



CATACHAN ONE NINE MARK FOUR MARK TWO

OUTSIDE INFLUENCE

BY STEPHEN J DUTTON



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1.1 : OUTSIDE INFLUENCE

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The infamous jungle fighters of Catachan are notoriously distrustful of outsiders. So when Lieutenant Emilia Wolf of the Lyreian XXXII regiment is captured by alien mercenaries her rescuers are not the friendly faces she hoped for and things go from bad to worse for them all when it turns out that she cannot be returned to her original regiment. Instead she finds herself given command of a platoon almost as hostile to her as the alien forces they face.

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The column of Imperial Guard vehicles made its way along the jungle road. Most of them were wheeled light transport vehicles rather than the tracked and armoured chimera infantry fighting vehicles that led the way just in case of an ambush no matter how unlikely such an event now seemed. The Lyrerian XXXII had been one of several regiments deployed to the planet Par Shallon on the Eastern Fringe of the galaxy following rumours that the loyalty of some of its leaders was wavering had reached Segmentum Command via the enforcers of the local Adeptus Arbites detachment. However, the presence of these troops as a reminder not to underestimate the reach of the forces of the Immortal Master of Mankind seemed to have put a halt to any thoughts of secession and now pressures elsewhere dictated that Segmentum Command redeploy these forces. A tropical world that orbited a hot white star, most of Par Shallon's land mass was covered in lush jungle, the notable exceptions being the areas that had been cleared for the coastal cities and farms that exported both staple crops and luxury foodstuffs across the sector.

Lieutenant Emilia Wolf sat in the back of one of the smaller vehicles, one laden with boxes of blank forms considered essential to the good running of a military regiment. She was the only officer amongst the four occupants, the others being the driver, a gunner manning the pintle-mounted heavy stubber that was the vehicle's sole armament and a reserve trooper able to take over from either of these if needed. Looking out of the window all she saw was the green of the local jungle and she yawned, knowing that there was still a good two hours of this at least until they reached the starport. All of a sudden there was a loud 'Bang!' followed by a sharp hiss and the vehicle veered off the road.

Wolf cried out in alarm as the vehicle slid down the steep slope, its driver doing his best to steer away from the larger trees that would cause severe damage if they were struck.

"Are we under attack?" she exclaimed as the vehicle finally came to a halt in the undergrowth at the bottom of the slope.

"No ma'am." The driver replied, "Or at least I don't think so. I think the automatic tyre pressure system burst. We've lost both left side tyres."

"How bad?" Wolf asked.

"I'll go take a look." The driver, Kole, replied and he pulled his las gun from the rack above his, "Are we clear Lee?" he asked as he took hold of the door handle beside him.

"All clear." The gunner replied, "Its just us down here." And the driver opened his door and got out. Wolf copied him, her hand resting on her holstered las pistol just in case.

"So what's wrong?" she asked, looking down at the driver as he lay down and peered beneath the vehicle.

"It's the tyre pressure system alright. The main line to the left has split."

"Kole do we need a tech priest?" she then asked.

"I wouldn't." the reserve trooper said as he got out of the vehicle, "Those tech priests don't like to be bothered with anything as trivial as this."

"Brinks is right. Those cogboys can get uppity when you ask them to del with little jobs. We've sealant in the vehicle." Kole said, getting back to his feet, "We should be able to plug the line and fix the tyres if needed."

"What's going on down there?" a voice called out from the road above and Wolf looked back up the slope where she saw an officer staring back down at her.

"Captain Grettan sir." She called out to him, "Our vehicle has suffered a malfunction. My driver assures me that it's fixable though."

"How long?" Grettan demanded and Wolf looked back at Kole who in turn looked to the other trooper.

"Hour?" Kole said and Brinks shrugged, "An hour or two." He then said to Wolf.

"At least an hour sir." She shouted up the slope.

"Then get to it lieutenant." He replied, "Because the shuttles aren't going to wait for you. If you're not at the star port by twenty-two hundred then you'll be classified as a deserter. Do you understand?"

"Yes sir." Wolf replied and her superior stepped away from the top of the slope, disappearing from view. Wolf turned back to face the three other troopers from her vehicle, "Okay guys, let's get this thing fixed." She said, "Unless anyone's in a hurry to be shot for desertion."

Being both an officer and much smaller than the three other troopers Wolf let them get on with raising up the vehicle and fixing it while she stood back and handed them tools as they requested them.

"How much longer?" she asked, nervously looking at her watch.

"Done, I think." Kole said, "Get in and turn her on. If this is right the tyres should auto-inflate."

Wolf climbed into the vehicle and turned the ignition. Despite the barely controlled descent of the slope the driver had been able to keep the vehicle from suffering serious harm and the engine roared into life at the first attempt.

"That's it!" Kole yelled as he slid out from underneath it, "The tyres have inflated lieutenant so we're good to go."

"Great." Wolf replied and she glanced up the slope, "But how do we get back up there?"

Kole smiled back at her and then looked to Lee.

"Lee take this." He said as he unhooked the end of the reel of metal cable attached to the front of the vehicle and handed it to him, "Go up there and find us a nice thick tree trunk to attach it to."

"Got it." Lee replied and with the cable in his hand he began to climb back up the slope. Meanwhile Kole stood beside Wolf.

"As soon as we let's us know that the line's secure we'll just trigger the winch and drag us back up to the road." He said, "Simple."

Wolf looked at her watch.

"And we should get to the star port with two hours to spare." She said, smiling, "Well done."

"Why's the cable not moving?" Brinks suddenly asked, looking at the reel. Wolf and Kole both looked down to the ground and they saw that the length of cable that Lee had been dragging behind him was now lay on the ground motionless. Both of them frowned as they looked up the slope for any signs of Lee.

"Maybe he stopped to take a leak." Brinks suggested.

"Hey Lee!" Kole yelled out, "You can take a piss after finding us a tree." Then he glanced at Wolf, "Sorry about the language ma'am." He added.

"That's okay." Wolf replied and she took a deep breath, "Lee! Tie a knot in it if you have to. I want this vehicle back on the road." She shouted but there was no reply.

"Why is it so quiet?" Brinks asked and he raised his las gun to his shoulder and looked around.

"You're right." Kole said as noticed that many of the natural noises of the jungle had stopped and he too raised his las gun, "Lieutenant I think you should contact the column. See if there's still anyone close enough to come give us a hand out here."

"I think you're right." She replied and she reached for the vehicle's built in vox set. But just as she took hold of the handset there was a sudden 'Thud!' as Lee's severed and bloody head bounced off the front of the vehicle and she screamed.

"Contact right!" Kole yelled, discharging his las gun on full auto into the undergrowth when he saw something move there. In reply there was the sharp 'Crack' of a projectile weapon and a small explosion as a round struck Kole in the chest, blasting a hole through his armour.

"Oh feth!" Brinks snapped as he whirled around, searching for a target before something unseen by Wolf suddenly took hold of him and dragged him away screaming.

Terrified, Wolf reached for her sidearm. But even as she was pulling the pistol from its holster a clawed hand reached in through the open door beside her and grabbed hold of her ankle. Before Wolf could react the hand pulled on her ankle and began to drag her from the vehicle. She screamed and ignoring her las pistol she instead grabbed hold of the steering wheel, hoping to stop herself from being pulled out of it.

"No!" she shouted as she felt another hand take hold of the hair on the back of her head. But before she could do anything else the hand forced her head forwards, slamming it against the frame of the vehicle and everything went black.

It was the need to relieve herself that brought Wolf back to consciousness and she found her self lying face down in a jungle clearing. Trying to get up she realised that her wrists and ankles were bound tightly. Darkness had fallen while she had been unconscious and the air was cool, however Wolf could feel heat from behind her and she turned her head to see a small fire had been set up in the centre of the clearing and sat around this were her captors.

They were aliens and although the species not immediately familiar to Wolf she could see that they were of tall and slender build and possessed the humanoid form common to most of the galaxy's intelligent species. With pale greenish skin and a cluster of long spines extending from the backs of their heads instead of hair, they also possessed a prominently beaked face. Though near-naked, wearing just loin cloths and bandoliers of ammunition, each was armed with a long barrelled projectile rifle of alien design and as Wolf watched them they squawked at one another as they shared out chunks of meat that they held over the fire on sticks to cook.

Turning her head further she spotted Brinks lying close by. He was lay with his back to her and although he was not bound he had been stripped.

"Brinks." Wolf whispered, "Brinks can you untie me?"

There was no reply and Wolf looked back towards the aliens around the campfire. Seeing that they appeared focused on their meal and were still squawking at one another she began to wriggle closer to Brinks.

"Brinks." She whispered again as she got closer and she kicked him gently, the blow striking him at the base of his spine. This caused Brinks to roll over towards her and as Wolf saw where the aliens had got the meat for their meal she screamed.

Squawking frantically the aliens all leapt to their feet, dropping their food and raising their rifles. They ran towards Wolf, surrounding her and looking down at her with their heads tilting from side to side as they looked at her.

“Who – who are you?” she asked, “What do you want from me?”

There was another squawk, this one not from any of the aliens massed around Wolf and they stepped back, forming a gap that another of their species stepped into. This alien wore the same sort of crude clothing as the others but also wore a necklace bedecked with assorted totems and trophies. Wolf gulped as she spotted three sets of blood stained Imperial Guard identity tags amongst them. This alien held a rifle of the same design as the others but also clutched a slender metal pole about a metre long. The alien stared down at Wolf and let out a single squawk.

“I don’t suppose you could untie me could you?” she asked hopefully, “I could do with using the-“ and then the alien leader squawked loudly once more, taking a step closer and stamping its foot down close to Wolf’s face, “Look I won’t try and run away I promise. I don’t to end up like-“ and she glanced towards what was left of Brinks. But before she could finish her sentence the alien leader jabbed Wolf with the tip of his staff. Energy coursed through her body and Wolf screamed, convulsing. Then as the charge was shut off she felt warmth and wetness between her legs.

“Oh – Oh no.” she said as she realised that the shock had caused her to lose control of her bodily functions, “Are you happy now?” she snapped, looking up at the alien leader, “Is that what you wanted?” and then she noticed something different about the alien leader from when she had looked at him before. Now there was a tiny red dot on his forehead and Wolf smiled.

The alien’s head jerked backwards as the single well-placed bullet punched through its skull, roasting its brain. The others squawked loudly, raising their rifles and looking around for the source of the attack. But before they could find it there was a roaring sound from in the undergrowth, accompanied by a crashing as something big forced its way through the jungle and into the clearing.

The seven giant figures that emerged were like some parody of human beings, massively proportioned and clutching oversized drum-fed weapons that boomed loudly as they were fired, ripping several of the aliens apart where they stood. The survivors returned fire, their explosive rounds striking some of the newcomers, but doing nothing to slow them down and they in turn charged at the aliens, roaring and swinging their weapons like clubs.

Wolf squealed, curling up into a ball as the two opposing groups battled around her. Her captors were fast and agile, but the giant humans could shrug off the blows of the aliens whereas just a single strike from one of them was enough to smash an alien’s bones. With her eyes closed tightly Wolf could not see the battle but she could hear it and it was not long before there was quiet once more, the only sounds the crackling of the campfire and the heavy breathing of the giants. Wolf opened her eyes and once again found herself being stared at.

Now that the giant figures were stationary Wolf could see that they wore crude versions of Imperial uniforms, though not of her regiment and she realised that they were ogryns. Ogryns were abhumans; their ancestors had been settlers on harsh worlds where physical strength was key to survival. Cut off from the rest of humanity for millennia during the Age of Strife they had evolved to their current form, hulking brutes with great strength but little intelligence. They were recruited into the Imperial Guard in massive numbers, making excellent shock troops. A few, the most intelligent were surgically modified to further enhance their intelligence to the point where they could reliably act as unit leaders. This process was known as Biochemical Ogryn Neural Enhancement and involved the implantation of cybernetic devices and chemical dispensers into the ogryn’s brain. One of these so-called BONEheads was amongst the ogryns now looking down at Wolf.

Catching sight of her lieutenant’s rank markings on the shoulders of her overalls the BONEhead snapped to attention and saluted.

“Officer!” he yelled, “Attention!” and the other ogryns all mimicked his stance, standing upright at attention and saluting Wolf.

“Could you untie me?” Wolf asked, wriggling.

“IG three six seven eight slash forty-seven K. Any soldier who fails to salute a passing officer or anyone of higher rank shall be flogged.” The BONEhead replied, quoting directly from Imperial Guard regulations.

“Fine you’ve saluted me. Now untie me.”

“All salutes to be held until returned.” The BONEhead said.

“Oh you have got to be kidding me.” Wolf said and then from in the distance there was an all too familiar squawking sound.

“More coming.” One of the ogryns said, “Could be lots.”

“Untie me and we can get out of here.” Wolf said.

The BONEhead let out a brief growl, frowning as he attempted to reconcile his situation with Imperial regulations. All of a sudden and all the while holding his salute he slung his bulky weapon over his shoulder

and then reached down with his free hand to scoop Wolf up off the ground, throwing her over his shoulder as well.

“With me.” He ordered and he began to run back the way the orgyns had come prior to their appearance in the clearing with one hand still saluting. The other orgyns did likewise, all holding their salutes as they ran.

2.

Platoon Sergeant Roland Vance zipped the body bag shut and paused. There were two of the bags lay side by side. The one Vance had just sealed contained Lieutenant Silt the platoon's commanding officer while the other held its medic, both victims of alien bullets. The bodies of those aliens now decorated nearby trees. "I guess this means you're in command now." A voice said from behind him and Vance looked up at the other sergeant, Molla of First Squad.

"Only until the vote." Vance replied.

"Who do you think it'll be?" Molla asked.

"Quinn of course." Vance said as he stood up.

"So not you? You're platoon sergeant after all."

"Only because the lieutenant made me it." Vance said and before Molla could reply another guardsman interrupted them, one wearing a large vox set mounted on his back.

"Transmission sergeant." He said, "Its Rull." And he handed Vance the handset.

"Vance." Vance said and then he listened to what the individual on the other end of the link had to say and frowned, "Say that again." He said and then paused while the message was repeated, "Copy that. Vance out." Then he turned around and called out, "Grey! Quinn! Over here!" and he strode across the clearing to a spot that offered a view of a trail leading downhill.

"What's is it?" Molla asked as Vance took out a set of field glasses and used it look down the trail. Reaching to his belt, Molla did the same.

"Rull says Khor's squad is heading back." Vance said, "Apparently they ran into trouble to the south."

"Problem Vance?" one of two other men approaching asked and he lifted a shotgun to rest it over his shoulder.

"Quinn, Khor's heading back." Vance replied, "Rull said we should take a look."

"Are they being pursued?" the other sergeant, Grey asked as he stood behind Molla and Vance.

There was a distant crashing sound.

"I see them." Molla said.

"No need for magnoculars, I heard them." Quinn added.

"What in the name of Him on Earth are they doing?" Molla then asked, "Wait. Are they-"

"Saluting?" Vance interrupted, "It looks that way."

"What?" Grey said and he and Quinn both took out their own sets of magnoculars and looked down the trail towards the distant ogyrns.

"They are. They're bloody well saluting." Quinn said in amazement.

"Uh-oh." Vance said, focusing on the BONEhead at the head of the unit, "Look at Khor. What's that he's carrying?"

"Looks like they've caught someone." Grey said.

"Whoever it is, they're tied up." Quinn said, "No way Khor's lot did that. They can't tie knots. You know that."

"Then who is it?" Grey asked.

"Oh no." Vance said, lowering his magnoculars, "That uniform's one of ours."

"No more of us out here." Molla said, "Or at least there's not supposed to be."

"No not one of 'us' us." Vance said, "Another guard unit. Those fething kroot must have grabbed some poor Emperor damned soul and Khor's rescued him."

Molla lowered his magnoculars as well.

"So if the ogyrns are saluting then that means that he's-" he began

"An officer." Both Grey and Quinn said together.

"Okay everybody look sharp." Vance called out to the nearby guardsmen, "Looks like we're about to have a visitor."

"What about Corporal Mayer?" Grey asked and Vance shook his head.

"The mortar squad don't need to know yet. This officer isn't arriving to carry out an inspection after all." He said, "Leave them where they are for now."

"The officer better think the same." Grey muttered.

Led by Khor the seven ogyrns soon came charging up the hill and into the clearing. They lined up in front of the four sergeants and Khor dropped Wolf to the ground. She squealed as she fell and then wriggled until she could look up at the four men.

"That's an officer?" Grey said.

"Yes I am." Wolf replied, "So how about someone unties me?"

Molla sniffed the air.

"I thought those ogryns were hosed down this morning." He said, "What the hell have they gotten themselves covered in now?"

"It's not the ogryns." Quinn said and then he grinned as he added, "I believe that the officer has soiled herself."

"I've been tied up for hours!" Wolf snapped back, "And then I got hit with some sort of power maul or something. I'd like to see you do better." Then her eyes widened, "What time is it?" she asked.

"Twenty-three twenty." Vance replied, glancing at his watch and Wolf's face fell.

"Look," she said, "My name is Lieutenant Wolf of the Lyrerian thirty-second regiment. I was supposed to be at the starport more than an hour ago."

A hint of a smile appeared on Grey's face.

"The thirty-second have already bugged out." He said, "That makes her a deserter."

"I am not a deserter." Wolf replied sternly, "Now who are you and where's your officer?"

"Platoon Sergeant Vance. Second Platoon, Fourth Company Nineteenth Catachan Regiment and Lieutenant Silt is over there." He said and he pointed towards the body bags, "A kroot unit tried to ambush us and one of their rounds blew up in his neck. He probably would have lived anyway if the second shot hadn't killed our medic. For the time being I'm in command here."

"What are kroot?" Wolf asked.

"They're kroot." Vance replied and he pointed to the bodies the men of his platoon had strung up in the trees and Wolf immediately recognised them as the same species that had taken her captive, "We wanted to send them a message about messing with us." And then he drew a long and vicious looking knife. For a moment as Vance reached down to her Wolf was afraid but he simply used the blade to slice through her bonds and then turned his back on her, striding across the clearing towards the two dead guardsmen.

"You need to get cleaned up." He said, "Even if the kroot can't smell you I can and it's rank." And he knelt down beside the pack that had belonged to the late Silt and began rummaging through it, producing a pair of trousers and a vest like the ones the Catachan troops wore that he tossed at Wolf, "Take those and these as well." He said, taking a canteen and folded entrenching tool from the outside of the pack as well, "Now go off over there somewhere and change. Then we'll take you back with us."

"She's not one of us." Grey pointed out.

"I know." Vance replied, "She won't be in command."

"I outrank you sergeant. I could report you for that." Wolf said and the Catachan scowled.

"There are more than forty of us." He said, "Against just you. Do you even have a weapon?"

"No." Wolf admitted reluctantly.

"Commissars are a long way off lieutenant." Grey commented, "They may not be too happy to see a deserter anyway." Then he smiled again, "On the other hand maybe Commissar Layne will appreciate having someone to execute."

"Just go and change." Vance said, "Bury your old clothes. Oh and one last thing."

"What?" Wolf asked.

"Will you please salute those bloody ogryns?"

Standing at little more than one and a half metres in height, the clothing given to Wolf was far too big for her and when she emerged from the jungle back into the clearing she had been forced to tie off her vest and fix the trousers around her waist using her old belt as well as rolling up the legs and tucking them into her boots.

"That'll just have to do I suppose." Vance said and he held out a load-carrying belt that included a holstered las pistol and several pouches of equipment, "Take this. It was the lieutenant's."

"Our lieutenant's." Grey added.

"Thanks." Wolf said as she took the belt and then she noticed that Vance was also holding another knife in its scabbard, "Is that for me as well?" she asked, reaching out for the weapon.

"No." Vance said, pulling the knife away.

"That's the lieutenant's knife." Molla said.

"So? He's dead isn't he?" Wolf replied and she noticed that the Catachans all seemed to be glaring at her, "What did I say?"

"This is a Catachan's blade." Vance said, "And you're no Catachan." And then he clipped the knife to his own belt, beside his own knife, "Now let's move out."

As a file clerk Wolf was not used walking great distances through terrain that could have an enemy hiding behind tree or rock, however to the Catachans it came naturally. The planet Catachan was a deathworld, covered in lush green jungle that from space looked idyllic but on the surface almost every native life form was hostile. Catachans grew up learning to watch their backs or they did not grow up at all.

The platoon formed into a column with Quinn's veterans to the front, Grey's and Molla's squads marched single file on the flanks with each squad focusing their attention to one side while the remains of the

command squad, Corporal Mayer's mortar squad and the ogyrns marched along in the centre and it was with these units that Wolf travelled.

"How much longer do you think this will take sergeant?" Wolf asked Vance, if only to break the monotony of walking in silence.

"Depends." He replied without breaking stride, "The terrain's pretty open between here and camp. There's a trail further up ahead but I don't think we should risk that. If there are more kroot around they may be watching it."

"Me and my men were just off the road when they attacked us." Wolf said but then Vance suddenly came to a halt, his hand pressed to the microbead communicator in his ear and he raised the other in a clenched fist, "Platoon halt!" he called out.

"What's wrong?" Wolf asked.

"Kroot." Vance replied then in a raised voice he addressed the platoon, "Okay everyone Rull's spotted a group of kroot on the trail ahead."

"Who's Rull?" Wolf asked.

"The sniper who saved your skin." Grey replied.

"Rull moves around us." Vance explained, "Acts as a scout to warn us about enemy movements."

"Plus takes the head off a few of them." Quinn added from up ahead.

"Yeah, I've seen that." Wolf replied.

"So what's the plan Vance?" Grey asked.

"The trail's about eight hundred metres ahead." Vance said, "Bomber will set up his mortars here while we double time it to the trail. We'll need a good spread of fire Bomber, have one tube put rounds ahead of them and another behind to keep them in our kill zone. The third tube can be used to land rounds in the middle of them. First and Second Squads will deploy along the near side with my unit behind them. Quinn, I want you and Khor's unit to set up on the other side of the trail. That's the only direction the kroot will have to run in so be ready."

"Flamers?" Quinn asked and Vance nodded.

"Torch them. Then Khor's ogyrns can finish them off. Okay, everyone know what they're doing?"

"No." Wolf said.

"You just stay out of the way and stay quiet." Vance said.

"You're about to see how a real combat unit operates." Grey added, "If you get into trouble just scream and one of us will come and rescue you again."

Wolf frowned.

"Right let's get a move on." Vance ordered, "We can't let those kroot get there ahead of us."

The platoon advanced to the wide jungle trail at a faster pace than before, paying less attention to their surroundings now that they knew what lay ahead. The squads commanded by Grey and Molla spread out and took up firing positions concealed in the undergrowth. Both squads included a heavy weapon operated by two man teams but only the belt fed heavy bolter of Molla's squad was set up, the missile launcher of Grey's was left on the ground, its crew instead opting to use their rifles for what seemed likely to be a battle at close quarters.

Quinn and Khor rushed through this line and across the trail. Quinn quickly located a area of denser undergrowth and directed the ogyrns towards it.

"Khor, take you troops and hide behind there. When the enemy comes this way I'll signal you to charge."

Khor smiled.

"Ogyrns smash." He said before waving to his unit to follow him.

As the massive abhumans concealed themselves in the jungle Quinn activated his microbead.

"This is Quinn. We're all set."

"Good." Vance replied, "Because the kroot are almost here."

3.

From her hiding place amongst the three survivors of the platoon's command section Wolf could just about make out the kroot as they came down the trail but the light was too poor for her get a proper look at them. Then she remembered that the equipment on her belt had belonged to the platoon's officer and reasoned that it would include some sort of image magnification device. Sure enough as she felt through the pouches she came across a set of standard issue guard magnoculars that included light magnification and she lifted them to her eyes.

The kroot force seemed to be made up of about three dozen of the humanoid aliens Wolf had already encountered, all armed with the same style of rifle. But in addition to these were several quadrupeds that looked as if they were some sort of mutated form of the kroot warriors. Most looked like they were a canine version of the kroot, moving under the direction of one of the warriors but two of them were much bigger. These had a hunched appearance and each of them carried a single warrior as a rider to operate the oversized gun mounted on their backs.

Wolf went to return the magnoculars to her belt, but as she put her elbow back to the ground she accidentally leant on a fallen twig.

'Snap!'

Grey, Molla and Vance all glared at Wolf as the kroot came to a sudden halt, letting out numerous squawks as they raised their rifles and searched for targets. Vance activated his microbead.

"Bomber." He said softly, knowing that the microphone pressed against his throat would pick up the slightest sound, "Adjust your fire twenty metres back along the trail and wait for my signal. Acknowledge."

"Copy that. Twenty metre lateral adjustment."

Molla stared at Vance as the platoon sergeant raised his hand slightly, watching the now slowly advancing kroot carefully. There were sudden barks from some of the kroot hounds and Vance brought his hand down at the same time as he whispered, "Now." through his microbead.

Molla slapped the nearby heavy bolter gunner on his back and the man opened fire, the roar of the explosive tipped rocket assisted projectiles tearing through the relative quiet of the jungle night. The bolts were aimed for the pack of kroot hounds and being designed for use against armoured infantry as well as lightweight vehicles the mass reactive ammunition burst their bodies wide open. At the same time the other guardsmen of the two squads also opened fire with their las guns and the night was lit up.

A whistling from overhead heralded the incoming mortar rounds. The first detonated behind the kroot position causing panicked squawks as the aliens rushed forwards, firing wildly into the undergrowth in the hope of hitting something as they attempted to flee through the Catachan's ambush. As the kroot ran on the second mortar round landed in the trail ahead of them, blasting a crater in the ground and throwing up a cloud of dirt and rocks. Neither of the explosives inflicted any casualties on the alien kroot, but it did let them know that the Catachan's could call down fire support on them. A point proven by the third mortar round that landed amongst them.

Higher pitched squawks were let out by several of the aliens as they were blasted off their feet, the fragments of the bomb tearing through their unarmoured bodies as well as taking the rider off one of the larger krootox beasts.

The gun mounted on top of the second krootox boomed and tore a hole in the undergrowth concealing a pair of Catachans and there were screams as the men died.

"Somebody take out that Emperor damned gun!" Vance yelled, but a moment later the kroot gunner sudden twisted around and toppled off the back of the beast.

"Rull?" Wolf said to Vance.

"Rull." He replied.

Another mortar round detonated on the trail back the way the kroot had come from, reminding them that they could not retreat that way and this broke their resistance. One of them, an alien wearing similar decoration to the one that had used its staff on Wolf raised its rifle into the air and squawked loudly. Immediately the kroot began to fall back away from the Catachans into the jungle on the far side of the trail.

"Quinn they're heading your way." Vance signalled, "Bomber, let there be light." Then as he shut off his transmitter Vance took a deep breath, "Fix bayonets!" he yelled.

As the kroot ran through the jungle there was another whistle from overhead and some looked up, attempting to determine where the mortar bomb would land. However, there was just a flash and the night sky was lit up, revealing a brightly burning flare slowly drifting downwards on a parachute and at the same time Quinn's unit sprung their trap. Two jets of flame swept through the already disorganised kroot, enveloping some totally in flames while others were merely set alight. Following this the rest of Quinn's unit including Quinn himself burst out of cover to charge at the aliens, blasts from the shotguns clearing a path ahead of them.

"Khor now!" Quinn yelled and the thicker patch of undergrowth was torn apart as the ogryns chose to simply run straight through it, ignoring the minor scratches this inflicted on their tough hides.

"Ogryns smash!" Khor bellowed as he first fired as many rounds from his weapon as its burst limiting mechanism would allow and then swung it out in front of him, lifting kroot up off the ground and propelling him backwards.

The kroot leader lashed out at one of Quinn's men with a curved blade, slicing the veteran guardsman's throat open and then squawked more orders to the surviving aliens who began to fall back once more. But as they attempted to disengage from the Catachans and their ogryn comrades they ran right into the charging members of Grey and Molla's squads.

The kroot leader fired a round that struck one of the guardsmen, killing him instantly but as he opened the breech of his rifle to reload it he felt the muzzle of Quinn's shotgun press against the side of his head.

"Who's a pretty birdie then?" Quinn said and he pulled the trigger, taking off the side of the alien's head.

Running along behind the Catachans Wolf was reluctant either to engage the kroot directly or to let herself get left behind just in case any of the aliens were able to get past the guardsmen. However, it seemed that the expert jungle fighters had everything well in hand. For a moment Wolf thought she saw one of the aliens about to escape and instinctively she reached for the las pistol still holstered on her hip but before she could draw the weapon there was a brief flash as Rull brought a halt to its escape.

The last few remaining kroot attempted to use the trees as an escape route, making use of their clawed hands and feet to rapidly scale the trunks. But this attempt was proven to be futile as the flamers of Quinn's squad screeched again, jets of fire igniting the canopy above. The squawks of the kroot turned to screeches as they found themselves surrounded by flames and they dropped back towards the jungle floor. One of them came down amongst the ogryns and while it was still in mid air one of the brutish creatures delivered a punch to its face so powerful that it sent the alien flying backwards into a tree trunk.

Another landed close to Molla and it swung its rifle at him, hoping to impale him on one of the large blades set into either end. Seeing this attack coming Molla raised his own blade to parry the strike, knocking the rifle aside long enough for him to get his las pistol up under the kroot's jaw and fire a single shot up through its head.

Only two kroot now remained and both charged headlong towards the remnants of the command squad. Vance took aim with his pistol and placed a las bolt between the eyes of one just as the other took a swing at the other guardsmen with its rifle. The Catachan carrying the unit's vox set brought his own rifle up to block the strike and the pair wrestled briefly as each tried to get their own weapon free while keeping the other's pointed away from them. The Catachan broke this stalemate simply by thrusting his head forwards suddenly and butting the alien in the face. Both staggered away from one another, the kroot surprised by the suddenness and unexpected nature of the attack, while the force of the impact with the alien's beak momentarily disorientated the Catachan. But this was all the opportunity the other squad member needed and with a roar of defiance he thrust his rifle forwards and the large Catachan blade mounted beneath its muzzle was forced into the alien's chest. It let out one last squawk, spitting blood as it did so and then collapsed.

"Just what the hell were you playing at?" Grey demanded, storming towards Wolf and glaring at her, "She gave away our position."

"Back off Grey." Vance said, "She didn't mean it."

"She could have got us all killed." Grey exclaimed, "She still could."

"Or I could have you brought up on charges for speaking to an officer like that." Wolf said and Grey turned back to face her, once again staring straight into her eyes.

"Oh really?" he said, "Well in that case why don't you just draw your las pistol and carry out the execution right here? The pistol you didn't fire once while we were fighting the enemy. There aren't any commissars about so you'll have to do it yourself. But mark my words missy, take a good look around you first and ask yourself if you think you can get off a shot before someone else puts a round into you. No one's expecting you back at camp. You're a deserter after all."

Wolf looked around and saw that all of the Catachans were looking at her and most had their weapons at the ready, not actually going so far as to aim one at her but it was clear that such an action would not take long.

"Just forget about it." Quinn said to Grey, "We've better things to be worrying about than her."

"I hope they hand you over to Ninth Company, I expect some of those criminals will enjoy having someone like you around." Grey said before he strode away from Wolf, leaving her staring at his back as he went. As he passed Vance he paused and looked at him.

"We should have left her with the kroot." He said.

Vance walked up to Wolf.

"Just don't do anything unless one of us says so." He said, "The trail is probably clear from here on so we can be back at camp in under an hour and then we can part ways. Understood?"

Wolf nodded nervously.

“Good.” Vance replied and then he looked around, “Bag up the bodies.” He called out, “Khor’s lot will carry them.”

4.

An area of relatively flat terrain had been cleared to make space for Fourth Company's camp, chosen so that the surrounding terrain did not offer high ground from which to direct fire into the camp or low ground that would expose the camp at a distance. The cleared area extended about a hundred metres beyond the ring of razor wire and angled spikes driven into the ground to block the advance of both armoured vehicles and tanks, providing an area devoid of cover for any attacking force.

It was still dark when Second Platoon reached the camp and the sentries stared at Wolf as she walked between them, it being obvious to them that she was not a Catachan.

"Grey go with Khor to the medical tent to turn in the bodies." Vance ordered and then he reached out and plucked the las pistol from the holster on Wolf's hip.

"Hey!" she exclaimed.

"You come with me." He said, "I'm taking you to see Major Trent. I'm sure he'll know what to do with you." Then he looked around, "The rest of you get some sleep."

"What about the vote?" Mayer asked and Vance paused.

"We can sort that out later Bomber." He said as he took hold of Wolf's arm, "Now come on."

"The Ninth Company," she said to him as he pulled her across the camp, "is that your penal company?"

"Yes it is." Vance replied, "The only company in the regiment that includes any outsiders like you in its ranks. Well not like you exactly, but people who aren't Catachans. Are you worried you'll get sent there?"

"Kind of."

"Well you better hope that the major and the commissar are in a good mood then hadn't you? And that no one's woken them up in the middle of the night to deal with you."

"And what was that about a vote?"

"Lieutenant Silt is dead." Vance replied, "That means we need to pick a new officer. So tomorrow the men will take a vote and one of us will be picked."

"But that's not-" Wolf began.

"Its how us Catachans do it." Vance interrupted. Then as they reached a large tent that still had light seeping from inside Vance called out, "Stubbs!" and a tall fair-haired man stuck his head out from inside.

"What is it Vance?" the man asked.

"Is he in? I need to see him?"

"What for?" Stubbs asked, "Don't you know what's going on right now?" and Vance shoved Wolf forwards.

"Who the hell is she?" Stubbs asked.

"We found her in the jungle. A bunch of kroot had taken her prisoner."

Stubbs sighed.

"Bring her in." he said and he held open the tent flap for Vance and Wolf to enter.

Inside the tent had been split into different rooms and voices could be heard coming from beyond a dividing fabric wall. Stubbs ducked through a split in the wall and then Vance pulled Wolf through it as well. The other side had clearly been turned into an office for the company commander and behind a fold away table sat a grey haired man studying a large map. Beside him was a younger man who rather than wearing the combat fatigues of the Catachans instead wore the more formal clothing of a commissar. Wolf noticed that one of the man's legs was in plaster.

"Sergeant Vance to see you Major Trent." Stubbs announced and both of the seated men looked up. Trent frowned when he saw Wolf standing between Stubbs and Vance in the ill-fitting uniform that clearly did not belong to her. Then his expression changed to a grin, "Did you guys get me a stripper?" he asked, "What's the occasion colour sergeant?"

"Platoon Sergeant Vance brought her." Stubbs answered.

"Platoon Sergeant Vance?" the younger man asked, his accent clearly indicating that he was not from Catachan himself.

"You're dismissed colour sergeant." Trent said and Stubbs nodded and left the room, "Report sergeant." The major then ordered.

"Yes sir." Vance replied, "Second Platoon was engaged by a small force of kroot about eight clicks from here. Lieutenant Silt was killed during this engagement and I took over command of the platoon. In case there were more xenos forces close by I despatched a patrol consisting of sniper Rull and my platoon's ogryn squad to sweep the area. They discovered the lieutenant in the custody of the kroot and released her. I brought her back here."

"Lieutenant?" the commissar asked.

"Yes sir." Wolf replied, standing to attention, "Lieutenant Emilia Wolf. Thirty-second Lyrerian-"

"The Thirty-Second has already left Par Shallon." The commissar interrupted and then he looked at Vance, "You may leave us now sergeant." He said and like Stubbs before him Vance nodded briefly before exiting the room, "Now then Lieutenant Wolf," the commissar continued, "I am Commissar Layne and this is Major Trent, commanding officer of the Fourth Company, Nineteenth Catachan Regiment. Now why don't you explain to both of us why you did not leave this world with the rest of your regiment and how you came you came to be in the custody of alien invaders."

Trent leant back in his chair and smiled.

"And this better be bloody good." He added.

"It's going to be you." Grey said to Quinn as the sergeants of Second Platoon left their tent shortly after sunrise to head for the mess tent where the rest of the platoon would be having breakfast.

"Not necessarily." Quinn replied, "The men could pick."

"They'll pick you." Vance interrupted.

"What if I tell them to pick you?" Quinn asked.

"They'll ignore you." Molla said.

"Besides, why would you?" Grey asked.

"Because I'm a sergeant. I like being a sergeant." Quinn answered.

"Hey boys!" a woman's voice called out to the four men, its accent clearly Catachan and they looked around to see a woman in a uniform like their approaching with a smile on her face. This was Sergeant Ursulla Gant who commanded the squadron of sentinel scout walkers attached to Fourth Company for reconnaissance purposes.

"What do you want Gant?" Vance asked.

"So," she said in return, rubbing her hands together, "new lieutenant?"

"It'll be Quinn." Grey said.

"Not if I can bloody well help it, it won't." Quinn replied, frowning and Gant smiled.

"That's not what I heard anyway." Gant said.

"The vote's not been taken yet." Molla pointed out.

"There was no vote." Gant said.

"There has to be a vote." Grey said.

"Not this time." Gant replied, "I was just over in the supply tent with Lieutenant Selena and"

"How is Short Arse Selena?" Grey asked.

"She said if you called her that or 'Anna Ass Wipe' I was to either punch you in the face or kick you in the"

"Just get on with it." Vance said.

"Well who should come walking in but probably the only other human being as short as Selena within twenty kilometres in a uniform that clearly wasn't hers. Well she hands over a chit that's all official that says she's to draw proper clothing, weaponry and equipment as the lieutenant in charge of Second Platoon."

The four men stared at her.

"Not funny." Molla said.

"Who's joking?" Gant asked, "That little outsider has just been made your new officer."

"Like feth she has!" Grey snapped and Gant shrugged.

"I just thought it better you boys hear it from me first." She said.

"Well do me a favour Ursulla," Vance said, "just don't tell anyone else okay? I want to get this sorted out before the men find out." Then he looked at his three fellow sergeants, "Come on, let's go speak to the major."

Gant watched as the four men walked off and then smiled as she spotted two guardsmen she knew to be from Second Platoon heading towards the mess tent.

"Hey you two!" she shouted at them as she walked towards them and when she was standing right in front of them she clapped her hands together, "So, new lieutenant." She said.

Stubbs looked up as the four men burst into the command tent.

"Now's not a good time." He said.

"We don't care." Grey replied, "We need to see the major now." And he pulled back the flap into the officer's room and they went inside. Where they promptly ground to a halt.

"Ah, men from Second Platoon to see you major." Stubbs said as he stepped through behind them.

"Platoon Sergeant Vance back so soon." Commissar Layne said and then he pointed to the four other men, one of whom was clearly a civilian now in the room who had not been there when Vance had brought in Wolf, "I believe you'll recognise you're regimental commander Colonel Shryke and Regimental Commissar Garratt." pointing to the third man, a hooded figure in red robes he added, "Of course I know you're familiar with Tech Priest Cornellius," Finally he got round to the fourth man, the civilian, "and this is Mister Austam Karr, a member of the planetary governor's personal staff. He's here to discuss the situation with these alien mercenaries with us."

The four men from Second Platoon stood up straight in the presence of the regimental commissar.

"I'm sorry for the intrusion colonel." Vance said, "But we have a pressing matter to discuss with the major."

"And what might that be sergeant?" Trent asked.

"Well it's about our lieutenant."

"Ah yes, Lieutenant Wolf." Commissar Garratt interrupted, "She has been transferred to the Catachan Nineteenth Regiment as of this morning. I approved the transfer personally."

"What about her own regiment?" Vance asked and Garratt exhaled.

"The Thirty-second Lyrerian regiment had already departed Par Shallon when you brought the lieutenant here." He said, "In fact their transport had been accelerating away from this world for an hour and a half by the time we knew anything about her. Now for them to return for her would require another hour and a half of deceleration, manoeuvring the transport to return followed by another hour and a half of acceleration and then an hour and a half of deceleration finally followed by the manoeuvring necessary to make orbit once more. Do you know how much fuel that would require? Well do you?"

"No sir." Vance replied.

"Eighteen thousand six hundred and forty eighty point three four tonnes." The tech priest rasped, "To two decimal places."

"Indeed." Garratt said, "Now alternatively they could just cut their acceleration and coast as far as the gas giant Par Nim and use it to sling shot back around to reach us but that would incur an even more unacceptable delay."

"Forty two point three six days." Cornelius added.

"He's saying that she's not worth their coming back to collect." Colonel Shryke said suddenly and then he looked at Garratt, "That is what you're saying isn't it?"

"It is colonel." He replied.

"So basically we're stuck with her." Trent said.

"But why us?" Vance asked.

"Because she is a lieutenant and it just so happens that there is only one vacancy for a lieutenant in the whole of the Nineteenth." Layne said with a smile.

"Look I know this isn't ideal." Trent said as he leant across the table, "But you're stuck with her. I suggest you just try and make the best of it."

"Perhaps if you were to offer her the benefit of your experience she will fit right in." Layne said.

"Now if you don't mind," Garratt said, "We were in the middle of something."

"Yes," Trent added, "I'm sure I can count on you to take proper care of Lieutenant Wolf."

Vance was the first back into the sergeants' own tent.

"This is fething ridiculous." Grey exclaimed as he burst into the tent behind Vance, followed by Molla and Quinn, "Outsiders have no business in a Catachan regiment. Especially not some non-combatant support officer."

"Are you sure about doing this?" Molla asked as Vance headed for one of the beds. There were five beds in the tent, four belonging to the sergeants and the fifth that had belonged to Lieutenant Silt. Lying on this now vacant bed was the late lieutenant's knife and scabbard.

"It has to be done." Vance said as he picked up the knife.

"Give it to me." Quinn said and he held out his hand as Vance stared at him, "Come on. If the men really do have the respect for me you claim then it has to be me that does this."

"No." Vance replied, "I'm still senior sergeant here so it'll be me."

At that point the tent flap was pulled back and Mayer burst in.

"Thank the Emperor I've found you." He exclaimed, "I think we've got a problem."

"What?" Molla asked.

"Well you know that Lyrerian lieutenant we found? Well command has gone and put her in command of-

"How the hell do you know that?" Vance snapped.

"Gant." Mayer replied, "She told a couple of the lads from First Squad. They told everyone else in the mess tent."

"Throne no!" Vance exclaimed, "I swear I want to rip the control levers off Gant's sentinel and ram them somewhere only Doc Altman will be able to retrieve them from. We need to find Wolf quick."

"That's just it." Mayer replied, "When I was looking for you I spotted her heading for the mess."

"We need to move fast." Quinn said.

5.

Wolf could hear the sounds of the men of Second Platoon inside the mess tent as she approached it and she saw the men of the command and mortar squads entering ahead of her, minus their squad leaders. Wolf followed the Catachans inside and looked around. The ogyrns were missing, that much was obvious if unsurprising. The eating habits of ogyrns could be disruptive to say the least, so in units that included them they tended to eat apart from the normal human troops. But it also seemed that none of the non-commissioned officers or Rull the sniper were present either and where they could be was unknown to Wolf. The tent was filled with long tables that featured built in seating. Along the edges of these tables were notches that lined up with indentations on the floor beneath. The guardsmen already seated at these tables had used these to stand their las guns in, the butts in the indentations while the barrels rested in the notches along the table edges, meaning that they were easy to hand if they were needed in a hurry. As far as Wolf could tell the seated guardsmen had selected tables by squads, a common practice amongst Imperial Guard regiments though there were no specific regulations about it in most. The guardsmen who had just entered ahead of Wolf had made their way to the serving counter and even now were selecting their breakfast. It was then that one of the Catachans noticed Wolf standing in the entrance to the mess tent.

A hush fell over the tent as the Catachans glared at Wolf and nervously she made her way towards the serving counter.

"I don't know what anything is." She said to the closest guardsman, the command squad's vox operator but the man did not reply, "Can I just have a little of everything?" she asked the two men stood behind the counter. One of them placed a plate on a tray before the other placed dollops of food on it and then handed the tray to Wolf in silence, "So where are we sitting?" she asked the vox operator.

The man looked around.

"Lieutenant's choice ma'am." He replied with a grin.

"Over there looks good then." Wolf said, looking towards the closest empty table and she carried her tray over to it and sat down. She heard the sound of footsteps as the other men who had been at the counter with her approached but as she looked up from her seat they continued walking past her and instead sat at the next table along, stowing their las guns as the other guardsmen had done. The noise level then returned to what it had been when Wolf first entered the tent, the Catachans all ignoring her as she sat alone.

The tent opened again and the platoon's four sergeants as well as Corporal Mayer entered and when the seated guardsmen noticed that Vance was holding Lieutenant Silt's knife they were silent once more. The five men calmly approached the counter and selected their food, Vance placing Silt's knife on his tray before he stared at the two servers.

"Get out." He told them and he waited for them to leave the tent before leading his fellow non-commissioned officers toward the seated Wolf. They surrounded her with Vance standing directly opposite while Molla and Quinn were positioned to either side of her and then they sat down, watched closely by the other Catachans. Afraid now, Wolf moved her hand towards her las pistol, but before she could reach the weapon she felt a firm grip around her wrist as Quinn took hold of it. When she looked at the veteran sergeant he looked back and gently shook his head.

Vance picked up Silt's knife, leaving it in its scabbard.

"Every Catachan has a blade." He said, "But you don't seem to have one yet. Aside from that useless munitorum pocket knife." Then he placed the knife down on the table and slid it towards Wolf, "So since you're our new officer you better take this one. It belonged to our last officer so its only fitting his replacement gets it."

"I- I-" Wolf stammered.

"Just take it." Quinn said softly, releasing his grip on her wrist.

Wolf took the knife from in front of her.

"So have you spoken to Lieutenant Lore yet?" Vance asked as he and the others began to eat.

"Who?"

"Lore's in charge of Third Platoon." Molla told her, "It's the largest in the company and it includes a conscript platoon. All the new recruits are there."

"With one exception." Grey muttered, looking at Wolf.

"We took casualties yesterday." Vance said, "So we need to make up the numbers."

"I've ideas for the men I'd like to move to my squad from the others." Quinn said, "I'll run it by you later."

"And there are several men qualified to be our new medic but we still need seven new ones." Vance said, "So we'll go with you to see Lore once we're done here."

As the platoon left the mess tent after breakfast Vance kept his fellow non-commissioned officers back, stopping them just outside the tent.

"Look we need to keep an eye on Wolf." He said.

"What's this 'we' stuff?" Grey said, "She's not one of us. She's-

"An outsider." Vance finished, "Yes I know. But right now she's in charge. Officially at least. So make sure the men remember that. No practical jokes or pranks and certainly no mysterious accidents like with Layne. Got it?"

The others nodded briefly but at that moment Wolf herself appeared from inside the mess tent.

"What's going on?" she asked, "What was that about accidents?"

"Nothing important." Vance replied, "I was just giving my colleagues a reminder that company inspection is in two hours and we need to be ready. That includes having our new recruits in place so we better get a move on." Then he looked to the other squad leaders, "Go on ahead. We need to get the transfer documents so we'll meet you there." He said and they left, all but Grey nodding briefly to Wolf.

"Am I in danger here?" Wolf asked as Vance led her away from the mess tent, "I mean is someone going to try and kill me? I heard you mention the commissar. What happened to his leg?"

"Commissar Layne is like all commissars." Vance replied, "He thinks everything should be done his way even if it gets people killed. His broken leg means he's stuck in camp away from where he can make decisions that will get someone killed."

"So one of you did it."

Vance smiled.

"Look," he said, halting and turning to stare directly at Wolf, "just keep close to me and don't do anything without running it by me first okay?"

"But I'm supposed to be in charge."

"In charge of what exactly? An infantry platoon? Are you an infantry officer? Do you know anything about Catachans? What it means to grow up on a world where absolutely everything wants to kill you?"

"No but-

"But nothing. The men will still see you as an outsider even though us squad leaders made a point of handing over Silt's knife. That tells them we're not planning to get rid of you and hopefully they'll accept that. Now if you just keep your head down long enough they may get used to you themselves in time."

"But for now they still hate me."

Vance snorted.

"They don't hate you. They just know you're not one of them and that's a big thing to us. Now come on, we need to get these new recruits transferred to our platoon."

Lieutenant Lore was just getting the fifty members of his training unit assembled on the camp's parade ground when Vance and Wolf arrived with the data-slate they would need to official transfer seven of its members to their own platoon.

"Any likely candidates stand out?" Vance asked the other squad leaders who were sat back watching the recruits march into formation.

"What? From watching them march up and down in a square?" Molla commented.

"Has the lieutenant pointed any out to you?" Vance responded.

"Only to say that he's put the best in the front row." Quinn answered, "But all of the front three rows are rated for line service apparently."

"So am I supposed to just walk up and down these lines and pick the ones I like the look of?" Wolf asked.

"Pretty much." Vance replied.

"Some are women." Wolf commented.

"So are you." Grey answered without looking at her.

"Technically we're already a mixed platoon so you can pick from them as well if you want." Vance said,

"Looks like Lore's already put three in the front row anyway."

"Will the men accept that?"

"Of course they will. They're guardsmen." Mayer said, "I'm sure they'll be perfect gentlemen."

"Yeah," Quinn added, "any of those ladies farts and they'll offer her a light for it."

It was then that Lore approached.

"Unit ready for inspection." He said, looking at Quinn.

"Tell her." Quinn replied, nodding towards Wolf.

"I heard." Wolf said and taking the data-slate with her she strode towards the lined up recruits and Vance darted after her.

"So she's the one that took your job?" Lore said to Quinn but watching Wolf.

"It was never my job." Quinn said and he looked at Grey, "No matter what anyone says."

"Of course." Lore said and he then turned and walked back towards the lined up recruits, staying just behind Vance and Wolf.

In five rows of ten the recruits all stood at attention staring straight ahead and as she walked along the line and checked each face against the file on her data-slate she wondered if they were deliberately avoiding looking at her.

Then as she passed one of the recruits he suddenly lifted his hand to his mouth and coughed.

"Outsider."

"That's a nasty cough you've got there boy." Vance said, "Maybe I can help you with it." And he punched the recruit in the stomach, "Anyone else got any chest infections?" he then called out as the recruit doubled over in pain and then he stepped up to the next recruit in the row, "What does article IG three-six-four-five slash sixty-seven K cover soldier?"

"Disrespect to an officer or anyone of higher rank sergeant." The recruit answered sharply.

"That's platoon sergeant to you." And then Vance took another step to better address the next recruit along, "And what is the specified penalty for failure to show respect in word or deed to an officer soldier?"

"Death by shooting platoon sergeant."

"Well they seem to know about respect for rank." Wolf said as she walked back along the line and she handed the data-slate to Vance who smiled.

"Congratulations you two, you're now officially a part of Second Platoon. Go and see the squad leaders over there for your assignments." Then he studied the notes concerning the other five recruits that Wolf had chosen. There was little to choose between most of the recruits officially rated for full duty but Vance was still curious to see who they were getting. Wolf had selected all three of the female recruits, while the young man still lying curled up on the ground had unsurprisingly been left out. Vance grinned.

"They'll do." He said and he went along the line tapping them on their shoulders, "You, you, you, you and you. You're in." he said and when he noticed that Commissar Layne, Stubbs and Trent had just emerged from the command tent with Austam Karr he added, "The rest of you stay here. Company inspection is about to begin."

As Vance and Wolf led the new recruits back to the other squad leaders Lore stepped forwards and looked over the others.

"Someone pick him up." He snapped and then a shrill whistle filled the air.

At the sound of the whistle every Catachan not on guard duty or reported sick from Fourth Company's three infantry platoons came rushing to the parade ground, lining up by platoon and squad. Several of the support staff also appeared for the inspection and Wolf caught sight of the company's medical officer, the four pilots of the attached sentinel squadron and a man in priest's robes who had a rosarius hanging around his neck as a symbol of his office. Then another individual appeared. Tall and hairless he took up a position close to Major Trent's company command squad. He carried with him a long metal staff and Wolf could not help but notice the multiple wax purity seals affixed to his clothing and equipment.

"A psyker?" she whispered to Vance and he nodded.

"Aloysius Veneel." He replied, "Stay clear of him."

"Don't worry I will." Wolf replied.

Stubbs stepped forwards from the command squad.

"Platoons report!" he yelled.

"First Platoon present. Two sick." The officer of First Platoon called out, unlike Lore and Wolf he had captain's markings on his uniform.

Then there was silence.

"Your turn." Vance whispered as the company's senior staff began to stare at Wolf, "One sick."

"Who?" Wolf asked.

"Rull. Not sick exactly, but not here."

"Oh right." Wolf replied then she called out, "Second Platoon present. One sick."

"Third Platoon present. Four sick, ten assigned guard duty." Lore then added and Stubbs turned back towards Major Trent.

"All platoons present sir." He said and then he took his place back with the company command squad.

Trent stepped forwards to address the assembled troops.

"I'm sure you've all heard about the kroot that Second Platoon encountered yesterday." he said, "Well it appears that this was not an isolated incident, Second and Fifth Companies have also reported minor engagements with xenos forces between here and the capital. Now the Fifteenth Catachan Division is the only Imperial Guard force left on the planet so it's all down to us and the local PDF to deal with them. The Fourteenth Armoured is holding the starport while the Twelfth and Twenty-Fifth are moving to join the Nineteenth here. The kroot are well known mercenaries and it is believed that they were brought here aboard merchant vessels to assist the insurrectionist elements of the local government. The governor has dispatched Mister Karr here to liase with us while the PDF holds the cities and the Adeptus Arbites roots out the traitors in the local administration. While we're waiting for the other regiments to arrive we'll be continuing to patrol our area as we have been doing and I want platoon commanders in my office for briefing immediately after this inspection."

The maps in Trent's office had more notes scrawled on them than Vance remembered from before breakfast as he looked at it when he entered the room with Wolf. The leaders of Fourth Company's other two platoons were already present with their own platoon sergeants and Gant followed behind them.

"He's the plan men." Trent said and then glancing at Gant and Wolf he smiled briefly and added, "And ladies of course." Then he too looked down at the map, "The kroot must have a large camp somewhere in this region and it's our job to find it. That means pushing our patrols further than we've been before, past this line here." And he ran a finger along a line drawn on the map that represented the furthest that Fourth Company had patrolled until now. Then he looked at First Platoon's officer, "Captain Fear I want your men to head south." And then looking at Gant he added, "You go with them. There are caves in the hills down there that your flamer should be able to clear out nicely."

"Got it major." Gant replied and she smiled as she looked at Fear. In return he just nodded.

"Second Platoon will head north." Trent went on.

"What about Third Platoon?" Lore asked, interrupting.

"Third Platoon will remain here. I don't want our camp over run while First and Second are out hunting."

"Major," Fear then said, "perhaps Second Platoon should remain. Lieutenant Lore may not have been in command of his platoon for very long, but he at least has more experience than—"

"There's thick jungle to the north," Trent said, "and Third Platoon's heavy weapons are better suited to defending here than carrying through that."

"Do we get any support major?" Wolf asked and as the Catachans stared at her she added, "I mean First Platoon has sentinels."

"We have only one sentinel squadron lieutenant." Trent replied, "But if it makes you feel better I'll send Mister Veneel along with you." And he looked around at Layne who so far had remained silent, "Does that meet with your agreement commissar?"

"It seems perfectly acceptable to me." Layne replied, "In fact I'm impressed at the lieutenant's rapid adjustment to the demands of front line duty. All too many new officers would head out into the field with inadequate support rather than ask for help. They think it shows weakness. Assign Veneel to their patrol."

6.

"You're kidding us." Molla said when Vance informed his fellow sergeants that Veneel would be joining them, "The warlock?"

"Oh this is just fething great." Grey exclaimed, "Now not only do we have two outsiders instead of one breathing down our necks, but one of them is the fething bolt magnet."

"You might want to keep quiet." Quinn said, looking past the others, "Here he comes now." And when the others looked around they saw the psyker heading towards them.

"Lieutenant! Your guest is here!" Vance yelled.

At that moment Wolf was sat in the back of one of the open topped trucks that would carry the platoon to the starting point for their patrol examining her equipment.

"Coming." She replied, jumping down from the truck and walking towards the squad leaders, "You know this armour is lighter than I was expecting." She added, adjusting the flak vest she had been issued with.

"It's meant to be." Molla told her, "Keeps the weight of your gear down while you're hacking through the jungle."

"Never mind the fething vest." Grey said, "Just deal with that freak would you?"

"I believe I am expected." Veneel called out.

"Oh, err, yes." Wolf answered, "I'm – I'm –"

"You are Lieutenant Wolf," Veneel said, "and you are the officer to whom I will be providing the benefit of my powers."

"Benefit my ass." Grey muttered but the psyker ignore the jibe.

"Well I suppose you should join up with my squad." Wolf said. Then she looked at Vance, "Right?"

"Right." He answered, staring at Veneel.

"This is our vehicle so-" Wolf began before another voice called out.

"Might I be allowed to assist you?"

The voice had the distinctive Catachan accent to it and when Wolf looked in the direction of it's source she saw the Ministorum priest she had seen on parade earlier approaching, now laden down with a backpack and a shotgun.

"I take it you're not meaning with a blessing Preacher." Quinn said.

"Not at all." The priest replied and he looked at Wolf, "I am Preacher Mordecai Black and on patrols such as yours it has been shown that the men's spiritual health-"

"Mordecai is being too kind." Veneel interrupted, "What he really means is that he is concerned that I will fall to the influence of ruinous powers and he intends to execute me if he suspects it has happened."

Preacher Black smiled.

"It saves one of us having to watch him." Vance whispered to Wolf.

"Then I suppose he's coming along with us then." She said.

There were half a dozen trucks in all; one for each squad in Second Platoon and with one squad in each vehicle the convoy was driven along a jungle road heading north. Often getting ogyrns to board transports could be difficult, the bulky abhumans were notoriously claustrophobic, however the open-topped vehicles presented no such problem for them.

Sat in the lead vehicle, Wolf noticed that Veneel was staring at her.

"What?" she said, "What are you looking at?"

"The cursed often have no reason for what they do." Preacher Black said.

"I was wondering what concerns you so much lieutenant." Veneel then said.

"I don't know what you're talking about." She replied.

"Yes you do." Veneel said.

"Reading her mind warlock?" Black asked.

"Nothing so complex preacher." Veneel told him before turning his attention back to Wolf, "Each of these vehicles has three guardsmen as crew. A driver and his spare to watch the road and the gunners manning the impressive looking heavy stubber each one carries to watch the jungle. A total of eighteen guardsmen looking out for any signs of trouble. Yet ever since we've left camp you've your hand resting firmly on that sidearm of yours."

"I hadn't noticed." Wolf replied, "My last ride wasn't so pleasant."

"Don't worry lieutenant." Her squad's vox operator replied, "If we get into trouble you could always just wet yourself again."

Vance looked up at the guardsman, but the other two members of the command squad grinned.

"Cut it out the lot of you." Vance said and then he glared at the vox operator, "Especially you Teal."

"Anything you say sergeant." Teal replied.

The truck shuddered suddenly and came to a halt.

"End of the line! Everybody out!" the truck's gunner yelled.

"You heard the man." Vance said, "Everybody out."

Watched over by the six heavy stubbers Second Platoon formed up alongside the stationary vehicles, unloading equipment and dividing it up between them. The ogyrns proved especially useful here, their muscular build allowed them to carry more than twice a normal man was capable of. This was put to good use by Mayer's mortar team, using the ogyrns to act as ammunition bearers for their heavy weapons. Wolf let the platoon get on with this, realising that they did not need nor would they welcome her interference. Something overhead caught her attention as she waited and she took out her magnoculars for a better look. "Something interesting up there lieutenant?" Black asked, approaching her from behind and she jumped slightly.

"Preacher Black, I didn't hear you." She said.

"So I noticed." He replied, "Looking for divine intervention?"

"No. Here, take a look." She said and she handed him the magnoculars.

"What am I looking for?" he asked.

"That little white spot up there." Wolf said and she pointed to the sky where there was a spec of white set against the pale blue sky. Black lifted the magnoculars to his eyes.

"What is that?" he asked in amazement, lowering the magnoculars.

"It's the *Fury of Man*." Wolf replied, "One of the Imperial Navy's lunar-class cruisers. All five thousand metres, twenty-eight million tonnes and ninety-five thousand crew of her. She's so big that we can even see her during the day."

"Ho do you know that?"

"I was a file clerk for the Lyrerian Thirty-second. Part of my job was dealing with the communications between the Guard and the Navy. The *Fury of Man* was the base for the valkyrie wings we had supporting us. She's not a true carrier, apparently that requires specialist equipment for the rapid refueling and rearming of attack craft, but her hangars can still carry dozens of ground support craft and atmospheric fighters. Not to mention the direct fire support she could provide, a ship like that can do terrible things to a planet."

"Everything okay over here?" Vance asked as he approached.

"Everything's just fine sergeant." Black replied as he returned Wolf's magnoculars to her, "Your lieutenant was just proving to me that the Emperor has seen fit to watch over us from the heavens."

"Well then in that case the Emperor's probably seen that we're ready to go." Vance replied, "Everybody's loaded up."

Wolf looked around and noticed someone missing.

"Hang on, where's Rull?" she asked. Then seeing Mayer she called out, "Corporal Mayer! Didn't Rull ride with your squad?"

"Yes lieutenant."

"So where-" Wolf began.

"Gone on ahead." Vance interrupted, "A scout's not much good if they stick with the rest of the group."

"Okay then let's get going." Wolf replied, "It's probably best if you give the order Sergeant."

Vance smiled.

"You're learning." He said then he looked at the rest of the platoon, "But we need to check in first. And by 'we' I mean you."

"Trooper Teal come here." Wolf said and the command squad's vox operator wandered over to them.

"Quicker than that Teal." Vance said sternly and the guardsman picked up his pace. Wolf took the vox set's handset and was about to speak when she paused instead, "Who are we?" she asked Vance and Teal smirked.

"Catachan one nine mark four mark two." He replied, "And you're calling company HQ so its Catachan one nine mark four delta."

"Okay thanks." Wolf said and she activated the long-range vox, "Catachan one nine mark four delta this is Catachan one nine mark four mark two come in please. Over."

"Catachan one nine mark four mark two this is Catachan one nine mark four delta. Go ahead. Over."

"We have disembarked transport and are moving north as ordered. Over."

"Copy that. Good hunting. Over and out."

"Okay everyone move out. Molla, first squad has point." Vance called out.

"Rejoice men!" Black cried out, "We bring the Emperor's light to this dark jungle."

This far from Fourth Company's camp the jungle was much thicker than the area where Wolf and Second Platoon had encountered the kroot previously and their rate of movement was correspondingly slower as Molla picked out the best route.

"Can't we go any quicker?" Wolf asked Vance, keeping her voice low enough that only the members of the command squad could hear.

"Molla's our best pathfinder." He replied, "Well aside from Rull that is."

"Yeah, it would be nice if Rull would stick around every so often." Wolf said and Vance grinned.

"Just let Rull do as Rull does." He said, "It's for the best. Trust me. That's why we never replaced the rest of the sniper squad when they got killed. Rull wouldn't even take a spotter, said they move too slow."

Ahead of them First Squad came to a halt and with it the rest of the platoon did as well. A moment later Molla came walking back towards the command squad and he waved Grey and Quinn towards them as he came.

"Jungle's getting thicker up ahead." He said, "We'll have to start hacking a path soon."

"The kroot won't have hacked a path." Quinn commented.

"And those big beasts of theirs would never be able to scale the trees." Grey added, looking up into the jungle canopy overhead.

Wolf pulled out a copy of the map that had been issued to everyone in Second Platoon.

"Oh so now you're going to find an area of the jungle that's not as dense are you?" Grey asked.

"What about here?" Wolf asked, pointing to a thin winding blue line, "Its less than half a click that way and leads all the way to-"

"That's what we term a river lieutenant." Grey replied, "Didn't they teach you about those in combat officer school? Oh yeah, you're not a combat officer."

Wolf scowled while Molla shook his head.

"Rull's already made it to the river." He said, "The trees there are just as dense and the roots run right into it."

"Well how deep is it?" Wolf asked, "Why can't we just wade along it?"

The Catachans looked at one another, frowning. Veneel threw back his head and laughed.

"Why can't we?" Vance asked.

"Don't tell me you guys have never waded along a river." Wolf said.

"Ah." Vance replied.

"Lieutenant," Black began, "on Catachan, as on many deathworlds, rivers are extremely dangerous."

"You mean man-eating fish?" Wolf asked.

"That's just the start of it." Molla replied, "My father was a tour guide and every season he brought back at least two or three who got killed by going into a river. They only thought to look out for big predators."

"They forgot the swarm feeders that'll strip the flesh from your bones in under a minute." Quinn added, "Plus the tangle weeds that'll pull you under and drown you."

"Not to mention the various species of fish that'll force their way into one of your orifices and lay their eggs in there so their young will eat your-" Teal said, overhearing the discussion.

"Ick." Wolf interrupted, "Perhaps you take your own advice and not mention that ever again."

"The thing is," Vance said, "we've got into the habit of staying away from rivers where we can. Except as a source of water."

"But this isn't a deathworld." Wolf pointed out, "This is just regular jungle."

"The undergrowths not too thick if we're willing to double back a bit." Molla said, "We can get to the river without having to cut a path."

"How much is a bit?" Vance asked.

"About two hundred metres."

"Then that's where we're going." Wolf said.

"Best my squad take point I think." Quinn said, "Our shotguns and flamers will be easier to handle standing in a river than that heavy bolter of First Squad."

"Okay then." Wolf said, "Let's go." And as the sergeants returned to their own squad she looked at Vance and added, "Score one for the outsider huh?"

"Maybe lieutenant." He replied, "But by pointing it out like that you made even me want to shoot you."

The slow moving river was about a metre deep, barely waist high to many of the Catachans and just up to the thighs of Khor's ogryn squad. But to the diminutive Wolf the water came right up to her chest.

"Having trouble lieutenant?" Grey asked as she waded into the river, "Its only a river after all."

"This deep I'd normally swim." She replied, "What about you?" but Grey didn't reply, "You can swim can't you?"

"Of course I can." They teach us on the troop transports leaving Catachan. But swimming isn't popular on our homeworld."

"Yeah I get it. The fish eggs in your butt."

"There are a few indoor pools." Vance commented, "But there aren't many wealthy enough to be able to afford to have that much clean water just sloshing around."

Strangely Veneel seemed less bothered about the water than many of the Catachans and he simply lifted his staff up, resting it on his shoulder to keep it clear of the water. Wolf wasn't certain but she thought she

spotted a hint of a smile from the otherwise dour looking psyker as he watched the Catachans entering the water.

"Alright men." Quinn then called out to his squad, "Let's get a move on. Hooper and Velt, you keep those flamers clear of the water, I don't want the ignition systems getting a dunking."

Spreading out across the river Quinn's squad of veterans then began wading along it. Fortunately the direction that the platoon wanted to go was down river from here, so they were going with the flow of water rather than fighting against it.

"So how are you enjoying our little paddle lieutenant?" Vance asked after some time and Wolf frowned.

"Oh it just great." She replied, "I'm an officer. Shouldn't someone else be carrying me?" and the unit's medic snorted.

"Well I'm sure Khor would offer the services of one of his lads." Vance said and he glanced back at the ogryns bringing up the rear, "Right Khor?"

Khor grinned.

"Ogryns carry." The BONEhead replied.

"No thanks." Wolf said and looking at Vance she carried on, "I've been carried by an ogryn before remember. They're not a very comfortable ride." Then she reached down beneath the level of the water and took the canteen from her belt, wiped the river water from around the opening and took a sip.

Then, at the front of the column Sergeant Quinn lifted a fist in the air and the platoon came to a halt.

"What's he seen?" Wolf asked.

"Probably just taking a break." Vance replied.

"Well I'm going to find out." Wolf said and she began wading towards Quinn's veterans.

"Five more minutes." Quinn said to his squad as they took a brief break.

"There anywhere around here to take a leak?" one of them responded, looking around at the thick tree roots lining both banks of the river.

"Now you mention I could do with going as well." One of the flamer armed veterans added.

"Anyone else?" Quinn asked and all of the squad raised their hands, "Well since we're up to our waists in water anyway and the local wildlife doesn't include any fish that will use the scent to track us I suggest we just go here and now. Agreed." There were nods, "Okay off we go then."

The veterans stood still as they relieved themselves in the river. Then one looked around and saw Wolf approaching.

"Outsider." He whispered.

"Okay everyone stop." Quinn said, "Let's see what she wants."

"I can't." one of the veterans said then another hushed him as Wolf came closer.

"What's the hold up Sergeant Quinn?" she asked before taking another sip from her canteen.

"Just taking a quick break." Quinn replied, "We're making good time thanks to your idea, so we'll not fall behind schedule."

"Good." Wolf said and she shook her canteen upside down to confirm that it was empty. Then she undid the anti-bacterial filter built into its neck and dunked it into the water to refill it. Several of the veterans winced.

"You might not want to do that lieutenant." Quinn said.

"Why not?" she replied, refitting the filter, "There aren't any pathogens in the water on this planet in concentrations that the filter can't handle." Then she took a drink, "Mind you it does taste a bit strange." She added before taking another mouthful and let it slosh around her mouth.

"That may be because we've just pissed in it." Quinn said.

Wide-eyed Wolf spat the water out, spraying Quinn and three of his troops. Then she began to spit into the water.

"Eww." She said, "Eww. Eww." Then as she waded back towards the command squad she called out, "Just keep moving."

"You know what men," Quinn said, wiping his face, "there goes one of the bravest officers I've ever met."

"What? That outsider?" one of the veterans asked.

"That's right Boxer. After all how many have you met that stand right in front of us, gargle a mouthful of piss and then spit it right in our faces?"

"She does not look happy." Veneel commented as Wolf returned to her squad.

"Problem lieutenant?" Vance asked.

"The first thing I'm doing when we get back to camp is getting a new canteen." She told him.

"Is something wrong with that one?" Preacher Black asked, looking at the canteen she still held.

Wolf reached into the water again and produced her las pistol. She shook it briefly to ensure that it was clear of water then pressed it against the canteen and fired a single shot that punched straight through it.

"It has a hole in it." She said.

7.

The platoon set off again soon after and this time they continued to move until they reached a fork where the river joined a much larger one. Here there was a patch of open ground on the shore and while they decided how to proceed the platoon rested here.

"That looks too deep to wade across." Wolf commented as she looked at the much wider waterway.

"That's the least of our worries." Molla added as he took out his map, "See there's a sudden drop marked here. We've been heading downhill for a while now and it's about to get a lot steeper. And listen carefully, do you hear that?"

"Hear what?" Wolf asked.

"The rumbling." Quinn replied.

"Oh yeah. What is that?" Wolf then asked.

"A waterfall." Preacher Black told her.

"So we can't stay in the water then." Wolf said and Molla shook his head.

"No, but fortunately Rull says that the jungle isn't as dense around here. Plus there are a few trails dotted about, looks like some of the local wildlife congregate around her to drink from the river."

"That's good right?" Wolf asked.

"Depends." Vance said, "Trails make us easy to spot if the kroot are watching them."

"Plus there's the risk of predators." Molla added, "If animals use the trails to get something to drink then it's a fair bet that others will be hanging around waiting for something to eat."

"Fortunately there are more than forty of us." Quinn said, "A lot of-" and then he was interrupted by the roaring sound of engines overhead.

"Flyer!" someone yelled out and the Catachans ran for the tree line. As Wolf just stood where she was Vance grabbed hold of her and dragged her along as well.

"What's going on?" she exclaimed.

"Air travel is supposed to have been restricted lieutenant." Veneel said, "And since all of the Navy's assets have been transferred to that orbiting cruiser-"

"There shouldn't be anyone flying around here." Vance interrupted as he took out his magnoculars and began searching the sky. Wolf and the other squad leaders copied him.

"Got it." Grey said, "Single aircraft to the south. Coming in low and slow."

"Look like he's trying to avoid detection." Vance said.

"But wouldn't the Nineteenth air defence auspexes-" Wolf began.

"We're below the hill line." Molls said, pointing to the horizon.

"You better call it in." Vance said to Wolf and then he looked around and called out, "Teal!"

The vox operator rushed to them and held out the handset.

"Catachan one nine mark four delta this is Catachan one nine mark four mark two. Do you read me?" Wolf signalled but as she waited for a reply all she got was static, "Catachan one nine mark four delta do you read?" she repeated but again there was no response.

"I thought those things had a range of a thousand kilometres." Mayer said.

"The hills must be blocking our signal." Preacher Black said and Wolf shook her head.

"We're supposed to have access to the satellite relay network." She said, "We should be able to reach any point on the planet."

"So either the satellite network has been taken out-" Vance commented.

"Which would be difficult with the *Fury of Man* and the system defence boats up there." Wolf interrupted.

"Or someone has been able to cut us off from the network." Vance continued, "Whoever brought the kroot here."

"That means they're well connected. Defence Ministry level." Wolf said.

"What about you?" Vance asked, looking at Veneel.

"I'm no astropath sergeant." The psyker replied.

"I'm not asking for you to contact Holy Terra, just get word to company HQ."

"My skills do not lie in that direction at all." Veneel said, "I'm afraid you'll have to look elsewhere for an answer."

"So we're completely cut off then." Wolf said, "What do we do now?"

"Only one thing to do." Quinn told her, "Bring the fething thing down."

Wolf paused for a moment then nodded.

"Sergeant Grey," she said, "please shoot down that aircraft."

"Yes ma'am." Grey replied with a genuine smile on his face. Then he looked towards his squad and yelled, "Hook! Jarvis! Bring that thing down!"

Hook ran from the cover of the trees, a long tubular missile launcher over his shoulder and he knelt down by the river. Behind him Jarvis ran up with a long thin missile that he slid into the rear of the launcher until it clicked into place.

"Missile ready!"

Hook activated the targeting auspex, aligning the front of the launcher with the approaching aircraft and there was a rapid beeping as the machine spirit of the missile sought to lock onto it. The beeping turned to a sudden continuous tone and Hook gave a yell.

"Lock!" and he fired the missile.

The blast of the exhaust kicked up a massive cloud of sand from the riverbank as the missile shot skywards. "Get back here!" Grey yelled, but the two missile operators were already turning to run back into cover. The moment their weapon was fired they knew that their position had become exposed. But for now at least the mysterious aircraft had better things to worry about than strafing a platoon of guardsmen. The missile was heading straight for it.

The aircraft banked sharply and then turned again in the opposite direction, a classic manoeuvre designed to present a continuously crossing target that would force the missile to burn precious fuel tracking it. But the range at which the missile had been fired was well within its maximum and even this increase in fuel consumption was not enough to cause it to run out. Apparently lacking any form of effective countermeasures, the missile's machine spirit remained focused on the heat of the aircraft's engines."

"You got him!" Wolf exclaimed as she saw the flash of the exploding missile followed by the sound a moment later, "Look he's going down!"

The missile had not struck the aircraft directly, that would likely have totally destroyed it. But the machine spirit had detonated it close enough that shrapnel had torn through several critical systems and it was now descending rapidly, a trail of black smoke belching out from behind it. The pilot of the stricken aircraft was able to keep it aloft long enough for it to pass by the platoon before it vanished over the horizon. Shortly thereafter there was a sudden 'Crash!' as its flight was finally brought to a close.

"No explosion." Vance commented, "It came down intact. Well sort of."

"Then we need to go and find it don't we?" Wolf said.

"Of course we do." Molla said, "And since we're now in a hurry I suggest we chance the trails."

Though the aircraft had crashed out of sight of Second Platoon it continued to release smoke as parts of it burned and the cloud it created formed a beacon for the platoon to follow. Every time they caught sight of the plume they adjusted their heading to bring them closer.

Once again leading the way Molla placed a hand to the microbead receiver in his ear and he gave a shout.

"Rull's there." He called out, "The thing's a total right off, but the fuselage is intact. Looks like an aquila."

"One of ours?" Wolf exclaimed, "They're using an Imperial aircraft against us?"

"What did you expect?" Vance asked, "Whoever it is comes from this planet after all."

"Tell Rull to stay back." Vance shouted back to Molla, "We should be there in a few minutes to secure the wreck."

Aquila-pattern landers got their names from the stylised structure of their wings that, when viewed from above, resembled the double-headed eagle emblem of the Imperium. Now though the wings of this particular lander were mangled beyond this shape being recognisable. Crashing through the trees had ripped them both off, leaving jagged holes in the structure of the engines that ran down each side of the craft and sending them all flying away from the fuselage and breaking them up into fragments no bigger than a man. The cockpit and its under slung weapon mount had caved in, crushing the pilot to death before the fuselage had hit the ground and leaving the passenger compartment and tail as the only parts of the aircraft still recognisable.

Quinn's veteran squad rushed from the jungle with their weapons held ready. The two flamer equipped veterans dropped to crouching positions, covering the flanks of the advancing veterans. Quinn himself ground to a sudden halt upon reaching the wrecked lander, aiming his shotgun at the still closed hatch with the rest of his squad forming up behind him. Quinn raised a hand and waved and from further back Khor smiled.

"Ogryns!" he called out, "Forwards!" and the seven giant abhumans charged towards the aquila. They ran right past the veterans of Quinn's squad and took up positions either side of the craft's hatchway.

Immediately beside the hatch Khor extended an arm and took hold of it, an action copied by one of the ogryns on the other side. Then, following a nod from Quinn they pulled on the hatch.

There was a sound of grinding metal as the hatch was torn open and both Khor and the other ogryn stood back as it dropped between them. The moment the hatch hit the ground, forming a ramp that led into the lander Quinn began to run. Behind him two more of his squad followed him.

"Imperial Guard!" he yelled as he burst into the craft, "Get your hands up!"

The inside of the aquila-pattern lander was as badly damaged as its exterior, access covers had been thrown open in the crash and many of the cables they concealed now hung loose in the passenger cabin. However, aside from these and several smashed seats it was empty and Quinn lowered his weapon. "Someone tell the lieutenant that the ship is secure." He said.

"Throne your lads really made a mess of this thing Grey." Vance said when he saw what was left of the aquila and the other sergeant smiled.

"Just doing as the lieutenant asked." He replied.

"The armaments the Emperor provides us are mighty." Preacher Black called out to no one in particular, "All the better to smite the unworthy."

"I don't even need to be able to see you to know you're looking at me." Veneel commented as the priest glared at him from behind.

"No one left." Quinn told Wolf as she walked closer to the wreck.

"All the passengers were killed?" she asked.

"No just the pilot." Quinn answered.

"So what happened to the passengers then?" Vance asked, "We didn't see any chutes."

"You got me." Quinn replied, "Maybe they left after the crash. Through that smashed window in the roof."

Molla looked at the ground around the remains of the fuselage and shook his head.

"It'd help if your entire squad hadn't trampled the ground like a herd of ambulls." He said, "I can't make out anything."

Vance activated his microbead.

"Hey Rull, can you see any signs of life out there?" and then he paused for the reply before looking at Wolf, "Rull's got nothing either."

"Then no one left." Quinn said, "If Rull can't find tracks its because there never were any."

"But this is a passenger transport." Wolf said.

"For important passengers." Grey added, "Us grunts get arvus lighters or valkyries. Only high ranking officers or senior quill-pushers get a cushy ride like this."

"If someone wanted to find us they'd have sent a scout or a gunship." Wolf said, "Why send a transport like this if it's not carrying anyone?"

"To collect someone." Veneel said, "As Sergeant Grey pointed out, someone important."

"You mean like the person who hired the kroot?" Wolf asked.

"If there is a heretic here then it is our duty to root them out and put them to the flame." Preacher Black exclaimed, "There can be no forgiveness for traitors."

"For once then we are in complete agreement." Veneel said and Black glared at him again.

"But where is he?" Wolf asked out loud, "I mean look at this thing, its wrecked. I doubt we could get anything from the navigation engine even if we had a tech priest here with us."

"She's right about that." Molla said, "The machine spirits of this vehicle are long gone."

"But we already knew where it was headed." Quinn said and as the others looked at him he took out his map and a pen, "Look we first saw the aquila here." He said and he placed a dot on the map, "Then when Hook fired at it, it was here." He added, putting a second mark on the map, "And the thing about aircraft is that they tend to fly in straight lines, which tells us his course." And he drew a line starting from the first mark, going through the second and then continuing on across the map.

Wolf smiled.

"So if we just follow that line we'll eventually get to where it was going." She said.

"That's fine in theory." Vance said, "But there is the issue of the person this thing was sent to collect is going to figure out we're on our way. Even if they didn't see or hear it getting shot down they're bound to get suspicious when it doesn't turn up."

"Well then," Wolf said, "I guess that means we'd better get moving doesn't it?"

The manoeuvring by the aquila lander in its pilot's attempts to avoid the missile had taken the craft off its original course by some distance and so the Catachans were forced to march through the jungle as far back as the riverbank in order to properly follow the path marked out on Quinn's map. Once again Quinn's veteran squad took the point position in the column and so he was the first one to see the tracks in the river bank that had not been left by the Catachans and he raised his fist to bring the platoon to a halt.

"Kroot." He said, using his microbead to spread the warning to the entire platoon at once without raising his voice.

The guardsmen raised their weapons, searching the undergrowth all around for the first signs of an ambush.

"We better go check this out." Vance said softly to Wolf and when she nodded he looked around at Mayer and his men who were also aiming their rifles into the jungle, "Get those mortars set up. One facing each side and one behind."

The command squad then moved forwards, meeting up with Quinn's unit at the front.

"Where are they?" Wolf asked nervously, "The kroot I mean."

"Right his minute?" Quinn asked in reply, "I don't have a clue, but they've been here since we left." And he pointed to the closest footprint, "That wasn't there last time we were here."

"How many do you think?" Vance asked.

"Not many." Quinn replied.

"How can you tell that?" Wolf asked as she gazed around the riverbank, trying to pick out the footprints left by the kroot from those left by her own troops.

"Easy." Quinn told her, "We haven't been attacked yet."

"But what does that tell you?"

"Look," Quinn began, "there are more than forty of us. Even without you, the bolt magnet there and Khor's squad that would still mean leaving a trail that a blind kroot could follow. Now the tracks we left here will have given them a clue as to our numbers so they must have figured that the best course of action was for them to go and find some friends before trying to take us on. That means we outnumber them. We're probably looking at a single pack of about ten or twenty."

"So like that group you ambushed after you found me?"

"Yeah, but I don't see any tracks from any of those big beasts of theirs." Quinn said.

"But the important thing is that they obviously know we're here. If they get word back to their mates we could be up to our asses in them at any time." Vance pointed out.

"Kroot move pretty quick through jungle." Quinn added.

"Not as fast as your men I think sergeant." Preacher Black suddenly interjected, "The Emperor will guide you."

Wolf looked at Quinn.

"Is he right?" she asked, "Can you outrun them?"

"Oh yeah." Quinn replied with a grin, "My men can outrun any xenos in the jungle. But tracking them may be an issue, kroot can cover their tracks quite well and that'll slow us down."

"Molla could follow them." Vance said.

"Yeah, but Molla's squad can't move as fast as mine." Quinn replied.

"Take Rull." Wolf said abruptly and as the Catachans looked at her she added, "I mean you've been telling me how good he is at tracking and he can obviously move faster than the rest of us. So why not have him do the tracking and he can guide Quinn's men to the kroot."

Quinn and Vance looked at one another.

"That's two good ideas in one day." Quinn said.

"I know." Vance replied, "Not bad for an outsider."

Quinn reached for his microbead again.

"Rull, the kroot have been here and the lieutenant's sending my squad after them. I need you to follow their trail and guide us in." he transmitted then he got up and began walking back along the column, his men following him.

"What's happening?" Grey asked as the veterans passed his squad.

"The lieutenant's splitting the platoon." Quinn replied, "We're going hunting for kroot."

After Quinn's veterans had gone on their way Wolf and the command squad returned to the rest of the platoon, halting when they reached Grey and Molla.

"Mayer! Khor! Get over here." Vance then called out and when the other two squad leaders arrived they all stood in a tight group, "Off you go lieutenant." Vance told Wolf.

"Okay we're continuing with Quinn's plan to follow the course that the aquila lander was taking when we shot it down." She explained.

"And what about Quinn?" Grey asked.

"He's going to try and stop the kroot that know we're here from telling anyone about us." Vance replied.

"Rull is going with him." Wolf continued and then she looked at Molla, "I want your squad at the front to keep an eye out for an ambush while the rest of us follow at a distance."

"What sort of distance?" Molla asked and Wolf looked to Vance.

"About a hundred metres." he said, "Out of sight but in range to support you if you need it."

"Probably better to split his squad." Grey suggested, "Have the heavy bolter team stay with the rest of us."

"They would be more use in a fire fight back here." Vance agreed.

"Okay then its settled." Wolf said, "The heavy bolter will remain with the rest of the platoon. But there is one more thing."

"What?" Molla asked.

"I will be accompanying you." Veneel replied.

"Throne." Molla muttered.

"My prescient abilities will help provide early warning of an attack." The psyker went on, "Not to mention the support I can provide in battle."

"Yeah I bet." Grey said.

8.

Directed by Rull, Quinn's squad moved quickly through the jungle in pursuit of the kroot war party. Normally their progress would have been slower, with some of the veterans keeping an eye out for an ambush. But Rull's jungle hunting and survival skills were such that Quinn had faith that an ambush would be impossible and so the unit instead concentrated on pushing on through the jungle. What surprised Quinn was that the psyker Veneel seemed to have no difficulty in keeping up with them. He had always thought of psykers as physically lacking, but this one seemed to be an exception to this and was maintaining a position just beside him.

"I'm impressed." He said quietly, not wanting his men to be too alarmed that he was communicating with the psyker, "Not many outsiders can keep up with us."

Veneel smiled, producing an expression that Quinn found mildly un-nerving.

"Really sergeant. I have served with your company for more than a decade now and I've learnt a few things about jungle travel."

"Is that so? Such as?"

"Such as my force staff makes an excellent walking stick." Veneel replied.

The conversation was then interrupted by the distinctive sound of a kroot, a single piercing squawk that was abruptly cut off.

"Cover!" Quinn snapped and he tapped his microbead as he crouched down, "Rull what have we got?" he asked.

"Problem sergeant?" Veneel whispered, "I didn't sense any—"

"Pair of kroot up ahead." Quinn replied.

"Two? But I heard only one cry." Veneel commented and now it was Quinn that smiled.

"That's because the first one Rull shot didn't have chance to scream." He said before getting back to his feet,

"Okay everyone forwards. Eyes and ears open, Rull will try and give us a warning but we need to be alert anyway."

The bodies of the kroot both lay in a shallow stream and the blood that was pouring from the bullet wounds in their chests flowed along with the water. The first of the veterans to reach them kept his shotgun pointed at them as he moved closer.

"Cover me." He said to the man beside him and he bent down over the bodies to examine them more closely, "They're dead." He called out as he straightened up, "Or least they are as far as I can tell."

"What do you expect?" Quinn asked as he and Veneel approached, "Rull doesn't do injured." And then he looked around, "Okay it looks like we've just caught a pair of stragglers, but I don't want anyone finding them like this. Get some holes dug. They don't need to be deep." Then he noticed that Veneel was staring intently at the two aliens, "What's wrong?"

"Tell me sergeant, does that not look out of place to you?" Veneel asked and he pointed to a small polished cylinder that was tucked into the loincloth of one of the dead kroot.

"Yes it does." Quinn replied, "Doyle give me that." He added.

Without a word the Catachan who had checked the kroot for signs of life removed the cylinder from the corpse and then tossed it to Quinn.

"At least we know it's not a bomb." Veneel said, the eerie smile appearing on his face again while Quinn examined the cylinder.

"Take this." He said, passing his shotgun to the psyker and then he grasped both ends of the cylinder and twisted it. Nothing happened.

"Problem sergeant?" Veneel asked.

"I think it's hollow." Quinn said, "Which means there could be something inside it." And he set the cylinder down on a nearby log and drew his long blade. Swiftly he brought the weapon down twice, hacking at the cylinder and there was an audible 'crack' as it split open, followed by a 'fizz'.

"Lookout!" Veneel yelled, and he barged into Quinn, knocking him aside just as the cylinder was consumed in a sudden flash, "It seems I was somewhat hasty in declaring that it was not a bomb." The psyker added.

"You think?" Quinn said, "Now get the hell off me."

Back on his feet Quinn examined what was left of the cylinder. Most of the metal itself seemed to still be intact, but when he picked it up a fine powder spilled out.

"Ash." He said, "That charge was mean to destroy whatever was inside, not kill us."

"A message perhaps?" Veneel asked and Quinn nodded.

"Looks like we just took out a couple of runners. Either bringing new orders or taking a report back to their commanders. Since we're hunting for a group that knows we're here my money's on reporting in about us."

"Then the kroot have already reached their fellow xenos." Veneel said, "Which means they could already be headed for the rest of Second Platoon."

Quinn held up his hand for quiet, the other going to his microbead.

"Go ahead Rull." He said and a moment later he snatched his shotgun back from Veneel and called out to the veterans around him, "Rull says there's campfires four hundred metres away."

The trees came to an abrupt halt ahead of Second Platoon and instead gave way to a wide expanse of tall grass. Leaving his squad deployed along the tree line Molla returned to consult with Vance and Wolf, beckoning Grey and Mayer to join them.

"Looks like swamp grass ahead." He said, "About a thousand metres of it before we hit cover again."

"So we'll have to pick our way through it and try not to get stuck." Vance said.

"We'd be sitting ducks out there." Mayer added.

"Can we go around?" Wolf asked but Molla shook his head.

"I think this is another tributary to that river, like the one we waded down. Now maybe it narrows further upstream, possibly even becomes a proper river but its all marshland for at least two clicks in each direction."

"With a river at one end." Grey said.

"Going around will take too long." Vance said, "We're losing light as it is."

"Okay so we go across." Wolf said.

"What and just pray that there aren't any kroot hanging around?" Grey asked.

"I can think of worse ideas than prayer." Preacher Black responded.

"Well not all of us are Emperor botherers like you preacher." Grey said sternly.

"We split up again." Wolf said suddenly and the Catachans stared at her.

"Just how many times are you planning to send people off?" Grey asked, "If the kroot turn up and you've sent everyone away-"

"I'm not sending anyone away." Wolf interrupted, "Just because I'm not from your precious Catachan doesn't mean I don't know anything about tactics. First Squad and my command squad will cross the marsh while you remain here with Second Squad, Corporal Mayer's mortar squad and the ogyrns. Corporal Mayer I want you to deploy your mortars ready for use. When we reach the far side First Squad will set up its heavy bolter and cover all of you while you follow. The two halves of the platoon will be in visual contact at all times. Now do you have a problem with any of that sergeant?"

"No he doesn't." Vance said before Grey could answer and he stared at the sergeant of Second Squad, "Do you?"

Apart from several locations where waste had been piled around the perimeter the smouldering campfires were the only part of the kroot camp on the ground, the rest of it consisting of what looked like tents of some sort made of crudely stitched animal hide had been strung up in the trees themselves. Of the kroot themselves however, there was no sign at all.

"Spread out." Quinn hissed, "Don't assume they're all gone. Flamers be ready to torch this place." Then he flinched as there was the sound of a las shot, "What the feth are you playing at?" he demanded, grabbing hold of Veneel's pistol and forcibly lowering it.

"Confirming that the kroot are gone sergeant." He replied without even looking at Quinn, his attention instead focused on the abandoned campsite, "Had there been any here then my shot would surely have brought them running."

"Yeah, right into us."

"Are you saying that your men could not hold, this position? Eight shotguns and two flamers makes for a powerful defence. Plus my own abilities of course."

Quinn scowled.

"Just put that bloody gun away until I say otherwise. Got it?"

"Of course sergeant. Whatever you say."

Despite Veneel's gunshot indeed proving that the kroot had abandoned their camp Quinn's men still advanced through it cautiously with their weapons held ready. Veneel himself followed Quinn calmly.

"Satisfied now?" the psyker asked.

"Not exactly." Quinn replied, "The plan was to deal with the kroot before they got here and warned their mates." Then in a raised voice he called out, "Orthan! Get over here." And the squad's vox operator ran over. Quinn plucked the handset from his back and switched it on.

Wolf wobbled as she took another step. Most of the ground was covered in about thirty centimetres of water, with just small sections where it stuck out like miniature islands in a muddy ocean. But the water was the least of the problems for the guardsmen, not only Wolf but the Catachans also. At the bottom of the water was a thick layer of mud that sucked their feet down into it and made every step taken a supreme effort. Not used to anything like this level of physical exertion Wolf soon found herself out of breath.

"Having trouble lieutenant?" Black asked as he saw she was having difficulty.

"Oh no." she replied sarcastically, "I did this all the time while I was a file clerk so-" and then she stopped as she realised her foot was stuck fast in the mud, "A little help please?" she asked and Vance nodded to the closest guardsman to her, the command squad's medic. His own footsteps slow and producing loud squelches the man approached Wolf and held out a hand.

"Here you go ma'am." He said.

"Thanks." Wolf replied as she took hold of him and he pulled her free, "Okay everyone hang on a minute." She then added, gasping for breath, "I just need to sit down for a moment to catch my breath." And she stepped towards one of the nearby mounds that stuck out of the water. Molla looked around just as she was about to sit down on it.

"No wait!" he yelled, but it was too late. Wolf sat down on the mound and it instantly gave way, dropping the screaming officer into the water.

"Get her out quick!" Vance yelled, struggling to get close enough to help her. Unable to stand by herself, Wolf thrashed about in the water until Teal and the medic grabbed hold of her arms and forcibly pulled her out. As soon as she broke the surface Wolf gasped and began coughing.

"I stink!" she exclaimed, realising that the disturbance she had created had thrown up rotten vegetation from within the mud.

"No worse than when we first met." Vance commented.

"The back of her pants is the same colour too." Teal added and Wolf looked around at him, scowling. Suddenly Teal put a hand to the earpiece of his vox set.

"Sergeant Quinn for you ma'am." He said, holding out the handset.

Wolf coughed again as she took it.

"Wolf here." She croaked, "Go ahead sergeant."

"Quinn here lieutenant. We've found the kroot camp."

"Excellent." Wolf said and looking at Vance she said, "Quinn's found them."

"The kroot are gone." Quinn then told her and her face fell.

"What do you mean gone?"

"I mean we were too slow. We ran into a couple of runners that were probably carrying word back to their headquarters but however many were here are probably already headed for you. Where are you exactly?"

Wolf looked to Molla.

"Where are we?" she asked him.

"Grid four four six by four eight one." He replied.

"Did you catch that?" Wolf asked.

"Yes. Four four six by four eight one. We're heading straight there. Hopefully we'll make it to you before the kroot do."

Then in the distance, from inside the jungle there was a distinctive squawk.

"Too late." Wolf said, "They're here."

"We're still about three hundred metres short of the trees." Molla said.

"We'll never make it." Vance added, "That sound was too close." And sure enough the first of the kroot appeared in the tree line.

"Purge the alien!" Black yelled defiantly, drawing his las pistol and firing it towards the kroot.

"They're out of range of that thing." Vance said and then there was a sharp 'crack' followed by the sound of a projectile whizzing overhead, "Though evidently not out to rifle range." He added as everyone ducked down, crouching in the water.

"Molla can your men get that heavy bolter set up here?" Wolf asked, looking around for anything that looked like solid ground.

"We can try." He replied as a second bullet passed close by.

"What's everyone waiting for?" Vance added, "You've got las guns, try using them."

The Catachans armed with las guns did as they were ordered, returning fire at the kroot warriors standing between the trees. However, they were a considerable distance away and the returned fire was no more effective than the few shots fired by the kroot. But then there were three loud 'pop' sounds in rapid succession, followed by the whistling of heavy projectiles.

"The mortars!" Wolf exclaimed as she realised that Mayer's squad was engaging the kroot.

There was another squawk from the kroot position, followed by yet more but these were different. Lower in pitch and more prolonged and moments later a swarm of the hound like creatures that had accompanied the group ambushed by the Catachans the previous day came bounding out into the swamp.

"Here they come." Vance warned as the beasts approached rapidly, bounding between the tiny muddy protrusions without ever putting enough pressure on them to cause them to collapse, "Concentrate your fire on the hounds and leave the warriors to Mayer."

9.

Within the jungle undergrowth Mayer looked through his magnoculars at the kroot, making a mental note of the range and their rate of advance. Then checked his data-slate and looked to his men.

"Set for three hundred. Two rounds each." He said and other two gunners joined him in adjusting the angle of the heavy weapons while their loaders clipped propellant charges to mortar rounds. The gunners then ducked back as the rounds were dropped tail first into the mortars and instantly came flying back out, travelling upwards in a steep arc that brought them back down to the ground amongst the trees where the kroot now were.

"You know if they get much closer they'll inside our minimum range sergeant." Mayer said to Grey.

"I know." He replied, "I'll take my squad forwards to head them off. You try and support Molla and Vance."

"And Wolf." Mayer added and Grey frowned.

"Yeah, the outsider as well." He said. Then he looked at Khor, "Khor you and your men stay here." He said, "Make sure the mortar teams are kept safe if any of the kroot get past us."

"Ogryns stay." Khor replied simply and Grey then led his squad towards the advancing kroot warriors.

A heavy chattering sound heralded the heavy bolter's entry into the battle. The tripod had been set up at its maximum height in the mud beneath the water while the weapon's number two was holding the case of ammunition above the surface. The weapon began to chew into the charging kroot hounds and their cries of pain were audible over the sound of both the weapon firing and the detonation of the mass reactive rounds exploding inside their targets. But as the guardsmen continued to concentrate on the hounds a group of kroot warriors also emerged from the jungle and began to wade through the swamp. These aliens kept low, only appearing above the long blade of swamp grass to fire their rifles at the guardsmen. But there was worse to come.

Wolf just had time to notice a figure decorated in the same way as the leaders she had previously seen amongst the kroot before the alien lifted a long barrelled weapon that instead of the crude construction of other kroot weapons had the look of being the product of more advanced science before there was a sudden flash from its muzzle. Exposed by the need to hold the ammunition for the heavy bolter clear of the muddy swamp water the loader was an easy target and the brilliant white blast of energy more powerful than a las gun shot took him off his feet and sent him crashing into the water.

"Throne!" Wolf exclaimed, "Where did they get that?"

"They are xenos lieutenant." Black said to her as he made his way towards the heavy bolter, "No doubt they trade with all manner of scum." And then he lifted the case of ammunition out of the water and looked at the gunner, "Keep firing." He told the man as he shook the water from it.

"Shouldn't you stay down?" Wolf asked just before there was a second blast from the kroot leader's energy weapon. This shot was as well aimed as the last one and it would have struck Black in his chest had there not been a second flash of light that originated from the priest himself.

"The Emperor protects." He said as he took one hand away from the ammunition crate just long enough to gently rub the rosarius he wore.

Along the tree line as it curved around several of the larger ridden beasts appeared, each mounting a single large calibre gun and there was a sudden 'boom!' as the first was fired.

"It's wide." Molla called out as it became immediately apparent to him that the shot was aimed nowhere near to either his squad or the command squad. Then there were two more sudden discharges from the large kroot guns.

"Those are wide as well." Vance added.

Wolf looked at the beasts and their riders, wondering why they were shooting if not to try and hit the Catachans. It was when she turned her head in the direction the aliens were facing that she realised.

"They're after the mortars!" she yelled, "Molla have your men target those creatures with the heavy bolter."

"You heard the officer!" Molla snapped at the heavy bolter gunner, "I want the heads of those things to mount on my wall." And the guardsman swung his weapon about, bringing it to bear on the beasts and their riders.

Grey heard a squawk from ahead and raised his las pistol just in time to put a shot through the face of the first kroot to appear through the undergrowth.

"They're here men!" he shouted, "Show 'em what Catachans are made of!" and he drew his long blade.

Another kroot leapt out of the undergrowth, producing a strange chattering sound as its leap carried it through the air towards the sergeant. It held its rifle sideways, clearly intending to use the pair of vicious spikes mounted at either end to strike at Grey. But he was ready for this and bringing up his own blade just as the kroot landed he knocked the rifle aside long enough to get his pistol under the alien's jaw and fire.

A gunshot nearby caught his attention, but even as Grey turned to face this next alien there was the sound a las gun being fired and the kroot warrior toppled back into the undergrowth behind it.

A human scream told Grey that one of his men had not been so lucky as him and spinning around he saw one of the aliens plunging one of his rifle blades into a guardsman for the second time. He charged the alien, catching it unawares as swung his own blade sideways. The long weapon cut through the muscle of the kroot's neck effortlessly until it struck its spine. Blood sprayed out of the wound and the kroot collapsed without a sound, its head flopping backwards and barely remaining connected to the rest of the corpse. It was then that Grey felt the ground shaking and he looked in the direction that the kroot were coming from. "Oh throne no." he said to himself before calling out, "Cavalry!"

About half a dozen kroot rode on the backs of beasts even more massive than those used to carry their support weapons. Like those weapon carriers these beasts bore a slight resemblance to the kroot warriors themselves, possessing large beaked heads. But where those were quadrupeds these were hunched bipeds, their stubby arms tipped in long clawed fingers.

Defiantly Grey fired his las pistol at the nearest of the charging cavalry, but the shots failed to penetrate the creature's thick hide, instead just causing it to roar as it charged towards him, unimpeded by the jungle. Knowing that he had too few men to form a defensive line against these monsters Grey gave the only order he could.

"Scatter, get close to the trees." He yelled.

The Catachans of Grey's squad did as they were told, disengaging from the kroot and heading towards the thick tree trunks that they hoped would give them some cover from their cavalry. One of the Catachans, a young woman who was one of the new recruits, was not fast enough and she let out a piercing scream as one of the charging beasts used its snout to flip her into the air, hurling her against the tree trunk she had been heading for.

Grey expected the kroot and their mounts to attempt to move around the trees in an attempt to engage his squad. This would of course have made the riders themselves easier targets for the Catachans' las guns. But instead as they broke through the Imperial line they continued on their way and Grey realised what their real target was and he stuck his blade in the ground so that he had a free hand to activate his microbead with. "Mayer! Heavy cavalry heading your way. Get Khor and his ogyrns to deal with them."

"Got it. Cavalry." Mayer said, though at the moment he was more concerned with the kroot shooting at his position. Already he had lost one man to a powerful gunshot that had torn large chunks out of a tree and produced an effect similar to a fragmentation grenade and he was busy applying a field dressing to a second.

Then he heard the sound of the kroot cavalry tearing through the undergrowth.

"Khor." He called out, "Charge."

"Ogyrns!" Khor yelled, holding up his bulky weapon, "Charge!"

Roaring, the ogyrns matched the kroot cavalry's charge with one of their own and like the aliens the massive abhumans simply trampled the undergrowth between them underfoot. As soon as the aliens came into view the ogyrns opened fire, only the limiting devices built into their weapons preventing them from emptying the ammunition drums in one single long and uninterrupted burst. The heavy-duty shotguns, known to guardsmen as ripper guns did just as their name suggested they would do. The clouds of projectiles ripped through the undergrowth and also the flesh of the kroot riders and their mounts. The first kroot was thrown backwards from his mount as the beast reared up in pain, exposing its underbelly to the next volley that split it wide open while another fell as the ripper gun blast simply tore its head from its shoulders.

Khor swung his ripper gun by the barrel as the kroot cavalry came closer and his swing brought the weapon's metal stock down on the head of the nearest beast with a 'crunch' as its skull gave way. The rider let out a squawk and fired its rifle, the bullet ricocheting off the prominent cybernetic implants in the BONEhead's own skull. Reaching out Khor grabbed hold of the muzzle of the kroot's rifle and used it to drag the alien towards him, swinging his ripper gun back around as he did so. The kroot and the ripper gun collided and the alien's head jerked backwards to produce a snapping sound. Letting go of its rifle the kroot collapsed in a heap beside its dead mount.

Close by two other ogyrns had pounced on another of the kroot cavalry. One had his arms wrapped around the mount's neck while the second was repeatedly pummelling the rider with his fist. As Khor watched the rider was pulled from his mount and the ogyryn hurled it to the ground, stamping on it repeatedly.

"Ogyrns strong!" Khor exclaimed.

Not expecting resistance of this kind, the two remaining kroot riders found that the momentum of their charge had been lost and they now faced odds of more than three to one. One of the riders fired at the closest ogyryn, the bullet striking him in the leg and he collapsed with a roar as he clutched at the wound. Then the kroot let out a squawk and guided its mount to turn around.

"They're running away!" Khor bellowed as the other rider also turned to flee, "Get after them!" and the ogyrns roared once more.

"Medic!" Molla called out as the guardsman beside him was struck. The bullet had struck the Catachan in the stomach as he had tried to stand up just long enough to get a better shot at one of the approaching kroot. Molla caught the man as he fell backwards, letting his las gun fall into the swamp.

"Go to him." Wolf ordered the command squad's medic, even though the man had already been about to go to the injured man's aide. Wolf herself saw that the kroot were now much closer and she fired off a shot from her las pistol. The shot missed its intended target, the kroot leader armed with the energy rifle, but it did prove that the alien warriors were now in range of her pistol. Seeing this Vance fired his own sidearm and this time the alien leader was struck. The shot was not fatal, but it did knock it down. Then another mortar round landed amongst the kroot. It did not detonate until it was already buried in the mud at the bottom of the swamp, this absorbing most of the energy of the blast but it did throw a plume of water high into the air and some of this was sprayed over the Catachans.

"They're getting too damn close." He said.

"Should we try and fall back?" Wolf asked.

"No." Vance replied, "Our one ace in the hole is that heavy bolter and we'd have to pack it up to move it. Plus we can't move as quick as we'd need to through this swamp.

"Then what do we do?"

"For the time being just we've been doing." Vance replied, "But we need to get Mayer to back off. I'd rather not see one of our on bombs taking us out."

Wolf activated her microbead.

"Corporal Mayer cease your fire. Enemy is too close. See if you can pick some of them off with rifle fire instead." She transmitted.

"Copy that. Ceasing fire." Mayer replied and the mortars fell silent.

The pounding sensation of the kroot cavalry returned and as Grey plucked his blade from the guts of a kroot warrior he turned, expecting to see the six kroot cavalry charging back towards him. However, now there were only two of the alien riders left and behind them Grey saw six ogryns doing their best to keep up, firing their ripper guns and bellowing their hatred at the aliens.

"Lookout to the rear!" Grey yelled. Despite there only being two of the kroot cavalry left they were still well ahead of the ogryns and it was obvious that they would be back amongst his squad before the abhumans caught up with them. If they chose to make a fight of it then Grey's men would have a hard time fighting them as well as the kroot warriors they were currently fighting. As it was Grey had only six troops left now, with one of those injured.

Grey headed for this injured man, hoping to protect him if the need arose. But as the kroot cavalry reached the Catachans it just charged right past them once more, evidently the fight had been knocked out of them by the ogryns. Furthermore the kroot warriors on foot had not expected their cavalry to retreat in such a disorganised fashion and they were not paying enough attention to the fast moving beasts. The riders squawked at their comrades but their warnings went either unheard or unheeded and several kroot now found themselves being trampled underfoot as the beasts stampeded back through their own lines. Seeing an opportunity Grey reached for a grenade.

"Fire in the hole!" he yelled as he hurled the explosive at the kroot. It landed amongst a group that had only just made it out of the path of one of the fleeing cavalry before it detonated, further adding to their confusion.

In the swamp things were not going as well for the Catachans, with the remaining guardsmen still facing large number of kroot warriors advancing towards them.

"Throne!" Teal exclaimed as he felt the impact of the kroot bullet. The shot had missed him but instead struck the bulky vox unit he carried on his back. Sparks flew from the device and there was an acrid smell as the electronics inside began to burn.

"Get rid of it!" Vance yelled, scrabbling towards the vox operator as he began to undo the harness that held it in place. Then with a loud 'splash' the vox was dropped into the swamp.

"Oh I hope at least one of those things is still working." Wolf said worriedly.

"Why?" Vance asked, "We can't get a signal out of here anyway."

"We still need to be able to contact Sergeant Quinn." She answered, "Where the hell is he anyway?"

Before Vance could speculate about the location of the platoon's veterans the near continuous chattering of the heavy bolter came to an abrupt halt. Both Vance and Wolf looked around to see the gunner sinking into the swamp as Molla dragged himself through the swamp to the heavy weapon.

"A waste of effort it seems sergeant." Black said, dropping the ammunition case and drawing his las pistol once more, "It seems that this machine's spirit has also passed." And Molla saw that part of the heavy bolter was missing, shot away by the same kroot bullet that had then bounced into the gunner.

"Everybody stay down." Vance called out.

"What are you planning sergeant?" Wolf asked.

"Just trying to keep us alive long enough to come up with a plan." He told her and then he took the opportunity to take a shot at a kroot that had stood up to fire at them and even as the kroot's rifle barked the alien was falling backwards into the swamp.

"What about grenades?" Wolf asked.

"Not much good around here." Molla told her, "They'll just sink into the swamp before they go off."

"I know." Wolf said, "But what if we use them at the last minute? Closer than is normal and wait until the kroot try and overrun us."

Vance smiled, plucking a grenade from his belt.

"It's worth a try." He said.

The kroot continued to advance towards the Catachans, with both sides firing at one another only intermittently as they did their best to keep out of sight. All the while Vance and Molla kept a careful eye on their advance, doing their best to monitor how close the nearest kroot were to them. Vance heard the sound of movement in the swamp from close by and turning around he saw a clump of swamp grass only a few metres away quiver as something pushed its way through it.

"Now! Fire in the hole!" he yelled, hurling his grenade at the grass.

The others followed suit, tossing their grenades out in front of their position. At that moment one of the kroot leaders suddenly appeared, standing up straight in the swamp and raising its decorated rifle above its head and pointing towards the Catachans with a crude looking curved knife. The alien let out a squawk and more of the kroot leapt into view and began to rush forwards as fast as they could manage through the swamp. That was when the grenades started to go off.

Just as Molla had stated the grenades had sunk into the swamp, settling on the bottom where the water absorbed much of the energy of the detonations. Much, but not all. Some of the kroot were close enough to a grenade that even the water could not save them and they were killed instantly. But those who were further away were still close enough that at least some of the fragments of the grenades sliced into their feet and lower legs beneath the water and the sound of kroot screams filled the air even over the detonations of the grenades.

The kroot charge was broken.

"Purge the alien!" Preacher Black bellowed and holding his las pistol in one hand and his blade above his head in the other he stood up and fired at the remaining kroot.

"You heard the man!" Vance shouted as he too leapt to his feet, "Charge!"

"For the Emperor!" Black yelled as he led the way.

"Come on lieutenant." Vance said as he looked down at Wolf, "Time to lead a glorious charge."

"I'm a file clerk." She muttered to herself as she drew the long blade the Catachans had given her, "We're not supposed to do any charging."

With most of their number already attempting to drag themselves away from the Catachans the kroot stood little chance when their would-be prey came at them. Las guns were switched to fully automatic and bursts of las blasts finished off the closest aliens even as they tried to bring their own weapons to bear.

One of the few uninjured kroot took aim at Black, the screaming priest being the closest human and fired. But the protective energy shield built into his rosarius flared again and as the kroot attempted to reload for a second shot the priest was upon him.

"Death to enemies of mankind!" he yelled, bringing his blade down on the alien's head. Then even before the dead kroot had dropped into the swamp he spun around and shot the next closest alien in the chest.

Wolf felt something heavy strike her from the side as one of the Catachan's fell victim to a kroot bullet and she almost fell into the swamp with him. As she turned she saw the alien that had killed him now lifting its rifle ready to swing it at her and impale her on the massive spike beneath its muzzle. She squealed in alarm as the kroot let out a squawk and entirely on instinct she pointed her pistol at the alien and fired. This time her aim was true and the kroot's eyes widened suddenly as a smoking hole appeared between them. Wolf them squealed again as she was forced to dodge out of the way of the falling alien before being impaled anyway as the rifle also fell towards her.

"Not bad outsider!" Vance yelled as he pulled his blade from the stomach of a kroot warrior and kicked it into the swamp, "Now do it again!"

Before another target presented itself to Wolf there was a volley of las gun fire and she looked around to see that Grey's squad had formed up along the tree line at the edge of the swamp and they were now firing at the kroot yet to reach her command squad or Molla's. At the same time Khor's ogryns were now starting to wade across the swamp itself towards the fight. Wolf noticed that there were only six of the abhumans now, though just as she was fearing that the seventh had been killed she spotted it within the trees just behind Grey's squad.

This unexpected intervention seemed to break the will of the kroot and those not yet engaged with the Catachans turned back for the jungle behind them. Seeing this change of heart just as he placed a las bolt from his pistol through a nearby kroot caused Black to cry out.

"Rejoice!" he yelled, "The xenos is beaten. After them. Wipe them out!"

"Hold!" Vance shouted in response, just as some of the Catachans were starting to wade after the fleeing kroot.

"We must finish them!" Black snapped at Vance.

"We need to regroup." Vance replied, "We've no idea how many of those things are waiting for us in those trees."

"But if they-" Black began.

"This is my platoon." Wolf interrupted, "And I say we continue across the swamp and regroup with Sergeant Grey's squad and the ogyrns at the far side. We need to know where that lander was heading."

"You're nothing but an outsider." Black said, snarling, "The men know that I-"

"The men know that you're not in command Preacher." Molla interrupted, "Even if they won't listen to her they'll listen to us over you and we're heading for the other side of the swamp."

Angry at being forced to allow the kroot warriors to escape Black nevertheless knew that he was beaten; the guardsmen would not follow him over the two sergeants. But before he could speak to admit his defeat there was the sound of engines from overhead.

"What the hell?" Vance commented.

"Is it another aquila?" Wolf asked as she looked upwards, trying to locate the source of the sound.

"Those aren't aquilas." Molla replied and he pointing into the air in the direction that the platoon had been heading before the battle with the kroot. Turning around Wolf saw a cluster of dark shapes in the sky coming steadily closer. Unlike the aquila-pattern lander that they had shot down earlier these craft had no wings at all, instead relying on large engine pods mounted either side to maintain lift.

10.

"Hook! Jarvis!" Grey barked as he studied the approaching craft through his magnocular. It was clear that these wedge-shaped vehicles were not of Imperial origin which meant that they had to be hostile.

Understanding what was desired of them the two guardsmen rushed forwards into the swamp and as Hook lined the missile launcher up on the closest aircraft Jarvis loaded an anti-aircraft missile.

"Missile ready!" he called out, standing back and a moment later as the missile launcher indicated a lock Hook fired.

Just as the missile fired at the aquila had done, this one accelerated directly towards the alien craft. But this time the target was not a helpless passenger transport. The craft banked sharply just as the aquila had done, but as the missile turned to track it a pair of small objects were ejected from its rear. These burst open suddenly, producing a brilliant flare that lit up the night sky and also a cloud of reflective particles. It's sensors overloaded and unable to determine its real target from the countermeasures the missile turned again, heading for the closest flare and detonating well clear of the vehicle.

"Reload!" Grey ordered.

"I need another flakk-" Jarvis began, but the vehicle that had just avoided being shot down was now turning back towards the Catachans and as it did so blasts of energy erupted from the multi-barrelled weapon mounted beneath it's nose that tore Hook and Jarvis apart.

Two of the alien craft swooped over the jungle while the other three in the formation halted above the guardsmen standing in the swamp and slowly descended, their nose-mounted weapons pointing ominously towards them.

"Lower your weapons!" a voice boomed out from one of the hovering vehicles and even though they were clearly of alien origin the words were spoken in Low Gothic, the language spoken across the Imperium of Man.

"I don't suppose you've any ideas?" Wolf whispered to Vance, but he shook his head.

"Without that missile launcher we're fethed." He replied.

"Your orders lieutenant?" Molla asked.

"We can't win." Wolf replied, "Everyone lower your weapons."

"Traitor!" Black yelled, "You can't just surrender."

"We've no choice." Vance replied as he holstered his las pistol, "Everyone lower your weapons. But don't put them down just yet. Right lieutenant?"

"Right." Wolf replied and she looked around to where Khor's ogryns were still heading closer, "And perhaps you should pass the message onto Grey and Khor."

Grey's squad had heard the sound of troops deploying via drop lines from the hovering carriers even if they had not seen the new arrivals.

"Stand by." Grey whispered as he pressed himself up against a tree trunk for both support and concealment, "Don't shoot until I-" and then his microbead activated.

"All squads this is Vance. Stand down. Hold positions and do not fire unless fired upon. Acknowledge."

"This is Grey. Are you insane?"

"Stand down Grey. We're not done yet."

Grey sighed.

"Stand down men." He said and then with his microbead he transmitted, "Order acknowledged."

"Ogryns halt." Khor shouted loud enough that the command squad heard his voice and the ogryns came to a dead stop in the swamp.

Looking at each of the alien vehicles in turn Wolf took a deep breath, afraid that her next words could be her last.

"Okay so now what?" she asked.

Immediately a pair of disc like machines that mounted pairs of energy weapons beneath them detached from each of the vehicles near the command squad and spread out around the Catachans and this was followed by a sudden hiss as hatchways opened in the sides and rear of the vehicles.

The figures that leapt out into the swamp were roughly humanoid, with large armoured helmets covering their heads and more armour plates protecting their torsos and limbs. Though she had little chance to observe them before their feet vanished into the waters of the swamp Wolf thought she noticed that they were cloven rather than of a more human form.

"You know who these guys are?" she whispered to Vance and he nodded.

"More foul xenos." Black exclaimed, overhearing Wolf's question, "That's all I need to know."
"I think they prefer the word tau." Vance replied, "Right lieutenant?" and Wolf nodded.
"That's my guess. Not that I've ever seen one before."
As the tau soldiers spread out around the Catachans another figure climbed out of the side of one of the troop carriers. This one was human.
"You!" Vance snapped.
"Me." Austam Karr replied.
"So you're the one that the aquila was coming to pick up." Wolf said.
"Indeed I was." Karr said, smiling, "So unfortunate that you had to murder my pilot like that."
"He was a traitor. Just like you." Black hissed.
"Oh come on now." Karr said, "How can it be treason when I'm just following the orders of the governor of Par Shallon?"
"The governor knows you're negotiating with aliens?" Wolf asked.
"My dear it was his idea. You see the Imperium doesn't exactly give worlds out here on the Eastern Fringe the respect they deserve. The tau on the other hand-"
"They have seduced you away from the guiding light of Him on Earth." Black interrupted.
"They've given us an army." Karr responded with a smirk, "Thousands of their warriors and armoured vehicles are hidden in this valley. We had hoped to wait until all the Imperial Guard forces had withdrawn to make our move, but somewhere along the way things got a bit confused. No matter, one division will be no match for our PDF combined with the tau."
"The Emperor's reach is long." Black said.
"Your Emperor is failing human." An alien voice said in accented Gothic from inside the same troop carrier that Karr had just exited.
"Ah." Karr said, turning towards the still open hatchway, "Please allow me to introduce you to his Excellency Aun'Lortas. The Tau Empire's ambassador to Par Shallon, here to oversee our admission." And at that moment another alien figure stepped out of the transport. Unlike the others this one wore no visible armour at all, just flowing robes and the only weapon it carried was a long decorated staff. The lack of armour left the alien's face uncovered and the humans got a good look at its flat, noseless face and blue-grey flesh.
"Abomination!" Black yelled and he began to arise his las pistol. Immediately the tau warriors and the floating discs turned towards him.
"Easy Preacher." Vance said, "You'll never make it." And Black lowered the gun once more.
"So what do you want anyway?" Wolf asked the alien leader.
"I want you." Aun'Lortas replied, "All of you. Join us and serve the greater good."
"And what happens when I say no?" she asked.
Aun'Lortas swept an arm out in front of him to indicate the tau forces arrayed around them.
"You die." He said, "The greater good cannot be stopped."
Wolf paused, trembling slightly. There was no chance of her surrendering to the alien, but she also knew that if she ordered the Catachans to open fire they would all be dead in seconds. Then as she stared at Aun'Lortas she noticed something. Something that Karr could not see from where he stood and that none of the tau warriors, their attention focused entirely upon the human troops, had seen. On the side of Aun'Lortas' temple was a tiny glowing red spot and Wolf smiled.
"I need to inform the rest of my men." She said, putting her blade back in its sheath and lifting her hand to her microbead.
"An excellent deci-" the tau began.
"Do it Rull." Wolf transmitted and the alien's skull exploded.
"No!" Karr screamed, pieces of the dead tau's head now splattered across him.
Wolf had expected the tau warriors to react in one of two ways. Firstly they could have opted for self-preservation, taking cover as they searched for the source of the sudden and unexpected attack. Or alternatively they could have simply opened fire, wiping out herself and the Catachans before they could respond. What she did not expect was for them to all turn and stared dumbfounded at the headless corpse of Aun'Lortas now floating in the swamp, only the disc shaped drones moving to seek out Rull.
"Fire!" Wolf ordered, yelling it as loud as she could.
The reason that Vance had chosen to holster his pistol now became apparent as he hurled the grenade he had been holding onto into the troop carrier that had brought Karr and his alien master. It was a krak grenade, possessing an enhanced explosive content over the standard fragmentation grenade and was designed specifically for attacking armoured targets like the transport.
Detonating inside the transport, the blast was directed out through the side and rear hatches. But it also ripped apart the vehicle's vital systems and as it caught fire it dropped out of the air into the swamp with an almighty 'Crash!'

The primary threat seemingly now coming from the troops, tau drones turned back towards them. But by this time the Catachans had raised their own weapons and firing on full auto they tore into the tau, both their warriors and the drones.

This was all the signal that the other squads needed.

“Ogryns fire!” Khor yelled and all six ogryns began to advance once more, their ripper guns trained on the nearest troop carrier. Though they were not designed as anti-armour weapons the ripper guns nevertheless packed an incredible punch and there was a flash of sparks from under the vehicle’s nose as the weapon there failed, exploding as the pilot tried to fire it at the oncoming ogryns. Stripped of his only weapon and with the disembarked squad unable to come to his aide the pilot chose to withdraw. The hatches of the vehicle sealed with a hiss and the engines roared as the vehicle lifted off.

Rull fired again, this time aiming for the last of the three vehicles hovering over the swamp. The bullet struck one of the side mounted engine pods from the rear, punching a neat hole through its plating. Thick smoke began to bellow out of the engine and inside the cockpit alarms sounded. Worried for the safety of himself and his craft the tau pilot panicked and put more power into the engines to increase altitude. But this brought it into the path of the other fleeing transport. A tearing sound filled the air as the two vehicles collided and both burst into flames and came crashing back down into the swamp, thankfully rolling away from the Catachans before coming to a halt.

As the guardsmen dealt with the tau themselves Preacher Black spotted Karr now cowering behind the ruins of his transport and the priest strode towards him.

“Vengeance is mine sayeth our Emperor!” he yelled, “There is no adequate punishment for your treason but I will endeavour to mete one out anyway.” And then discarding his weapons Black grabbed hold of Karr and thrust his head under the water of the swamp, a look of fury on his face as he held the struggling man down, “Drown heretic! Drown in the water polluted by the blood of your xenos allies!”

“Black we don’t have time for this.” Wolf cried out as she rushed towards him and pulled Karr up out of the water, spluttering and gasping for breath.

“He is a traitor and he must die!” Black yelled.

“Yes he must.” Wolf replied, shooting Karr between the eyes, “But we need to get out of here.”

The moment the first troop carrier exploded Grey knew that the tau would attack.

“Fire at will!” he snapped, despite there being no obvious targets just yet. But it was just a few moments before the first energy blast came out of the darkness to take down the squad’s vox operator. With more than half his squad now dead Grey doubted that his remaining men and the one injured ogryn with them would be able to hold off the tau for any length of time. But the next volley of weapons fire came not from tau pulse weapons but from shotguns.

Quinn’s veterans had advanced cautiously behind the tau, taking them entirely by surprise and even as they turned to face this new threat the two veterans armed with flamers unleashed jets of fire that washed over them.

Above the trees the to circling transports heard the panicked communications from the troops on the ground, both in the jungle and the swamp. Deployed to support the squads in the jungle the pilots attempted to locate targets to attack, but the jungle canopy was so thick that nothing more than brief flashes of weapons fire was visible.

That was until Veneel unleashed his power.

Channelling psychic energy in the form of lightning the psyker lashed out at the closest of the tau vehicles. This energy arced around the inside of the vehicle, including its cockpit and the pilot screamed as his flesh was burnt away from his bones. His suffering was cut mercifully short as the strike overloaded his vehicles engines and it simply exploded in midair.

The tau communication channels were now silent. All of the warriors were dead at the hands of the Imperial Guard while the other four troop carriers were all burning wrecks. Facing an enemy of unknown strength the final tau pilot opted to withdraw.

11.

Wolf looked around at the survivors of her command squad and Molla's squad.

"I think we ought to leave." She said.

"I think you're right." Vance agreed, "That last tau is probably telling those thousands of others Karr mentioned. We were lucky this time, I don't want to bet on us being lucky a second time."

"The Emperor protects." Black said, "Have faith and—"

"How much faith does it take to stop a pulse round preacher?" Molla interrupted. Then he looked at Wolf, "After you lieutenant." He added.

With the threat of ambush no longer their most pressing concern the Catachans waded back through the swamp as fast as they could manage. As they approached the ogryns a wide smile appeared on Khor's face.

"Ogryns smash!" he said excitedly.

"Yes you did." Vance replied, "Saved us all." And he reached out and patted Khor's arm as he waded past, "Now come on, we're leaving."

"Ogryns march." The BONEhead said and the ogryns joined the Catachans in wading back the way they had come. Standing on the shore as they approached was Quinn, smiling as he balanced his shotgun on his hip.

"You took you're bloody time didn't you?" Vance called out.

"Hey," Quinn replied, "what's the point in arriving early?"

Wolf looked around.

"Where's Rull?" she asked.

"Gone on ahead." Quinn replied, "We'll never make it out of here if any of those kroot that got away manage to regroup and come back for another go. Rull'll make sure they stay away."

"Okay then." Wolf said, nodding, "Let's get going. Corporal Mayer, give your mortars to Khor's ogryns to carry."

"Ogryns carry." Khor said.

Back in their natural environment the Catachans made much better time through the jungle as they raced to escape the valley. Cut off from the planetary satellite network their only hope was to reach the edge of the valley from where they would hopefully be able to get a clear vox signal to other Imperial Guard forces. But as they made their way through the jungle there was an ominous sound, that of engines overhead.

"The tau." Wolf said, "They've found us."

"Not yet maybe." Vance replied, reaching to activate his microbead, "Rull, do you have eyes on what's coming?" and then he nodded as the sniper reported in, "Rull says its two light vehicles moving too fast to get a clear shot at. Open topped and two man crew, but more of those drones on each as well. Probably just scouts."

"Suggestions?" Wolf asked, looking at her squad leaders.

"Krak grenades'll do it." Vance said, "Assuming we can get close enough."

"Since they're open topped we could use the flamers." Quinn said, "But they've got the same range issue as chucking grenades at them."

"Enough las gun fire and we ought to be able to pick off the crew." Grey suggested and then he looked at how many of the platoon were still alive, "Of course we don't have as many las guns as we started out with either."

"So we've nothing powerful enough o bring them down?" Wolf asked.

"Lieutenant," Mayer began, "the most powerful weapons we've got left are the ogryns' ripper guns." And Khor grinned.

Wolf turned to Veneel. The psyker had been quiet ever since the Catachans had begun their withdrawal and he looked to be relying on his staff for support.

"What about you?" she asked, "You took out those armoured—" and Veneel shook his head.

"I'm afraid the effort of that has drained me somewhat lieutenant." He said and a hint of a smile appeared on Black's face.

"Witchcraft is no substitute for strategy." He said but Wolf ignored him.

"Lieutenant," Quinn said, stepping closer to her, "our best option is to avoid those things entirely. We don't know if they're on a search and destroy mission or just a scouting run. But I guarantee that if they call in our position we'll have more to worry about than just a couple of scouts."

"Then we keep moving. If it looks like the tau have seen us we just fire everything we've got at them." Wolf said and she activated her microbead, "Rull let us know if those things look like they've spotted us." She signalled.

The sound of the tau engines continued unabated, the scout craft obviously loitering over the area as they hunted for the Catachans and despite the darkness and cover from the jungle canopy the guardsmen were under no illusions about the ability of the aliens to locate them. The noise increased suddenly as the tau scouts came closer.

"Scatter!" Vance yelled, "And stay low."

Clutching their weapons tightly the Catachans dispersed as the scout vehicles approached and all of a sudden the jungle was lit up by a brilliant beam of light that came from the nose of one of the vehicles. The powerful searchlight beam swept around the jungle, threatening to expose the Catachans at any moment and Molla noticed the way in which the beam was moving.

"They're circling us." He said, his back pressed up against a thick tree trunk as he looked upwards, "They know we're down here."

Wolf lifted her las pistol, pointing it up into the trees as she thought.

"Then we have to attack." She said. But at that moment the noise from above the trees increased dramatically and then began to fade as the two scouts flew off, "They've given up." Wolf exclaimed, smiling. "More likely they've just reported our position in." Vance replied, "We need to get out of here now."

The Catachans began to run, abandoning any pretence of stealth as they tried to put as much distance between themselves and the position the tau scouts would have given for them. But it was not long before the sound of engines returned, this time from something much bigger and more powerful than a scout.

The night was lit up again, but rather than a searchlight this time it was the concentrated fire of the four rapid firing tau energy cannons mounted on the vehicle sent to deal with the Catachans. The strike was not aimed directly for where they were located, instead tearing up the jungle about fifty metres ahead of the remains of Second Platoon. All of a sudden Veneel's eyes opened wide as his prescience gave him a brief glimpse of what was to come.

"Down!" he bellowed, diving to the ground. Without questioning him the others did the same, even Preacher Black and a second later their actions were justified as the tau tank dropped into the area it had just cleared for itself. The vehicle was of the same general construction as the troop carriers the Catachans had already encountered. But this mounted two of the rotary cannons under the front of its hull instead of one, taking the place of the drones while a pair of even larger rotary weapons was mounted on a turret on top of the vehicle. The tau opened fire again. Knowing that the humans were close by but not exactly where they were concealing themselves, the crew of the hovering tank instead opted to let their weapons rip apart everything around them.

"Stay down!" Vance yelled over the sound of heavy weapons fire and splintering wood, "If we can play dead long enough maybe they'll go away."

"That's your big idea?" Wolf asked, "Hope they give up?"

"Better than just charging into that firestorm." Vance replied as the continuing torrent of energy blasts incinerated a bush close by.

There was a creaking sound from beside Wolf and she looked up to see that repeated strikes from the tau weapons had severely weakened the trunk of a tree close to her. All it would take was one or two more hits and it would undoubtedly give way. Sure enough as the tau cannons swung back towards her they ripped apart what was left of the tree trunk and the creak turned into a crash. Wolf squealed as she rolled over to avoid the falling tree and she found herself facing straight up as the branches came down around her.

"Lieutenant, are you alright?" Vance called out.

"Fine I think." She called out in reply, "But I can't move, I think I'm stuck."

"Just stay put." Vance said, "We'll get you out just as soon as-" and then he was interrupted by a signal on his microbead, "What do you mean keep that tank right where it is?" he asked in reply to Rull's request.

The area cleared by the tau tank's initial strike from above the trees was not that much larger than the vehicle itself. So as it's weapons rotated, spraying energy blasts through the surrounding jungle the tank remained stationary. Exactly the sort of target favoured by a sniper.

A sharp 'crack!' indicated that Rull was not using the usual silenced subsonic ammunition. But this first shot just bounced off the curved frontal armour of the tau tank. Then after a brief pause Rull fired again. This shot struck the narrow transparent vision plate set into the front of the tank to allow the pilot some degree of vision without having to rely on his instruments alone. Theoretically armoured against small arms fire, the specialist armour-piercing round Rull had loaded was able to punch right through this with enough energy left over to send it into the pilot's throat. Blood spurted from the wound as the tau clamped his hands around his neck in a vain attempt to stem the bleeding. Beside him the co-pilot reached out to try and take control of the tank but not before the vehicle's nose dropped and the ground shook as the armoured vehicle ploughed right into it.

The vehicle's weapons stopped firing the moment it crashed and Quinn saw his chance.

"Come on!" he snapped and he and Grey got up from where they had been hiding and rushed towards the wrecked tank, running up the front of the vehicle that now formed a convenient ramp as far as the turret,

"When I say." Quinn said, chambering a round in his shotgun and Grey took hold of the handle of the turret hatch. Now!"

Twisting the handle and pulling it back Grey pulled the hatch open. Already dazed by the crash the tau vehicle commander stared up at the two sergeants, startled. Quinn fired twice, putting two rounds into the commander's chest.

"Stand back." Grey said, plucking a fragmentation grenade from his webbing and he pulled out the pin. Grey tossed the armed grenade into the tank and kicked the hatch shut before leaping down to the ground. There was a dull 'crump' as the grenade went off, filling the inside of the tank with shrapnel and killing the co-pilot.

Still lying pinned under the tree branches Wolf stared up into the sky. There were few clouds and she had a good view of the stars. Against this background she noticed that one of the points of light was in motion and she smiled.

"Lieutenant!" Vance shouted as he ran towards her, drawing his blade. Standing over her he brought the weapon down on the branch she was trapped beneath, hacking a rut in it before kicking it. There was a loud 'snap!' as the branch broke and Vance reached down to lift Wolf back to her feet, "Are you okay?" he asked her.

"Yes. Thank you." Wolf replied and she took out her magnoculars and aimed them upwards, "Please, please, please." She said to herself, suddenly adding, "Yes!" and she looked around, "You! Get over here." She called out to Orthan and she ran towards the veteran squad's vox operator.

"What are you doing lieutenant"? Mayer asked as she plucked the handset from the device, "We can't get a signal out of the valley."

"We don't need to." Wolf replied and activating the vox she lifted the handset to her mouth, "*Fury of Man* this is Catachan one nine mark four mark two. Do you read me? Over."

"The *Fury of Man*?" Veneel said.

"The cruiser." Black said with a smile and in a raised voice he called out, "Rejoice! The Emperor's might will be visited upon this world and the foul xenos purged."

"Catachan one nine mark four mark two this is *Fury of Man*. State your message. Over." A male voice responded over the vox, the accent clearly not of local or Catachan origin.

"*Fury of Man* I have a fire mission." Wolf replied as she took out her map and studied the grid markings,

"Target four five zero by four eight one. Circular ten thousand. Over."

"Throne!" Mayer exclaimed, "She's going to take out the entire valley with that."

"And us with it as well." Grey added, scowling.

12.

On the bridge of the *Fury of Man* the vox officer called out to the captain.

"Sir I have a signal from the surface." He said, "A request for fire from an Imperial Guard platoon. Call sign Catachan one nine mark four mark two."

"A platoon?" the captain asked and he descended the steps leading to his command pulpit, the ship's commissar following close behind. Around the bridge several crewmen glanced at one another nervously. To unleash the firepower of a navy capital ship on an Imperial world was a serious matter and not undertaken lightly. The captain leant closer to the vox system and activated it himself, "Catachan one nine mark four mark two this is *Fury of Man* actual. Confirm your identity. Over."

"Wolf. Emilia. Lieutenant. Over." Wolf responded.

"Clarify your request Wolf. Over."

"Fire mission. Target four five zero by four eight one. Circular ten thousand. Over."

"And the purpose? Over."

"Xenos on surface in large numbers. The local government is compromised and we have been cut off from the planetary communications network. Over."

"Augurs! Report!" the captain snapped.

"Reading multiple contacts at low altitude sir." Another bridge officer called out, "No Imperial IDs."

The captain then looked at his vox operator.

"I'm reading Guard signals from several locations sir." He said, "But it's all local. Nothing on the satellite system."

"Try accessing it yourself." The captain said and the vox operator quickly checked the satellite frequencies. Then he looked directly at the captain.

"I can't sir. We've been shut out of it as well."

The captain now turned to the commissar and stood up straight.

"Commissar it is my intention to turn the ships weapons on the planet as requested by the Imperial Guard." He said.

"Carry on captain." The commissar replied and the captain turned back to the vox system.

"Catachan one nine mark four mark two this is *Fury of Man*. We will fire for effect on our next orbital pass. ETA eighteen minutes. Over and out." Then he shut off the channel and headed back to his pulpit, giving orders as he went, "Raise void shields and sound action stations. All gun crews to station and load torpedoes. Vox contact the Fifteenth Division headquarters and make sure they know what's happening. Helm increase orbital velocity, I want us in firing position in fifteen minutes exactly."

Wolf handed the handset back to Orthan and looked around.

"Well what are you waiting for?" she asked the Catachans who were stood staring at her dumbfounded, "In under twenty minutes this place is going to burn. Let's move!"

In orbit around Par Shallon the *Fury of Man* rolled, aligning one of its massive broadsides with the surface of the planet while at the prow of the ship the cruisers six torpedo tubes slid open. On the bridge both the captain and commissar studied their pocket watches.

"Torpedo room reports all tubes loaded and ready to fire." One of the crew called out.

"I make that four minutes and two seconds." The commissar said.

"I agree." The captain replied, "Two seconds too slow." Then he looked up, "Master of Ordnance I want those loading crews flogged. Twenty lashes each."

Abandoning all pretence of stealth the Catachans ran through the jungle. For the native Catachans this was not an issue and they instinctively avoided anything that would cause them to trip. On the other hand the ogyrns simply smashed through the jungle, their immense bulk clearing their way. This left only Veneel and Wolf and the pair were frequently grabbed by a nearby Catachan who pulled them out of danger.

"Listen!" Wolf yelled suddenly as she heard a faint rumbling, "It's the waterfall. We're almost there."

"About three hundred metres by my reckoning." Molla said.

Wolf glanced at her watch.

"We've got four minutes." She said.

"Target coming over horizon now sir." The *Fury of Man*'s helmsman called out from his station.

"Excellent. Exactly on schedule." The captain said and then he looked down at his master of ordnance,

"Master of Ordnance inform the torpedo room. Fire tube one." And looking through the metres thick armoured

viewports to the front of the bridge the captain witnessed a brilliant flash as the sixty metre long torpedo was fired, the engine flaring as it ignited and the weapon sped away.

"Impact estimated in tee-minus three minutes captain." The master of ordnance stated and the captain started his watch.

The Catachans had just reached the top of the hill at the edge of the valley when there was a rumbling from overhead.

"That wasn't thunder." Molla said.

"Then this'll have to do." Wolf said, "Everyone take cover and don't look into the valley. No matter what don't look."

The Catachans took whatever cover they could, seeking out slight dips in the ground or rocky outcrops for shelter. Some just lay face down on the ground and placed their hands over their heads. Having been ordered not to look the ogryns closed their eyes tightly as the entire platoon waited for the impact.

It came just seconds later. There was a distant screaming that grew in volume and an initial wave of heat washed over them as the torpedo streaked overhead, still several kilometres up. Then came the detonation.

The torpedo exploded before impact, releasing its stored charge of super heated plasma that raised the temperature so high that everything within three thousand metres caught fire in an instant. The sound of the explosion was rapidly replaced by the screaming of the wind as air was sucked into the firestorm and the Catachans felt the heat from the blast even more than ten thousand metres away.

As the wind subsided Vance looked up, peering into the valley and his jaw dropped.

"Throne." He said as he looked at the scene of devastation laid out in front of him. The jungle valley was gone now, replaced by scorched ground and dry riverbeds, the water they had contained boiled away by the torpedo strike.

"He has laid His vengeance upon them!" Black yelled, getting to his feet.

"Get down!" Wolf yelled, "They're not done yet."

"In position now captain. Target is directly below."

"Commence broadside. Continuous fire."

In the gun decks of the *Fury of Man* loading crews fed shells the size of tanks into the macro cannons that sat side by side for a thousand metres as rapidly as they could, not even waiting for them to be fired before rushing back to the ammunition lifts to collect the next rounds. Further back along the length of the ship two massive turrets turned as power was diverted from the main drives to charge them up. A klaxon sounded as the massive capacitors below the turrets reached full charge and brilliant beams of energy erupted from the ship-killing weapons.

The pounding of the macro cannon bombardment seemed as if it would go on forever as hundreds of shells containing thousands of tonnes of explosives were dropped into the valley. Weapons such as these were designed to fill regions of space with volumes of billions of cubic kilometres with shrapnel capable of overloading void shields and tearing through thickly armoured adamantium hulls so concentrating their destructive power against such a small area was devastating, blasting craters large enough to bury entire buildings in. The final blow came in the form a screeching sound as the lance beams cut through the atmosphere, creating a column of fire in their wake. The ground already weakened by the macro cannon bombardment gave way entirely as the lances burrowed deep into it and pierced the planet's crust. Lifting her head Wolf looked down into the valley and all she saw was the molten magma now flowing from the hole torn in the planet.

"Catachan one nine mark four mark two this is *Fury of Man*. Do you copy? Over."

Wolf waved Orthan towards her and took the vox handset.

"Fury of Man this is Catachan one nine mark four mark two. We read you. Over."

"Bombardment complete. Report effectiveness. Over."

Wolf smiled.

"Bombardment effective *Fury of Man*. Xenos threat eliminated. Over and out."

EPILOGUE.

"Gant!" Vance yelled as he walked across the parade ground to where she was inspecting the row of sentinel walkers she commanded.

"What the feth happened to you?" Gant replied, smirking as she saw the dust now covering the platoon sergeant from head to toe as a result of the debris thrown into the atmosphere by the orbital bombardment.

"While you and First Platoon were busy poking around in holes in the ground we were actually doing Imperial Guard stuff." He replied.

"Well you need to wash it off."

"I know. But I need a favour from you."

"What?"

"You and Lieutenant Selena are still heading over to Regimental HQ tonight after your duty shifts finish aren't you? About eight?"

"Yeah. You want us to get you something?"

"No. I want you to take something with you. Or rather someone."

Gant groaned.

"That outsider. Why?"

"Because we're stuck with her and you owe me."

"I owe you? How do you figure that?"

"You told my platoon about her being put in charge when I told you not to. Now I think she'll fit in more if you two would just get her used to how we do things."

Gant sighed.

"Fair enough. I'll tell Anna." She said, "But I swear," and she reached into a nearby tool box and took out a roll of industrial tape, "if she tries to tell us how we should do things I'll make sure she shuts up."

Vance smiled.

"I'll tell Wolf to be ready at eight." He said and he turned around and walked away, heading for his own tent.

When he reached it he found the other three sergeants inside, attempting to clean the dust off their equipment.

"So?" Quinn asked.

"She agreed." Vance replied, "But we better make sure we're up early tomorrow."

"How come?" Molla asked.

"Because we'll probably have to figure out what they've taped her to."