stores so I was thinking that we could string that up between the trees all the way around us."

"So the enemy thinks the entire treeline is mined?" Vance said with a smile, "Nice. It'll slow them down as they approach and it'll buy us time to organise ourselves before they figure out that they've been tricked."

"Exactly." Wolf said, smiling back at Vance, "So what does everyone think?"

"I think we should lay a couple of genuine snare mines as well." Mayer said, "Plus the odd flare or grenade trap."

"Bomber's got a point there lieutenant. That'll stop the enemy being able to ignore them all when they figure out most are fake. Who knows, maybe they'll even blunder into a few live traps thinking they're all fakes first." Quinn added.

"Okay do that then. Do your best to make it look like the entire perimeter is protected but I want you back inside before nightfall." Wolf said.

"Surrendering control of the jungle isn't going to do us any good in the long run lieutenant." Grey pointed out.

"Grey's right." Vance added, "If we just sit inside our perimeter-

"Yes platoon sergeant I have read the officer's field guide for counter insurgency operations." Wolf interrupted, "Starting tomorrow I want Sergeant Quinn and his veterans patrolling at random. If the enemy is as good at remaining hidden as they seem then he men may not be able to locate any of them, but I'm hoping it will spoil any attempts to launch and attack without us knowing about it. Plus as you say we'll have Rull out there. Frankly I don't believe that anyone can remain hidden from him indefinitely."

"What are we going to do about communications?" Molla asked and Wolf paused for a moment.

"We'll have to use visual signalling." she responded eventually, "We've got flares so Quinn can take a launcher and several different colours with him. We'll agree a different colour code each day for messages like 'The enemy is approaching' and 'We are returning to base'. That way even if the enemy is watching they won't be able to copy the signals from one day to try and fool us the next."

"We should have signals to send to him as well." Mayer suggested and Wolf nodded.

"Good thinking corporal. We'll figure that out at the same time as we decide on Quinn's signals. I also want you to prepare all the illumination rounds you have for your mortars. I want a total blackout of our position at night but I also want to try and stop the enemy from using the darkness to move around without being seen." Mayer nodded.

"I'm guessing you want the rounds rigged for long duration burns?" he asked and Wolf nodded back at him.

"The longer the better. I'm not keen on the idea of us starting any uncontrolled fires so I'd ideally like them to have burnt out before they land."

"A smouldering flare can still start a fire." Molla said, "I've seen it happen."

"Maybe so, but I'm hoping that the terrain is damp enough that anything other than a properly burning flare won't start a fire." Wolf said.

"Let's face it, my squad blew up a whole bunch of fuel cans with a flamer and that's not caused a wildfire." Quinn pointed out, "I think we'll be safe enough dropping a couple of flares into the jungle."

"As a last resort I do want a way of setting fire to the jungle though." Wolf said, "If it comes down to it I'd rather start a wildfire that destroys a few thousand square kilometres of jungle than lose any of us. So consider that while you work and get back to me. Now are there any questions?" and she looked around as she waited for a response, "Very well, dismissed." she added when no-one spoke.

6.

With the heavy bolter team from First Squad covering them, Quinn's veterans climbed over the perimeter wall and sprinted across the narrow gap between it and the treeline. Despite Wolf's intention of clearing the trees back to twenty metres from the outer edge of the settlement, only a small portion of this had been pushed back at all and even then it was only about ten metres at its furthest point. However, the shorter circumference that Quinn's squad had to cover meant that their task would be over much quicker than it otherwise would have been.

As soon as they reached the trees the veteran guardsmen dropped to the ground and crawled across the ground as they spread out. Then they began the process of fixing trip wires between the trees surrounding the settlement. The majority of these were nothing but simple wires taken from the settlement's part stores that would do nothing more than trip anyone unlucky enough not to notice them. But the squad also carried with them a number of snare mines that would explode like a massive shotgun blast if triggered that they were able to set up on the approaches they considered most likely to be used by an attacking enemy. Added to this were several flares that would at least alert the Catachans to anyone disturbing them and several grenades that were wired up to be triggered in a similar way to the snare mines.

His squad was about half way around the treeline setting up the wires and traps when Quinn suddenly found himself blinking as a highly concentrated light was shone into his eyes. Initially he thought that it was one of his own men trying to attract his attention and he was about to scold whoever it was for the irritating method he had chosen when he realised that the light was coming from further afield than one of his own men. Moving his head back, Quinn saw that the light that had been shining on him was a tiny red dot that was now being projected onto a nearby tree trunk and it was obvious to him that this dot was being produced by the targeting scope fitted to a weapon that none of his men carried. But he knew exactly who in the platoon did. It was Rull.

Without his microbead functioning, the sniper was obviously trying to alert Quinn to the presence of something he needed to know about and the laser was the only means of doing so discretely at his disposal. To let Rull know that he understood this, Quinn took out his magnoculars and lifted them to his eyes before starting to search the jungle.

"What's wrong sarge?" the closest of his men asked.

"Shush." Quinn replied, "Rull's spotted something."

The tiny red dot had disappeared from the tree trunk now and Quinn searched the jungle for it, knowing that Rull would place it somewhere that it could be seen from his position. Quinn located the dot being projected onto another tree trunk, but higher up off the ground than when Rull had been trying to attract Quinn's attention. Obviously Rull was not trying to just point out the existence of the tree to Quinn, so that meant that there had to be something significant close by and so Quinn lowered his magnoculars slightly to take a look at what lay at the base of the tree.

At first he saw nothing, but then he noticed a dark outline that looked like a humanoid form crouched beside the tree and he increased the magnification of his view. This revealed the figure more clearly and Quinn saw that it was definitely humanoid in form though overly slender and fragile looking for a human being. The figure wore an all enclosing suit that was dark green in colour, helping it to blend into the background in the jungle even if it was not to the same extent as whatever had attacked Delta had been able to manage. But more significant than the suit that appeared to be covered in armour plates contoured to match the curves of the figure's body was the rifle that it held. The figure appeared to be looking towards the settlement beyond the jungle rather than at Quinn and his men. But as he watched he saw the tall helmet that it wore turn towards him.

"Throne." Quinn hissed as he realised that the figure knew he had been watching it and he started to lower his magnoculars. But the lone figure moved more quickly than Quinn could have guessed and raised its rifle, pointing it straight towards him. But before it could fire a hole appeared in the figure's chest as a bullet from Rull's rifle struck it and it fell backwards into the undergrowth. A muscle spasm as the figure fell triggered its weapon and Quinn heard the sharp 'crack' of a fast moving projectile before something struck the tree trunk close to him.

Quinn's men reacted immediately, dropping the wires they were connecting to the surrounding trees and picking up their weapons. In most cases this meant a shotgun, but two of his men carried flamers while another was armed with a powerful meltagun that was normally used for destroying heavily armoured vehicles at close range.

There was more projectile fire from several directions at once and Quinn and his men ducked out of sight.

"Suppressing fire." he said.

"Which way?" one of his men asked.

"All of them." Quinn replied, "Shotguns only though. Keep the support weapons for when we really need them."

Still lying flat on the ground the shotgun-armed Catachans opened fire, directing their blasts in the approximate directions where the attacks seemed to be coming from. Meanwhile Quinn reached for the flare pistol holstered on his thigh where he usually kept his stub pistol. Fumbling through his webbing he quickly located a red flare and loaded it into the pistol before pointing it straight up and pulling the trigger. Then as the flare rose into the air and ignited he dropped the pistol and picked up his shotgun again to join his men. The burning red flare attracted the attention of the heavy bolter team on the roof of one of the settlement's buildings and they knew that it meant the enemy were attacking from that direction. Swinging the heavy belt fed weapon around to face that way, the gunner opened fire and unleashed a sustained stream of rocket assisted projectiles into the jungle. The mass reactive rounds easily penetrated the jungle canopy and the air around Quinn and his men was filled with debris as the bolt shells buried themselves in the trees before detonating, causing fragments of wood to fly in all directions.

Quinn spotted another dark green figure as it darted between two trees. But before he could aim his shotgun at it one of the heavy bolter rounds struck it dead centre before exploding and the figure was torn apart. This seemed to have some psychological effect on the enemy firing at the Catachans and in a matter of seconds the incoming fire ceased, leaving only the sound of their own shotguns and the heavy bolter.

"Cease fire!" Quinn yelled over the noise and his men stopped their shooting. The heavy bolter team was too far away to hear his command though and Quinn loaded a second red flare into the pistol before shooting it into the air as a signal for them to cease fire.

This left the jungle in almost total silence, with the wildlife that had not been scared off by the noise lying dead on the ground where it had been caught up in the barrage of projectiles flying back and forth and Quinn waited to see if there would be any more enemy gunfire. However, none came and Quinn slowly got to his feet, clutching his shotgun and lifting it to his shoulder. Then he started to advance through the badly damaged undergrowth towards the tree that Rull had marked out at the start of the firefight. Just as he had hoped the body of one of the enemy was still lay at the base of the tree, its rifle on the ground close by and Quinn reached down to pick up the weapon.

"Okay lads." he called out, "Now we get some answers."

Wolf and her sergeants came running into the room where the enemy body had been carried by Quinn's men. The humanoid figure was laid out on a table with its rifle and other equipment that had been taken from it on a second surface close by.

"What are you doing?" Wolf asked when she walked into the room and found Quinn leant over the body, apparently focused on its neck.

"Trying to figure out how to get this helmet off so we can see what we're dealing with here." Quinn replied, "But the problem is I can't find anything that looks like a fastener that I recognise. I'd use my knife to cut through this membrane connecting the helmet to the body armour but I don't want to risk damaging it."

"Let me see." Molla said and as he walked over to the table Quinn stepped back to allow him access to the body. Molla then leant over it for himself, examining the neck closely. Then he drew his blade in one hand and grasped the tight membrane covering the body's neck between the thumb and forefinger of the other.

"Molla, are you sure you know what you're doing?" Wolf said and he smiled.

"Trust me lieutenant." he replied, "These hands know how to carry out delicate work."

"Just ask your sister." Grey commented, provoking smirks from the other squad leaders.

Molla then gently pushed the tip of his blade into the membrane, just enough to pierce it and he twisted the blade to widen the hole and limit any ability that the material had to reseal itself. Then after returning his knife to its sheath he simply began to tear the membrane away from the body's neck. As a final act once he had torn all the way around its neck, he simply pulled the helmet free to reveal the face of their enemy.

Though obviously not human, the corpse looked eerily similar to one in the placement of its facial features. However, the alien's physique was too slim and elongated for a human and this applied to its face as well with the eyes in particular appearing longer and narrower than they ought to have been. But the most telling feature of the alien's body were its ears that rather than being rounded came to a delicate point.

"Throne." Wolf said when she saw this, "Eldar."

The Eldar were an ancient race that boasted of having travelled the stars while mankind's ancestors were still unable to even to walk upright. It was known that they had already possessed an interstellar empire by the time humans first discovered warp travel but this had collapsed at the end of the Age of Strife and their home world had been lost along with most of their colonies. Now the remnants of this species travelled the galaxy in continent sized spacecraft called craftworlds that moved at sub-light speeds only. Occasionally these ships came close enough to Imperial territory that the two species would come into conflict and they also fought over access to worlds that had been long abandoned by the Eldar but that they still pretended to have some claim to when the Imperium chose to settle there.

"It looks kind of sick." Mayer commented.

"It's bloody dead Bomber." Quinn responded.

"I know. But look at it's skin, it's practically transparent." Mayer said, pointing at the corpse. Eldar were known for their pale skin tones but the skin of this example was so pale that it was almost possible to see the muscle structure beneath it and clusters of narrow blood vessels could be seen here and there, giving the skin a patterned appearance in places.

"I didn't realise that this planet was an old Eldar colony." Vance said.

"It's not in any of the briefing notes." Wolf replied, "The Adeptus Mechanicus mustn't have known."

"This weapon doesn't look right for Eldar." Quinn said as he picked up the alien rifle and examined it more closely. Finding a release switch at the base of the grip, Quinn ejected the magazine that was held inside it and peered at the contents. Inside the magazine were staggered stacks of crystals that were obviously the projectiles that the weapon fired. But they lacked any obvious means of propulsion, meaning that the energy used to launch them obviously had to come from somewhere else, "Every time I've heard about them they've used weapons that launched spinning blades. This looks more like a caseless version of one of our own auto rifles, even if I can't see how the rounds are propelled."

"I've never heard of them using poison either." Molla added, "Something about these Eldar isn't right."

"They're aliens." Vance said sternly, "Of course they're going to act strange."

"Platoon Sergeant Vance is right." Wolf added, "Thankfully we now know what we're facing. We've beaten tau. We've beaten Necrons and we've beaten Orks. So who can tell me the best way for us to beat these Eldar as well?"

7.

Clad in ornately carved armour, the Eldar commander stood flanked by a pair of four-armed serpentine bodyguards as one of her soldiers dropped to one knee, removed his helmet and bowed his head.

"Speak." the commander said, "Explain why you have abandoned your post."

"The Mon-keigh detected our presence dracon. They attacked and-"

"Silence!" the dracon hissed, "You fled from a band of Mon-keigh? If the other kabals hear of your cowardice when faced with such a rabble they will think us weak."

"Dracon, these Mon-keigh are not like the others we took. They are well armed and ready for battle. We observed them laying traps around their settlement to protect it. It was then that-" the Eldar warrior protested, raising his head to look the dracon in the face.

"You would look at me worm?" the Eldar commander exclaimed and before the warrior could react she lashed out with the clawed gauntlet that she wore and drove two of her fingers into the warrior's eyes, just deep enough to destroy them but without piercing the thin layer of bone that separated them from the brain inside his skull.

The warrior screamed in pain as the dracon removed her claws from his eyes and collapsed to the ground, clutching his hands over the now empty sockets. His screams continued as the toxins that coated the blades did their work and stimulated every nerve they came into contact with and he began to convulse violently. Meanwhile the dracon turned her attention to the rest of the four strong group that had returned from observing the Catachans.

"I will give you one chance to redeem yourselves." she said, "Return to the Mon-keigh settlement. Locate their leader and bring it to me alive. I wish to feast on their soul. If you fail then do not come back at all. Am I clear?"

"Yes dracon." one of the remaining trio of warriors.

The three warriors took one of the smaller anti-gravity vehicles that the raiding party possessed to get them back to the settlement. Travelling at high speed above the trees for most of the way they were able to reach the settlement just as the sun was setting. Knowing that the Catachans would have observed the direction that they had been monitoring them from, the Eldar were careful to circle around the settlement at a distance that would prevent the sound of their vehicle's engines from being heard and their targets to their approach before they set down in the jungle and continued on foot towards the settlement, approaching it now from a different direction before coming to a halt just inside the treeline.

The Eldar species had naturally good night vision and so the trio of warriors needed no specialist optics to study the settlement in the dark despite the Catachans having made sure that all visible lights had been extinguished. With the sun having set most of the Catachans had retreated inside, leaving just a small number outside to man the crude perimeter wall that they had constructed between the structures that made up the settlement. In daylight the Eldar had seen that the Catachans had dug a position where they could set up the crude weapons they used for launching explosive projectiles in an arc and while the three mortars were still visible within this dugout there were only two Catachans present to act as gunners. All of this had the appearance of a small force acting in shifts to protect their position during the hours of darkness and the Eldar immediately began to search for gaps in their defence that could be exploited.

Getting inside the perimeter and locating the Catachan's commander meant not only getting past the sentries on duty but doing it quietly. This meant that evading them entirely was the only real option open to the Eldar, the poisons that coated their blades and rifle ammunition was designed specifically to inflict overpowering agony on a target that was not instantly killed and this would have the unavoidable result of causing them to cry out if merely injured but not killed, thus alerting their comrades and giving away the presence of the Eldar. They positioning of the Catachan sentries made this difficult though. There were two sentries at each compass facing of the perimeter, along with two more positioned on the water tower with a heavy weapon. This looked like one of the Imperium's missile launchers, a weapon considered crude by the Eldar but none-the-less quite capable of taking out all three Eldar warriors with a single explosive round or shooting down their Venom transport if they could get it in their sights.

But what the Eldar did have in their favour was their natural speed and grace. Providing they could reach the very edge of the treeline without being noticed then they could cover the narrow gap between it and the Catachan perimeter in a matter of moments. The key was to locate the best possible angle of approach. With the sentries on the perimeter spaced out evenly in pairs the Eldar crept through the undergrowth to reach the treeline midway between two of these pairs. Their cautious rate of advance helped them spot the wire strung across between two trees in front of them easily and they waited just beyond it to see if the Catachans gave any hint of having seen them.

There was no reaction from the sentries and so the Eldar concluded that they remained undetected, but they did not make their break for the perimeter just yet. Instead they turned their attention to the two Catachans on the water tower. These were not looking towards the Eldar but they were on the near side of the tower so

the Eldar warriors remained in place until they saw the two sentries move around to the other side, at which point they leapt over the trip wire and bounded across the gap between the jungle and the settlement. The Eldar now had two choices open to them, they could attempt to enter the building now concealing them from the Catachan sentries or they could slip into the gap between it and one of the neighbouring ones, climbing over the unmanned perimeter wall blocking their way. But each of these posed their own difficulties, breaking into the building would level evidence of their passing that would be discovered by anyone who happened to come past, whereas scaling the perimeter wall threatened to bring them into the line of sight of the mortar team on duty.

The second of these was considered preferable, the Eldar knowing that humans had only limited night vision and so the trio of warriors plotted the path they needed to take. From their observations they had seen the way in which the Catachans had deferred to Wolf and her significantly shorter stature had made it easy for the aliens to monitor her movements and from this they had identified the building she used as her headquarters. This was about half way around the ring-shaped settlement and so the Eldar were going to have to travel a significant distance out in the open. To limit the risk of being detected and ambushed by the defending Catachans who had yet to notice the alien intruders in their midst, the Eldar moved one at a time while the other two kept watch with their rifles trained on the mortar team that was the only real threat to them. Knowing that the humans would notice movement in the darkness more easily than a stationary figure the two watching Eldar warned their comrade each time that the mortar crew appeared to be turning in their direction and they would suddenly come to a halt and wait for them to look away again.

Moving like this, the Eldar made their way around the settlement quietly and unnoticed one building at a time, paying extra close attention when they also had to pass behind one of the pairs of sentries until they finally reached the structure they had concluded was the command post where Wolf could be found and prepared to enter it.

"Excuse me Major Trent." Elisa said when she located Fourth Company's commanding officer in his command tent.

"Yes lieutenant, what is it?" Trent responded. Trent was well aware that Elisa had transferred to the XIX Regiment and so he was not surprised to hear her non-Catachan accent.

"I was wondering whether you'd heard from Second Platoon today sir." Elisa asked.

"No, we don't have vox communications out that far." he replied.

"I know sir. We were bouncing signals off the atmosphere when I was able to speak to your Lieutenant Wolf yesterday and we arranged for her to check in daily. But there's not been anything received at regimental headquarters today so I was wondering whether she'd been able to contact you instead."

"No, nothing's been received here lieutenant." Trent told her, shaking his head, "But missing one check in isn't enough to get me that worried. If your sister's platoon is having to bounce signals off the atmosphere then there could be any number of reasons why she hasn't made contact."

"Yes sir, I realise that. But I needed to be sure. The arrangement is that we'll send someone to investigate if two check ins are missed in a row."

"Good. In that case all this can wait until tomorrow. In the mean time even if you don't have work to do, I know I do."

"Yes sir." Elisa replied before she left Trent's office and continued out of the tent. Outside she found two Catachan women waiting for her. Jenni Molla was Sergeant Molla's daughter while Quinn's younger sister Bess stood beside her.

"Well?" Jenni asked.

"Nothing." Elisa replied, "Emilia's not checked in here either."

"It's only one day." Bess pointed out.

"Maybe. But this is supposed to be just a survey mission. Entire platoons shouldn't be just vanishing." Elisa replied.

Meanwhile inside his tent Trent suddenly paused in his work and set down his dataslate."

"Stubbs." he called out and his company sergeant appeared in the office doorway.

"Yes major?" he said.

"Tomorrow I want the company readied for deployment and organise some Naval transport." Trent told him.

"Yes sir, can I tell them where we're going?" Stubbs asked.

"I'm not sure that we're going anywhere yet. But that outsider does have a nasty habit of ending up up to her neck in trouble." Trent said.

"That's not difficult sir." Stubbs replied, "Have you seen how short she is?" and both men smiled at one another.

"Feeling better?" Molla asked as Torrent swung her legs over the side of the bed she had been lying on and she glared at him. Though he was not a professionally qualified medic, Molla's personal history as the son of

a tour guide who spent most of his time away from even the scattered settlements on Catachan meant that he knew a fair amount about treating minor injuries and so had kept watch over her while she was incapacitated by the Eldar poison.

"Better is a relative term." she said.

"Look on the bright side, at least you're still alive."

"Even if I shouldn't be." Torrent commented, "I made a stupid mistake that could have got me killed. On Catachan that's exactly what would have happened too, I'd be dead. Feth sergeant, being away from home is making me soft. Worse still that Emperor-damned outsider was there to see it."

"The lieutenant's not going to hold it against you." Molla replied.

"Yeah don't I know it. She'll hold me to her standards, not ours." Torrent said. Then she looked at where Delta lay, the tech priestess still convulsing randomly, "I see her condition hasn't changed."

"No, what the Eldar did to her we can't fix it. She's going to have to wait until we can be evacuated so some other cog boy can help her."

"Eldar?" Torrent commented, "We're being attacked by those lanky xenos freaks?"

"Yes. Plus they cut off our communications. It'll be another three days before anyone comes to find out what's going on here. We need to hold out until then."

"In that case I better go and let that outsider know that I'm back on my feet. Then I'll come back and see if there's anything else I can do with her." Torrent said, getting to her feet and glancing at Delta once more.

"Sure you're up to it?" Molla asked as he followed her towards the infirmary exit.

"I'll be fine." Torrent answered and she opened the infirmary door only for Molla to suddenly grab her and pull her back, "Hey! What are you doing?" she exclaimed.

"Shush!" Molla hissed, drawing his las pistol.

"What's wrong?" Torrent asked.

"Look at the ground right outside the door." Molla said softly as he cautiously opened the infirmary door once more and both he and Torrent looked down at the ground just outside where light from inside the infirmary revealed multiple sets of footprints passing by the doorway, "Those aren't Imperial Guard issue boots. In fact they don't even look human, too long and narrow."

"There are Eldar inside the perimeter?" Torrent said as Molla stuck his head out through the doorway and looked in the direction the tracks led in to see if he could spot the intruders, but he saw only shadows. Then he looked towards the dugout where Second Platoon's three mortars were set up.

"Looks like it." he said, "Come with me."

"Where are we going?"

"To pay Bomber a visit." Molla replied and then he broke into a run, dashing from the infirmary towards the dug out. The sound of his and Torrent's approach attracted the attention of Mayer and the second guardsman sat inside the dugout, causing both to reach for their las guns, "Easy there Bomber." Molla said as he leapt into the dugout, followed close behind by Torrent, "We're not the ones you need to be worried about."

"What's going on?" Mayer asked.

"We've got Eldar inside the perimeter." Molla answered.

"And they got right past you." Torrent added.

"No need to be casting blame right now." Molla said, "Bomber, pass me those magnoculars." and he took Mayer's magnoculars from him before using them to search around the settlement.

"See anything?" Mayer asked.

"No. I see Grey and his guys on the perimeter so at least the Eldar haven't slit anyone's throat yet. But I don't see any signs of those xenos themselves." Molla replied.

"Perhaps I ought to send up an illumination round." Mayer suggested, "Give us a bit more light to see by. Plus it could reveal anyone else in the area."

"Can you get one to go off right above us?" Molla said and Mayer nodded.

"Pretty much. Extreme elevation and a short fuse." he said.

"Then do it. But give Torrent one of your las guns. If the flare reveals the enemy I want more than just my sidearm to use on them right away."

Torrent accepted a lasgun and checked it was ready to use while Mayer and his second prepared a mortar round that his second then held over the muzzle of one of the mortars as Mayer adjusted it to its maximum elevation.

"Go." Mayer said, ducking back and covering his ears before the other Catachan dropped the shell into the mortar.

There was an explosion as the mortar fired that attracted the attention of all of the sentries, causing them to turn their attention inwards from the perimeter moment before the illumination round was triggered and a sudden brilliant white light lit up the sky above them.

"Throne!" Molla exclaimed as he looked around and saw no signs of the Eldar themselves but did see an

open doorway in the building being used as Wolf's command post, "They're inside the command post!"

8.

Wolf was still trying to get to sleep when the sound of a mortar discharging brought her back to a state of alertness. Instinctively she reached for the belt that held her las pistol and knife that she kept close by her bed when she slept before getting up and heading for the door to her room. Holding her las pistol in her hand she opened the door a small amount and peered into the darkened hallway. As far as she could tell there was no one immediately outside but she could see the shadow being cast by the light of the illumination round of someone coming up the stairs. Significantly she could see the tall helmets the Eldar were wearing. For one brief moment Wolf considered calling out for help. But then she realised that the Eldar probably did not know exactly where she was and any sound she made was likely to attract their attention, bringing them to her faster than help could arrive so instead she gently pushed the door shut again. Looking around in the dark, Wolf could make out several pieces of furniture that could be used to jam the door shut or at least make it more difficult for the Eldar to open it. But they were large and heavy, meaning that moving them into a useful position would not only be difficult for Wolf, but also likely to make a lot of noise. This left hiding as the only realistic solution left open to her and so Wolf lay down on the floor and crawled beneath her bed. She waited under the bed for what seemed like an age until she heard the sound of someone opening the door to her room and she held her breath as the door slowly opened.

The first Eldar that entered the room stood just inside the doorway and looked around. For a moment Wolf hoped that the alien might just leave but instead she saw the mess that Wolf had left her bed in as well as the armoured vest resting against the wall in the corner of the room and realised that someone had to be hiding somewhere in the room so the Eldar signalled to her two comrades to follow her into the room. Standing inside the room the three Eldar looked around and saw two obvious hiding places, beneath the bed and also a large cabinet in the far corner and while one waited by the door the other two split up and made their way towards these.

Wolf waited, seeing the Eldar's feet from beneath the bed and hoping that someone would arrive to help her in time. But instead she saw the Eldar walk right up to her hiding place and then crouch down to peer under the bed.

At which point Wolf shot her in the face.

The las pistol shot punched through the faceplate of the lightweight helmet worn by the alien and she collapsed to the floor, already dead. But the remaining two Eldar now knew exactly where she was and they rushed towards the bed as well. The body of the dead Eldar obscured Wolf's line of fire and so she lashed out with her foot to try and kick it away from her. But the nearest Eldar reacted to this faster than she had believed possible and the alien grabbed hold of Wolf by her ankle and pulled on it hard enough to drag her out from under the bed. The other remaining Eldar loomed over Wolf, aiming his rifle down at her. But Wolf was not about to give up yet and she reacted by pointing her las pistol at the Eldar and pulling the trigger repeatedly. The lightweight armour that the alien wore was insufficient to protect him from every shot and he spun around as he was hit repeatedly before falling backwards to the floor.

The final Eldar kicked Wolf's pistol from her hand and dragged her to her feet before using the butt of his rifle to club her, the impact stunning her sufficiently to cause her to drop the knife she had just drawn to replace her lost pistol. The Eldar hissed something in its own language that Wolf was unable to understand before wrapping an arm around her neck and dragging her towards the door. Wolf tried to resist but despite appearances the Eldar warrior turned out to be stronger than she was and she was unable to break free.

"Let her go!" a familiar voice yelled when the Eldar dragged Wolf out into the hallway and as the alien turned to use her as a shield she saw Vance pointing his las pistol towards the Eldar while more of Second Platoon appeared behind him.

The Eldar reacted by dropping his rifle and for a moment it appeared to the Catachans that he might be about to surrender. But in fact he was just swapping to a weapon that was easier to wield with one hand, drawing a pistol of similar design to his rifle and pointing it towards the Catachans.

"Down!" Vance yelled before the alien fired and he heard the sharp 'crack' of supersonic projectiles passing above him before one of the other Catachans screamed in agony as he was hit. Mercifully the projectile clipped the guardsman's heart and he was dead before hitting the floor, spared the prolonged agonising death from the poison that coated the crystalline round.

The other Catachans ducked back out of sight as the Eldar fired twice more, not aiming at any of them in particular but instead just intending to force them to take the action they did while he backed away and dragged Wolf towards the stairs behind him. Vance chanced a quick look around the corner at the alien but another shot from its pistol made him retreat again. But then Wolf ceased her attempts to break free of the Eldar's powerful grip and instead reached out to grab the arm in which he held his pistol by the wrist and twisted it sharply. This provoked a cry of pain from the Eldar as he dropped his pistol and Wolf was able to kick it down the hallway towards Vance and the other Catachans. But before they could come rushing to Wolf's aid the Eldar drew a long dagger and held the tip close to Wolf's throat, hissing at the Catachans when

they appeared.

The Eldar continued to drag Wolf towards the stairs while the Catachans looked on, unwilling to risk rushing the alien while he held the blade at her throat. But then Wolf saw Vance's serious expression suddenly become a smile and she knew something had to be about to happen that would change the situation seriously. The problem for her was that she had no idea what that was or how she needed to act when it happened.

Fortunately for Wolf she did not need to do anything. No-one standing in the hallway needed to do anything at all about the tiny glowing red dot that Vance saw being projected onto the side of the Eldar's helmet just a few seconds before a single bullet came in through the window on the staircase and punched right through the alien's skull.

Wolf, the Eldar and the Eldar's knife all fell to the stairs when the alien was killed and Wolf let out a squeal as she was dragged down.

"Lieutenant are you alright?" Vance called out as he rushed to help her, "Are you cut?"

For a moment Wolf wondered what Vance might be talking about. But then she remembered the Eldars' use of poison in at least some of their weapons and realised that even the slightest piercing of her skin could allow the toxin into her bloodstream.

"I'm fine I think." Wolf replied as Vance helped her back up but she ran her hand over her neck anyway, checking for blood.

Just then there was the sound of more footsteps coming up the stairs and looking down Wolf and Vance saw Grey and one of his squad coming towards them.

"Molla's tracked the Eldar back to the perimeter." Grey said, "He reckons that the tracks they left outside it confirm that there were three of them. He's doing a full sweep around the outside to see if any more managed to get in."

"Well there's one here." Vance replied, looking down at the Eldar corpse on the stairs.

"And there are two more in my room." Wolf added, provoking a smile from Vance.

"Really? You took down two of them? Nice." he said.

"Actually I hid under the bed and just shot one when they made the mistake of looking under it." Wolf responded.

"Dead is dead." Vance said, "I'll get them moved." then he looked at Grey and added, "You should get back to the perimeter. You, Molla and Khor can secure it while Quinn's men do a sweep of the buildings just in case there are any more of these xenos scum hiding anywhere else."

"Dracon." an Eldar warrior said as he knelt behind his commander as she watched the sun rising over the trees and waited for her to turn around.

"Speak." she said, still facing away from the warrior.

"Dracon the warriors sent to retrieve the enemy commander have not yet returned."

"The Mon-keigh have bested them again." the dracon said, "These Mon-keigh are more resourceful than I initially thought. We will need to prepare more carefully before striking at them again."

"I shall inform the sybarites, dracon." the kneeling warrior said.

"No." the dracon responded and she turned to face him, "I will not throw away any more of our limited force piecemeal and risk returning to Commorragh in disgrace. Where are the Hellions?"

"They have not yet returned from raiding the Mon-keigh farms we found to the north dracon."

"Then summon them back here. Tell them that if they do not return before the sun reaches its highest point then I shall have their skins. We need more information on these Mon-keigh and the Hellions will obtain it for me."

Though they soon determined that there were no further Eldar infiltrators inside the settlement, Wolf refused to allow any more of her troops other than Rull to leave the perimeter to search the surrounding jungle for any further Eldar troops. Instead the entire platoon manned the perimeter, waiting for another assault by a stronger force. However, by the time the sun came up no such attack had come and Wolf stood down her troops and only then did she allow Quinn to take his squad into the jungle.

Despite their efforts to move through the jungle stealthily, the Eldar lacked the innate skill that the Catachans possessed and the aliens had left a trail that Quinn and his men were able to follow without much effort. This trail led them back to the Venom transport that had brought the Eldar from their camp. The Eldar had not anticipated failing in their mission to kidnap Wolf and so had made no effort to try and conceal the vehicle. Therefore, as the Catachans approached it they saw it easily through the undergrowth.

"Spread out." Quinn whispered to his men, "We can't be sure they're left it unguarded." and he then waved groups of his men in opposite directions. The veterans moved cautiously, well aware by now of how fast the Eldar could move and they formed a loose circle around the Venom before Quinn signalled for them to move in.

The lightweight vehicle was obviously designed to carry only a handful of passengers and had just one seat for use by its pilot. It was only lightly armed with weaponry almost identical to the rifles that the Eldar warriors had carried so its use as a fighting vehicle appeared as limited as its use as a transport.

"Doesn't look like much sarge." one of the veterans commented.

"Maybe not Moss," Quinn responded as he stepped up onto the the Venom's rear platform and moved forwards to inspect the control console, bending over the back of the pilot's seat for a closer look, "but I bet that the cogboys would just love to get their tentacles on this thing."

"Reckon we could get it going?" another squad member asked and Quinn snorted.

"Are you kidding? This thing doesn't even have tracks or wheels. Even if I could figure out which of these buttons starts up the engine I'm no pilot and I know none of you are either. So no, we aren't going to be able to get it going. But we can note its position and let the cog boys know where to find it." and Quinn reached for his dataslate. Without a satellite link to automatically pinpoint his position Quinn had to determine it by comparing local landmarks to the details on the map stored on the device and while he was doing this he heard a strange sound coming from within the jungle. The sound was a high pitch whining that seemed to be coming from several different places in one general direction and did not sound like it was of natural origin.

"What's that?" one of his men said, indicating that others had heard it as well.

"Trouble." Quinn said, stuffing his dataslate back into his belt and readying his shotgun.

At that moment something flew by so quickly that all Quinn saw was a dark shape about the size of a man as it passed between his men and all of a sudden one of them just ended at his neck, his severed head having vanished entirely.

"Down!" Quinn yelled as he dived off the back of the Venom to the ground as his men did likewise just before more of the rapidly moving shapes sped above them. Quinn pointed his shotgun upwards and fired two rapid blasts towards the shapes but they were moving so fast that he couldn't hit them.

Looking around Quinn got his first good look at one of the Eldar now attacking his squad as one of them rode straight towards him. The alien was standing on what was clearly a tiny anti-gravity vehicle that was nothing more than a flying wing about two metres in span. There were no obvious controls and Quinn guessed that the rider operated it by adjusting the position of their feet and body, leaving both hands free to grip the long pole arm they carried. This alien weapon had a large blade at each end of the central grip and Quinn guessed that it was probably poisoned like the Eldar's other weapons had proven to be.

He fired again, hoping that the direct path that the alien was flying in would allow him to score a hit. But the Eldar reacted at the moment of the shotgun blast and veered away more sharply than Quinn could have thought possible without being thrown from the flying wing. The Eldar rider's new course took him straight towards another of Quinn's men instead. This Catachan had just risen to his knees to try and aim his shotgun at the rapidly approaching alien but the Eldar's speed was so great that the Catachan was impaled through the chest with a swing of the alien's weapon before he could get off a single shot and he was hurled backwards by the force of the impact.

"Stay low! Stay down!" Quinn shouted over the noise of the Eldar flying all around his squad. Their movement was so fast and erratic that Quinn could not make an accurate count of how many Eldar there were but he could tell that their numbers rivalled, or possibly even surpassed, the number of Catachans that remained and given how difficult it seemed to be even targeting the aliens he doubted that his small force could emerge victorious from this fight and he reached for the flare pistol he was carrying. Loading a suitably coloured flare into the weapon he pointed it upwards and fired before casting it aside and looking around again. All around he could see the Eldar making rapid passes over his men at low level. As far as he could tell no more of his squad had been killed but he could not see all of those who he knew had been alive just a minute earlier and it was possible that their bodies were hidden by the undergrowth. Regardless of this Quinn knew that it was likely that a large part of his squad would be killed before help could arrive from the settlement, possibly even all of them and so some way needed to be found to disrupt the Eldars' attacks. "Smoke!" he shouted and he reached for one of the smoke grenades he carried on his webbing, "One each. Just pick a direction and toss it." and then he threw the grenade.

As the grenades burst open they produced a thick cloud of smoke that obscured everything and even with their superior senses the Eldar found that this concealed not only the Catachans but more significantly the trees all around them. This meant that the high speed passes they had been making over the Catachans went from being almost unstoppable to suicidal as the risk of flying into a tree hidden by the smoke became highly probable. Instead they started to circle the Catachans, remaining just beyond the cloud as they waited for it to clear while simultaneously preventing their prey from escaping.

But Quinn was not content to just wait inside the cloud of smoke, hoping that help would arrive before it dissipated enough that the Eldar could begin their attack runs again. The obvious problem was that the Eldars' reactions appeared fast enough that they could dodge blasts from the shotguns most of the Catachans carried. The unit did have two flamers available, but to use these against targets so close in a relatively flammable environment was too dangerous to be worth attempting. On the other hand the squad's

meltagun required careful targeting that would undoubtedly expose its operator to attack. However, the squad also had other weapons at their disposal.

The stub pistols carried by Second Platoon as back up weapons were not standard Imperial Guard issue. They had been found inside an ancient starship and Second Platoon had added them to their armoury. More recently the pistols had been modified by the addition of slightly lengthened barrels that permitted the fitting of a silencer to quiet the sound of their discharge. It occurred to Quinn that the Eldar were able to avoid the subsonic blasts from his shotgun because they were able to hear them coming. However, if his men fitted the silencers he knew they still carried then perhaps they had a fighting chance of picking off a few of the Eldar themselves. As quickly as he could, Quinn screwed his silencer onto the end of his pistol and began to search for a target. The difficulty with this was that the smoke obscured his line of sight as much as it did the Eldars', but he had the advantage of being able to hear the aliens' flying machines through the smoke and so when the blurred outline of an Eldar appeared briefly through the smoke he was ready with his pistol and he fired three times in rapid succession. None of the rounds hit the Eldar as far as Quinn could tell but at least one seemed to hit the alien's mount as the sound of its engine suddenly spluttered and the steady high pitch tone became suddenly erratic.

"There you go lads." Quinn called out, "Pistols and silencers. Follow the engine noise and be ready to take any shot you get."

9.

Wolf and her command section were gathered around the main map in the command post discussing theories on where the Eldar may be based and how they would choose to attack the perimeter next when Mayer burst in.

"Lieutenant, we've got an orange flare." he said.

"Throne, Quinn's under attack." Wolf exclaimed and with her squad following after her she rushed to the door, hurrying out of the building and heading for where both Molla and Grey were stood by one of the perimeter walls and looking out into the jungle with magnoculars. She took out her own as she ran up to them and looked in that direction for herself.

"It went up about a minute ago." Molla commented without taking his eyes off the bright orange flare now floating over the jungle on a parachute.

"Is that smoke?" Wolf asked as she looked at the jungle below the flare and saw wisps of smoke coming from beneath the canopy.

"Look like someone's chucking lots of smoke grenades around to me." Grey said.

"Quinn's laying cover. They must be under heavy fire." Vance added as he also looked through his magnoculars.

"How far would you say that is Sergeant Molla?" Wolf said.

"About fifteen hundred metres." Molla replied, "We could be there in half an hour."

"Sergeant Molla-," Wolf said, lowering her magnoculars.

"My men can be ready in five minutes lieutenant." he interrupted.

"Same here." Grey added.

"No." Wolf replied and the two squad leaders exchanged glances before glaring at Wolf.

"Now look here, Catachans don't just abandon-" Grey began before Wolf interrupted him.

"No-one's being abandoned but I won't leave our camp undefended." she snapped, "Sergeant Molla I want you to take command here. First and Second Squads will remain on the perimeter and Corporal Mayer's mortar squad will continue to be ready to provide fire support. I'm taking my command section out to help Third Squad." then she looked around to where Second Platoon's ogryns were clustered together, "Sergeant Khor." she shouted and the entire ogryn squad snapped to attention and saluted, holding the salute until Wolf returned it exactly as regulations required.

"Ogryns ready for orders." Khor announced.

"Sergeant Khor your squad will accompany us to help Sergeant Quinn. If we get separated then head for that smoke. Do you understand?" Wolf asked, pointing towards the plume of smoke now visible in the jungle.

"Ogryns follow." Khor replied.

"Good. Then let's go." Wolf ordered.

Thanks to their upbringing the Catachans were able to move rapidly through the jungle while the ogryns could use their massive bulk to simply smash through the undergrowth, leaving an obvious trail of destruction behind them. On the other hand Wolf lacked both the level of skill possessed by the Catachans as well as the strength of the abhuman ogryns and so she found herself struggling to keep up. Not wanting to slow down their pace, Wolf ordered her section to continue at best speed while she dropped back among the ogryns and made use of the trail they created until she heard what seemed to be the sound of alien engines from ahead.

"Stop!" she called out and her command section came to a halt.

"Ogryns stop!" Khor bellowed and his squad also came to a rapid stop, raising their ripper guns and aiming them all around.

"Sounds like engines." Vance said as Wolf rejoined her command section and she nodded.

"We don't exactly have a lot of anti-armour firepower." Torrent commented, "Maybe if we had Grey's missile launcher instead of you having split our numbers-"

"Be ready with krak grenades Kent." Wolf said to the Catachan armed with her section's grenade launcher, ignoring Torrent and he nodded as he checked that the rotating drum magazine of his weapon was correctly loaded. The krak grenades fired by the launcher or in the case of the rest of the command section thrown by hand contained a shaped charge that was effective against light vehicles. They could not match the armour penetrating power of the krak missiles fired by Second Squad's launcher but could still be effective against most of the lightly armoured vehicle types that the Eldar were known to make use of. Wolf then drew her las pistol and started to advance towards the source of the noise.

All of a sudden one of the flying Eldar swooped down towards her and Wolf threw herself to the ground just before the alien flew right over her.

"Lieutenant, are you all right?" Vance asked as he dived to the ground beside her.

"Fine. First time I've been glad to be this short since I joined you though." she replied.

"Good. Now where's that xenos?" Vance said.

"Ogryns fire!" Khor shouted unexpectedly and his entire squad opened fire on the Eldar that Wolf had just evaded and was now looping back around for another run.

Like Quinn's veterans the ogryns were armed with a shotgun type weapon. But their ripper guns were not only much larger but also capable of firing short bursts with each pull of the trigger and the effect of seven such weapons firing simultaneously was devastating. Between them the ogryns created a cloud of fast moving projectiles that even the Eldar's superhuman reactions could not avoid. Flying straight into this cloud of projectiles, the unarmoured Eldar was torn apart while her flying machine burst into flames as dozens of the projectiles were sucked into its inner workings before it slammed into the trunk of a nearby tree and exploded.

"What was that?" Torrent exclaimed.

"I think you mean what are they." Vance replied, "Look." and he pointed to where two more of the Eldar were flying straight towards them.

"Just shoot them." Wolf ordered before firing her las pistol. The energy blasts moved too quickly for the Eldar to avoid but their speed and erratic manoeuvres made them hard to hit. However, one of the Eldar vehicles had clearly been damaged already, smoke trailing from its spluttering engine and this made it easier to hit. One of the las blasts from the command section struck the rider's knee and he was thrown from his mount and promptly impaled through his stomach on a tree branch. Meanwhile the now riderless vehicle went into a spin and crashed into the second vehicle, causing both to explode and killing the other Eldar rider instantly. The command section and ogryns then began to advance towards the cloud of smoke again, watching out for more of the flying Eldar that they could still hear even though they were out of sight at present. All of a sudden a crouching figure darted out of the smoke and skidding to a halt.

"Lieutenant," Quinn said, "thanks for coming."

"What's going on here sergeant?" Wolf asked.

"We found a vehicle that I think the Eldar who raided us last night used to transport themselves here. But as I was logging its position we were ambushed by these skyboard riders. I've lost two men that I know of." Quinn explained.

"Something wrong with your shotgun?" Vance commented, noting that Quinn was currently wielding his stub pistol.

"I figured that they wouldn't be able to dodge a bullet if they couldn't hear it coming." Quinn replied and Vance nodded in agreement.

"How many of them are there?" Wolf said.

"I don't know. But I'd say eight to a dozen." Quinn said before looking around at the trio of dead and injured Eldar, "Or at least there were."

"Gather your men sergeant." Wolf ordered, "We're pulling back to the settlement. Disable that Eldar vehicle first though. No sense in allowing the enemy to recover it."

"Incoming!" Torrent snapped when she spotted another Eldar flying around the cloud of smoke in a wide circle and she fired her las pistol at the alien. However, the Eldar was agile enough to prevent Torrent from aiming properly and each las shot passed through the air just behind the alien instead of hitting it or its skyboard.

The Eldar suddenly veered towards the Catachans and accelerated rapidly. This dangerous move sent the Eldar flying straight through the ogryns before the slow witted abhumans could bring their weapons to bear on the alien. The Eldar made use of his skyboard itself as a weapon and the razor sharp wings sliced through the side of Khor himself while the rider swung his pole arm at a second of the abhumans and opened up the flesh of his arm.

Khor roared with rage as he dropped to his knees, clutching at his side while the other ogryn howled in pain. The poison coating the alien blade began to flow through the ogryn's system but he did not collapse as Torrent had done when she was exposed to it. Not only did the ogryn's much greater body mass meant that a much larger dosage of the poison was needed to have a significant effect, but the abhuman's nervous system was slower and less vulnerable to the effects of a toxin that targeted it specifically than an ordinary human's was.

"Torrent, see to the ogryns." Wolf ordered as she and the Catachans opened fire on the withdrawing Eldar. But the alien was not done yet and in another surprise move he held out his weapon so that it caught on a tree trunk and hurled him around it to come flying straight back towards the Catachans at the same high speed, intending to make another pass through the ogryns. Once more he was moving too fast for the humans to accurately target him and the ogryns were too slow to be able to take aim without Khor to guide them. But one, the only female among the abhumans, was able to lash out sideways, intending to try and knock the Eldar off his skyboard. She failed to land her blow as she had intended, striking only the air in front of the Eldar but she did not then have time to withdraw her arm and try again before the Eldar flew right into it.

The force of the impact knocked the Eldar off his skyboard and he dropped to the ground while the vehicle

sped on uncontrolled until it ploughed into the ground, flipped over and burst into flames. Meanwhile the Eldar lay on the ground too dazed to move and before he could recover he saw only the sole of the female ogryn's boot as it came down on his face, smashing his skull wide open.

"Well that's four down." Wolf said.

"And still at least that many left." Quinn pointed out. Then he looked towards the cloud of smoke and took a deep breath before shouting out as loudly as he could, "Pull back! To me!"

"Ogryns." Wolf added, turning towards the abhumans and all of those that were still standing snapped to attention upon being addressed by an officer, "Relax." she told them, "Ready your weapons, fire on any Eldar you see." but the abhumans just looked at her, confused, "What do I do?" she asked, looking at Vance.

"Ogryns," Khor said as Torrent tried to seal his wound with numerous lengths of tape, "see and shoot." and the other ogryns all raised their ripper guns as the men of Quinn's squad began to emerge from the smoke.

"Come on, hurry." Wolf called out to them, waving them towards her.

"We still need to disable that vehicle." Vance pointed out.

"Not a problem." Quinn responded as one of the flamer-armed veterans appeared, "Dolton, flamer." he said and he took the flamethrower from the veteran. Pointing the weapon back towards the cloud of smoke Quinn pulled the trigger and held it down as he moved the muzzle from side to side. The sustained jet of burning promethium set light to everything it touched and in a space of seconds the jungle ahead of Quinn was ablaze. But he did not stop until he heard the sound of the open topped Venom exploding as its fuel tank overheated and the contents ignited all at once, at which point Quinn ducked as he ceased fire.

Immediately following the explosion another of the Eldar Hellions came flying towards the Catachans, this one choosing to try and surprise them by flying over the flame and diving down at them. But one of Quinn's men spotted the alien and called out a warning.

"Above us!" he shouted before firing his silenced pistol at the Eldar. The veteran's shots missed but his warning was enough to alert the ogryns and the air was filled with the roaring of ripper guns that created a cloud of projectiles that struck the alien in the shoulder and the sudden motion as he was pushed off his skyboard turned his controlled, if rapid, dive into an uncontrolled fall that brought him and the skyboard to the ground several metres apart.

"Torrent how are those ogryns?" Wolf said, looking at the platoon medic.

"Khor's mobile. But I don't know about Murga. That poison could slow him down."

"Then we move slower, but we don't split up." Wolf replied, "Sergeant Quinn, I want your squad to bring up the rear. My command section will lead the way."

Another Eldar then appeared, flying past the Catachans at a distance beyond the ability of the ogryns to concentrate enough fire to bring her down and too far away to accurately target with a pistol.

"Incoming." Vance said, following the Eldar with his las pistol and waiting for her to turn towards the Catachans. But rather unexpectedly the alien veered off and gained altitude, disappearing about the jungle canopy.

"Where's that thing going?" Wolf said.

"Could be planning to try another run from above." Quinn suggested as he looked upwards.

Then another Eldar appeared, this one also flying at an angle that took him away from the Catachans.

"Are they retreating?" Wolf said in amazement.

"Looks like it." Vance replied, "But they could just be regrouping for another run."

"Then we need to get out of here." Wolf said.

"Hang on a moment." Quinn said, "Now we've got some more time there's something I need to do." and he strode over to where the still living Eldar was impaled against a tree, silent despite his terrible injury and smiled at the alien, "I don't know if you can understand me or not," he said as he crouched down and picked up the alien's weapon, "but I just wanted to make sure you got what you deserved." and then he used the pole arm to cut the Eldar's arm. The wound was not deep and Quinn knew that it would not be life threatening to a human. But it was enough to allow the poison on the blade to enter the wound and the alien immediately began to scream, "There, now we can go." Quinn said, leaning on the pole arm and grinning.

10.

No longer concerned about Eldar pursuit, the group led by Wolf did not need to hurry on its return to the settlement and this enabled them to spare the time to construct a stretcher to carry the injured Murga. This took two other ogryns to carry and so reduced the group's immediately available firepower even further but that was not considered a problem now that the Eldar had retreated. Arriving back at the settlement they found the perimeter wall still fully manned and as the stretcher was being lifted over this both Molla and Grey rushed to join Wolf and the other sergeants for an update.

"What happened out there?" Grey asked.

"Eldar, that's what." Quinn responded, "Mounted on skyboards this time. We're going to have to come up with a way of protecting ourselves against fast moving aerial targets.

"Easy." Molla replied, "We've got my heavy bolters and Tyler's missile launcher." and he glanced at Grey who just smiled.

"We aren't facing conventional aircraft here sergeant." Wolf pointed out, "The Eldar are making use of some kind of sky board. Frankly I think the men should be ready to use their las guns on full auto."

"That could deplete our ammo pretty rapidly." Vance pointed out.

"I realise that." Wolf replied, "But what alternative do we have? In the mean time I want to make it as difficult for the Eldar to fly around this place as possible."

"We could string some blankets up to block their view." Grey suggested.

"And hang a few solid objects inside them just in case any of the Eldar decide to risk ramming through one." Quinn added and Wolf nodded.

"Get to it." she said, "We only need to hold out another day. We've managed one so we should be able to manage another."

"What about tonight lieutenant?" Molla asked, "The Eldar managed to walk through our perimeter last night, who's to say they won't do that again tonight, only more of them this time?"

Wolf sighed.

"Someone go and find Rull." she said, "Tell him he's to stick close tonight. If he sees any signs of intruders he's to alert us immediately. Hopefully the bloody nose we've just given them will convince them that we're not worth the trouble of attacking."

The Hellion brought his skyboard to a complete halt and hovered in front of the dracon, uncaring about the authority of the Eldar commander he stared her straight in the face. The dracon was experienced enough to know that the youthful Hellions were prone to such disrespectful behaviour and that attempting to instil some sort of discipline in them was a waste of time so she let the insult pass. Her bodyguards twitched, raising their weapons but the Hellion ignored this.

"We have returned." he said.

"Though not all of you I see heliarch." the dracon responded, looking around and counting the number of Hellions that had come back from the mission compared with the number that she had sent on it earlier that day, "Were the Mon-keigh not slow enough?"

"They are cunning and used the jungle against us." the heliarch answered defensively, "Rather than stand and fight the first group we encountered hid from us in the undergrowth and behind smoke."

"Ah, so you couldn't fly your precious skyboards through them without risking crashing." the dracon commented, "So what happened then?"

"The Mon-keigh used a crude signal to send for help. More of their number arrived, several more Mon-keigh themselves and a number of the even more primitive giants. They used these beasts who carried rapid firing weapons that were capable of bringing down our skyboards."

"So that explains your losses." the dracon replied, "After which you chose to withdraw."

"You asked us for information and we already had it."

"Ah, so you wanted to bring me this information as fast as possible. How considerate."

"I remained to observe the Mon-keighs' reaction to our departure." the heliarch said, "Rather than return to their camp immediately they took the time to kill one of our own injured. I witnessed one of the Mon-keigh use one of our own weapons to poison him. His injuries were fatal anyway but they wanted him to suffer."

"Interesting." the dracon replied, "So these Mon-keigh are not only skilled at using the terrain to their advantage, they are also vindictive enough to risk delaying reaching safety to take revenge on an enemy." and she smiled, "They will bring a good price when we take them back to Commorragh."

The dracon then walked away from the heliarch, striding between the cages of human captives already taken towards a cluster of her warriors who were organising the loading of these cages onto the Raiders that would take them back through the webway to the dark city of Commorragh. Some of the humans tried to speak to the Eldar commander as she passed but she could not understand their primitive grunting language and so she ignored them, leaving her bodyguards to deliver beatings to demonstrate what happened to prisoners

arrogant enough to think that she would converse with them.

"Dracon." the leader of the warriors said, dropping to his knees as soon as they noticed her approach, "How may we serve?"

"I want the cargo loaded and despatched as rapidly as possible." the dracon said, "I intend to assault this new group of Mon-keigh with full force at first light tomorrow."

"Dracon, our forces stand ready to act on your command now. We have six squads of warriors and our incubi will soon return as well." the warrior said.

"I know this. But I also know that these Mon-keigh know how to fight. Sybarite, you will take two squads of warriors to the Mon-keigh settlement. There you shall harass them, strike and fade but do not attack fully. Operate in small groups and force the Mon-keigh to defend themselves throughout the night. Then when the sun reaches its highest point tomorrow and they think they have driven you away we shall launch our attack while they are weakened from lack of sleep."

"Yes dracon. By your command I shall gather the warriors." the sybarite answered, still looking at the ground.

Wolf looked up at the blankets now strung up between the settlement's structures. These guaranteed that any skyboard mounted Eldar attacking the settlement would not be able to fly right through at much over ground level and other obstacles that had been set up on the ground made such extreme low level operations risky as well. The only drawback was that the Eldar could still swoop down from above and then circle around the area inside the settlement since the requirement to keep a clear landing area prevented similar barriers from being hung here. However, the plan was that Second Platoon would avoid placing themselves out in the open here. Only Mayer's mortar squad would be in the central area and they would not leave their dugout. The rest of the platoon would stick to the buildings and the gaps between them, with holes hacked in side walls to permit passage from structure to structure without having to enter the large open area in the centre. Most vulnerable would be the two heavy weapon teams that had been detached from First and Second squads, Molla's heavy bolter team on the roofs and Grey's missile launcher team on the water tower but Wolf hoped that the protection offered by their improvised positions would be adequate. "Lieutenant." Wolf heard Torrent call out and she turned to see the medic approaching her.

"Yes Torrent?" she replied, "I take it you've got an update on the ogyrns for me?" and Torrent nodded.

"Khor's back on his own two feet now without support." Torrent told.

"Good, the ogyrns are too important to our defence to not have him to direct them. But what about Murga?" Wolf asked.

"I'm not sure. There's still poison in his system and I don't have an anti-toxin available for it. Perhaps if we had access to-"

"We have what we have." Wolf interrupted, "So what's his condition?"

"Still in pain. The toxin hasn't worked its way out of his system yet."

"Can you estimate how long that will take?" Wolf said but Torrent shook her head.

"He's taken a larger dose than I got but he's got a much greater mass so it's not affected him as badly as it did me. But at the same time I can't give him pain killers or muscle relaxants like you were able to do with me because I'd need a lot more of them than I can spare to have any effect on him. Right now all I can do is recommend he's kept off duty." she explained.

"I doubt he'll like that." Wolf commented.

"I know, but I figure that if I just keep feeding him then it'll keep him quiet. Plus it'll keep his metabolism working as it digests the food and that might just speed up getting rid of the poison."

"What are you feeding him? I know we're supposed to be picked up sometime tomorrow but if anything goes wrong we could be stuck here longer." Wolf said.

"Don't worry lieutenant, I'm not wasting rations. I'm using up some of that spoiled food we found when we got here. It takes a lot to make an ogyryn sick so I figured we may as well use some of it up on him." Torrent told her.

"Fine. Carry on and keep me up to date." Wolf said and Torrent turned to walk away, prompting a smile from Wolf, "What, no sarcastic remark about me being an outsider? Are you sure you've recovered from that poison yourself?" she said and Torrent came to a stop and turned back towards her.

"You're short and you have stumpy legs." she said, "Better?"

"Carry on guardswoman." Wolf replied and then as Torrent headed back towards the infirmary Wolf frowned.

"Lieutenant we've got all the blankets strung up." Molla said suddenly as he appeared beside Wolf, having walked up to her without her noticing. Then he noticed the look on her face, "Problem lieutenant?"

"Sergeant, do you think my legs are stumpy?" Wolf asked and Molla smiled as he looked down at her legs.

"I don't know." he replied, "How about you take off your pants and I'll inspect them properly."

"Why do I bother asking you anything?" Wolf said with a sigh and then she started to walk back towards the command post.

"You know I'll happily offer an opinion on any part of your anatomy you ask me to lieutenant." Molla called out

after her but all Wolf did in response was raise her hand in an gesture known on most human worlds as an insult, "I make house calls." Molla added. Then he smiled and headed back to his post.

"Where's Rull?" Wolf asked when she returned to the command post, "I thought he was going to be here for us to explain our plan to."

"I already did that." Vance answered, "So he left. Did Molla find you to let you know that the modifications to our defences are complete? If the Eldar want to try using those skyboards against us again then they're going to find it tough going."

Wolf leant on the table and looked at the map spread out on it. The site of their last engagement against the Eldar had been marked on it but Second Platoon still knew nothing about where the aliens were based or what their total strength was. All they could do was hope that their own position was strong enough that they could hold out long enough for an evacuation force to arrive and take them back to their base.

"So where are we weakest?" Wolf asked.

"I wouldn't say we were particularly strong anywhere." Vance replied, "But we've got pretty even coverage all around the perimeter. Extending the watch duration from four to six hours let's us use more troops at a time of course."

"I keep trying to think of anything else I could have the platoon do to reinforce the perimeter." Wolf commented.

"With the time and resources we've got available to us? I don't think there is anything." Vance said.

"Then all we can do now is wait." Wolf replied and she sighed, "I've got a feeling that it's going to be a long night."

The two Raider transports had the appearance of ancient sailing ships as they floated over the jungle, each one carrying a squad of ten Eldar warriors towards the settlement. Although lightweight and open topped, the Raiders were potentially potent war machines themselves, each one mounting a dark lance energy weapon that could cut through even the most heavily armoured targets but tonight the Eldar would not be using them in an offensive role. Their mission was to wear down the settlement's human defenders, not exterminate them and so just as the smaller infiltrating party had done the previous night the pilots of the Raiders set their vehicles down in the jungle just far enough away from the settlement that they would not be detected but close enough for the squads they carried to continue the rest of the way on foot.

There were twenty warriors in two squads and they further divided themselves into four smaller units of five warriors each who moved to position themselves on all sides of the settlement and waited for the order to attack. The senior sybarite led his troops forwards first and they advanced until the settlement came into view through the darkness of the jungle and they crouched down and raised their rifles.

"Remember," the sybarite told his men, "the dracon wants to take as many of these Mon-keigh back to Commorragh as she can. You will not be rewarded for killing any of them." and then he took careful aim with his rifle and opened fire.

The sharp 'crack' of the fast moving projectile made both Grey and the guardsman accompanying him drop down behind the barrier they were stationed at as it flew overhead.

"Throne." Grey hissed, "They're here." and in the absence of his microbead he pulled a whistle from his pocket that he put to his lips and blew to alert the rest of the platoon. Then he took out his magnoculars and raised himself up just far enough to be able to see over the barrier with the device while more rifle fire continued to fly overhead.

"Sergeant Grey, what's happening?" Wolf asked as she and Vance appeared behind him.

"What do you think is happening?" Grey snapped back at her, "The God-Emperor himself arrived personally to reinforce us and I thought you deserved an audience with him. We're under attack, that's what."

"How many?" Vance asked as Wolf scowled at Grey.

"Not many I think, unless only few are shooting at once. But I can't find them."

"We need more light." Wolf said and she turned towards the settlement's central area, "Corporal Mayer! Illumination. One round, five hundred metres west."

Seconds later there was the sound of a mortar discharge, followed by a 'fizz' from overhead as the illumination round went off over the jungle, deploying a parachute to extend the amount of time it would remain aloft.

"Got them!" Grey exclaimed, "Could be about half a dozen."

"We need to let the heavy bolter team know." Wolf said before there was the pounding sound of the belt fed heavy weapon firing on fully automatic and the sound of the mass reactive rounds detonating in the jungle.

"Sounds like they've already found them themselves." Vance commented.

"They're retreating." Grey added and Wolf took out her own magnoculars so that she could look for herself.

"They didn't last long." she said.

"Maybe they thought they could stay hidden and just keep taking pot shots at us." Grey suggested just as the heavy bolter team noticed that their targets had withdrawn and ceased fire to avoid wasting ammunition.

"Did we lose anyone?" Wolf asked looking around.

"Second Squad sound off!" Grey yelled and one by one his men called out their names.

"First Squad sound off!" Molla then shouted from elsewhere on the perimeter and once again all of his men known to be alive responded.

This went on for the other squads in the platoon as well and it became clear that no-one had been hit during the brief exchange of fire.

"Well that was easy." Wolf said.

"Too easy." Vance pointed out, "I don't think they were trying to hit us."

"Evaluating our defence?" Wolf said.

"Possibly." Vance answered, "Though what they can learn from that brief exchange is-" but before he could finish there was the sound of more Eldar rifle fire from another direction and another whistle blew, "That's Quinn's position." Vance exclaimed.

"Hold fire! Hold fire!" Wolf shouted as she and Vance started to run towards Quinn.

The Eldar rifle fire continued, but in accordance with Wolf's order the Catachans did not return it.

"Lieutenant, what's going on? Why aren't we firing?" Quinn asked as Wolf and Vance arrived with him while Eldar projectiles continued to strike the defensive barrier in front of him.

"Has anyone been hit?" Wolf asked.

"Not that I know of." Quinn replied.

"They're probing us sergeant." Wolf said, "They're trying to learn something about us or our defences I'm sure. Keep your men on the perimeter but don't fire unless the Eldar actually try to penetrate it or deploy heavier firepower."

"That's risky lieutenant." Vance said, "If they do have heavier weapons and this is just to cover them setting them up then they could start causing a lot of damage."

"On the other hand by shooting back we could be exposing our positions for targeting by those heavy weapons. We hold our fire for now." Wolf said and Vance nodded.

"It's your call lieutenant." he said.

At that point the fire from the Eldar suddenly stopped and the jungle became eerily quiet again, causing Wolf to smile at Vance. However, before she could say anything there was the sound of yet more Eldar rifle fire from yet another direction.

"They can't have got around there already." Quinn said, "There must be at least three groups of them."

"They're looking for a weak spot, trying to judge where we've fewest people." Vance said.

"I'm heading for the south facing perimeter." Wolf responded.

"But the Eldar are to the north lieutenant." Vance pointed out and she nodded.

"I know that sergeant. But they've hit the east, west and now north. I'm betting they'll hit the south as well

with another probing attack. Sergeant Quinn is here, Molla is to the north and Grey is to the west. I want you to tell Molla and Grey to just try and locate the Eldar when they attack and feed co-ordinates to Corporal Mayer. Then he can engage the Eldar with his mortars.”

“Rull's out there.” Quinn reminded her.

“I'm sure that Rull will stay far enough away from any Eldar to avoid our mortars. Now make sure everyone knows what to do.” Wolf replied before she scurried away, keeping low just in case there were any Eldar snipers waiting in the darkness who were willing to fire directly at a human target.

The piecemeal attacks on the perimeter continued, with the Eldar warriors co-ordinating their attacks so that there was no regular pattern and the gaps between the attacks were as short as possible. This forced Wolf to keep her entire platoon on alert continuously even though she maintained her order to hold fire unless an obvious threat presented itself. This did not concern the Eldar though, their only intent was to prevent the Catachans from getting the rest they would need if they were going to face the main assault the next day. However, what the Eldar did not know was that while they were being hunted.

The unit of Eldar to the north had spread out into a line abreast to cover as much of the Catachan perimeter as they could in one go and were firing short bursts from their rifles that were keeping the Catachans' heads down. But as one of the aliens ejected a spent magazine from the grip of his weapon and reached for another she noticed a tiny red dot on her side. Realising at once what this was she slammed another magazine into her weapon and turned to try and locate the source of the targeting laser. But the moment she turned to face the direction that the beam was coming from the dot lifted up between the eyepieces of her helmet and Rull fired.

The single silenced round punched through the Eldar's lightweight helmet with ease and killed her instantly, causing her to topple forwards. The disturbance this caused attracted the attention of the other Eldar in the group and the next closest rushed to investigate. This was exactly what Rull was waiting for, however and another shot struck the Eldar in his heart.

“Sybarite, we are under attack.” one of the three remaining Eldar transmitted as it became obvious that a human sniper had located their position, “The Mon-keigh have-” but then a bullet passed through the Eldar's throat and his hurried message became a sudden gurgling as he began to choke on his own blood.

The final two Eldar in the group now turned their rifles on the jungle instead of the settlement but with no obvious target all they could do was fire wildly in the hope of hitting something, even though this technically violated their orders against killing any of the humans.

There were no further rifle shots as the Eldar fired and they rapidly emptied their magazines. It was when the first of them found himself holding an empty weapon and ejected the spent magazine that Rull fired again, picking off the Eldar who was still firing with another shot to the head. This now left only one Eldar holding an empty rifle and he hurriedly tried to reload. But even with the lightning fast reflexes of the Eldar, Rull was quick enough to be able to get off another shot that sent the Eldar sprawling across the ground where he crouched.

It did not take long for the senior sybarite to realise that he had just lost an entire team of warriors to a small group of human troops or possibly just one individual and this had serious implications for his plan. If he could not keep his force intact until the dracon arrived to launch the main attack then the settlement's defenders would be able to get the rest that the sybarite had been ordered to deny them.

“All units,” he broadcast, “the Mon-keigh have troops outside their perimeter. Fall back and rendezvous at the Raiders. We will attack again but with our numbers concentrated.”

Immediately the remaining units of Eldar warriors began to retreat from the settlement, heading back towards where they had disembarked from their raiders. Knowing that there were human forces active beyond the settlement's perimeter they remained alert for an ambush but they all arrived safely at the rendezvous point without seeing any signs of a Catachan.

It had been twenty minutes since the last attack on the perimeter had suddenly ceased and with the sky just starting to lighten Wolf was starting to get impatient.

“What are they waiting for?” she said.

“Perhaps they've got the information they were looking for.” Vance suggested.

“I hope not.” Wolf replied, “If that's the case then we can probably expect a much larger attack sometime soon.” then she yawned.

“Perhaps you should get some sleep.” Vance said, “You're no use if you can't stay awake.”

“I could say the same of any of us. I can't leave everyone else out here while I go to bed.” Wolf said.

All of a sudden a female Catachan from Molla's squad rushed up to them.

“You need to come and see this.” she said, pointing back towards Molla's position.

“What is it?” Wolf asked.

“The sarge thinks Rull's making contact.” the woman answered.

Wolf and Vance followed the woman back to where Molla was leaning on the barricade in front of him and looking through his magnoculars.

"What have you got sergeant?" Wolf said.

"I think Rull's trying to send us a message." Molla responded and Wolf quickly took out her magnoculars and looked into the jungle.

"I don't see anything," she said.

"That's because Rull doesn't want to be seen. But he does want us to see his message." Molla said and he lowered his magnoculars and pointed at the wall close to his head where a tiny red dot was flashing on and off.

"What's he saying?" Wolf asked.

"It's the number nine-hundred and fifty over and over again." Molla said and Wolf smiled.

"The Eldar position, nine-hundred and fifty metres that way." she said and she turned to Vance, "Go tell Corporal Mayer to bracket that location. Fire for effect."

"Yes lieutenant." Vance replied, smiling back at her and he turned and ran all the way to the dug out where Mayer and his mortar squad were sat, "Bomber!" he called out.

"Yes sergeant?" Mayer responded.

"Target nine-hundred and fifty metres that way. The lieutenant wants the whole area hitting with high explosive." Vance told him, pointing in the direction that Rull's signal had come from.

"Yes sergeant." Mayer said and he and his squad hurriedly started to prepare the ammunition for their weapons and align them with the target area. He waited until there were several rounds prepared for each mortar before he held one in the muzzle of his own weapon and two of his men copied him with the other two mortars. Meanwhile the other three members of the squad continued to fit propellant charges to more rounds for use later, "Fire." Mayer said simply and he let go of the mortar round he was holding and ducked back away from the weapon, clamping his hands over his ears as the weapon discharged. The other two mortars were fired at almost the same time and then the operators adjusted their aim slightly before letting loose another salvo before the first had even landed.

The Eldar gathered together close to their Raiders. None of the group targeted by Rull had escaped but that had been the only group to be ambushed and the lead sybarite did not intend to repeat the mistake of dividing his forces into such small and obviously vulnerable groups again.

"The Mon-keigh have deployed a small force beyond their position." the sybarite explained, "This has already killed five of our number and threatens us all if we divide our numbers too small. Instead we shall return in one group. Two of us will be tasked with maintaining a watch to either side and behind our position while the rest fire on the Mon-keigh. Each warrior will fire two magazines at the Mon-keigh before we withdraw and move to a new position."

"That will take time." the second sybarite commented, "The Mon-keigh will soon realise that we are acting as a single unit and adapt. They are primitive but they are not stupid."

"The Raiders will also accompany us." the senior sybarite responded, "They will allow us to redeploy more rapidly. If the Mon-keigh demonstrate too much resistance then we will use them to strike at their structures as well. The dracon cautioned us not to kill the Mon-keigh, she said nothing about-" but then the sybarite stopped speaking and looked skywards as he heard a whistling sound from overhead, "Scatter!" he shouted but it was too late.

The first mortar round struck the trunk of a tree and exploded, scattering debris made up of bomb fragments and burning wood over a large area before the next two struck the ground in rapid succession and tore up large chunks of dirt and undergrowth. As the sybarite had ordered, the Eldar warriors scattered but this did not protect them as the barrage continued and the air was filled with flying debris that the lightweight armour worn by the Eldar failed to protect them against. The crews of the Raiders fared little better either. Not only was the superstructure of their vehicles not proof against the mortar rounds but the open topped vehicles they left their pilots and gunners almost entirely exposed.

Two of the Eldar managed to escape the barrage, crawling through the undergrowth until they were clear of the ongoing bombardment behind them, at which point they got to their feet and started to run back towards their own camp as quickly as they could. However, the lead Eldar suddenly heard the sound of his trailing companion crash to the ground through the undergrowth and he turned to see what had happened. He could quite clearly see the body of the other Eldar lying face down and noticed that there was a small hole in the back of his head where something had punched through his helmet. Then a tiny red dot appeared on the chest of the final alien before Rull put a bullet through his heart.

The dracon watched the mortar bombardment from a safe vantage point.

"Raise the sybarite." she said to the Eldar stood behind her with one of her force's long range communication devices without looking around at him.

"He does not respond dracon. Do you wish me to send-"

"No." the dracon interrupted, "He has failed. The Mon-keigh's crude weapons have destroyed his force."

"What are your orders now dracon?" the other Eldar asked.

"My orders have not changed. We still have four squads of warriors and a squad of incubi. That is more than enough to deal with these lowly vermin. All they have done is make themselves more valuable to me in the slave markets of Commorragh. Go tell the other sybarites to be ready, we leave in the morning."

"Yes dracon." the warrior responded and as he backed away from her she continued to look towards the settlement and the clouds of smoke in the night sky created by the mortar bombardment that was still ongoing. Her plan to wear down the Catachans so that she could strike at them in a weakened state had obviously failed and now they would have the opportunity to rest themselves before the main assault commenced in daylight. Of course the dracon could have ordered the attack to start straight away but she wished to rest her own forces before doing that or the advantage would be lost. Of course she could have just given up and returned to Commorragh with the captives her raiding force had already captured and return with a more powerful force but that would be dangerous in itself. To face her archon and tell him that she could not even handle a small force of humans would be to look weak publicly and that would only serve to invite rivals to attack her. The same could be said of expressing any concern about the progress of her expedition to her own warriors. Any of the squad leaders could see this as an admission of weakness and attempt to take control of the raiding force for themselves. Her bodyguards would make such an endeavour more difficult, but even if they successfully dealt with any usurpers it would leave her with a force that was weakened even further. Therefore, she had little choice but to carry on as if everything was normal.

12.

With the hoped for evacuation due later that day Wolf decided against allowing Quinn to take his squad out of the perimeter to evaluate the effectiveness of the mortar barrage against the co-ordinates provided by Rull. All that mattered to her was that after the bombardment had been completed not one Eldar warrior had been seen and no more projectiles had been fired at Second Platoon from the jungle. This had allowed Wolf to stand down most of the platoon to get some rest but having spent most of the night awake and ready to defend themselves had left the platoon tired and many were downing mugs of recaf at every opportunity when Wolf ordered the perimeter fully manned during daylight.

"Here." Vance said, handing her another mug of recaf.

"Thanks." Wolf replied, then she winced as she tasted how bitter it was, "At least it'll keep me awake." she commented before she heard someone give out a shout.

"Incoming!" one of the members of the missile launcher team shouted from the top of the water tower and just seconds later there was the 'whoosh!' of a missile being fired.

Wolf dropped her mug, spilling its contents over the ground as she reached for her magnoculars and looked in the direction that the missile had just been fired in.

"What the feth are they?" she said in amazement as she saw the two Eldar Raider craft rushing towards the settlement over the jungle. Each of the two vehicles was filled with Eldar warriors and mounted vicious looking hooks on the underside of its hull. As she watched one of the Raiders suddenly turned to the side as its pilot attempted to avoid the missile heading straight towards it. But the Catachans had determined themselves to be under attack by an aircraft and so used a heat seeking missile instead of an unguided armour-piercing round and the missile turned to follow the alien craft. The presence of the squad of unsecured warriors on the Raider's open deck limited the pilot's options for trying to avoid the missile and although having to turn burned up more fuel the missile was still able to get close enough to the Raider to trigger its proximity fuse and the effects of the explosion were catastrophic.

The warhead detonated close to the middle of the Raider, just behind its sailed mast and the explosion cut the vehicle in half. Most of the passengers suffered a similar fate as their armour proved ineffective against the blast. On the other hand those fortunate not to be killed instantly by the explosion now found themselves falling uncontrollably to the ground while pieces of burning debris and bodies fell around them.

The missile team hurried to reload their weapon but before they could get off a second shot a beam of black energy erupted from the weapon mounted on the remaining Raider's prow as its gunner fired his dark lance. This beam initially struck the water tank itself, slicing all the way through it and creating a double spurt of steam as the contents were boiled off and escaped through both holes. The Eldar gunner maintained the beam but instead of guiding it towards the two Catachans he adjusted it downwards and sliced through more of the tank itself before cutting through the supporting structure. This produced a loud groaning sound as what remained of the structure proved unable to support the top of the tower and it began to peel away. The two Catachans at the top dropped the missile launcher over the side and hurried for the ladder leading down to the ground. But before they could make it the tower's supports gave way entirely and the structure came crashing down on one of the outer buildings, crushing both of the Catachans in the process.

The Raider then moved closer to the settlement as First Squad's heavy bolter team hurriedly tried to turn their weapon around to face it. Meanwhile the Raider turned aside just as it came within lasgun range and the Eldar warriors mounted on the deck of the vehicle began to fire their own rifles towards the Catachans' perimeter. Circling the settlement at high speed the Eldar could not aim their weapons precisely enough to target any specific member of Second Platoon but the weight of fire they produced while firing their weapons in unison kept the Catachans pinned down.

"Can we get someone to target that thing with a krak grenade?" Wolf said as she crouched behind a lighting unit and watched the Raider zoom past between two buildings.

"Muzzle velocity's too low." Vance said, shaking his head, "It'd be pure luck to hit it."

However, the heavy bolter team on the roof of one of the buildings that had made a few brief efforts to target the Raider directly soon realised that the vehicle was moving too quickly to aim at accurately and so they turned their weapon directly towards the jungle and the gunner opened fire, holding down the weapon's trigger and unleashing a concentrated stream of mass reactive rounds just moments before the Raider flew in front of them. Even for the Eldar pilot this happened too quickly for him to be able to react to and as he was trying to steer away from the hail of heavy bolter fire the Raider flew right into the stream. Standing in a raised position at the rear of the Raider, the pilot watched in horror as the explosive rounds first destroyed the prow mounted dark lance and ripped its gunner apart before the seemingly unending stream tore through the Raider's sail and engine as well as the squad of warriors being transported on the deck. By the time the bolt rounds reached the pilot he was already the last living Eldar aboard the flaming wreck of the Raider. Everything was now eerily quiet and the Catachans watched the jungle for any signs of another wave of Eldar. Meanwhile Wolf looked around the settlement. Her three main infantry squads were all positioned on

the perimeter while her own command section was located near the clear area left as a landing pad not far from the dugout being used by Mayer's mortar squad and Khor's ogryns were being held in reserve in an empty vehicle garage.

All of a sudden the sound of engines from directly overhead shattered the silence. For one brief moment Wolf had the hope that this was an Imperial Navy aircraft come to discover why Second Platoon had not been in contact. But as soon as she looked upwards she blinked and was forced to avert her gaze as three more of the Eldar transport vehicles dropped out of the sun.

The trio of transports set down in the landing zone and the Catachans saw that each one carried more alien troops. Two of them were filled with more of the warriors who Second Platoon had already encountered while the third carried a smaller squad of Eldar in much heavier looking armour who wielded large double handed swords, a pair of aliens of a different species to the Eldar who resembled large snakes but with four arms being used to carry an assortment of ranged and close combat weapons and also a single female Eldar whose customised armour and weaponry gave her the obvious status as a leader.

Reacting quickly to the appearance of these three vehicles full of enemy troops Kent raised his grenade launcher and without waiting for Wolf or Vance to order him to he fired a Krak grenade towards the nearest of the Raiders. This was filled with Eldar warriors but the grenade was not aimed at them. Instead the grenade was aimed at the rear platform where the pilot stood and when it exploded the crewman was hurled from the vehicle as his control station was destroyed. This brought the Raider crashing down to the ground but had little effect on the Eldar themselves who leapt down and immediately charged away from the command section towards the nearest section of the perimeter where Grey's squad was positioned. Meanwhile the second squad of Eldar warriors disembarked from their transport before charging towards Quinn's veterans. This left the other Eldar and their alien allies aboard the final Raider and as it set down the leader was the first to leap from the vehicle and charge straight towards Wolf's command section.

"Khor!" Wolf yelled and the BONEHead grinned.

"Ogryns charge!" he bellowed and the bulky abhumans came rushing out of the garage. They had just enough time to fire off a few rounds into the squad of warriors heading for Quinn and his veterans before they crashed right into them. The ogryns were clearly more physically powerful than the delicate Eldar but the aliens had such agility that they were able to duck out of the way as the ogryns swung their ripper guns like clubs, landing much lighter blows to the abhumans from the side or rear and then retreating before the ogryns could strike back.

"Bomber!" Vance shouted as he saw the Eldar heading towards him and Mayer and his men reached for the las guns leant by the side of their dug out as one of the serpentine aliens fired a short burst of fire from a carbine that struck Kent at the base of his neck. Kent screamed in pain but his scream became just a gurgle as the corrosive nature of the toxins injected into his system dissolved his flesh and he collapsed to the ground, "Come on lieutenant, it's not safe here." Vance added before dragging Wolf into the dugout.

The dracon signalled to her bodyguards to cease fire, knowing that each human killed meant profit lost when it came to selling of the spoils of this raid and then she pressed her hand down on a device fitted to the back of her left forearm, causing her to suddenly become wrapped in a dark miasma of energy that appeared to soak up the impact of a las gun blast as Mayer attempted to shoot her. Confident that her shadow field was functioning and would give her almost total protection from even the Catachan's most powerful weapons While their passengers moved to engage the Catachans, the two surviving Raiders rose back into the air and started to circle the settlement. Their first target was the heavy bolter team and both raiders opened fire at the two men in the fortified rooftop position. The weapons carried by these two Raiders were different to the dark lances on the other Raiders and although they also fired blasts of highly unstable dark matter they did so in small packets rather than continuous beams, giving them less overall power but a much higher rate of fire. The two streams of energy pulses slammed into the heavy bolter team's position and blasted the improvised barrier apart before striking both the men and their weapon. This was followed by a sudden explosion as the unstable energy reacted with the explosive content of the heavy bolter's ammunition container. Satisfied that the threat to their vehicles was now dealt with, the pilots of the Raiders turned their vehicles to face in opposite directions while still hovering over the landing zone while their gunners fired short bursts of energy blasts to keep the Catachans pinned down.

In the dug out Wolf popped up to fire at the approaching aliens, targeting one of the heavily armoured Eldar. But the protection offered by this armour was enough that the wearer was able to just shrug off her shots. Meanwhile beside her Vance instead took aim at one of the snakelike alien bodyguards and fired. The shot hit the alien just under its jaw and it collapsed. But the Eldar leader charged ahead of her supporting troops, unconcerned about facing both Wolf's command section and Mayer's mortar team on her own and she leapt into the air before somersaulting and landing in the middle of the dug out.

Torrent pointed her las pistol at the shadowy form of the Eldar and fired, but once again the dracon's shadow field protected her and she responded by lashing out with her foot and kicking the las pistol from Torrent's grip before punching her in the face. Mayer lunged forwards, swinging the butt of his rifle at the dracon but

she effortlessly stepped aside and as he overbalanced and fell past her she kicked him in his stomach and he collapsed, coughing and gasping for breath.

One of Mayer's men raised his rifle, intending to shoot the dracon from point blank range but before he could pull the trigger the dracon's bodyguard and the armoured Eldar reached the dugout and one of the armoured aliens swung his sword at the Catachan, cutting him in two at chest height. Vance immediately turned his attention to these newer arrivals, drawing his knife and diving towards the closest of the armoured Eldar. The heavier armour slowed down the alien's reactions enough that Vance was able slip inside the reach of its sword and he thrust his knife up into the gap between chest plate and helmet, producing a sudden spurt of blood as the Eldar died.

While most of the rest of her command section and Mayer's men also turned their attention to the armoured Eldar and the dracon's bodyguard Wolf defiantly fired her las pistol at the dracon herself. Each shot struck the shadow field that surrounded the Eldar commander and was harmlessly absorbed before it could injure her. Wolf's attack did attract the dracon's attention though and the alien turned towards her, intending to punish her for her arrogance in thinking that the dracon's life was Wolf's to take. But just as the dracon turned the field generator attached to her arm suddenly failed and the miasma of energy that surrounded her began to dissipate. The dracon looked down at the shadow field and snarled. Then she hissed at Wolf and spoke words that the woman could not understand but could guess were an insult of some kind. Then before Wolf could fire again at the now exposed dracon, the Eldar tossed aside her weapons, reached out with one hand and grabbed Wolf by the throat. In a display of strength that startled Wolf she then promptly lifted her off the ground, holding her at arm's length. The dracon stared at Wolf as she tightened her grip, choking her and she snarled again. Wolf struggled to get free but the dracon easily grabbed hold of the hand in which she was holding her las pistol and pointed it aside before she could attempt to use it. Wolf felt herself getting light headed as the flow of blood to her brain became increasingly restricted but before she could lose consciousness she heard the sound of a missile flying overhead before one of the two hovering Raiders was suddenly consumed by an explosion. This was followed by the loud rattle of auto-cannons that ripped the final Raider apart before two familiar aircraft zoomed over the settlement. The two craft were Thunderbolt heavy fighters of the Imperial Navy and both craft pulled up, gaining altitude after destroying the two Raiders. The Thunderbolts were followed by several Valkyrie transports that slowed to hover over the settlement's structures while Catachans slid down ropes to their roofs and began firing at the Eldar below them. Startled by the sudden and unexpected arrival of powerful human reinforcements the dracon relaxed her grip on Wolf just enough that she was able to free her hand and she promptly shot the dracon in her knee. The Eldar woman screamed as she collapsed, no longer able to support even her own bodyweight let alone that of Wolf as well and she let go of Wolf entirely. The dracon's other bodyguard slid towards Wolf and hissed. But before it could strike Wolf shot it between the eyes.

Another Valkyrie descended then towards the settlement but instead of hovering over one of the buildings it settled down in the landing area and from inside Major Trent and his company command section came running out, charging at the remaining armoured incubi to assist Wolf's and Mayer's men. At the same time the warriors fighting Khor's ogryns broke and attempted to flee, only to be cut down mercilessly by the Catachans above them. This left the surviving abhumans able to join in the fight against the incubi as well and facing such odds even the elite of the Eldar force could not prevail. They did not go down without a fight, however and another of Mayer's squad was cut down before Khor himself lifted the last of the incubi up off the ground and tossed the alien like a doll into the burning wreckage of a Raider.

"Lieutenant Wolf." Trent said, looking straight into Wolf's eyes, "Your report is overdue."

"I'm sorry sir." she replied and she looked down at the Eldar dracon who was now cowering on the ground, clutching at her ruined knee, "However, I would like to report that I have a prisoner who may be able to shed light on why the colonists have been disappearing."