



CATACHAN ONE NINE MARK FOUR MARK TWO

# OUT OF THE ASHES

BY STEPHEN J DUTTON



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## **4.2: OUT OF THE ASHES**

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

Following the crash of the Ork space hulk the world of Valus is undergoing massive changes. This has done nothing to halt the Ork attack though and when Second Platoon find themselves sent on a mission to discover what the aliens are up to Lieutenant Wolf must face up to the possibility that her place in the regiment may be about to change.

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# 1.

The introduction of an outside factor into a planet's environment could have major consequences if it was large enough and the impact of an ork filled space hulk more than forty kilometres in length and weighing many millions of tonnes in the local gravity was as large as things could get. The crude patchwork vessel had ploughed into the surface of Valus rather than coming down in a controlled fashion when the tractor beam intended to land it reasonably safely had been destroyed. As well as utterly destroying the city of Fort Resolute when it ploughed right through it, the crash landing had created a cloud of debris thrown thousands of metres into the air. Much of this had fallen back down to the ground, covering a wide area in a layer of dust and inflicting even more damage in places where larger chunks landed but the more significant damage had been caused by the dust that remained in the upper atmosphere, blocking out the sunlight and triggering an anti-greenhouse effect that cooled the planet rapidly. Before the crash Valus had been a largely tropical world, its landmasses covered in lush green jungles but now these were dying off as the temperature dropped well below the range that the vegetation could tolerate and rather than the rain that had been the primary form of precipitation, snow now fell on a daily basis.

This was a major issue for most of the remaining planetary population. Given the usual temperature range they were not used to requiring artificial sources of heat and all of a sudden there was high demand for heaters and warm clothing. This also applied to the regiments of the Imperial Guard that had been deployed to Valus to assist the planetary defence force in battling the ork invaders. Some of these had brought their own cold weather gear but others had not. The four regiments of the Catachan VII Division were specialist jungle troops from the infamous death world of Catachan and just like the natives of Valus they were used to much warmer temperatures than those they were now experiencing. The division's supply officers were working as hard as they could to obtain enough winter clothing and heating units to supply their troops but the sudden demand was overwhelming the local industry's capacity to supply these and large portions of the division were having to make do with substandard equipment.

Lieutenant Emilia Wolf, commanding officer of Second Platoon in the XIX Regiment's Fourth Company sat alone in her tent holding out her hands towards the compact heating unit she had been issued. It was a small device and incapable of properly heating her tent so to try and keep warm she had wrapped herself in whatever else she could lay her hands on. Her issued clothing consisted of short sleeved or sleeveless tops so her choices were limited to a blanket from her bed and somewhat bizarrely a straitjacket that she had been tricked into signing for not long after she had joined the regiment after becoming separated from her own XXXII Lyrerian Regiment. Catachans did not take well to so-called 'outsiders' telling them how to go about their business and the straitjacket had been a result of her suggesting to the Fourth Company's supply officer that she could help improve the company's logistics. Now both the straitjacket and the blanket were draped over Wolf's shoulders in an attempt to keep her warm. However, it was not working and she continued to shiver.

"I've had enough of this fething cold." she hissed, getting to her feet and walking over to the heater before turning it off. Then she picked up the device, leaning to the side to counter balance the weight as she exited her tent. The ground outside was covered in a thick layer of snow that crunched underfoot as she struggled with the weight of the heater and headed for another nearby tent. This was the first time in her life that Wolf had encountered snow. Lyreria was a hive world and her family had been among the masses that never even saw the sky let alone got to go outside the massive hive cities so the current weather conditions were just as alien to her as they were to the Catachans she now served with.

When she reached the other tent she just pulled open the door and went inside without knocking.

"Close that fething door!" one of the four men inside bellowed. Then he frowned as he stared at Wolf.

The tent belonged to the four sergeants of second platoon. Quinn, the man who had just yelled at Wolf led the platoon's veteran squad while Molla and Grey led First and Second squads respectively. This just left Platoon Sergeant Vance who served directly under Wolf and had been advising her ever since she had replaced their previous Catachan born officer.

"We're not trading heaters." Grey said when he saw what she was holding, "If yours is broken it's your problem."

"It's not broken." Wolf replied as she dragged the heater to the identical device that was proving just as ineffective at warming the sergeants' tent as her had done in her own, "But I figured you could return the favour."

"What favour's that?" Molla asked.

"That night you slept with my sister the others stormed into my tent and slept on my floor." Wolf explained before she turned her heater back on, "So it occurred to me that if I came and slept on the spare bunk in here we could use both heaters to keep us warm."

"You know there are other ways of keeping warm lieutenant." Molla commented with a smile and she glared at him.

"No chance Molla." she said and then she walked over to where the sergeants were all sat in a line on one of the bunks and squeeze in between Vance and Quinn, "There, that's better." she said.

"The idea does have its merits." Vance commented.

"Just as long as Short Arse doesn't find out and decide that we have to give one up." Grey added. The individual he referred to as 'Short Arse' was Lieutenant Selena, Fourth Company's supply officer whose nickname came from her diminutive height. Catachans, even women, tended to be tall and Selena's height was almost identical to Wolf's. Needless to say, Selena did not appreciate the nickname.

"It's one heater per tent." Wolf replied, "We have two tents between us so we're entitled to two heaters." then she noticed the metal jug that had been placed beside one of the emitter panels on the sergeants' heater, "Is there anything left in that?" she asked, guessing that it was being used to keep recaf warm."

"Sure. Allow me." Quinn replied and he got up to pour a mug of the beverage for Wolf.

"Thanks." she said as he handed her the drink and she took a sip, at which point Quinn noticed the straitjacket draped over her shoulders beneath the blanket.

"Thinking of adding an extra layer of clothing there?" he asked, pulling at the jacket as he sat back down and the other Catachans grinned.

"No." Wolf said sternly, "I was using it to try and keep warmer under this blanket. I shouldn't need it now though." and she took the straitjacket from under her blanket and tossed it onto the spare bunk she planned on sleeping in, "I still think we'd be better off if we could find a warehouse or something that we could move the entire company into. Then we could concentrate all the heaters we have in a more insulated structure." and she took another gulp of her drink.

"Perhaps you ask your commissar friend lieutenant." Grey suggested. The commissar in question was the political officer assigned to the company of Lyrerians that Second Platoon had recently been seconded to. When the company commander had been incapacitated Commissar Creon had promoted Wolf to mission commander over the technically superior Lyrerian officers.

"You did seem to have Creon wrapped around your little finger." Molla added.

"He just knew it made sense to have an officer from a Catachan unit in charge of a deep jungle patrol. Even if I am an outsider to you." Wolf said, "I guess his Catachan upbringing broke through all that commissariat conditioning."

All of a sudden she noticed that the four sergeants were glaring at her.

"What?" she asked, "Why are you all looking at me like that?"

"You never mentioned Creon was a Catachan." Quinn said, "In fact I seem to remember you had something very specific to say about the people from his home world."

"You said they were arse holes." Vance added.

"That's right. Arse holes. Or ass holes as she says it." Quinn repeated and he got up and walked across the tent.

"Oh come on, that was just a joke." Wolf said.

"And to think we shared our recaf with you." Molla said before reaching out and plucking the mug from her grip.

"Oh don't be like that." Wolf said, "I'm sorry, okay?"

"Yes, you will be." Quinn said, reaching down and taking hold of the straitjacket, "Grab her arms." he added.

"No!" Wolf squealed, but before she could react Vance and Grey grabbed hold of her and lifted her to her feet as Quinn advanced towards her with the straitjacket.

Three Catachans made their way from tent to tent. Led by Company Sergeant Major Stubbs the other two carried a sealed box between them that had a narrow slot cut in the top. Approaching the tent occupied by Second Platoon's sergeants they heard a sudden high pitched scream from inside and looked at one another.

"Ten to one that was the outsider." Stubbs said and then he walked up to the tent door and knocked.

"What is it?" Molla's voice called out and Stubbs opened the door and stepped inside.

Before him he saw wolf being held face down on the floor while the four Catachan sergeants pulled the straps of the straitjacket she had been forced into tight.

"Regimental command has listed Major Trent as KIA." Stubbs announced, "The vote's been called." and Second Platoon's sergeants relaxed their grip.

"What's happening?" Wolf asked, looking up at Stubbs and the others.

"Don't you know anything about how a Catachan regiment works yet?" Grey hissed, "Trent's dead so we vote for which officer takes over the company."

"You've got the papers I take it?" Vance asked as the two troopers carrying the ballot box entered the tent behind Stubbs.

"Right here. One each." Stubbs replied as he handed each man a slip of paper.

"What about me?" Wolf asked, wriggling, "I can't vote like this."

"Officers don't get a vote." Molla replied as he took a ballot paper, "You'd all only vote for yourself."

Vance produced a pencil from his pocket and marked his paper. Then he passed the pencil on to Quinn before inserting his ballot in the slot on the box. One by one each of the other sergeants marked their own ballots and put them in the slot before Stubbs nodded.

"The result will be announced tomorrow at nine hundred hours." he said, "If there's to be a second vote ballots will be distributed later."

"Got it." Molla said solemnly before Stubbs and the other two Catachans turned to leave.

"Wait a moment Sergeant Stubbs." Wolf called out before he could open the door, "Are you really going to leave me like this?" and he looked at the other sergeants. Standing close by Stubbs, Grey leant in closer and whispered in his ear, prompting a nod from the company sergeant.

"Sorry lieutenant." he said, "I didn't realise you were waiting for help." and Wolf smiled as he bent down towards her. But all he did was drag her to her feet and then step back.

"Seriously? You're not going to untie me?" she asked as he turned to leave again.

"I guess I'm just an arse hole." he said as he opened the door, leaving Wolf alone with the sergeants.

Looking around at the four Catachans who towered over her she smiled.

"Okay can we just call it even now?" she asked.

"Even?" Vance asked, "Not even close. You insulted us all. I think that the entire company should decide when we're even."

"Good thing we all meet up tomorrow morning." Grey added and Wolf groaned.

## 2.

The one plus point to the sudden climate change was that all of a sudden it had become easy to plunder the previously deadly jungles for firewood and Fourth Company's parade ground was surrounded by braziers made from fuel drums that had been filled with small pieces of wood doused in promethium to make them burn easier. This could not remove all trace of the cold but it could make it more bearable as the Catachans started to emerge from their tents to assemble to hear the result of the vote to replace Major Trent.

"Come on guys, I can't go out there like this." Wolf said, having spent the entire night in the straitjacket.

"You have to." Vance replied, "All candidates have to be present so everyone knows they're still alive and eligible to take command." and then he reached out and dragged her into the open air. Despite the time of day it was still dark, a consequence of the particulate matter in the upper atmosphere blotting out the sun and as well as providing some limited warmth the braziers also produced enough light to see by.

Right away Wolf could see the gathered Catachans grinning and laughing among themselves when they saw her and she tried to avoid eye contact as Vance led her to where with one notable exception Second Platoon was assembling.

"Finally flipped then lieutenant?" Second Platoon's medicae Guardswoman Torrent asked as she stood beside Wolf and looked straight ahead.

"Oh I bet you're just loving this aren't you?" she replied.

"Must be the arse hole in me." Torrent replied.

"I guess everyone knows?" Wolf asked, looking at Vance.

"The entire company." Corporal Mayer, the leader of Second Platoon's mortar squad responded from behind her, "Stubbs spread the word."

Just then the company's command section appeared, along with Fourth Company's own commissar, Layne and Wolf smiled in anticipation that he would order her release. But instead he took his place before the company and said nothing. The commissar looked more comfortable than the rest of the company, thanks in no small part to the long black coat that was part of his uniform.

"Oh and I believe Stubbs also told our very own leash that you referred to a commissar as an arse hole as well." Vance added and Wolf's face fell.

"Soldiers of Fourth Company." Layne called out, "As you all know Major Trent has been declared lost. The major was a loyal soldier of the Imperium and he will be sorely missed by us all. We will shortly have a moment of silence in his honour along with a salute but first I will hand you over to Preacher Black for some words of support." and the ministorum priest stood beside Layne stepped forwards and spread his arms as he prepared to speak.

"Death comes to all men." he called out, "But it is how we face life before this that will determine whether we spend eternity bathing in the light of the Emperor's spirit or in unending torment cast adrift in the depths of the warp. Major Xavier Trent spent many years bringing the judgement of his Divine Majesty to heretic's traitors and xenos alike and there can be no doubt the he has earned his place with the Emperor and those of us who are as loyal as he can be assured to be joining him when our own time comes." and then the priest stepped back.

"Thank you Preacher Black." Layne said. Then he looked towards First Platoon where its commanding officer Captain Fear stood with his traditional Catachan blade already in his hand, "Captain Fear. The salute." he said and the entire company stood in silence.

Fear stepped forwards and turned around to face his men. The first row of them promptly brought their las guns up to their shoulders and aimed them skywards as Fear brought his blade up in front of his face.

Bringing the blade down he gave the signal for the squad to fire and a volley of lasgun blasts was sent into the air as Fear brought the blade back up and paused. Then he lowered the blade again and a second volley was fired before he repeated the process once more for a third volley. Only then did he return the blade to its sheath and step back into position as his men lowered their weapons.

At this point Layne was handed a dataslate by Stubbs and he looked down at the display.

"And now to the reason why we are gathered here." the commissar said, "The vote to replace Major Trent as commanding officer of Fourth Company. Two-hundred and twenty-four votes have been cast which means an officer must gain one-hundred and thirteen to be declared the winner. Should no officer reach this number a second ballot will be held between just the two most popular candidates. I shall now read out the number of votes cast for each officer in the reverse order to which they appear on the company's order of battle."

This meant that Layne would read out the votes of the support officers first before moving on to the

commanding officers of the three combat infantry platoons, starting with Third Platoon and ending with First.

"Lieutenant Anna Selena," Layne began, "two votes." and there was some barely stifled laughter as some of the Catachans considered who would vote for the supply officer, "Surgeon Captain Rod Altman, seven

votes." Wolf was not surprised that Altman had attracted some support. Even though he was not formally part of the company's command structure he remained an officer and was widely respected by the troops. There had even been one occasion where in the absence of any better options he had taken command of the company in combat. However, the respect for the company's chief medicae obviously was not enough to secure him the position of commanding officer and Layne moved on to Fourth Company's combat officers, "Lieutenant Lucien Lore, eleven votes. Lieutenant Emilia Wolf," Wolf braced herself when she heard her name called out. She had heard the reaction when Selena's tally had been read out and she had no doubt that she would face even worse, "one-hundred and one votes." Wolf's jaw dropped. Not only had she been voted for by a significant number of the company but she had secured enough support that according to some quick mental arithmetic meant it was impossible for Captain Fear, the officer most likely to be voted as Major Trent's successor to be appointed on a single ballot, "Captain Hal Fear, one-hundred and three votes." Layne then lowered the dataslate and looked straight ahead again, "This means that no officer has the support of more than half of the company and a second ballot shall be held in five days time. Until then by the authority granted to me by the Officio Prefectus I appoint Captain Hal Fear as acting company commander."

Wolf was about to turn to Vance and ask how it was possible that given her status as an outsider she could have come so close to getting the most votes to take over as the company's commanding officer but before she could do this Stubbs lifted a hand to his ear as someone called him on his microbead headset. Then he leant closer to Layne and whispered something in his ear.

"I don't like the look of this." Molla said from behind Wolf as the pair continued to talk.

Then came the sound of an engine from towards the main entrance to the camp and looking around the Catachans saw a Chimera armoured fighting vehicle approaching.

"All platoon commanders assemble in the command tent for mission briefing." Layne announced as the Chimera circled around the parade ground and came to a halt outside the command tent, "The rest of you are dismissed."

The rear access ramp of the Chimera dropped down as Stubbs and Layne headed back towards the tent and both men saluted as a Catachan officer and another commissar disembarked and Wolf recognised these two men as Colonel Shryke, the commanding officer of the XIX Regiment and Regimental Commissar Garratt.

"Quick, get me out of this thing." Wolf said, flexing her arms as much as the straitjacket would allow.

"Sorry lieutenant. No time." Quinn replied and he waved towards the Chimera where two young women had just disembarked behind Shryke and Garratt, "Coming Tari?" he added, glancing at Molla.

"Right behind you." the other sergeant added and the pair started heading for the Chimera.

"Platoon dismissed." Vance called out and all around Wolf her troops started to disperse.

"Hey wait!" she called out after them.

"No time to wait lieutenant." Fear called out as he and Lore walked past, "You heard Commissar Layne. The colonel wants to see us now."

"Hang on." Wolf replied, scurrying after her fellow platoon commanders, "Hold on." she said, "Can one of you just give me a hand here?" and both Fear and Lore paused, looked at one another and smiled. Then they turned towards Wolf and both began to clap, "Oh ha-ha. Very funny. Now untie me." she said, scowling.

"Sorry Wolf. We've got a briefing to get to." Lore said and then he and Fear continued towards the command tent.

Wolf looked around, hoping to find someone else who could help her but by this time the other Catachans had been able to make themselves scarce and she groaned before hurrying towards the command tent.

Stubbs grinned at her as he held the door open and pointed her towards what until recently had been Major Trent's office.

"Go right in lieutenant." he said, "You are expected."

"Oh feth off!" she snapped before walking into the office only to find everyone present staring at her.

"Are you perhaps going to tell me that you were caught scratching your arse on parade again lieutenant?"

Shryke asked, referring to the excuse given to him when he had walked in on her when she had first been tricked into putting on the straitjacket and signing for it by Selena. Wolf attempted to think of a suitable reply, unsure of whether or not the colonel had been let in on why she was stuck in the straitjacket again but he spoke again before she could think of anything to say, "Never mind that now." he told her, "I came here to brief you all." and he pointed to the map on the table between them, placing his finger where Fort Resolute had been before the Ork space hulk destroyed it, "I'm sure you're aware that the Ork space hulk entered the atmosphere uncontrolled it totally destroyed Fort Resolute, killing everyone there at the time. I'm here to tell you that what limited surveillance we've been able to carry out has suggested that the Orks already on the surface may have moved to secure the crash site for some purpose that remains unknown to us.

Unfortunately atmospheric conditions had grounded all our aircraft and are blocking orbital auspex sweeps so the only way for us to gather more information about what the greenskins are up to is to send in a ground force."

"The entire company?" Fear asked.

"No." Garratt replied, "Just one platoon. Now that the local wildlife is dying off at such a rapid rate the Orks are being able to advance through what's left of the jungle more rapidly and they're closing in on our positions to the west. With no air or orbital cover available we need as many troops as possible to hold them back."

"The very fact that the Orks have diverted resources to Fort Resolute tells us that they're up to something major." Shryke added, "Everything we know about them tells us that when battle starts they all want to join in. So there has to be something in the ruins that is just as important to them as fighting is."

"A weapons stockpile?" Fear suggested.

"If you don't mind me asking colonel, but why us?" Lore asked, looking carefully at the map, "There are four other regiments closer than us."

"Yes but none of them are Catachans." Shryke replied, "This is a reconnaissance mission, not an assault. We don't know exactly how many greenskins there are in the ruins of Fort Resolute. There could only be a handful of scavengers there or it could be the equivalent of an entire division. Ruins may not be our favoured terrain but we're still more acquainted with operations that require stealth and that's what we need here. The platoon we send will be required to enter the city and locate the Orks before determining whether they constitute a threat to our forces and reporting back."

"How are vox conditions?" Fear said, "The last I heard the atmospheric distortion created by the crash was playing havoc with them and the cog boys still hadn't got them sorted out."

"They haven't." Shryke answered, "The platoon will effectively be cut off. That's why I've brought two extra personnel with me who will join the platoon we send. Guardswoman Quinn will act as a messenger and Guardswoman Molla has been instructed on how to recognise and treat the respiratory conditions that could be caused by exposure to the dust in the atmosphere around the crash site."

"So basically we're sending one platoon unsupported into a hostile environment that could be overrun with enemy troops?" Lore asked.

"Are you refusing to go lieutenant?" Layne responded.

"I haven't told him to go yet." Shryke pointed out without even bothering to look at the commissar, "I command this regiment and I'll decide what forces are deployed." then he looked at the line of platoon commanders stood in front of him, "Now this is a dangerous mission, I acknowledge that." he said, "And that's why I'm going to offer you the chance to back out without it being held against you. Anyone who doesn't want to lead their platoon into territory controlled by a hostile xenos force that will likely skin every last one of you alive just raise your hand."

Wolf groaned as Fear and Lore each lifted a hand into the air while she was unable to move hers.

"I get it." she said, "I should have guessed when I saw Quinn's sister and Molla's daughter."

"In all honesty lieutenant I planned to ask for a volunteer." Shryke said, "But then I heard about your little comment about Catachans and decided you needed to spend some more time getting to appreciate how we live our lives. You can't expect to lead a company if you can't grasp that."

"Fourth Company hasn't completed the bizarre ritual of electing its new commanding officer yet." Garratt pointed out, "Lieutenant Wolf didn't even get the most votes in the first round."

"Perhaps not. But I have no intention of ignoring the possibility that she could be chosen and promoted to captain." Shryke replied. Then he looked directly at Wolf and added, "Now I need to brief Captain Fear and Lieutenant Lore on their assignments so I suggest you go and brief your own troops and consider whether your actions could lead to you taking Major Trent's place behind this desk."



### 3.

The distance between Fourth Company's camp and the ruins of Fort Resolute made travelling there on foot impractical so instead a number of utility vehicles were being prepared to carry Second Platoon. Each vehicle could carry six people so there were two per infantry squad plus one each for Wolf's command section and Mayer's mortar squad. In addition to these there was a larger truck that was capable of carrying the seven strong squad of ogryns attached to the platoon. The massive abhumans were far too large to fit comfortably within a utility vehicle and so the truck was the best option. Ogryns were notoriously claustrophobic so the covering of the truck's rear section was being rolled back and removed. This would leave the ogryns exposed to the elements but the cold bothered them much less than it did the Catachans and none of them were complaining about it. Finally a pair of motorcycles had been assigned to Second Platoon and Quinn's veterans were busy mounting one of these on the back of a utility vehicle.

"You sure you can handle this thing?" Quinn asked, glancing at his younger sister Bess.

"Of course." she replied, "You worry too much Ibram. I've been taking lessons."

"But do those lessons include riding on icy roads?"

"I'll just slow down. It's not like there's going to be much other traffic." Bess said. Then she looked towards Second Platoon's command section, specifically at Wolf, "So how long are you going to leave her like that then?" she asked, referring to the straitjacket and Quinn looked up and smiled as well.

"About as long as it takes for her to think we'll never let her out." he told her, "We reckon about a kilometre outside the city walls ought to do." then he smiled, "Though if she keeps bitching about it we may leave her in that thing a little longer."

"It's secure sergeant." one of the veterans then said and Quinn nodded.

"Bike secure lieutenant." he called out, "We're ready to go."

"What about the second bike?" Wolf asked, looking around and trying to locate the second motorcycle.

"Rull took it and went on ahead." Vance told her. Rull was Second Platoon's sniper. Formerly part of a six man squad consisting of three snipers and accompanying spotters he had already been the only survivor by the time Wolf had taken command of the platoon and she had quickly come to appreciate his skills not only as a marksman but also as a scout capable of operating independently of the rest of the platoon.

"He came asking if it was okay," Torrent added, "but I told him he should just go because you were a little tied up right now."

"Oh you're really enjoying this aren't you?" Wolf replied, snarling at the Catachan woman.

"What, an outsider being brought down to size for thinking she's better than us? Yes, yes I am." Torrent said.

"Oh enough of this!" Vance snapped, "Lieutenant turn around." and before Wolf could turn he placed his hands on her shoulders and turned her away from him before starting to undo the straps running down her back.

"Thank you sergeant." Wolf said as she was finally freed, "Now if you don't mind I've been dying to use the bathroom for about an hour and a half now." and she set off running towards the latrines.

By the time she returned the vehicles were loaded and the members of Second Platoon were starting to embark.

"I want someone manning the stubber on every vehicle." Wolf called out, pointing to the belt fed weapon mounted in a cupola on the roof of the nearest vehicle, "And everyone is to keep their issue weapon to hand. If one vehicle breaks down the entire column stops until either it's moving again or we can transfer everyone to another. We leave no-one behind." then she climbed into the passenger side of her command section's vehicle as Turner, the unit's vox operator was climbing up into the cupola.

"Pretty certain about what you want there lieutenant." Vance commented from the driver's seat as he started the vehicle's engine, "Practising in case you win the vote?"

"Just remembering what happened the last time I rode in one of these things." Wolf replied, sliding her las pistol from its holster and checking it before putting it back again.

"Really, when was that?" Torrent asked from the back seat.

"When I was in the Lyrerian Thirty-Second and we were heading for the space port on Par Shallon." Wolf replied, "My vehicle went off the road and that was when we were ambushed and I got captured by Kroot. Those things almost had me for dinner. Literally."

"Don't worry lieutenant." Vance said, "The Imperial Infantryman's Uplifting Primer is quite clear on Ork behaviour. They aren't smart enough to stage an ambush." and everyone in the vehicle smirked as they thought about how the standard instructional textbook issued to all Imperial Guardsmen whether commissioned or enlisted often distorted the truth for the sake of political expediency.

"Are you ready sergeant?" Wolf asked.

"Ready as I'll ever be." Vance replied.

"Then let's get going." Wolf said, "And turn the vents on. We may as well be warm while we drive."

The column of vehicles sped along the deserted roads leading to Fort Resolute. Along the way were signs that they were not the first to try making the journey. Civilian vehicles had been abandoned at the side of the road when their occupants had been dragged out by Planetary Defence Force or Imperial Guard troops deployed to prevent looting and then either hanged from a convenient tree or simply shot and left at the side of the road with their vehicles. Despite the gloom caused by the thick clouds the Catachans left the headlights of their vehicles unlit, well aware that the light would make it easy for any Orks in the area to locate them from a distance and it was this lack of illumination from their own location that made it easy to spot other light sources.

"Throne." Turner exclaimed from the cupola, looking straight ahead of the vehicle towards the horizon.

"What in the name of Him on Earth is that?" Torrent asked from the back seat as she peered between Wolf and Vance at where the sky beneath the clouds was a dull red.

"It's fire isn't it?" Wolf said, looking at Vance, "It's been burning since the space hulk crashed." and the platoon sergeant nodded.

"It could be something that was inside the hulk or maybe there was something volatile that was kept in the city. A promethium dump or something."

"We'll need to be careful of that." Wolf said, "If its spreading then we could end up being cut off." and then she reached for the handset of the vox set built into the dashboard of their vehicle, "Wolf to all units." she broadcast, "I'm guessing you've all seen the indications of fires burning at Fort Resolute so I want all of you to stay alert. We'll need to maintain a clear path back to our vehicles after we disembark. Also everyone needs to make sure they have their respirators with them. The last thing we need is to take casualties from smoke inhalation. Wolf out." then she returned the vox handset to its cradle and took out her dataslate, calling up a map of Fort Resolute. Under normal circumstances the map would be kept up to date using information from orbital and aerial observations. But since the crash had made such surveillance impossible she was having to rely on a map that still showed the city as it had been when it was intact and had been crudely annotated to show the path taken by the space hulk as it crashed.

"You do know that pretty much everything will have been flattened don't you lieutenant?" Torrent asked, peering over Wolf's shoulder, "Even whatever didn't get hit directly by the hulk will have been destroyed by the shock wave. That's why there weren't any survivors."

"I'm trying to figure out what could be causing that fire." Wolf replied, "The best way to avoid being cut off is if we can stay away from areas prone to catching fire in the first place."

"She's got you there Torrent." Vance added, "Remember, this isn't a jungle op. I doubt that there are many jungle hazards in those ruins."

"You mean it'll just be her general incompetence that gets us killed?" Torrent commented.

Without looking around, Wolf suddenly used her elbow to deliver a blow to Torrent's face that sent the startled medicae backwards into her seat before she lifted her hands to her face and felt blood coming from her nose.

"Oops." Wolf said, "My arm slipped." and she smiled.

"It happens on these roads from time to time." Vance said as he grinned as well. Summary punishments were common in the Imperial Guard and in Catachan regiments they frequently involved a physical beating. On previous occasions when Wolf had been called upon to dispense justice she had relied on her sergeants to carry it out but this time she had opted to do it herself and Vance was impressed. If she followed with Catachan tradition then Torrent's insubordinate attitude would now be forgotten unless she repeated it.

"The snow's melting." Wolf said, staring out of the window, "It's getting warmer."

"Heat from the fire." Vance pointed out, "We're almost there now."

Moments later what was left of Fort Resolute's city walls came into view. Every city on Valus possessed walls that had ensured the native jungle wildlife could not find its way into the human inhabited areas and it was because of this separation that the local defence forces had been unable to prosecute the war against the Ork invaders on their own. Even most of their own troops lacked the skills in death world jungle fighting that came naturally to the Catachans. But whereas the city walls of Fort Resolute had once stood as tall as a battle titan, now all that remained stood no more than ten metres tall at its highest point. Of course the missing material had not simply vanished into thin air, the shock wave that had destroyed the city had shattered the walls and propelled debris across the cleared kill zones just outside the walls and into the surrounding jungle where it had smothered the vegetation in rubble and dust and now this presented a barrier to the column's progress.

"Wolf to all units," Wolf broadcast over the vox, "we're about to run out of road. Drivers don't go too fast, we can't afford to lose too much time making repairs due to stupid accidents and gunners stay sharp. The greenskins could be close by. Wolf out."

The column slowed now as Vance looked for a path through the rubble that the utility vehicle was capable of traversing. Beside him Wolf assisted, pointing out flatter areas whenever she spotted them.

"What's that to the right?" Turner asked from his vantage point in the cupola and he swung the heavy stubber around as Vance slowed the vehicle and Wolf took out a set of magnoculars so that she could make use of their light amplification function to see better in the poor light.

"It's an arrow." she said when she saw three narrow pieces of metal that had been arranged as an arrow pointing through the rubble towards Fort Resolute.

"Rull." Vance added, "He's marked us a path." and he turned the vehicle sharply towards the marker left for them and headed straight for it. Then upon reaching it he turned again, this time in the direction that the arrow pointed.

"Turner, get down." Wolf ordered as she released her seat belt and started to climb over the seat into the back of the vehicle. As soon as Turner was clear of the cupola Wolf took his place and used her magnoculars to search the rubble for more of Rull's markers, "Over there!" she called out when saw the next one and she pointed towards it.

"I can't see your hand from down here." Vance responded.

"Left. Thirty degrees." Wolf told him and Vance looked in that direction.

"Got it." he said, turning the vehicle again.

Behind them the rest of the column followed the path of the command section's vehicle as closely as they could, weaving back and forth like a snake. Knowing that they were following a relatively safe path encouraged Vance to speed up somewhat and this meant that with every change in heading the occupants of the vehicles found themselves being pressed against their seatbelts and this prompted numerous curses directed towards Vance while he was out of earshot.

However, the curses stopped when the first rocket was fired at the column only to pass harmlessly between the two vehicles carrying First Squad only because of the sudden change in direction they made at that moment.

"Throne!" Wolf exclaimed as the rocket shot past and exploded, "Who's shooting at us?"

## 4.

"My guess would be Orks." Vance responded and now that he knew the column had already been detected he turned on the utility vehicle's headlights, a move matched by the other vehicles in the column and Wolf caught sight of a figure moving through the rubble towards them. Dropping her magnoculars, Wolf grasped the grips of the heavy stubber in front of her and turned the weapon towards the figure before letting loose with a short burst of fire. Even fixed in the cupola, the heavy stubber produced a recoil that took Wolf by surprise and she let out a yelp and let go.

"Don't stop shooting!" Vance yelled and Wolf took hold of the weapon's controls again as there was the sound of more gunfire coming from the other vehicles in the column.

This time Wolf was ready for the recoil and she held the triggers down long enough to send a stream of high calibre bullets at the figure. This time she hit it, one of the bullets striking it at the knee and blowing off its leg below that point. The ork let out a howl as it collapsed but did not die. Instead it swung a bulky pistol towards Wolf and returned fire. Fortunately for Wolf the wounded Ork displayed the typical poor marksmanship of its species and not one of the shots came anywhere close to hitting her before she fired a third burst that finished off the creature.

But the Ork was not alone and there was more alien gunfire from close by where Wolf had killed the Ork, including a second crude missile that, like the first went wide. But firing the rocket served to give away the Ork's position and in return the Catachans focused their fire on it, spraying bullets all around and Wolf saw the Ork literally come apart under the barrage. In addition there were two more Orks close by were exposed only as the sustained gunfire took some of the less resilient pieces of rubble apart before striking the Orks using them for cover as well.

"Contact west!" Molla's voice sounded over the vox and looking around Wolf saw a cloud of smoke at ground level that was a mix of dust and the exhaust fumes being produced by a small group of ramshackle Ork vehicles that were now heading straight for them.

"Turner take over." Wolf ordered as she slid back down into the vehicle and climbed back into the front before grabbing the vox handset, "Sergeants Quinn and Khor have your troops dismount and deal with these Orks on foot." she ordered, "All other units turn west and engage. Molla, Grey I want you heavy weapons setting up to cover us."

The truck carrying the ogryns as well as the two smaller vehicles carrying Quinn's veteran squad came to a halt as the rest of the column turned to engage the oncoming Ork vehicles.

"Ogryns out!" Khor, the leader of the ogryn squad yelled. Considered one of the more intelligent among the abhuman subspecies, his mental faculties had been further enhanced by means of a process known as Biochemical Ogryn Neural Enhancement, resulting in him being able to understand and follow orders more easily than an ordinary ogryn and being known as a BONEHead. Each of the seven ogryns was armed with a ripper gun, a type of heavy duty belt fed shotgun and as soon as they jumped down from the back of the truck they started running towards the Ork positions and firing their weapons. Behind them Quinn's veterans disembarked from their vehicles and started to advance as well.

"Not you." Quinn called out as Bess started to climb out of the vehicle he had just exited.

"I'm not some kid lbram." she replied angrily.

"Look, just make yourself useful and get on that stubber." Quinn told her and he pointed the cupola mounted weapon. Bess snarled at him then looked up at the heavy weapon and climbed up into the cupola.

All of a sudden a large ork that towered over the Catachans appeared wielding a pistol in one hand and an large sword in the other stood up from behind a particularly large piece of rubble and raised its sword in the air.

"Waaargh!" it bellowed and on this signal around a dozen other Orks leapt into view and charged headlong towards the Catachans and ogryns. Being located further forwards the ogryns took the brunt of the Ork attack but the pistols they wielded lacked the stopping power to pose a serious threat to the massive abhumans and in return they unleashed a barrage of fire from their ripper guns that brought almost half of the Orks down before they got close enough to strike at the ogryns in hand to hand combat.

The largest Ork had one of its forearms and hands encased inside a bulky metal gauntlet with hydraulic powered claws mounted on the end that snapped open and shut as it charged towards the nearest ogryn. The abhuman responded with a roar as loud as the Ork's and he swung his ripper gun like a club. But the Ork reacted in time to reach out and grab the ripper gun in its claw and its jaws snapped shut producing a bright flash as the crude energy that surrounded the jaws interacted with the ripper gun before they cut it in half. The ogryn stared in disbelief at the destruction of its weapon for a moment and this was enough time for the ork to press the muzzle of its pistol up under the ogryn's jaw and pull the trigger several times in rapid succession, yelling something loudly in its own language as it did so. With its gun pressed directly against

the ogryn the Ork could not miss and the bullets were able to pierce the muscle between the muzzle and the ogryn's brain and the abhuman fell backwards.

Letting out a victorious roar, the Ork looked around for another victim and saw Quinn's veterans rushing towards the melee. The Ork took aim but Quinn was faster and he fired two rapid blasts from his shotgun that both struck the Ork and caused it to stagger backwards but the wounds were minor and the creature roared once again as it charged headlong towards Quinn, ignoring everything else going on around it. That proved to be the Ork's undoing as Quinn came to a halt where he was with his shotgun aimed at the Ork. "Jackson! Light him up!" he snapped and the member of his squad armed with a meltagun ground to a halt as well and took aim.

The meltagun was a powerful directed energy weapon that was designed to be able to burn through the thickest of armour. Though its range was somewhat limited its hitting power was unmatched by any other weapon of its size and that power was now unleashed on the Ork. At first there was no indication that anything was happening until the energy beam heated the air between the weapon and its target sufficiently that it glowed with a brilliant white light. The intense heat burned right through the Ork, roasting its organs and boiling away its bodily fluids until there was nothing left but a charred corpse that collapsed in a heap before it could reach Quinn.

While Quinn's veterans and Khor's ogryns were dealing with what remained of the Orks on foot Wolf watched the Ork vehicles getting closer and there was the sound of projectiles passing close by her unit's vehicle. Now that they were closer it was possible to see that the Ork force consisted of four lightweight buggies, each of which mounted a heavy weapon and one similarly sized and tracked vehicle that looked to mount some sort of flamethrower. Backing these up was a unit of crude motorcycles, some of which were half tracked. The riders of these bikes rushed ahead of the buggies and in one case the rider did so in such a hurry that it failed to take into account the terrain and the Ork was thrown from its bike as it struck an obstacle. From behind her Wolf heard more gunfire as Turner returned fire with the heavy stubber and a second biker fell, either struck directly by the bullets or coming off a critically damaged bike.

Meanwhile two of the utility vehicles came to a halt just long enough for two Catachans to bail out of each. Both pairs immediately headed for the nearest sheltered location and began to set up the heavy weapons they were equipped with. The weapon team from Molla's squad was armed with a heavy bolter and as soon as the weapon was mounted on its tripod and a belt inserted the gunner opened fire, spraying mass reactive explosive rounds towards the Ork bikers. The effect of this weapon was devastating, just one round was enough to tear a limb or a head from an Ork while a hit to their chest could tear them apart from the inside out. Even a near miss could be good enough to stop them, the rounds were powerful enough to punch through the lightweight construction of their war bikes and these came apart just as easily as their riders did. On the other hand a hit to the rubble surrounding the bikers would shatter it and send pieces of debris in all directions as if from a grenade.

Grey's men on the other hand were armed with a missile launcher that required more precise aiming and as the loader was unpacking an anti-armour missile capable of knocking out heavily armoured battle tanks the gunner was lining the weapon up on the tracked vehicle.

"Ready!" the loader yelled as he ducked back to avoid the back blast of the weapon.

"Firing!" the gunner responded and he squeezed the launcher's trigger, producing a massive flash both in front of and behind the weapon as the missile shot towards its target.

The Orks aboard the half track had no chance to avoid the incoming missile and it struck the weapon mounted towards the rear of the vehicle. Had the vehicle been armed with an ordinary slug throwing weapon or rocket launcher then the damage would probably have been limited to blowing this off and possibly killing the gunner. But the warhead ignited the stored fuel for the flamethrower and it exploded in a ball of flame that engulfed the entire vehicle. The crew screamed for a few moments before the flames burned out their lungs and silenced them but the vehicle continued on its path still ablaze. This continued until the vehicle struck a piece of debris that caused it to flip end over end and another of the Ork vehicles had to swerve violently to avoid being crushed by it.

The two sets of vehicles exchanged fire, but both were primarily armed with rapid firing anti-infantry weapons. Those on the Ork vehicles were more powerful but the Catachans' vehicles were correspondingly tougher and rounds bounced off armour plating on both sides. However, one of the Ork vehicles was equipped with a rocket launcher and the gunner pointed this at the vehicle carrying Molla and half of his squad along with Jenni before unleashing a salvo of rockets at it.

"Swerve!" Molla yelled at his driver when he saw this and in the seat between them Jenni flinched. The driver turned the vehicle as rapidly as he could to get it out of the rockets' flight path but in doing so he took it over a piece of debris that appeared far more stable than it actually was and as it gave way at one side the vehicle was thrown sideways and rolled. Unable to get out of the cupola in time the gunner was crushed beneath the vehicle but the safety cage built into its chassis was strong enough that the rest of the occupants remained unharmed if a little shaken.

"Is everyone okay?" Molla asked when the vehicle came to a halt with the occupants all suspended upside

down in their seats and there were grumblings of agreement.

"If being upside down counts as okay then yes, I'm fine dad." Jenni added, "Now how do we get out of here?" Molla tried his door but it opened only a few centimetres before becoming jammed against rubble outside the vehicle.

"Everyone try your doors." he said and the other Catachans sat beside doors attempted to open them but in each case the result was the same and none of the doors would open enough to allow the Catachans to escape their stricken vehicle.

"Well can we break the windscreen?" Jenni asked but Molla shook his head.

"It's armoured against small arms fire." he told her, "It would take the grenade launcher to punch a hole and we'd all come off even worse. Besides, I'm not so sure there's enough room out there for us to crawl out through either. All we can do is wait and hope that it's our own side that comes to dig us out."

from her own vehicle Wolf gasped when she saw Molla's roll over and come to a halt upside down.

"Molla!" she exclaimed.

"We can't help him right now." Vance responded as he steered around a large steel beam that was stuck out of the rubble at an angle, "Hopefully the safety cage has done its job and they're all okay."

Just then an Ork war bike came flying off the end of a large piece of flat rubble that was raised at one end to form a ramp and it landed in front of the vehicle. Vance swerved towards the bike, hoping to run it and its rider over but the bike was too agile and he missed. In response the Ork rider turned back towards the vehicle and rode straight at it. Ignoring the guns mounted on the bike the rider unhooked a bulky chainsword and swung it at the side of the vehicle. There was a brief grinding sound as the blade bit into the door beside Wolf and instinctively she reached for her las pistol when she saw sparks near her feet. Meanwhile behind her Torrent reached for the door handle beside her and pushed the heavy door wide open with a kick. The door struck the side of the war bike and sent its startled rider flying off his mount where he landed right in front of the vehicle carrying Mayer and three of his mortar squad, the other two members driving the larger truck that had carried the ogryns. Inside Mayer and his driver both gasped as the Ork bounced off the front of their vehicle.

"Throne!" the gunner in the cupola exclaimed as the corpse then rolled past him. Then he turned his weapon and opened fire on another Ork biker, causing his bike to burst into flames and sending him ploughing into a large piece of rubble.

Vance suddenly found that he had driven the command section's vehicle into an unusually flat section of ground that would allow him to drive rapidly along it. Or least it would if there was not an Ork buggy coming the other way down it.

"Vance get out of the way." Wolf said but Vance just stared straight ahead and pressed down on the gas pedal.

"Is he doing what I think he's doing?" Torrent asked as her eyes widened at the sight of the Ork vehicle heading straight for them.

"Playing chicken with Orks? It looks that way." Wolf replied, "Vance stop this right now, that's an order."

"Sure lieutenant." he said, "Where do you want me to steer instead?"

Wolf looked down each side of the stretch of clear ground and saw that between them and the Ork vehicle there were no openings in the rubble that looked large enough to take their own vehicle.

"Oh no." she said, tugging at her safety harness to check that it was secure as the two vehicles closed with one another rapidly.

As the distance closed both vehicles fired on one another and Wolf flinched as bullets bounced off the armoured windscreen. Turner aimed his weapon high, going for the gunner standing behind the driver of the Ork buggy and some of his rounds struck the alien and sent it tumbling from the back of the vehicle.

Enraged, the driver accelerated.

"Everyone get ready to bail out." Vance said.

"What?" Wolf replied.

"I said be ready to bail out." Vance repeated and then all of a sudden he slammed on the brakes and brought the vehicle to a halt, "Now!"

Releasing their harnesses the occupants of the vehicle threw open their doors and leapt out of the vehicle, rushing into the rubble either side of the clear path and taking cover. Confused at this unexpected turn of events the Ork driver watched the Catachans take cover before realising that he was still heading straight for their abandoned vehicle and putting his foot down on his own brakes. However, the poor construction of the buggy now came to the fore and although the brakes did engage and there was a squealing sound as the buggy skidded along it failed to stop before smashing right into the empty human vehicle. The empty vehicle was pushed backwards by the force of the impact while the Ork driver was crushed by his own buggy as it mangled itself.

"Stay back!" Vance yelled when he saw flames among the wreckage of the Ork buggy and he darted back towards their own vehicle. Reaching inside he grabbed a fire extinguisher and started to spray it at the wreckage now entangled with the front of the vehicle.

"Vance get away from there." Wolf called out, "We won't get the vehicle going again anytime soon anyway. We need to get clear."

"Feth it!" Vance hissed and he tossed the extinguisher aside before hurrying to Wolf's side while she looked around.

"Kent!" she shouted towards the Catachan who carried her squad's grenade launcher, "Can you put that thing to use?"

"Sure thing lieutenant." he replied with a smile and he lifted the weapon to his shoulder and lined it up on another of the Ork buggies. Squeezing the trigger he fired two Krak grenades, leading them each slightly differently to take into account the haphazard manoeuvring of the Ork buggy. Containing shaped charge warheads similar to the larger versions fired by missile launchers the Krak grenades were ideally suited to use against light vehicles like the Ork buggies and when one of the two rounds Kent fired struck the engine block of its target the detonation blew it apart, sending shrapnel ripping through the two alien crew and the ruined vehicle was brought to an abrupt halt.

The remaining Ork buggy fired at the exposed command section and they dived for cover as bullets whizzed over head, taking chips off the rubble around them.

"We're too exposed here." Wolf said.

"Cover coming right up." Vance replied and he pulled a smoke grenade from his webbing, removed the pin and tossed it towards the buggy. It detonated with a 'fizz' and as the cloud of thick white smoke grew the command section got up and sprinted in the opposite direction.

The combined roar of both an engine and an Ork made Wolf turn and she saw a pair of Ork bikers, the last ones still remaining, bearing down on them. Still running she fired her las pistol in their direction but even those shots that struck either rider did nothing thanks to the thick plating of the bikes and thick hides of the riders. But before the two bikes could run the fleeing command section down the two vehicles carrying Grey's squad appeared, rushing in from the side and ramming both bikers almost simultaneously. Both vehicles then ground to a halt and the door of one opened enough for Grey to lean out.

"Need a lift lieutenant?" he asked, "It'll be a squeeze but I think we can get you all in."

"Come on." Wolf told her section and they hurried towards the vehicles while their gunners fired at the remaining buggy that was now effectively surrounded.

"Ogryns charge!" Khor's voice sounded across the battlefield and his squad came rushing towards the buggy as well. Seeing that his vehicle was now operating all alone the Ork driver turned towards the city, intending to withdraw. But the straight path he took as he began to retreat was all that the operator of Second Squad's missile launcher needed and there was a 'Whoosh!' as another anti-armour missile shot towards it. Striking the rear of the vehicle the warhead detonated and sent a blast of molten metal along its length that blew the whole thing apart along with both crew members.

Almost at Grey's vehicle, Wolf stopped and looked around. She could still hear the occasional gunshot as her troops fired at what they suspected could be Orks but the lack of any return fire or alien war cries told her that none remained.

## 5.

Still suspended upside down inside their vehicle, Molla and members of his squad waited for rescue and when the noise of battle stopped he and Jenni looked at one another.

"I think we just won." Molla said.

"How do you know it wasn't the greenskins?" his daughter asked in reply.

"Because it's gone quiet. Orks don't generally do quiet." Molla told her.

"Those Orks that ambushed us were lying in wait." Jenni pointed out.

"That's why I said 'generally'." Molla said before all of a sudden their vehicle lurched and there was a grinding sound.

"What the feth?" one of the guardsmen inside exclaimed and Molla scowled.

"Mind your language while my daughter's present." he told the man and Jenni sighed. However, before she could respond the vehicle was suddenly lifted up at one side and looking out of the window the occupants saw several pairs of extremely large boots along with one much smaller pair and then Wolf bent down to peer into the vehicle.

"Is everyone okay?" she asked.

"Apart from Grant, yes." Molla replied, "He was in the cupola when we rolled."

"Well we'll have you out of there in a few minutes." Wolf said and she looked up at the ogryns, "Carry on Sergeant Khor." she added.

"Ogryns! Lift!" Khor bellowed and he squad completed the process of righting the vehicle.

"Okay give the engine a try." Molla ordered and the driver turned the key. To start with there was just a whining sound as the engine failed to start but then all of a sudden it roared into life and Molla smiled.

"Looks like we're good to go lieutenant." he said.

"Good." Wolf replied, "Because I want to get moving before more Orks can turn up."

"Lieutenant!" Quinn's voice called out from behind her and she looked around.

"Sergeant Quinn, have your squad get back in their vehicles." she responded.

"You may want to come and take a look at this first lieutenant." Quinn replied, "In fact I think all the squad leaders should take a look at this."

"Oh very well." Wolf said, "Sergeant Molla you better come along too."

Second Platoon's squad leaders gathered around where Quinn's men had collected the Ork corpses together so that they could be burned before decomposing and releasing spores that could eventually grow into a new generation of Orks and it was instantly obvious that they could be divided into two distinct groups. Ork society was built around clans, with Orks of particular clans favouring specific behavioural traits and it was possible to tell these apart by the way in which they dressed. One clan was known to favour the use of vehicles, especially fast vehicles such as war bikes and buggies and the crews of the ones just encountered wore the distinctive red of that clan. But the other Orks, those who had been lying in wait for Second Platoon were dressed radically differently.

Orks of most clans tended to wear clothing that was predominantly one colour, though this could sometimes be highlighting with a contrasting one. But even when more than one colour was worn the garments would be plain. However, the clothing worn by the Orks that had staged the ambush was not only sombre in colour but also marked with what was undoubtedly a camouflage pattern and they looked like an alien approximation of human Imperial Guard troops rather than Orks. All of the Orks were marked with an emblem that proclaimed their clan and while those dressed in red were marked with a grinning sun, these other Orks bore two cross axes on their clothing.

"Ork commandos." Quinn said, "I've heard of them but never encountered them before now."

"This is going to make our job more difficult." Vance commented as he crouched down to inspect one of the corpses.

"Why?" Wolf asked, "One greenskin is pretty much the same as another isn't it?"

"Not when this sort are capable of acting in a rational manner." Quinn told her, "We've seen them stage an ambush and that's something Orks aren't supposed to be able to do. You'll notice they use camouflage as well, something else Orks have a reputation for avoiding. If there are more of these in the city then they could hit us at any time and place."

"What about those on vehicles?" Wolf asked, "Were they co-ordinating their actions?"

"Unlikely." Quinn replied, "There's no signs of any of them having anything that even remotely resembles a vox set. I think it's more likely that the vehicle mounted warband just happened to be in the area and came to investigate when they heard the shooting."

"So how do we protect ourselves?" Wolf said.

"It'll be easier once we're on foot." Molla answered, "Being in vehicles limits our ability to spot an ambush."



"It also makes it easier for them to spot us." Grey added, "A vehicle makes a lot more noise and can't duck for cover."

"We'll be abandoning them when we reach the city walls." Wolf announced, "From then on I want us on foot so we can try and pick a trail that will lead us to wherever the Orks are carrying out whatever it is that's important enough to keep them off the front lines. In the meantime get these bodies burned and let's get out of here. If there are Orks sneaking about that we can't see then I don't want to be caught out in the open like this." and then she turned around and started to walk back to her vehicle now that it had been separated from the wreckage of the ork buggy.

"Impressive." Molla commented as he watched her leave.

"Yeah," Grey responded, "almost as if she's practising for taking over command of the company."

Though some of the vehicles in the column had suffered damage, none of them had been disabled and so Second Platoon was able to continue to follow the markers left behind by Rull as far as what remained of Fort Resolute's city walls. Here they found the motorcycle that Rull had used to get to the ruined city ahead of them lay on its side beneath a dust covered sheet. Only another marker pointing straight down from above identified the bike's position. More significant though was the fissure in the wall that had been filled in with rubble. None of this was much bigger than a man's head and it was obvious that the ogyrns would be able to dig their way through into the city in a short space of time.

Beyond the wall the crashed space hulk was visible and the Catachans could not help but be taken aback by its scale. Even the smallest of warp capable starships was about a thousand metres in length and this vessel was known to be more than forty times that size. But just knowing the numbers involved was vastly different to seeing the hulk in person, especially when it was on the surface of the planet. Only the front end of the hulk was actually within the limits of the ruined city while the bulk of the vessel was in fact still outside in what had been the jungle but was now nothing but scorched wasteland that was slowly being covered under a layer of snow. The hulk itself stretched up hundreds of metres into the air and with only the side facing the Catachans visible it appeared like a great wall cutting the city in two.

"Okay we set up camp here." Wolf announced as she climbed out of the command section's vehicle, "Sergeants Molla and Quinn are to take half their men each and scout along the wall for two thousand metres in each direction and make sure that there are no likely exit points for more greenskins. I don't want them stealing our rides home while we're gone."

Wolf then watched as the two squads departed on foot, cautiously making their way along the walls to make sure that there were no other gaps that the Orks could use to approach the Catachan position. Then she took out her dataslate and called up the city map again, trying to determine their exact position. The problem was that the damage to the city was so extensive that she could not identify any landmarks that tied in with her map and because of the dust in the atmosphere she could not rely on orbital positioning. More than any mission since her first as a platoon commander with the Catachan XIX Wolf was keen to do well.

"Problem lieutenant?" Grey asked, placing his hand on her shoulder and Wolf jumped.

"Sergeant Grey." she said, "You scared me. What do you want?"

"I was asking whether you wanted us to prepare any firing positions for our heavy weapons but you seemed distracted." he told her.

"Sorry yes." she said, "I was just trying to make sure I did everything right."

"Thinking about the second vote by any chance?" Grey asked and a brief smile appeared on Wolf's face.

"Tyler," Wolf said using Grey's first name rather than his surname or rank, "just a few days ago I signed a form that could have sent me back to the Lyrelian thirty-second. Back where I came from as whoever filled out the rest and left on my bunk said and I bet you'd have been among those glad to see the back of me. Yet this morning I find out that I'm within a hair's breadth of being promoted to captain and made commanding officer of Fourth Company. How does that happen?"

Grey sighed and leant against the vehicle Wolf was stood beside.

"Lieutenant when we Catachans vote for our leaders we vote for whoever we think can take on the role best. Someone who will give orders that we're willing to follow and people follow your orders, you've proven yourself a leader. Plus there's this." and he grabbed her arm where it had been tattooed with a large skull, "We put this mark on you to show your courage. There isn't a Catachan in the galaxy who would call you a coward. Voting for you means voting for someone who doesn't flinch from a fight or from duty."

"But I'm an outsider still aren't I?" Wolf pointed out in the Catachans' own term.

"Yes you are. But think about what that means. The jungle isn't your home like it is to us. But a company commander won't spend as much time out in the field as a platoon commander does. Even when they do they're giving higher level orders that platoon commanders have to implement. Making you a company commander means removing you from where you're likely to get people killed by accident and gets a real Catachan into your position as a replacement. I can't speak for anyone else, but that's why I voted for you in the first vote and that's why I'll vote for you in the second as well."

Wolf looked at him dumbfounded, unable to grasp the idea that one of her most vocal critics had supported

her in the election for company commander.

"So do you want us to prepare emplacements for our heavy weapons?" Grey asked again.

"What? Oh, err, yes sergeant. Carry on." Wolf answered.

When Molla returned to the camp Wolf already had Khor's ogryns at work digging through the wall to the other side.

"Sergeant Molla." she called out when she saw him, "Anything to report?"

"No other breaches in what's left of the wall lieutenant." he replied, "But we ran into Rull."

"Did he have anything more to report?" Wolf asked.

"He's been inside the city and taken a brief look around. From what he's seen there are small bands of Orks scattered around the city but the main force appears to be congregating around the hulk itself but he can't say why."

"Okay, well we'll be through the wall in a few minutes and we'll head in as soon as Sergeant Quinn's squad returns as well. Then we'll try sweeping around the hulk and see whether we can determine what the Orks are up to. Now have your men prepare their equipment for an advance on foot."

It did not take long for Quinn to return and like Molla his squad had found no other entry points through the city walls within the specified distance. With the platoon now gathered in full Wolf gave the order to advance into the city. When deployed on normal jungle operations she placed First Squad along with Quinn's veterans at the front to take advantage of the extensive field craft Molla had developed during his years growing up as the son of a tour guide on Catachan, a life that had taken him deeper into the Catachan jungle than most others ever ventured. However, given that on this occasion the platoon was not operating in jungle terrain and was at risk of attack from all sides Wolf opted to place just Quinn's veterans at the front. First and Second Squads took the flanks while Mayer's mortar squad and Khor's ogryns brought up the rear behind Wolf's own command section in the centre. As usual Rull operated independently. He could move with greater stealth and speed on his own than as part of a larger body of troops and Wolf knew it was best to let him do as he wished.

Apart from this the platoon treated advancing through the city exactly as they would an advance through the jungle. The terrain was different but it shared many features with the jungle in that there were many places for an attacker to hide and the density of terrain limited lines of sight greatly. Fortunately the heat being given off by the fires still burning around the city not only kept the temperature high enough that the Catachans found themselves quite comfortable in their standard uniforms but the flames also provided some illumination.

Advancing through the city the platoon saw plenty of the common signs of an Ork presence from tracks and litter to several examples of the strange animal forms known as squigs that seemed to accompany the aliens wherever they went but no actual Orks themselves and for time being at least Wolf viewed this as a blessing. However, after just over an hour in the city Quinn brought the platoon to a halt.

"Sergeant Quinn what's wrong?" Wolf asked, using her microbead to talk directly to him.

"Lieutenant we're not the first ones to come this way." he responded, "There aren't any recognisable tracks but I can see where the rubble has been disturbed."

"Orks?" Wolf suggested.

"I doubt it." Quinn said, "It looks like just a handful of individuals and they managed to scale a pile of rubble without smashing everything to pieces around them. It could be a group of the smaller slave species."

Orks never travelled alone. As well as the various trained and untrained animals that went along with them there were two smaller humanoid subspecies as well. The smallest of these, known as Snotlings were of little consequence. The only threat they posed was when they were used as living ammunition for some of the Orks' bizarre weapons. On the other hand there was a third subspecies that could be more dangerous.

These creatures were known as Gretchin and their behaviour was almost exactly the opposite of that of their larger cousins. Where Orks would charge headlong into danger without any fear for their own safety, Gretchin were instinctively cowardly and tended to sneak around rather than charging loudly wherever they went. Weaker than Orks and invariably less well armed they could be a threat even to Imperial Guard troops if their numbers were great enough. More worryingly their marksmanship was superior to that of Orks and it was not unheard of for them to act as snipers.

"All units call in." Wolf ordered, "Any signs of enemy activity?"

"Negative lieutenant." Molla replied first.

"Nothing here either." Grey added.

"All clear behind." Mayer said and Wolf looked at Vance.

"We could try avoiding them." he suggested, "Or we could go after them and try to find them before they find us."

"We do that." Wolf said after pausing to think, "If it is Gretchin then they could follow us at a distance and give us away to the first Ork warband they come across. I want them taken out first." then she activated her microbead again, this time setting it to broadcast to the entire platoon, "Mayer and Khor hold your position.

Mayer, get those mortars set up just in case. Everyone else continue ahead and keep your eyes sharp. There may be Gretchin around and I want them found before they can give us away. Rull, if you're out there then we need your eyes too."

The platoon started to move again, leaving Mayer's squad behind to provide cover and Khor's so that they would not reveal their presence to the Gretchin. Leading the advance, Quinn followed the signs of someone else passing this way ahead of them until from beyond a ruined building he noticed a glow that was characteristic of a camp fire.

"Target dead ahead." he said softly into his microphone, "Looks like the little critters have stopped to make camp."

"Any idea of numbers?" Wolf asked. If it was just a handful of Gretchin then this would be easy. On the other hand if there were several dozen of the creatures then it would be harder to prevent them all from escaping. "I'm not hearing any noise." Quinn replied, "So I'm guessing single digits. Even Gretchin have trouble keeping quiet around a camp fire."

"Spread out." Wolf ordered, "We'll form a perimeter around the camp and move in together."

Keeping rubble between themselves and the fire the Catachans spread out quietly to encircle the camp before they began to move closer. For Wolf's command section this involved climbing a mound of rubble and when she was about half way to the top she felt it give way beneath her foot and she winced as there was a clattering of stone as several pieces of rubble slid down to the bottom of the mound.

Torrent glared at Wolf for possibly having given them away but there was no reaction from the camp and so they continued to climb.

They halted just below the very top of the mound from where they would still be out of sight of the camp on the other side and Wolf put down her las pistol and took out her magnoculars. Before giving the order to attack she wanted to know exactly what they were dealing with and she carefully pulled herself further up the slope. But just as she was reaching the top an arm reached over and grabbed her by the neck before dragging her forwards and Wolf screamed as she felt a knife pressed against her throat.

In desperation she dropped her magnoculars and reached for the Catachan blade she kept sheathed on her belt. However, before she could reach the weapon the grip on her throat was released and she fell the ground at the feet of her mysterious attacker. Looking up, she found herself staring into a familiar face.

"Wolf?" Major Trent asked.

"Major Trent?" she replied, "You're supposed to be dead."

"I almost was." Trent said as he offered her a hand getting back to her feet, "But the bunker I was in was deep enough underground that even a space hulk crashing into the city wasn't enough to completely destroy it."

"Major?" Vance said from behind Wolf as he came to investigate, las pistol in hand.

"Sergeant." Trent replied and then he looked at Wolf again, "I take it your entire platoon is here?" he asked and Wolf nodded, "Good. In that case we're going to need your medicae."

"But you don't look injured." Wolf said.

"I'm not. But I'm not alone." Trent said and he pointed back towards the camp fire where a second figure was sat cradling an injured arm and Wolf gasped.

"Elisa!" she exclaimed as she recognised her sister.

## 6.

Elisa's arm was broken and although Trent had done his best to apply a splint to it he was no medic and he had lacked proper medical equipment. Therefore, Torrent and Jenni effectively started from scratch with their treatment of her, reapplying a proper splint and coating the injured limb with a gel designed to prevent infection.

"The roof just fell in on us." Elisa told Wolf, "There was a sound like thunder and the major pushed me to the floor right before everything went black."

"I think she broke her arm when I landed on her." Trent commented.

"Did anyone else make it out of the command centre?" Wolf asked but Trent shook his head.

"By the time I came to everyone but me and the other Lieutenant Wolf were dead." he said, "Fortunately I had a light stick in my kit and used it to find the way to the exit. Mind you I had to dig us out with my bare hands and half drag her up the elevator shaft. Then when we got to what we thought was the surface we found ourselves right underneath the space hulk and we had to crawl out from underneath it."

"What about the Orks?" Quinn said.

"There were none. At least not at first." Trent said, "Those aboard the hulk must have been killed in the crash. It was only later that we started to see any greenskins."

"It was the smaller ones at first." Elisa added, "They came into the city looking through the ruins for anything they could steal."

"Kind of like what we were doing while we looked for supplies." Trent commented, "Then later on we heard the sounds of the Orks themselves and got out of their way. The lieutenant was in no fit state to fight and I can't take on an entire Ork warband on my own."

"I don't even have a weapon." Elisa said, "I lost my las pistol when the bunker collapsed."

"We can do something about that." Wolf replied and she looked around at a nearby Catachan, "Give her your stubber." she added.

During their previous deployment Second Platoon had come across a cache of simple slug throwing stub pistols that dated back to the Dark Age of Technology. Properly stored, the weapons had survived intact for thousands of years and the Catachans had taken them all for themselves. Now using ammunition made for them by Fourth Company's tech priest many of the platoon now carried one as a reserve weapon while the rest had been stashed away either as souvenirs or to be traded for other equipment they might want. The Catachan detached the holster that held not only the pistol but also a pair of extra magazines from his belt and handed it to Elisa.

"How does this work?" she asked as one handed she took the weapon from its holster.

"I knew you Lyrerians weren't any good at jungle warfare but do you really not know how to fire a pistol?" Torrent asked, "I got my first one of those when I was eight."

"Eight?" Jenni commented with a smile, "Dad taught me to shoot when I was four."

"I'm being serious." Elisa said, "And frankly you've got some nerve being so insubordinate."

"Insubordinate?" Jenni said as she and Torrent looked at one another.

"Seems like the smart thing to do would be to wait for us to finish fixing your arm before making stupid threats outsider."

"It's just like a las pistol. It just kicks more so you need to make sure you've got a firm grip on it." Wolf said more helpfully before her sister could get herself deeper into trouble. Standards of discipline in Catachan regiments were far different to any other and she knew from experience that threatening Catachans with formal disciplinary proceedings was not a wise course of action and the commissars assigned to Catachan regiments frequently met with 'accidents' when they attempted to exert their authority in such a way.

"So what's been happening while I've been gone?" Trent asked, "What's the status of the campaign?"

"The greenskins are throwing everything they've got at us." Vance replied.

"The crash caused massive environmental damage." Wolf added, "The jungle and everything in it is dying off so the Orks have been able to push right through. We're mobilising everything we have to try and push them back but there were reports of Orks gathering in Fort Resolute as well so Colonel Shryke sent us to find out what's keeping them away from the fighting."

"Well I can't offer you any more information." Trent said, "As I said, we've been avoiding the Orks completely." then he frowned, "Hang on a moment." he said and he looked at Wolf, "If you all thought I was dead then has anyone called the vote to replace me?"

"We had it last night." Vance replied.

"So Fear's been made company commander then?" Trent asked and the Catachans exchanged glances, "What?" he added, "Tell me what happened."

"Fear failed to get enough votes on the first count major." Quinn told him, "He was ten short of an overall

majority.”

Trent frowned.

“I didn't think that the votes would be so spread.” he said.

“They weren't.” Grey replied, “There was one other candidate who managed to get a hundred and one.”

“A hundred and one? Who? Was it Lore?”

“No sir.” Vance said as everyone in Second Platoon started to look towards Wolf.

“You're kidding me.” Trent exclaimed as he stared at her as well.

“It seems that the lieutenant is more popular than she thought.” Vance said, “She got the hundred and one votes.”

“Not necessarily popular.” Wolf said, glancing at Grey, “I've heard that some people just wanted me out of the way.”

Trent smiled and slapped her on the shoulder.

“But I bet you'd happily take the promotion wouldn't you lieutenant?” he said and she smiled.

“It would be nice.” she replied and Trent smiled back at her.

“Well tough luck lieutenant.” he said, “I'm back now and I've no intention of dying any time soon.”

It was then that the air was filled with the noise of a crudely built and maintained engine and the Catachans all looked in the direction it was coming from.

“Orks.” Wolf hissed, “Stand to.” and she activated her microbead, “Corporal Mayer we have incoming. Stand by to provide supporting fire on my command.”

Second Platoon scattered, each squad taking cover where they could find it while Wolf led her command section, along with Major Trent towards the sound of the engine. Taking cover behind what had once been a wall of a habitation unit they peered over and as expected they saw an Ork vehicle making its way towards them. The vehicle was a crude open topped box on tracks painted in a pale blue with white markings and had a pintle mount on each side positioned just behind the driver. As was to be expected for an Ork vehicle one of these mounts was fitted with a gun, a belt fed heavy stubber of obvious Ork manufacture while the second was instead fitted with a large mechanical arm that ended in a vicious looking claw. The purpose of this claw became apparent when the Catachans saw that the rear section of the vehicle was piled high with scrap metal.

“Reminds me of those vehicles we saw carrying hull plates ripped from that Ork starship.” Vance commented, not bothering to keep his voice down given that the noise of the Ork engine meant that there was no way the Ork crew would hear him.

“Only it looks like these Orks are taking junk towards the hulk, not away from it.” Wolf replied.

“It's probably scavenged from the ruins all around us.” Trent added, “Now that everything's been flattened, the steel reinforcing cores of a lot of buildings are suddenly accessible.” Orks were well known for salvaging anything they could and many of the vehicles they made use of from war bikes to starships had been recovered as salvage and then modified to suit the Orks' needs and the space hulk that had crashed into Valus was a prime example of such engineering.

“Lieutenant,” Grey's voice sounded over Wolf's microbead headset, “the missile launcher is set up and loaded with a krak warhead. We can take that thing out any time you give the word.”

“Hold your fire sergeant.” Wolf replied and then she looked at Trent, “Major if they're gathering scrap then isn't it likely that they'd be taking it back to wherever their operations are based?”

“Quite correct lieutenant.” he replied, “I'm guessing you intend to follow that vehicle back to its base?”

“From a distance.” Wolf said, “A thing like that ought to leave a trail my men can follow.”

“You hear that platoon sergeant?” Trent asked looking past Wolf at Vance, “Your lieutenant appears to have confidence in Catachan tracking skills.”

“I taught her everything she knows.” Vance replied, “Well, Molla and Rull helped out too.”

“By catapulting my clothes across the jungle.” Wolf muttered, remembering a trap she had triggered during an early jungle training session where she had been attempting to track Rull. Then she switched her microbead to broadcast to the entire platoon again, “Stand by to move out.” she told them, “But do not engage the enemy. We're going to have them lead us to whatever it is that they're so interested in.”

As Wolf's command section pulled back from their vantage point Elisa approached Wolf.

“Emilia did I hear that correctly?” she asked, “You're going after the Orks?”

“Of course, that's why we're here. To find out what the Orks are doing.” Wolf replied.

“But you're not a combat officer. You're a file clerk like me.” Elisa said.

“No I'm not. Not any more. Look around you Elisa, I command these troops.” Wolf said, “What sort of example would I be setting if I just turned and ran.”

“But there could be thousands of Orks in the city. They'll kill us.”

Wolf smiled.

“Obviously you don't know Catachans as well as I do.” she said, “We don't need to fight the Orks. All we need to do is find out what they're doing and report back. They'll never even know we're here. Now are you coming with us or are you heading back to our camp on your own? Because I can't spare any men to escort

you.”

Grey and Molla stood side by side as they watched this exchange between the two sibling officers.

“Not a bad speech for an outsider.” Grey commented.

“Very impressive.” Molla replied with a smile.

“You’re picturing getting them both into bed together aren’t you Tari?” Grey asked.

“Well since I’ve already had Elisa it only makes sense to see how our lieutenant matches up.” Molla answered and Grey winced.

“‘Our’ lieutenant? Throne Tari, she’s still an outsider.” he said.

Though the Orks had the advantage of mechanised transport it was not enough to allow them to evade pursuit by Second Platoon. The lightly equipped Catachans could make their way through the ruins of Fort Resolute just as easily as the Ork vehicle and thanks to the amount of noise being produced by its engine and crew they did not need to keep the vehicle in view to know exactly where it was. Of course there was still the risk of ambush by wandering bands of Gretchin or even the Ork commandos that they knew to be present in the city but this was something that they were used to.

The Ork vehicle led the Catachans around the front of space hulk and as soon as they got a look at the far side of the massive space vessel the Catachans knew exactly where the Orks were heading.

“Him on Earth.” Vance exclaimed as he looked at the Ork construction work in amazement. Right up against the side of the space hulk’s hull the Orks were building two massive towers. Each one consisting of a skeletal framework with numerous platforms built into this at seemingly random points. Every member of Second Platoon that was equipped with magnoculars took them from their webbing as soon as they saw this and zoomed in on one of the towers for a better look. Among the framework of both towers they saw what looked like hundreds of Gretchin scurrying around and acting under the order of dozens of Ork supervisors as they worked to further the construction of whatever it was that they were building. Most appeared to be working on extending the framework that was already well over a hundred metres tall even further up the side of the space hulk while others looked to be constructing more of the platforms within the framework. Finally there was a third group of Gretchin at work who could be seen apparently anchoring the construction to the side of the space hulk. As with most of the Orks Second Platoon had previously encountered the ones at work here wore plain clothing of distinctive colours. However, the exact colours varied from Ork to Ork, suggesting that they came from a variety of different clans working together.

“Why wouldn’t they just secure it as they went along?” Wolf commented as she tried to get a close look at one of this last group of Gretchin. Unfortunately however, they were too far away for her to be able to make out any details.

“Could be they just didn’t think about it.” Trent replied and he held out his hand, “Mind if borrow those lieutenant? Mine are buried about a hundred metres underground.” and Wolf handed over the magnoculars. Trent then tried to zoom in on the Gretchin working on securing the towers to the space hulk, “I suspect that when they started off they didn’t make any effort to stabilise it in any way. Then part of it probably fell down and they’re working to stop it from happening again.”

Quinn then came rushing towards Wolf’s command section.

“Major, lieutenant.” he said, addressing both her and Trent, “Rull just checked in. He’s been around the other side of the Ork camp and he says that they’ve been ripping steering thrusters off the hulk’s hull and stockpiling them.”

“Steering thrusters?” Torrent commented, “What would they want with them?”

“They’re basically big rocket engines.” Wolf replied, her eyes widening as she realised the potential threat, “The Orks would probably use them for large scale strategic missiles. That could be what these towers are for, they’re launching platforms for ballistic missiles.”

“But the other cities are defended with anti-aircraft and anti-missile batteries.” Trent pointed out, “A missile strike would need to involve more than just two missiles at a time to pose a significant threat.”

“Not right now sir.” Wolf replied and she looked upwards into the cloud filled sky.

“The lieutenant is right major.” Vance added, “Long range auspexes and vox communications are all down because of the debris in the atmosphere. The first thing any city is likely to know of a missile attack is when the warhead comes screaming down out of the cloud and explodes right above their heads.”

“Throne.” Trent hissed.

“I guess I need to head back then.” Bess said from behind Wolf, “Say two hours to reach our camp and another two to get back to Colonel Shryke. I’m sure General Fortnam will order a missile strike of our own to deal with this.”

“I don’t doubt he will.” Trent agreed, “But if auspex scans from orbit are unavailable you’ll need to take back accurate targeting data to guarantee a hit.”

“We need to get in closer anyway.” Wolf added, “The reason that space hulk crashed in the first place was because we destroyed the tractor beam that would have brought it down safely. I don’t want to make things even worse by blowing up anything else that could have unforeseen consequences.” then she looked at

Quinn, "Sergeant tell Rull to get in as close as he can to that construction so we can try and get some proof of what it's for. Then I want the rest of the platoon to split up and check out what the Orks are doing to support that building project of theirs. Maybe we can disrupt it by destroying the materials and equipment they're using to do the work."

"Aren't you forgetting something lieutenant?" Torrent asked and Wolf frowned.

"No, what?" she responded.

"You're not in charge here. Major Trent is the ranking officer." Torrent said and she looked at Trent.

"With the major's per-" Wolf began before he interrupted.

"This is your platoon lieutenant." he said, "And it's your mission as well. We'll continue as you see fit." then he glared at Torrent before adding, "Regardless of rank."

## 7.

Given that infiltrating an Ork camp required a degree of stealth, Khor's ogryns were left behind in a position chosen for being easily defended because of a low barrier that had been formed by rubble all around it. Leaving them alone was too much a risk however, and so both Jenni Molla and Bess Quinn remained with them as did Elisa Wolf. Corporal Mayer's mortar squad also left their heavy weapons here. Khor's ogryns were used to carry most of the ammunition for the mortars so there was little point in taking the bulky weapons with them.

Meanwhile the bulk of Second Platoon split up into separate squads and spread out as they encircled the vast Ork camp, surveying every detail they could. The difficulty here was that Orks lacked the more efficient or at least ordered organisational structures that the Imperium possessed and at the same time as the bulk of the greenskins were at work on some aspect of the two towers there were more of them at work on their own personal projects. Sometimes these projects would come into conflict with one another, if two different Orks each wanted to use the same components for their own project for example and given that greenskins had no concept of rational discussion or compromise this inevitable led to violence between them. This aspect of their behaviour actually worked in the Catachans' favour, however. The Ork tendency to fight among themselves meant that none of them would be suspicious if they suddenly came across the body of another Ork and would not necessarily investigate the sound of gunfire provided that it appeared any fatalities had been caused by other Orks. Fortunately, the Catachans were perfectly equipped to take advantage of this and as they approached the outer edges of the camp they slung their lasguns and instead drew their traditional Catachan blades as well as the stub pistols many now carried as well. Only Quinn's squad had no need to swap their weaponry, the loud booming of their shotguns would sound enough like an Ork weapon to allow them to remain undetected even if they used the normally conspicuous weapons.

There had been sewers running beneath the ground just as in any human city but the impact of the space hulk had caused most of these to collapse and so the camp could only be approached on the surface. But fortunately for the Catachans the Ork camp consisted of numerous small and scattered clusters of buildings that had been hastily erected out of whatever building materials the Orks could find. If the camp remained in place for long enough then these would become more permanent structures, either produced by steadily upgrading the existing ones until they became something that would last or if the time allowed the effort to be put in all at once by building new structures from scratch. Between these structures the ground was littered with the same debris, rubble and ruins that characterised the rest of Fort Resolute now and it was the uneven nature of this ground that the Catachans now used to infiltrate the camp.

Quinn's squad made their way to where most of the vehicles carrying scrap metal to the camp were gathering since this seemed like a logical point at which to disrupt the construction of the towers by cutting off their supply of materials. The problem with this idea was one of scale, however. As Quinn's men concealed themselves among several Ork buildings that had already been abandoned by the greenskins Quinn himself started to assess the Ork strength outside. Here he saw several dozen vehicles capable of moving cargo, some like the tracked vehicle Second Platoon had followed here were at least partially enclosed while others were little more than flat platforms mounted on a tracked or wheeled chassis. In addition these represented only a fraction of the vehicles available to the Orks. Beyond the area that Quinn could see he could hear the engines of even more along with sounds that he associated with scrap metal being unloaded.

Lowering his magnoculars he was about to tell his men that they would be moving on when all of a sudden another vehicle drove into view and Quinn's eyes widened as he recognised the underlying shape beneath all of the modifications made by the Orks since it had come into their possession. Under all of the extra metal plates and the new exhaust that had been welded, riveted, bolted, nailed or even just tied on with rope Quinn saw the familiar lozenge shaped hull and compact turret of an Imperial Guard Chimera infantry fighting vehicle. The turret mounted multi-laser had been replaced by a crude Ork automatic cannon and the hull mounted las guns had been ripped out but otherwise the vehicle was largely intact. Quinn smiled.

"Okay lads," he said as he put his magnoculars away, "I don't know about you but I've had enough of walking. Let's hitch ourselves a ride. Anyone know how to drive a Chimera?"

"I got behind the controls of one on a bet." one of the other veterans replied, raising his hand.

"Okay then Howser you're with me." Quinn said, "Moss, Downs, you as well. You'll cover us while we take the vehicle. Everyone else stay put."

Quinn watched as the Chimera came to a halt and the rear access ramp dropped open. Two Orks then came striding out of the vehicle, speaking in their own language that to Quinn sounded like nothing but snorts and grunts. These then turned and walked away from the building occupied by the Catachans and Quinn beckoned for his selected men to follow him. One after another the Catachans darted from one vehicle to



another, using them for cover as they approached the Chimera. As they drew closer there was a smashing sound from inside followed by a sudden outburst of Ork speech. Given that everything in the Ork language sounded loud and abrupt it was difficult to tell for certain but Quinn suspected that the words were cursing whatever had just happened.

With his shotgun braced against his shoulder, Quinn pressed himself up against the side of the Chimera just forward of the access ramp at the back and he was joined there by the rest of the veterans who had accompanied him. All of a sudden he leapt onto the lowered ramp itself, pointing his shotgun into the interior of the armoured vehicle. At the front he saw a single Ork that turned towards him and snarled as it reached for the pistol it had tucked into its belt. But before the Ork could either reach its weapon or shout out a warning in its own crude language Quinn fired his shotgun. The blast struck the Ork square in its chest and it fell backwards, injured but still alive. Quinn racked the slide of his weapon and fired again, hitting the Ork in the chest once more and this time the creature lay still.

"Move!" he hissed, darting inside the Chimera followed by Howser and while they tried to figure out how to get the Chimera running again Moss and Downs stayed outside, keeping watch for any other approaching greenskins.

When they had taken over control of the Chimera the Orks had found the existing ignition system too complex for their liking and had replaced it and Quinn and Howser found themselves having to follow a pair of wires around the driver's area until they found an extra lever located above the driver's seat.

"Think that's the starter?" Quinn asked as Howser sat down and tried adjusting the seat. This too had been modified by the Orks and the seat would move forwards only a short distance before jamming in place. Fortunately like most Catachans Howser was a tall man and he was just about able to reach the pedals with his feet.

"Could be some weapon we don't know about." Howser replied, "How about I pull it and find out?"

"Go ahead. If the engine starts then it's the ignition whereas if that truck in front of us explodes we know it wasn't." Quinn replied and Howser reached for the lever. It required considerable force to move the lever meant for an Ork's grip and Howser had to use both hands. However, once the lever started moving it suddenly lurched to the far end of its track and the entire vehicle started to shudder. Howser then grabbed hold of the steering column, the control grips of which had been replaced with a crude set of wooden handlebars.

"I guess it was the ignition then." Quinn said, "Hold on." and then he dashed to the ramp at the back of the Chimera and leant outside, "Get in, quick." he told the two Catachans waiting outside and Moss and Downs hurried inside.

The mechanism to automatically raise the ramp had been ripped out by the Chimera's new Ork owners and it could only be raised by having all three of the Catachans in the rear of the vehicle pull on the chain that the Orks had connected to the inside and run through a pulley bolted to the ceiling.

"I think this needs tying in place." Quinn told the other two Catachans as he let go of the chain and headed back to the front of the Chimera where Howser was inspecting some of the other modified controls, "Okay let's get going. Take us back to the others and we'll pick them up"

"Hang on." Howser said before pressing his foot down on one of the pedals and the Chimera jolted forwards several times.

"I thought you could drive this thing." Quinn said.

"I can. I don't think the fuel is getting to the engine properly though."

"Well the Orks didn't have a problem in getting it to go. Try driving like an Ork."

"How does an Ork drive sergeant?"

"Like they do everything else I suppose. Floor it."

Howser stomped his foot down on the gas pedal as hard as he could and the Chimera suddenly lurched into life and moved forwards. As expected the normal sound of a Chimera engine was heavily distorted by the repairs and so-called improvements made by the Orks since they had obtained the vehicle. It was still functional though and it lumbered forwards between the other parked vehicles. Howser turned the steering wheel carefully, uncertain of how sensitive the steering would be. But as with the gas pedal nothing happened with a alight touch and only when he suddenly pulled the wheel around did the Chimera turn in the direction he wanted it to go.

As Howser guided the vehicle towards the building where the rest of the squad was waiting Quinn climbed up into the turret and sat down. Quinn had ridden in Chimeras before and he knew that the ride was never to be considered smooth, whoever had designed the vehicle many thousands of years ago had not considered the comfort of the occupants to be the most important feature. However, even compared to the other Chimeras he had ridden in this ride was rough and sitting in the vehicle commander's seat that had lost most of its padding was slightly more bearable than having his head repeatedly struck against the numerous protrusions on the inside of the vehicle.

Another advantage of being sat in the turret was that it enabled Quinn to peer out through a vision slit that had been cut in the front in place of the now smashed prisms that the original commander would have used

to observe the battlefield. By looking through this Quinn was able to see when the Chimera was getting close to the building where the rest of his men were waiting and he activated his microbead.

"Okay we're almost with you now." he signalled, "As soon as we pull up outside we'll drop the ramp and you need to be in here before any of these xenos scum notice us."

"Yes sergeant. We see you now. We'll be ready." the reply came.

Howser drove the Chimera right up to the side of the building that the other veterans were still hiding inside and the chain holding the rear access ramp was released. Immediately the other veterans charged out of the building and hurried into the back of the Chimera so that the ramp could be pulled shut once more and conceal them within its armoured hull.

"Somebody get on that bolter." Quinn ordered, meaning the heavy bolter located beside the driver's seat in a forward facing mount and while the others sat on the benches running down each side of the passenger section one of the veterans made his way forwards, climbing over and around the numerous obstacles and he sat down in the gunner's seat. The weapon in front of him was still the standard heavy bolter that had most likely been fitted when the vehicle was first built rather than an Ork built replacement and so it was a weapon he had a passing familiarity and would be able to operate.

"Where to now sergeant?" Howser asked from the driver's seat and Quinn considered this for a moment before a smile spread across his face.

"The lieutenant wants us to find out what the Orks are up to." he replied, "So how about we drive right up to where they're working?"

While Quinn had taken his squad to where the scrap metal was being brought into the camp Molla had taken his towards the space hulk itself. The huge vessel had an irregular shaped hull and this had left a deep gouge in the ground as it had ploughed through the city that created a slope down towards the hull that offered cover for the Catachans as they crept forwards with knives and pistols drawn.

They encountered little greenskin activity along the way, the Orks and Gretchin having set up their camp at the top of the slope and stretching away from the hulk. However, they did come across several places where breaches in the hull had been formed, some looked to have been created deliberately while others appeared to be a consequence of the crash with even the thick armoured hull being insufficient in places to withstand the force of the impact and being dragged along the ground after it. Crude bridges and ramps that in some cases were nothing more than planks stretched from the ground to the holes in the hull had been put in place by the Orks and Molla's squad slowed each time they neared one just in case there were any greenskins close by. On one occasion they encountered a pair of Gretchin dragging the battered body of an Ork from the hulk down one of the ramps. The state of the body made it obvious that the Gretchin were not the ones responsible for its death, more likely it had been aboard the hulk and died in the crash. Molla didn't like to think of where they would be taking the body but with his limited knowledge of greenskin society he guessed that it was either to one of their equivalents of a medicae for use in spare part surgery or to be butchered for meat. Greenskins were not fussy eaters.

The Catachans froze as the Gretchin appeared, too engrossed in what they were doing to look down and see the human troops beneath them. But Molla was not willing to take the chance on one of them suddenly looking down and he looked at one of the Catachans aiming a pistol towards the aliens and pointed at them. Nodding, the Catachan lined up his pistol and fired two rapid shots. The pistol produced a 'crack' with each shot and the bullets found their mark, striking each Gretchin in the head and knocking them from the ramp. "Nice shooting." Molla said softly, impressed that the guardsman had made both shots first time. Fortunately Catachans invariably had considerable experience with weaponry of many different types by the time they joined the Imperial Guard and so their skill was not limited to the much narrower range of weapons they were generally issued with. Satisfied that any other greenskins in the area had paid no attention to the gunshots Molla then waved his squad onwards.

Further on the squad encountered several wooden and metal cases that had fallen down the slope from large irregular piles of them that were visible further up. The cases were of no set size, colour or pattern and some of them clearly bore markings that showed them to be of human origin. Molla crouched down beside one of the cases, a metal one marked with a faded aquila and reached out with the tip of his knife. Carefully inserting the tip of the blade into the crack between the body of the case and its hinged lid he used it to open the case and peered inside.

"Empty." he said as he withdrew his knife and put it away. The he picked up the case and opened it fully to see if he could determine what had been inside it before being removed by the Orks. The case was completely empty, just as Molla had first guessed but as happened with everything greenskins owned they had not bothered to keep the inside clean and there was some residue left from whatever had been kept in it smeared on the inside. Molla lifted the case higher and leant in closer so that he could sniff the residue and he frowned, "I don't like this." he said as he reached down to his webbing and took out a lighter. He ignited the lighter and carefully moved the flame closer to the mysterious smear. Continuing to move the flame closer, Molla allowed it to come into contact with the residue and there was a sudden flash as it ignited that

caused Molla to throw the case away from him as quickly as he could," Explosives. I thought so." he said and he started to pick up more of the abandoned cases, also finding them empty but with many bearing the same tell-tale smears of explosive residue on the inside.

"How much of that stuff do you reckon they've got sarge?" one of Molla's squad asked, a female trooper and Molla looked up the slope.

"Wait here." he replied, "I'm going to go and find out." and then he carefully pulled himself up the slope until he was able to peer over the top and he saw that there were dozens of large piles of cases along with individual ones scattered all around. All of those that Molla could see were open were also empty and it was obvious that this was a waste dump for containers that had already been emptied of their contents and assuming that the contents had been the same as those Molla had examined then it meant that the Orks had unpacked a huge amount of explosives.

Molla slid back down the slope and walked over to his squad's vox operator, grabbing the handset off his back.

"Molla to Wolf, do you read me lieutenant?" he transmitted.

"Right here sergeant, go ahead." Wolf's voice replied after a short delay.

"Lieutenant I've found signs that the Orks are preparing a large amount of explosives for something." Molla told her.

"Define a large amount sergeant." Wolf said.

"Err, tonnes of the stuff. All I've found is empty boxes with residue inside so I can't be more precise than that."

"So you don't know where the explosives are being taken then?" Wolf asked.

"Sorry lieutenant, there's just nothing but boxes here." Molla answered.

"Understood sergeant. Let me know if you find anything more. Wolf out."

As Wolf gave the vox handset back to Turner she looked towards Mayer. Given that both her command section and his mortar squad were about half the size of the other squads in Second Platoon it had made sense to her to have them remain together to better equalise the size of each group. Fortunately this meant that she had an expert on explosives to hand now that Molla had reported the Orks were using a lot of them for something. The haphazard nature of the Ork camp meant that there were few areas that any given type of task could be being carried out at several different locations scattered a considerable distance apart and the path taken through the camp by the two combined squads had taken them through areas that switched back and forth between different functions. Right now they had come to a halt near what looked to be some sort of workshops. Wolf had hoped that they would offer some clue about what the Orks were doing here but so far the only work the Catachans had witnessed being carried out was on personal equipment and lightweight vehicles being brought to the occupants for repair and Wolf was convinced that this was a support facility rather than part of the camp's primary function.

"Corporal Mayer." she said, waving him towards her. Given that the group was in the midst of the Ork camp she avoided raising her voice and alerting any nearby greenskins to the presence of humans.

"Yes lieutenant?" he replied as he came towards her.

"Corporal, Sergeant Molla reports that he has found evidence that the Orks are preparing a large amount of explosives for something. Do you think that these could be for use in the warheads of strategic missiles?"

"They could." he replied, "But if it's just explosives then there could be any number of weapons the Orks could be building."

"You're not exactly narrowing things down there Bomber." Vance said, using Mayer's nickname among the Catachans that came from his role as a mortar squad leader.

"Grey was heading for where the Orks were removing the thrusters from their space hulk." Wolf said, "Maybe he can shed some more light on this."

## 8.

"What was that lieutenant? You want me to watch out for explosives?" Grey asked when Wolf contacted him using the vox.

"That's right sergeant. First Squad have found evidence that the Orks are making use of a large quantity for whatever it is that they're doing here. If they are assembling missile warheads then we need to know."

Grey peered over the collapsed pillar that his squad was currently using for cover and pointed his magnoculars towards the Orks he had been observing when Wolf called him. Ahead of him he saw numerous greenskins of both the Ork and Gretchin varieties at work. Focusing on several of the Orks, grey noticed that many of them appeared to have had crude cybernetic components added to various parts of their bodies or even used to replace entire body parts and he could not help be reminded of the tech priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus. The manoeuvring thrusters removed from the space hulk had been collected together and the greenskins were climbing all over them. As was to be expected the Orks looked to be giving the orders while the smaller Gretchin were following them or in some cases being beaten for not doing so fast or satisfactorily enough. It did look to Grey as though the Orks were overseeing the removal of the rocket motors at the core of the thrusters but so far there was no indication of what they were planning to do with them afterwards and the removed engines had been lined up on the ground.

"Well if the Orks have been building missile warheads then they haven't brought them here lieutenant." he replied to Wolf's communication. Then he noticed something odd about the way the Gretchin were going about their work. Each thruster that they were taking apart was being drained of fuel before the rocket motors were being taken out of their housings. Having seen tech priests and servitors carrying out repair work before Grey had seen them follow such a procedure for safety reasons, if the promethium fuel was accidentally ignited then the consequences could be devastating. But Orks were not thought to concern themselves with such niceties and there seemed to be no reason why they would be removing the fuel. Unless it was the fuel they really wanted.

Grey looked around, watching for any indication of what was being done with the fuel removed from the thrusters. There were no stockpiles of the volatile liquid that Grey could make out and it took a few moments for him to find a cart loaded with an odd assortment of fuel canisters being pulled along by one of the myriad of variants of squigs, goaded by several Gretchin equipped with long pointed spears that they used to jab at the beast to get to go where they wanted. As he watched Grey saw the squig suddenly grab the tip of one of these spears in its mouth and use it to drag the Gretchin holding it off the ground and hurl the unfortunate creature aside, provoking an outburst of laughter from the other Gretchin.

"Lieutenant the Orks aren't building missiles." he told Wolf, "It's not the thrusters that they're interested in, it's the fuel. Maybe they need it for their vehicles or maybe-"

"Maybe they already have missiles of their own and just need fuel for them?" Wolf interrupted.

Being concealed within the Chimera meant that Quinn's squad was able to move relatively freely around the Ork camp and Howser drove directly towards the two towers that the greenskins were busy constructing while Quinn listened in on the vox conversation between Wolf and Grey. As the Chimera rounded the corner of a ruined building Quinn looked through the vision slit in the turret at the way ahead and he noticed a squig drawn cart that was laden with what looked like fuel canisters heading in the same direction as they were.

"Pass me that vox." he ordered, extending his hand downwards and his squad's vox operator got up and held out the handset for him.

"Quinn to Wolf, lieutenant I think we may have something here. I've got eyes on a fuel cart."

"Say again sergeant." Wolf responded and then she added, "There's a lot of background noise at your end."

"Ah, yes." Quinn said, "My squad has requisitioned a Chimera and is using it to advance towards the enemy construction site."

"'Requisitioned' a Chimera?" Wolf said, "Oh never mind, Go on sergeant."

"There's a cart loaded down with fuel canisters right ahead of us and it's heading for the hulk where the Orks are building those towers. We're going to follow and see what they're up to."

"Ideas corporal?" Wolf asked, looking over her shoulder at Mayer.

"Well if you add fuel to explosives you can get an incendiary effect." he replied, "The energy released in the detonation is enough to ignite the fuel while the consistency of the explosive allows you to shape the charge and not worry about the fuel just flowing away."

"Could we still be talking about a missile warhead?" Trent asked, moving closer to join in the conversation.

"Possibly. The blast would spread the burning fuel over a wide area if the charge was large enough." Mayer answered.

"So a massive incendiary bomb that could wipe out a regiment of troops?" Vance suggested.

"Pretty much, yes." Mayer agreed.

"But we still haven't seen this missile or missiles yet." Wolf pointed out, "We need proof of what we're dealing with."

"Rull ought to have reached the construction site by now." Vance said, "If there are missiles there then he will have seen them." and Wolf nodded.

"Has anyone had any contact with Rull?" she broadcast, knowing that her microbead was unlikely to be able to reach as far as the space hulk.

"Negative on that lieutenant." Quinn replied, "Wherever he is, he's keeping out of sight."

"No surprise there." Wolf said to herself. Then she lifted the vox handset back to her mouth, "Okay everyone carry on. Call in if you spot anything new."

Bess, Jenni and Elisa had put some distance between themselves and Khor's ogryns. Not enough that they were out of contact without using their microbeads but far enough away that the ogryn's powerful body odour was not unbearable. Elisa watched Bess and Jenni nervously. The limited contact she had had with Catachans had given her the impression that they were not particularly friendly. Thus she was somewhat surprised when Bess took a pair of ration bars from her webbing and held one up towards her.

"Fancy something to eat?" she asked cheerfully.

"What? Oh, err, yes please." Elisa replied and Bess tossed her the bar. Her injured arm meant that she was too slow to catch it and instead it landed beside her after bouncing off the tips of her fingers, "Looks like that arm's going to slow you down." Bess added.

"I'm sure it'll be fine once I get back to my own regiment." Elisa replied as she picked up the ration bar and started to unwrap it, "I'm not a combat officer so I can take things a bit easier."

"What do you mean 'when you get back to your own regiment'?" Jenni asked as she too produced a ration bar as well as a canteen of water and took a quick sip from it, "Take a look around you. You're regiment's gone. I heard there's one company left that was outside the city and that's it. There's them and you and everyone else is dead."

Elisa did not reply. Since regaining consciousness and watching Trent dig them out of the underground bunker she had not given any thought to the fate of the rest of her regiment. She had assumed that they had simply evacuated the city after the impact and that was why she and Trent had encountered no-one.

"I hadn't thought about it." she admitted as she pondered what would happen to her now. The typical fate of survivors of badly mauled units was to be transferred to whatever other units were available to take them. However, before she could fully consider the ramifications of this Jenni spoke again.

"So did my father tell you he knew your sister before you slept with him?" she asked and Elisa's jaw dropped.

"What?" she asked.

"Well you did, didn't you? He picked you up in a bar and took you back to his tent for the night." Jenni said.

"How did you know that?" Elisa said, "Did he say something?"

"Not likely." Bess replied, "If Jenni's dad told her about all his conquests there wouldn't be any time for her to get any work done. Ibram told me and I told her. Apparently all the other sergeants ended up sleeping in your sister's tent instead."

Before Elisa could respond to this there was the sound of a piece of debris falling and smashing as it hit the rubble covered ground.

"Someone's out there." Bess said, her hand reaching for her sidearm. As a nurse Jenni was not normally issued with a weapon apart from the traditional knife that every Catachan carried but for this mission she had been given one of Second Platoon's stock of stub pistols and both she and Elisa drew them.

"Gretchin?" Elisa whispered as the three young women looked around to see if whoever was approaching was doing so openly

"Possibly." Bess said.

"Or more of those camouflaged Orks." Jenni suggested.

"Sergeant Khor!" Bess called out, "Stand to." and Khor's head turned towards her rapidly. Technically Khor outranked both Bess and Jenni but even with the BONEHead modifications made to his brain he lacked the intelligence to take charge and so he grabbed his ripper gun and leapt to his feet.

"Ogryns!" he yelled, "Up!" and the rest of his squad copied him, taking hold of their weapons and getting to their feet. Not having been told where an attack may be about to come from the ogryns instead rushed over to the three women and joined them in forming a circle. Though this place had been selected for its defensibility the size of the ogryns made it difficult for them to take cover and instead they remained standing.

Then came the rattle of gunfire and one of the ogryns howled in pain as the burst of high calibre bullets tore through his arm.

"Over there!" Jenni exclaimed, having seen the distinctive muzzle flash among the rubble and she returned fire, the sound of her stub pistol being lost among the din of the Ork weapon as its owner continued to pump

bullets into the ogryn even as he fell dead.

“Ogryns! Fire!” Khor yelled and there was a thunderous roar as the remaining ogryns fired in unison. The ripper guns were fitted with limiters to prevent them from inadvertently emptying the entire magazine at once and so their fire was punctuated by the brief pauses needed before more rounds could be fired.

But while their attention was focused on the direction of the first attack another Ork was making its way quietly around behind them and it suddenly leapt out into the open clutching one of the Orks' stick like grenades.

“Waaargh!” the Ork yelled as it pulled out the pin and hurled the grenade towards the Catachan position.

The explosive flew over the barrier of rubble that protected the Catachans and landed among them but rather than detonating right away it just fizzed as sparks flew from the base of the handle where the pin had been located.

“Grenade!” Bess yelled and she and Jenni both grabbed hold of Elisa and dragged her over the barrier they were using for cover before the grenade could explode.

The cloud of shrapnel tore through the ogryns and it was only their massive bulk that prevented every one of them from being killed instantly. As it was one of them died when a fragment sliced through his jugular vein and a jet of blood spurted from the wound as the abhuman tried instinctively to clamp the wound shut with his hands. Although the other four ogryns survived the explosion none came away unharmed and the four abhumans were thrown to the ground by the blast, all bleeding from dozens of light wounds.

Acting quickly, Bess pointed her las pistol at the Ork grenadier and fired, putting a shot between the alien's eyes and it wobbled for a moment as its brain processed the fact that it was dead before collapsing in a heap.

But even with the Ork dead the Catachans had surrendered their favourable defensive position and all of a sudden Orks covered in dust to help them blend into the surrounding terrain appeared and waved a mix of pistols and assorted hand weapons in the air before the largest of them gave out a yell.

“Waaargh!” he cried out and the other Orks all repeated the war cry before charging headlong towards the Catachans.

“Emergency, emergency.” Bess yelled into her microbead, hoping that someone from Second Platoon would be close enough to pick up the signal, “We are under Ork attack and need urgent assistance.” and then she fired her las pistol again, striking one of the Orks but failing to inflict any significant damage.

Either side of her both Elisa and Jenni fired their stub pistols as well and the sharp sound of these roused Khor from the daze he had been left in by the grenade detonation. Looking up he saw the three women crouched outside the defensive barrier as well as the Orks charging towards them, bellowing their war cry and waving their weapons above them. Reaching out his hand Khor took hold of a nearby ripper gun, not caring whether or not it was his and he pointed it towards some of the charging Orks before pulling the trigger. The weapon roared even louder than the Orks and three of the aliens were cut down before they even realised what was happening. This was all the distraction that Bess, Jenni and Elisa needed and as the Orks' attention turned back towards the ogryns they scrambled back behind the rubble barrier and took cover.

“Throne damn it!” Bess exclaimed, activating her microbead again while both Jenni and Elisa were reloading their weapons, “Isn't there anyone out there?”

“Waaargh!”

This roar came as a shadow fell over the three women and they all looked up to see the largest of the Orks standing over them and it pointed its crude pistol down towards them. Then all of a sudden a tiny red dot appeared on the alien's forehead, dead centre. Then a moment later a hole appeared where the dot had been and the back of the Ork's skull exploded.

Bess, Jenni and Elisa all flinched at the sight of the explosion and then rolled out of the way as the Ork came crashing down right where they had been sat.

“What happened?” Elisa exclaimed.

“Rull.” Bess replied.

“What?” Elisa asked.

“Rull. Second Platoon's sniper.” Jenni said.

“I've never seen a sniper with them.” Elisa said.

“Oh he keeps out of sight.” Jenni told her.

“Some say he can stand right behind you without you ever knowing.” Bess said, “And some say he does that deliberately just to scare people.”

“All we know is he's called Rull and nobody messes with him.” Jenni added.

The sudden death of their leader appeared to confuse the Orks somewhat as they looked around, searching for the source of the attack that had killed him. Doing this out in the open just invited death upon them as well as Rull started to pick them off one at a time with shots to the head and chest. In addition more of the ogryns were coming to their senses and crawling to the barrier around their position to engage the Orks once more. However, the abhumans were still bleeding and so Jenni grabbed hold of her medical kit and looked at Bess.

“I better go make sure they're okay.” she said before she crawled towards the ogryns with bullets flying over

her as the Orks changed back to shooting at the Catachans from cover rather than charging across the open at them.

## 9.

"I don't like the look of that." Trent commented when he saw a large group of Orks starting to congregate after having laid down their tools and drawing their weapons. There was more than just hand weapons and small arms on display as well, some of the aliens were armed with larger belt fed support weapons, rocket launchers as well as bizarre contraptions that defied description but were obviously held in high regard by their owners.

"All units sound off." Wolf broadcast as she studied the growing group of Orks, "It looks like we've got a large group of xenos getting ready to move out. Has anyone been made?"

"Negative lieutenant." Quinn replied first, "The greenskins aren't even giving us a second look in this carrier. Not even when we ran a bunch of them over just now. In fact the others seemed to find it funny."

"All quiet here as well lieutenant." Molla then added, "We've taken out a few lone greenskins we encountered skulking about near the hulk but nobody seems bothered by it."

"Lieutenant it's not us." Grey then exclaimed, "I've just heard from Rull and the camp is under attack. Ork commandos have got it surrounded and they've probably sent word back about it. Rull reckons he can hold back the commandos providing not too many more turn up but he can't stop the entire camp."

"Neither can we." Vance commented as he overheard this and Wolf took a deep breath and thought for a moment.

"We don't have time for messing about." Torrent said angrily and she looked at Trent, "Major-"

"Specialist Torrent!" Wolf snapped, "Be quiet." and she placed her hand on the holster at her waist. Then she looked at Mayer, "Corporal I want you to take your men back to the camp. Set up your mortars and commence firing on the Ork camp. Direct all your fire at the workshops we passed, hopefully the contents are volatile enough that they'll cause secondary detonations. If the workshops go up then get Rull to act as a spotter and provide you with fresh targets. Now go."

"What about us lieutenant?" Vance asked as Mayer beckoned for his men to follow him back to where their mortars had been left.

"We're going to stir up what trouble we can." Wolf said, "If the Orks are too busy trying to find us then they won't be sending reinforcements to the camp. We can pull out when they're too busy chasing their own tails looking for us to be able to act in an organised fashion." and she lifted her vox handset back to her mouth, "All squads engage, I repeat all squads engage. Don't worry about what you're shooting at just make as much noise as you can to distract the Orks. Do not attempt to hold any position, fall back if under threat. The Emperor protects. Wolf out."

Handing the vox handset back to its operator, Grey looked around at the thruster assemblies being drained of fuel and the carts taking carrying it away. Then he looked at his squad's missile launcher gunner.

"Dean," he said, "reckon you could hit one of those carts with a frag round?"

"I think so sergeant." Dean replied and he took up a firing position, lifting the missile launcher over his shoulder and taking aim at a slow moving squig drawn cart that was laden with fuel canisters as his loader prepared a fragmentation round and slid it into the back of the weapons.

"Ready." the loader announced.

"Clear behind." Dean added clearly and then he fired the missile launcher.

The missile shot out of the weapon and headed straight for the cart. Rather than detonating as soon as it hit the stack of canisters being carried the missile knocked the first few it encountered out of its path until the nose struck one with enough force to trigger the warhead and it exploded in amongst all of the fuel instead of beside it. The fragments produced by the warhead ripped through the relatively fragile fuel canisters before the explosion ignited the fuel they contained to produce a massive fireball that consumed everything close by. The Gretchin guiding the cart were burned to death in moments but the thick hide of the squig itself was enough to protect the beast from the worst of the flames. Instead it raised itself up on its hind legs and roared as it was doused in burning promethium. Then as it brought its forelegs back down it broke into an uncontrolled run, still dragging the burning cart along with it as it attempted to escape the flames slowly burning through its back.

This produced exactly the sort of chaos that Grey had hoped it would and the greenskins confronted by the squig were far more interested in getting away from the enraged and out of control creature than they were in establishing where the missile had come from and taking action to deal with whoever had fired it. Grey knew that this state of affairs would not last, however and he looked at his men with a smile on his face.

"Good work Dean." he said, "Now let's get moving. It's not going to take long for the Orks to figure out where that shot came from and I want to be away from here by the time they come to investigate."

The squad began to move away immediately and Grey waited as Dean packed up his missile launcher. Then



he took a grenade from his webbing as well as a reel of string and he started to tie the string through the ring shaped pin as he prepared a surprise for the Orks that would inevitably come to investigate the launch of the missile.

"Looks like Grey found something volatile." Molla commented as he and his men saw the flash of the exploding fuel and the thick cloud of smoke it produced, "Now let's see if we can't find something just as interesting to blow up or shoot shall we?"

"What about all those Gretchin we passed back there?" one of his men suggested. The squad had passed by what looked like a shanty town consisting of simple dwellings constructed from lightweight waste materials "Gretchin?" another responded, "Why waste our time with them?"

"Because they're cowardly and panic easily." Molla said, "Okay boys let's get those lasguns out again. We'll use this slope for cover and put as much fire into those short arsed greenskins as we can. Don't waste any serious ammo on them though, no bolter rounds and no grenades. Hopefully we'll just start a panic and send them all running for the hills. Then we'll move on while the Orks are wondering what's going on."

The Catachans swapped their knives and stub pistols for their lasguns again and crept back along the side of the space hulk until they came to the Gretchin dwellings. Here they crawled up the slope to position themselves just below the top and looked at Molla. The sergeant held up three fingers and lowered one at a time, counting down before his squad suddenly leapt up and used the top of the slope for cover and support as they fired bursts of fire from their lasguns into the Gretchin structures as well as any of the creatures visible to them. The dwellings that the Gretchin had made for themselves were lightweight and flimsy and the blasts from the Catachans' lasguns as well as Molla's las pistol easily punched right through them, terrifying the unfortunate occupants and causing panic wherever the las fire was directed. Though the primary purpose of Gretchin in Ork society was as slave labour the Orks did not prohibit them possessing weapons of their own, such a concept went against everything Orks believed in and when attacked some of the Gretchin reacted by coming out of their homes wielding firearms that were crude and primitive even by Ork standards. As soon as they appeared however, the Catachans fired on them and they were cut down before any of them could get off a single shot. Then whenever any other Gretchin attempted to retrieve the dropped weapons for their own use they too were struck by las fire. Some of the materials used by the Gretchin to construct their simple buildings turned out to be highly flammable and when the blasts of lasgun energy struck them they ignited, triggering fires that started to spread from one structure to another and further served to flush out the occupants.

The result of this was exactly the sort of widespread panic that Molla had hoped to create as the Gretchin fled away from the flames and the las fire. But this meant that they soon encountered armed Orks who demanded an explanation with the threat of violence if it was not given from the more cowardly Gretchin and when they heard of the attack by human troops they gathered together and came to retaliate.

As soon as the first Ork appeared Molla shot it between the eyes and looked at his men.

"Okay that's our cue to leave." he told them and the Catachans retreated back down the slope before hurrying along the hull of the space hulk in search of another target.

At the ruined building where Grey's squad had fired their missile a group of Orks surrounded what remained of the hollowed out structure. Then the largest of the Orks held a large axe over his head in both hands and tilted its head back.

"Waaargh!" it yelled as it led the charge and rushed into the building through a gap in what remained of the wall. But in its hurry the Ork leader failed to check for tripwires and as he passed through the gap his foot caught on the line that Grey had wound around the perimeter of the building and it pulled the pin from the grenade he had secured in place more centrally. The Ork looked around as it heard the sound of the grenade lever bouncing off stone but did not spot the grenade before it went off and the blast hurled the Ork back through the gap in the wall through which it had entered.

Several hundred metres away and creeping between two rows of Ork structures Grey paused and looked around when he heard the detonation of the grenade and before continuing on his way he smiled to himself. "They never check for wires." he muttered.

## 10.

While Mayer and his men hurried back towards Second Platoon's temporary camp, Wolf's command section had also retreated and taken up a position on the outskirts of the Ork camp. From here they saw the first small groups of Orks heading to join in the attack. Unlike the almost professional commandos that made use of camouflage and concealment these Orks wore the more traditional bold colours and uttered loud barks and grunts in their own language as they advanced that made them easy to spot.

"Kent," she said as she watched the closest group through her magnoculars, "I want three rounds into that group over there." and she pointed to one of the groups that was further away from the command section. "You're not targeting the closest group lieutenant?" Trent asked and Wolf shook her head.

"No sir," she replied, "I think we should take cover after Trooper Kent fires the grenades but before they detonate so that the Orks aren't able to determine exactly where the attack came from. Then when they come closer to search for us we take advantage of the shorter range to ambush them using our las pistols and hand grenades. Kent can continue suppressive fire against the other units so the Orks can only come at us one squad at a time."

"Very good lieutenant," Trent said, nodding and smiling, "If I didn't know better I'd almost swear you were one of us with a plan like that."

Then Torrent leant in closer and whispered into his ear and Trent's face fell.

"Really?" he said, "Arse holes huh? Well lieutenant I think that when we get back I may just have a few odd jobs I need you to carry out." and then Wolf's face fell while Torrent grinned even as Vance sighed and shook his head.

"Okay Kent, the lieutenant gave you an order." Vance said, "Three rounds, fragmentation."

Kent raised the grenade launcher and fired off three rounds as rapidly as the revolving magazine would allow. Then the entire squad took cover before there was a trio of dull 'crump' sounds as the grenades detonated among the Ork unit and changing their roars of enthusiasm for battle changed into cries of pain. Just as Wolf had expected the other Ork units halted their advance towards the camp and started searching for the source of the attack. The Orks had been so focused on where they were going and making so much noise that they had not noticed the grenades flying over their heads or taken any notice of the 'bloop!' sounds that the launcher had made when it was fired so they did not know where to start and the various groups started to spread out as they hunted for the enemies they knew had to be close by.

The leader of one of the groups of Orks was accompanied by a creature that resembled a large red ball that possessed two stubby legs and a mouth full of teeth and as his squad searched for the Catachans the attack squig started sniffing the air. Then the creature let out a growl and charged towards the Catachans, prompting its owner to let out a roar of its own.

"Waaargh!" and the Ork pointed its axe in the direction of the Catachans as an order for the rest of the group to follow the squig.

Recognising the threat of the squig, Trent aimed his las pistol right into its gaping maw and pulled the trigger to put a las bolt straight into the creature's mouth that punched a hole right through to the other side of it. Seeing his prized pet die in front of him sent the Ork leader into a rage and it charged towards Trent waving a cleaver like weapon about its head as it ran. But the other Catachans now opened fire as well and the Ork ran headlong into a storm of las fire. The individual blasts were insufficient to put the Ork down but its body jerked under each hit and the combined salvo brought it crashing down to the ground less than ten metres from their position.

The rest of the Ork unit was not far behind and bullets flew overhead as the command section took grenades from their webbing.

"Now!" Wolf snapped and as one they hurled the explosives at the oncoming aliens before ducking for cover. The combined explosions of the grenades created a cloud of metal fragments as well as stone ripped up from the rubble on the ground and all but two of the Orks in the unit were killed in this storm of shrapnel. Those two were both badly injured by the multiple blasts as well and as the Catachans looked out from behind cover they saw the aliens trying to crawl away, only to be finished off by several more well placed las pistol shots.

Then there was the sound of the grenade launcher firing again as Kent targeted another of the Ork units that was heading for the command section now that their position had been exposed.

"Time to go I think," Wolf said and she looked at Vance.

"Smoke?" he asked as he took a smoke grenade from his webbing she nodded.

Vance tossed the grenade so that it landed between the Catachans and the oncoming Ork horde and the moment that it burst open to release a thick cloud of smoke Wolf got to her feet.

"This way," she ordered, "We'll head back into their camp while they hopefully go looking for us outside it."

When Mayer and his men heard the sound of Ork pistols and ogryn ripper guns they knew that they were getting close to where their mortars waited for them.

"Safeties off." he ordered, releasing the safety catch from his lasgun. Then there was an Ork roar and the 'Whoosh!' of a rocket as an Ork commando appeared with a heavy weapon and launched an explosive projectile at the squad. The round narrowly missed the Catachans and instead impacted on an already ruined wall. But the explosion created a blast of stone fragments that blew one of the Catachans off his feet as he was caught within their path and just one look down at the ruined body told Mayer that the man was dead. Turning towards the Ork Mayer returned fire with a short burst of fire from his lasgun that killed the Ork as it struggled to load a new rocket into its launcher.

Then came the rattle of an automatic weapon and Mayer and his men took whatever cover they could. Crouched behind a large chunk of concrete, Mayer could hear the bullets striking the other side of the obstacle and he knew that each hit would be knocking a small chunk off his only protection. If this continued then either the concrete would split and expose him or more Orks would appear to take advantage of him and his men being pinned down. Either way Mayer knew that the end result would be their deaths.

He tried peering around the side of the concrete block when there was a brief break in the gunfire but he was quickly forced back by more automatic fire from the Ork. However, he did get a good enough look at the Ork's position to know that it not only offered an excellent field of fire that meant it would not be possible to sneak around it but also that it was dug in making it unlikely that any random bursts of las fire would solve the problem.

Then came another break in the gunfire and Mayer heard a different sound, that of a bullet striking something softer than stone. His first thought was that one of his men had been hit but looking around revealed the other four surviving members of his squad to still be alive and well. Then Mayer noticed that this break in the gunfire had been longer than the previous ones and he risked peering around the concrete block once more. This time there was no sudden burst of fire that forced him to pull back. Instead Mayer saw that the Ork gunner was now slumped forwards while a piece of masonry next to it had blood and other tissue splattered all over it.

"Oh Rull." Mayer said, "You glorious bastard." then he looked around at his men, "Come on." he told them, "We're almost there now." and he got to his feet and started to sprint.

The sound of the defending gunfire grew louder as the mortar squad approached the temporary camp and Mayer reached up to activate his microbead.

"It's Mayer." he signalled, hoping that there was still someone left who could use a microbead to understand him, "We're coming in from the south."

"Ogryns! Friendlies!" a familiar voice boomed out and as the camp came into view Mayer saw Khor waving in his direction to indicate the direction that his squad was not to shoot in. This gave his men a clear run at the camp and Mayer picked up his pace and dived over the barrier surrounding it and rolled across the ground as he landed. Then he looked back over the barrier just as the next of his men leapt over it after him. This left three more men beyond the barrier but the Ork commandos had spotted them and there were puffs of dust as bullets struck the ground around them. The first two men made it safely to the barrier and jumped over to take cover. But a bullet passed through the leg of the last man and he fell to the ground, screaming in pain as he clutched the injured limb. Mayer was just about to get the rest of his men to cover him while he risked retrieving the injured man but there were more Ork gunshots and the injured man was hit repeated in the head and chest and Mayer knew that he was beyond help now.

"Bomber!" Jenni called out as she darted to where he and his surviving men had made it into the camp, "What's going on? Where's everyone else?"

"The Orks are preparing to overrun this place." Mayer replied, "Wolf sent my squad back to get the mortars set up. She wants us to hit the Ork camp to distract them. Everyone else is still back there causing whatever trouble they can. Once we've got the Orks off balance we'll withdraw. How's everyone here?"

"We've lost a couple of the ogryns but the rest of us are fine." Jenni told him.

"Good." Mayer said, "Because working a mortar properly is a two man job and my squad is down two men. I need you and Bess to help us out."

Jenni smiled.

"Sure thing." she said, "Just show us how."

The three mortars were quickly set up and aimed towards the Ork camp. Mayer studied his dataslate to estimate the range required and without needing to refer to the charts that listed the amount of propellant charges to be used and the angle of fire he knew exactly what needed to be done.

"Two charges each. Tubes at seventy degrees." he said as he took a mortar bomb from its case and clipped a pair of propellant rings around its tail, "Let's make it rain."

Quinn opted to use the Chimera itself as a weapon rather than opening fire on the Orks. This way his men were able to disrupt the Ork operations without betraying their presence in the Ork camp. All it required was for Howser to drive the Chimera at high speed around the camp and make it appear that it was driving into or over important looking yet breakable equipment or right through dense clumps of greenskins. In their obvious anger at almost being run over numerous Orks did open fire on the Chimera but they did so using small arms that could not damage the armoured vehicle even given its poor state of repair and none of them bothered to pursue the vehicle as it continued to drive away at speed. From his position in the turret Quinn could hear explosions from around the camp as the other squads destroyed whatever they could find and Mayer started to bombard the camp from a distance. Then he realised that the path of the Chimera had brought his squad to where the Orks were working on their towers and he took out his magnoculars.

"Howser stop." he ordered and as the Chimera came to a halt he peered through the vision slit using the magnoculars to inspect the construction. Even from this position it was impossible to tell exactly what the purpose of the towers was but it looked as if the Orks were now in a hurry about something. Most of the activity seemed to be among the Gretchin working on securing the structures to the side of the space hulk while others were rushing towards them carrying an assortment of small containers and in many cases brushes of one description or another. Quinn tracked a Gretchin carrying a long brush as it made its way up through the complex scaffolding structure to a point about half way up before it set down the container it was carrying and opened up the lid before dipping in the brush. He then watched as the Gretchin started to smear whatever was in the container onto the hull of the space hulk around one of the places where the scaffolding had been anchored to it.

Then Quinn noticed something odd about the anchor point. Although there was what looked to be a bundle of cables wrapped around the scaffolding to hold it in place there was only one narrow cable connecting the tower to the space hulk at this point while the rest from the bundle continued upwards. Furthermore the anchor point itself was not the solid construction that would be required to anchor the tower in place. Instead it appeared that just a small anchor had been fixed to the hull with some sort of malleable adhesive compound and Quinn knew that he had just found out what the Orks had done with the explosives that had been in the cases that Molla's squad had come across as well as why they were draining promethium from the thruster assemblies. By mixing the two together and applying them to the hull of the space hulk they were going to burn a vast hole in its hull and this could only mean that there was something important to their war effort currently trapped inside it.

Redirecting his magnoculars towards the top of the tower he was looking at Quinn saw that a line had been strung across between them both at this point and he saw Gretchin pulling themselves across as they finished fixing more explosive charges along here. It did not appear that they had enhanced these with promethium painted on the hull as they had done up with the vertically placed charges but Quinn guessed that there was already enough explosive power present to get the job of opening up the side of the space hulk done in place.

"Give me that vox!" he snapped, holding out his hand and he snatched the handset from the operator as it was offered to him, "Quinn to Wolf, lieutenant we've got big trouble here." he signalled.

"Go ahead sergeant." Wolf's voice responded, "Do you need back up?"

"Negative lieutenant. I think the Orks are planning to blow open the side of the hulk and I think that they're almost ready to go. There must be something really important in there for them to be going to all this trouble." Quinn warned her.

In her concealed position Wolf looked at Trent.

"What could be so important to them?" she asked him.

"That hulk was probably filled with weapons and ammunition lieutenant." he replied, "The greenskins we've encountered here aren't particularly heavily armed. It's mainly small arms and light vehicles. Add a few hundred tanks, dreadnoughts and artillery pieces to that and there's the making of an army here."

"Sergeant Quinn," Wolf signalled over the vox, "your orders are to do all you can to prevent the Orks from achieving their breach." then she paused before she added, "At any cost. So you understand me sergeant?"

"Lieutenant I'm from Catachan. Every one of us lives with the threat of instant death from the moment we're born." Quinn replied.

"I'm sorry sergeant." Wolf said.

"Don't be. You're not bad for an outsider you know." Quinn said and then he turned off his vox and looked down from the turret at his men, "Okay this is it." he told them, "We've got a job to do and the weapons to do it. Let's see how sturdy those towers are. Howser, gun it."

The Chimera lurched forwards as Howser slammed his foot down on the gas pedal again, flattening a pair of

Orks who had unwisely stood too close to the front of the vehicle and were unable to leap out of the way in time. As with all of the other collisions this was ignored by the greenskins in the immediate vicinity and Howser drove the Chimera directly towards the nearest tower.

Putting his magnoculars away, Quinn leant forwards to place his eye next to the primitive aiming reticule mounted beside the vehicle's main gun and turned the turret so that it lined up on the base of the tower, hoping to knock out one of the supports. If he could just get one of the towers to collapse then from what he had seen of the way the detonator cables were wound around them then they would be ripped away from the hull of the space hulk, possibly taking the explosive charges with them.

The trigger for the Ork made cannon consisted of a handlebar grip mounted on the opposite side of the weapon to the aiming reticule and Quinn had to reach around the breach to take hold of this.

"Keep us steady." he ordered as Howser continued on course for the tower and then Quinn squeezed the trigger tightly.

Nothing happened.

Quinn released his grip and tried again, tightening and relaxing his grip rapidly as he tried to get the weapon to function.

"Safety?" one of his men called out and Quinn lifted his head and looked at the weapon. Any form of safety device seemed unlikely for an Ork weapon but it was possible that part of the mechanism had been lifted from a human or other alien weapon that featured one. But Quinn could find no evidence of such a device if there was one. Over millennia of conflict between greenskins and humans, stretching right back to the lost days of the Dark Age of Technology, vast quantities of greenskin weapons had been captured and examined by humans and there had always been reports of weapons that refused to function. Some of this could of course have been put down to damage suffered during battle but Quinn had also heard tales that some greenskin technology functioned only because the greenskins themselves believed that it did. To a member of any other species it was useless.

"Bolter!" Quinn snapped, remembering the human built weapon mounted at the front of the Chimera, "Target that tower and open fire."

The guardsman sat behind the heavy bolter nodded and opened fire immediately, sending a stream of rocket assisted projectile with mass reactive warheads towards the nearest tower support and through his vision slit Quinn saw the detonations of each round. But although they pitted the support and in some cases put holes right through it the bolter rounds failed to bring it down. They did however, alert every nearby greenskin to the fact that their enemies were in their midst. Even inside the Chimera the Catachans heard the roars of the Orks outside and this was followed by the sound of hundreds of bullets bouncing off the vehicle's hull.

"See what you can do about those firing ports." Quinn told his men, "Let's show these xenos bastards what the men of Catachan can do."

The veteran troops in the Chimera's passenger compartment got up off the benches they were sat on and turned to face the sides of the vehicle, all of them drawing their knives. Although the Orks had removed the six lasguns that were mounted in an Imperial Guard Chimera for use by the passengers the holes intended for their mountings still existed and the Catachans attacked the plates that had been fixed over these with their knives, hoping to pry them away.

As they worked at this Howser swerved the Chimera away from the tower he had been intending to ram as an Ork truck drove in front of the armoured vehicle and the belt fed weapon mounted on top opened fire.

Meanwhile Quinn threw open the hatch above his head and stood up so that he could use his shotgun on the Orks. He chambered and fired one round after another until the weapon was empty and he sat back down just before a burst of Ork gunfire bounced off the open hatch, narrowly avoiding him.

"How are we going with those holes?" he asked.

"Almost there." one of his men replied and then there was a sudden 'Snap!' as the cover over one of the holes gave way and the veteran trooper sheathed his knife and instead picked up his flamer and thrust the muzzle through the hole. It was not possible for him to aim the weapon but with Orks and Gretchin all around the Chimera that was not necessary so he pulled back the trigger to open the fuel valve and held it down, sending a continuous stream of burning liquid out of the side of the vehicle that sent the greenskins on that side running.

One particular Ork headed towards one of the towers, shouting orders in its own language at a small cluster of Gretchin. The Ork was one of the larger specimens present and its body had been augmented with crude bionics. As it ran the Gretchin it shouted at worked quickly to connect bundles of wires together and connected them to a large wooden box that mounted a 'T' shaped handle on top. The process was just about complete by the time the Ork reached the box and it kicked the Gretchin out of the way before reaching out and pushing down on the handle.

The signal from the triggering device travelled up the nearest tower and along the line strung between them as well as along a second cluster of cables to the other tower and up it to the explosives that had been set against the hull of the space hulk. From Quinn's position in the Chimera the detonation appeared as twin columns of fire that enveloped both towers and incinerated not only them but also the Gretchin that were still

on them. The explosive charges set between the towers detonated at the same time as those mounted behind them but without the promethium to enhance their effect these detonations were not as noticeable. The promethium was rapidly consumed by the flames as they melted through the hull of the space hulk to create two massive vertical tears in it, the tops of these being linked by a series of holes blown in the hull as well. At the same time as this happened all of the small arms fire directed at the Chimera stopped and the Orks outside all turned towards the space hulk and began to chant two words over and over again.

“Gork!”

“Mork!”

“Gork!”

“Mork!”

“Gork!”

“Mork!”

Quinn did not know what these words meant but he guessed that it was nothing good.

“Howser!” he snapped, “Get us the feth out of here.”

Taking advantage of the ceasing of the Ork attacks on the Chimera Howser turned it around to point away from the space hulk and accelerated away as fast as he could. As it turned out he was just in time as a loud groaning sound started to fill the air, growing louder all the time.

## 12.

Wolf turned and gasped when she heard the explosions from the space hulk. She was in time to see the inferno that melted its way through the hull of the massive vessel and she too heard the groaning sound as what remained of the hull located between the holes punched through by the explosives placed along the line between the towers started to give way, the mass of the hull plating below this proving far too great for what was left to keep supported now that the two vertical tears had separated it from the support of the rest of the hull as well.

One by one the sections of hull between the holes gave way and the enormous loose flap that this created began to peel outwards to the delight of the Orks all across the camp and their cheers could be heard all over.

"Throne no." Wolf said as the flap of hull finally gave way and came crashing down to the ground, producing a sound like thunder as it landed and crushed dozens of Orks and Gretchin that had been stood beneath where it fell.

The lack of sunlight meant that the interior of the space hulk was in pitch blackness and it was impossible for members of the command section to make out exactly what was inside that the greenskins had been so eager to get hold of that they had deployed thousands of troops to obtain it and Wolf pictured a swarm of heavy battle tanks rolling out of the hole. From inside the space hulk there then came a loud, dull 'Thump', followed by a low rumbling that was accompanied by more cheers from the greenskins and once again they began to chant. Not just those by the hole but as far as the Catachans could tell the chanting was coming from everywhere in the camp at once.

"Gork!"

"Mork!"

"Gork!"

"Mork!"

"Gork!"

"Mork!"

The sound of the chant was then drowned out by a sudden loud rhythmic pounding and once more the Orks cheered and fired their weapons into the air in celebration as from inside the space hulk a single war machine came into view.

Rather than the tanks that Wolf had feared would emerge she found herself staring at a gigantic mechanical parody of an Ork figure. Its flared body was mounted on a pair of stubby legs that were concealed beneath a thickly armoured skirt that revealed just the massive feet on which it stood while the enormous cannon that protruded forwards out of its belly was only one of the multitude of weapons it carried. Each arm served as the mounting for another unbelievable massive weapon. One one arm this was another ranged weapon of some sort while the other sported a massive chain blade that itself had numerous smaller ranged weapons mounted along side it. More powerful looking gun batteries were mounted above these on the shoulders while the machine's armament was rounded out by a multitude of smaller weapon mountings that were scattered all over its structure.

"It's a Gargant." Wolf exclaimed. She had heard of the Ork equivalents to the battle titan god machines of the Adeptus Mechanicus along with tales of their destructive power but this was the first time she had faced one in real life and the sight of the Gargant as it waddled out of the space hulk terrified her.

"Your orders lieutenant?" Vance asked, just as overwhelmed by what he was looking at as Wolf was.

"We can't fight that thing." Trent pointed out.

"And we need to get word back to headquarters." Vance added.

"Retreat." Wolf ordered, "Tell everyone to pull back. Don't wait for other units to catch up, everyone needs to just run as fast as they can back to the vehicles and get out of here. Maybe General Fortnam or one of the other divisional commanders can come up with a way to destroy that thing before the Orks get a chance to use it."

"And if they don't?" Torrent asked.

"Then that machine alone will hand Valus to the Orks." Trent answered.