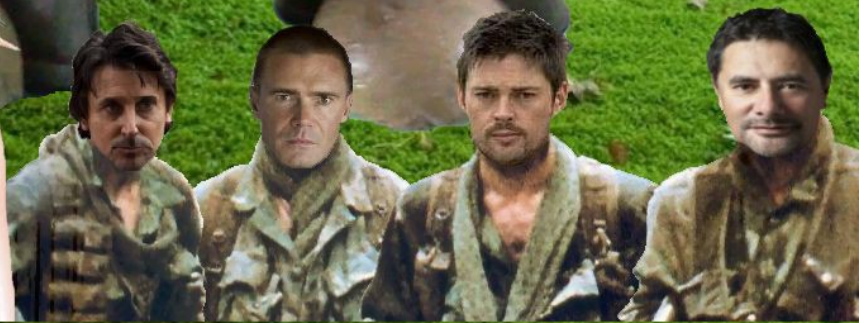




CATACHAN ONE NINE MARK FOUR MARK TWO

# PRIORITY TARGET

BY STEPHEN J DUTTON



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# **7.1 : PRIORITY TARGET**

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

The Catachan VII Division is deployed in the vanguard of an invasion of an Ork held world. Their mission is simple, support a team of marines sent by the Inquisition to locate and kill the leader of the Orks on the planet before the main invasion force makes its landing. The marines include a number of faces familiar to Captain Wolf and Second Platoon soon finds itself being sent deep into enemy territory with them.

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# 1 .

Captain Emilia Wolf checked her appearance in the mirror even though the dress code of the Catachan XIX Regiment was so relaxed that it did not differentiate between service and dress uniforms. As with everything that hailed from the infamous death world of Catachan, widely regarded as the most dangerous planet in the galaxy, it was all a question of what worked over what looked best. When Wolf had been left behind by her own regiment, the Lyrerian XXXII and she had been reassigned to the Catachan XIX this had been one of the many new things she had had to get used to. Most significantly her role had changed from an administrative one to that of a front line combat officer and the platoon of troops she had been placed in command of had made no effort to hide their displeasure at having her as their officer. Catachans had a reputation for disliking what they called 'outsiders', anyone not born and raised on Catachan who never faced the dangers of that world that meant more than half of all humans born there died before reaching adulthood. Wolf had now led her platoon through a total of six campaigns and earned a promotion to become the de-facto second in command of the Fourth Company as well as commander of its Second Platoon and she could at least count on them to be friendly towards her and listen to her orders but even to them she remained an outsider and there were those who would rather have a true Catachan in command of their platoon.

"Come in." she called out when there was a knock at the door of her cabin and she turned to see the hatch open and another officer of the Catachan XIX Regiment enter, "Elisa." she said, smiling at her sister. Wolf's sister Elisa had transferred to the Catachan XIX Regiment after their old regiment was almost totally wiped out in an Ork invasion and the few survivors divided between other regiments. Elisa had chosen to follow her sister and likewise run into the same problem of being considered an outsider by the Catachans, but thanks to her being able to retain her administrative role she had been able to avoid the worst of this by not having to lead them into battle.

"You're expected in the briefing room in ten minutes captain." Elisa replied, standing at attention and smiling as she spoke the rank that Wolf had now held for almost two months.

"At ease lieutenant." she replied, walking over to where her belt was hung on the wall and she took it down and wrapped it around her waist, "I don't suppose you know what this is about yet do you?"

"Sorry no. It's all need to know still and I don't need to know." Elisa told her and Wolf sighed.

"Okay, let's go. I suppose we'll find out when we get there. Even the Imperial Guard tells its troops what they are supposed to be doing when they have to do it." she said and then she indicated the open hatchway and added, "Lead the way."

Wolf's instruction for her sister to lead the way to the briefing was out of more than politeness. Given that Elisa worked directly for Colonel Shryke, the commanding officer of the Catachan XIX Regiment, she had spent much of the voyage aboard the massive naval transport ship moving from one section to another and as such was more familiar with its layout than Wolf who had spent the entire voyage in the barracks where Fourth Company had been billeted. As they walked along the corridor outside Wolf's cabin they encountered two more Catachans, a young woman and a pair of men.

"Major Trent." Wolf said to the older of the two men, her immediate superior in Fourth Company and then added, "Colour Sergeant Stubbs." to the other man.

"Captain." Trent responded, "Young Guardswoman Quinn here is escorting us to the briefing."

"Yes, that's where I was heading. I just wish I knew more about what it's all about." Wolf replied.

"Rumour is that we're going on the offensive." Stubbs said.

"How do you know that?" Elisa asked.

"It's true." the younger Catachan woman added, "Ibram told me." and Wolf frowned. The Ibram that the guardswoman was talking about was Bess Quinn's brother, the sergeant of Second Platoon's veteran squad and as such was one of her subordinates.

"He never mentioned it to me." she commented, "When did he tell you this?"

"Last night. Or at least what they call last night aboard this ship. You'd already told Molla that you weren't bored enough to want to sleep with him and gone. Ibram arrived and told us that the Naval Rating he's been seeing on the voyage said she had to make sure that her docking bay was ready to handle the arrival of a Thunderhawk gunship right after we translated out of the warp."

"A Thunderhawk? That means Astartes. Space Marines." Elisa said.

"Exactly," Trent replied, "and that likely means an invasion, not a defensive action. If it was then the marines would already be deployed and we'd link up with them on the surface."

"If it is marines then that means we're not the first wave." Wolf said, "They'll go in ahead and call us down when they've established a beachhead."

"Possibly. But if that was the case then why bring them in on this meeting? They'd just start the attack without us." Stubbs replied.

"Perhaps we should just wait to hear what we're told at the briefing then." Trent suggested.

The briefing hall aboard the transport ship was designed to hold several hundred people and in this instance it was more than half full. The senior staff of every company in the Catachan VII Division, of which the XIX Regiment was just one of four regiments were present, as were more than a dozen naval captains and officers from other Imperial Guard forces. Whatever was being planned called for the deployment of hundreds of thousands of troops from the Imperial Guard as well a sizeable force of starships and air support wings from the Imperial Navy. Mixed in among these were a number of commissars, the officers responsible for enforcing discipline in both the Imperial Guard and the Imperial Navy easily recognisable in their long black coats. Also present, all huddled together rather than mixing with any of the others present were a number of red robed tech priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus. Their presence at the briefing was not surprising, no military campaign could hope to succeed without them to maintain the war machines used by Imperial forces whether on the ground, in the air or in space. However, of far more interest were the trio of figures standing at the front of the briefing room, a man in ornate powered armour talking with a heavily decorated Imperial Guard officer that Wolf did not recognise while two other figures in power armour that was almost totally black apart from the shoulder pads loomed over them both silently. These two larger figures were space marines of the Adeptus Astartes, genetically enhanced soldiers capable of feats of strength and endurance far beyond anything an ordinary human was capable of. Each of the approximately one thousand chapters of the Adeptus Astartes wore armour of a different colour and pattern but Wolf knew the pattern she was looking at marked these marines out as special even among their own kind, having served with them once before.

These particular marines belonged to a force known as the Deathwatch, an elite force that drew upon the best marines from all chapters to create a specialised force of soldiers trained to counter the direst of alien threats to mankind. The Deathwatch operated under the orders of the Inquisition, the shadowy agency that generally fought secret wars against any enemy of the Imperium, whether human or alien and Wolf guessed that the figure in the more ornate powered armour was one of their agents.

One of the commissars in the room then approached the decorated Imperial Guard officer and whispered in his ear, prompting a nod before they both turned to face the rows of gathered officers.

"This briefing is now in session. All rise." the commissar ordered and the audience all got to their feet as the decorated officer stepped forwards.

"You may sit down." he said and after waiting for the audience to sit down again he continued, "For those of you who do not know me, I am the Lord General Militant Enfield of the First Praetorian Division and I shall be commanding this battle group for the campaign ahead of us." then he looked aside at a half human cyborg servitor, "Display." he ordered and the holographic display system behind him came to life, projecting an image of a planet, "This is the planet Rema Anta. Until the opening of the Great Rift this was an Imperial planet with Gamma classification."

The Imperium classified the worlds it controlled according to their environment, level of technological development and function. A Gamma-class world was considered a 'civilised' planet able to maintain a relatively high level of technology.

"However, the opening of the Great Rift brought with it the arrival of a large tribe of Orks that overran the planet." Lord Marshal Enfield continued, "Our intelligence believes that this was the source of the space hulk that then carried the Ork invasion force to the planet Valus where the surviving Orks are still being engaged by our forces."

The Ork invasion of Valus was one of the campaigns that Wolf had fought in as the leader of Second Platoon and she remembered witnessing the crash of the space hulk destroying that world's temperate climate, turning it into an arctic one.

"Valus." Elisa whispered, "Where our old regiment was wiped out." and Wolf nodded.

"The quantity of Orks involved in this invasion indicates that the population at Rema Anta has been severely depleted and we have an opportunity to retake the world for the Emperor. The planet is not without defences, however so it is my intention to carry out our invasion in stages. We are already approaching the planet and I am told that the fleet's auspexes have detected an Ork fleet in orbit that is powerful enough to threaten our troop ships, therefore our own naval assets will be used to clear these ships out of orbit first. In conjunction with this naval attack an advanced force of troops will be landed on the surface of Rema Anta to prepare for our primary landing. Despite the depletion of the Orks on the planet we still expect to face significant opposition. Our advanced force will land close to where we believe the Orks have their main base of operations and assault it directly with the intention of killing the ranking Ork leader on the planet. Given the feudal nature of the Orks this will undoubtedly trigger factional fighting as the rival candidates to succeed their leader attack one another. It is at this point that we will land our main force. I will now hand you over to Inquisitor Tobias of the Ordos Xenos. The inquisitor will be commanding the advanced force and the specialists that he has brought with him will be tasked with carrying out the assassination. Inquisitor." the lord general said and he stepped back as the man in ornate powered armour moved forwards to take his place.

"As the lord general has explained I will be leading the first wave of our attack. This will consist of the Catachan Seventh Division and will land here in the jungles of the continent that was known as Kasla prior to the Ork invasion. Our auspexes have indicated that there is far greater Ork activity in this region than can be explained by the pattern of settlement, the logical explanation being that it is the centre of their command and control operation. While we intend for our initial landing to go uncontested we will make our presence felt as swiftly as possible by attacking any nearby Ork forces. This will inevitably trigger a counter attack and the pattern of this will be used to determine the exact location of the Ork warboss. At that point I will lead an elite force specially chosen for this mission to the alien's locations and kill it." the inquisitor explained.

"The Seventh. Us." Wolf muttered, "Why do we always seem to get these assignments?"

"The Emperor's will perhaps captain?" Trent suggested and then he listened as Tobias continued to speak. "I should point out that the Death Watch kill team that I have brought with me is not the only specialised unit that will be supporting this mission. I have also brought a unit of Ordos sanctioned xenos troops." he said and there was murmuring from around the room. The use of alien mercenaries by Imperial forces was rare, official Imperial doctrine was that all aliens were the enemies of mankind and not to be trusted. However, it was not unknown for the Imperium to find common cause with some species and at times the Imperial Guard could be both fighting against and alongside forces from the same alien species on different fronts. It was at that point that one of the doorways into the briefing room opened and another pair of Death Watch space marines entered. These two men were not alone though and striding between them was an alien that equalled them in height and instantly every person present in the room recognised the muscular green skinned creature as an Ork. The size of the alien indicated that it was what they termed a 'nob', a member of their leadership caste and although the clothing he wore had the usual ragged appearance of Ork clothes it was marked with a crude camouflage pattern. This was unusual among Orks, who as a rule did not make use of such methods of concealment, preferring instead to charge headlong at an enemy wearing brightly coloured clothing that identified their allegiance to a particular grouping of Orks while screaming loudly and firing their weapons at anything that came within their line of sight. However, there was one clan of Orks, known as Blood Axes, that not only made use of camouflage and concealment but also on occasion traded with the Imperium. Wolf had encountered several members of this Ork clan before and she realised that this Ork was the leader of that group.

"Him." Wolf exclaimed, causing several of the officers close to her to look in her direction.

"What do you mean Emilia?" Elisa asked.

"That Ork." Wolf said, "I've met him before. He helped my platoon and a team of Death Watch marines escape from the Eldar."

"And now we know why we were picked to go in as the first wave." Trent said, "It's your fault."

"This is Koroth Nightkilla of the Blood Axe clan." Inquisitor Tobias said as the Ork was escorted to the front of the room, "For the last year he and a band of other Blood Axe Orks has been assisting the Ordos Xenos following their escape from the Drukhari, the Dark Eldar. Now they will be accompanying us down to the surface of Rema Anta where they will assist us in locating the local warboss by infiltrating the local tribes and reporting back to us. It is important to remember that although the Ordos Xenos has seen fit to sanction the presence of these Orks they do not hold any rank in the Imperium's forces and no guardsman or marine is under any obligation to follow their orders."

"Inquisitor I must protest!" an officer dressed in an Imperial Navy uniform called out, leaping to his feet, "To bring this - this thing aboard one of the Emperor's warships is heresy."

"Heresy indeed?" Tobias responded, "Well lieutenant, you are a lieutenant aren't you?"

"Flag lieutenant actually." the officer said, pointing to the rank markings on the greatcoat he wore, "Flag lieutenant Sonner, executive officer of the cruiser *Damnation Spear*."

"Well flag lieutenant, if you wish to continue challenging my authority you will lucky to keep your commission. In fact if you object so strongly to my strategy then perhaps you would rather return to the *Damnation Spear* now. Of course I don't see any reason to waste the fuel in permitting you to use a shuttle so you will have to walk. So flag lieutenant, what do you say?" Tobias responded, his voice calm and Sonner suddenly realised that in his haste he had brought upon himself the threat of being executed by being ejected into space.

"Perhaps I was too hasty inquisitor. I apologise for my indiscretion." he said, hoping that his contrition would sound sincere enough to save his life.

"Very good flag lieutenant. Now are there any questions?" Tobias said and from among the ranks of the Catachans the overall commander of the VII Division raised his hand, "Yes General Fortnam?" Tobias added when he saw this.

"What about the human population of Rema Anta? What happened to them?" Fortnam asked.

"The population resisted the invasion and as far as we know was almost totally wiped out. Those that survived to be taken captive were enslaved and put to work making whatever the Orks wanted them to. Given the length of time since the invasion and the fact that this world was used launch another invasion, we do not expect any of the human population to have survived this long. Of course should you encounter any humans then they will need to be interrogated, both for intelligence gathering and to determine if they are still

loyal to the Emperor and the Imperium. If not then they will be dealt with in the same way as all traitors.”

## 2.

As soon as the Ork vessels orbiting Rema Anta detected the Imperial battle group exiting the warp, several hours after the event, they began to break orbit and race headlong towards them. There was little in the way of meaningful organisation among the Orks, every ship's commander wanting to get into range of the Imperial ships as soon as possible and rather than advancing in a formation that enabled every ship and squadron to provide mutual support they instead spread out as the slower ships fell behind.

Even with both fleets accelerating towards one another as rapidly as they could it still took more than a week for the advanced elements of the Ork fleet to reach the Imperial force and the Imperial admiral made sure that he was on the bridge of his cruiser in his highly decorated command pulpit to see this.

"Report Ensign Duan." he said when one of the bridge's junior officers approached and bowed.

"Sire the Orks are entering firing range." the ensign responded and the admiral nodded.

"And our ships?"

"Withholding their fire until you give the word sire. All report batteries and torpedo tubes loaded and ready to fire. Attack craft standing by."

"Very good. I want our flanking squadrons to turn aside and deliver broadsides into the enemy's path. All ship unleash torpedoes. Single volley and reload then wait for damage assessment before further orders. The Orks will likely launch bombers so I want a constant screen of Furies to protect our ships. Have our own bombers held in reserve until their heavy units get closer."

"Yes admiral." the ensign said.

"Admiral." the flag lieutenant standing behind the admiral in his pulpit said soft.

"Yes? If you have something to say then spit it out man." the admiral replied without bothering to turn, instead watching the activities of the dozens of bridge crew around them.

"What about the Imperial Guard?" the flag lieutenant asked and the admiral sighed.

"Oh yes, the cargo." he said.

"Well I suppose they should be told that we will be entering combat in the next few hours. Helm, what is our ETA for planetary orbit?" the admiral said and another junior officer checked the instruments in front of him.

"Seventy nine hours ship time admiral." he answered.

"Best tell the guard to get a move on then. They have that long to load their drop ships."

Encased with the armoured hull of a twelve kilometre long starship that was surrounded by the warships sent to escort it, the divisions of the Imperial Guard that would be undertaking the invasion of Rema Anta were in little danger from the Ork fleet. However, they still spent most of the next three days listening to the sounds of humming void shield generators as well as the pounding of point defence batteries firing at any smaller Ork craft that managed to slip through the screen of escorts while the Catachans of VII Division loaded their dropships. The division had been assigned four dropships in total, long wedge shaped craft that were each capable of carrying a regiment of troops and all their equipment. Carrying little armament of their own, these ships would be released at the last minute and escorted through the atmosphere by waves of Thunderbolt heavy fighters and Marauder bombers before crash landing on the surface.

The ships were loaded in plenty of time before the drop and the Catachan found themselves sitting strapped into their seats for almost eight hours before a klaxon finally sounded to alert the passengers that the drop was about to commence.

"Finally." Platoon Sergeant Vance, Wolf's second in command said when he heard this and the man sat in the row of seats opposite him snorted.

"What is it Sergeant Grey?" Wolf asked when she heard this.

"It's not like we'll be seeing any fighting soon captain." Grey replied, "We'll be sat here at least another hour until we land."

"Assuming we do land." Sergeant Quinn commented from further along the row where his veteran squad was strapped in, "We might get shot down. That'll get us to the ground quicker."

"Why do I always feel like I need to take a piss when I hear that klaxon?" another of Second Platoon's sergeants, this one Molla, the Sergeant in command of First Squad.

"Instinct probably." Wolf said, "You're worried the navy will send someone to check tickets and you feel the need to hide in the bathroom until they're gone."

"Huh?" Molla replied.

"I think it's an outsider joke." Grey said.

"Ah, right." Molla said right before the drop ship lurched as it was ejected from the cargo hold of the mass conveyor that had transported the Imperial Guard here.

There was a brief roar of engines and the drop ship shuddered as somewhere towards the front of the vessel the pilot steered it towards the planet, lining it up so that it could follow a ballistic course into the atmosphere

before cutting the engines entirely and letting the ship drift onwards. With the space for millions of kilometres in almost all directions filled with warships hurling death at one another a few drop ships operating on minimum power were difficult to spot even for Imperial auspex systems. For the Orks with their crude and highly erratic detection systems they were invisible until the moment they entered the atmosphere and their hulls glowed with the heat from the friction of the air passing over their hulls.

"I hate this part." Wolf said as the drop ship shook.

"Need something to stop you puking captain?" the female medicae sat on the opposite of Wolf from Vance asked but Wolf shook her head.

"No thank you Torrent, I'll be fine." she said and then there was the sound of someone being violently sick from close by and Wolf winced.

"I think one of Khor's squad might need something though." Vance commented, looking at where one of the seven massive abhumans that made up the ogryn squad attached to Second Platoon were strapped in to seats specially modified to take their bulk. Then he looked at the mortar squad whose members were opposite the ogryns, "How does it look back there Bomber?" he called out to the squad's leader, Corporal Mayer.

"Looks vile. Smells worse." Mayer replied, frowning.

"Throne that's bad." Molla added as the smell reached him and then there was a rattling sound and the dropship lurched suddenly, sending the pool of foul smelling vomit sliding across the floor towards troops from another platoon, one of whom cried out in disgust as he saw it splash across his boots.

"What was that?" Torrent exclaimed, looking up as she searched for the source of the rattling.

"Don't worry, it was probably just cannon fire hitting the hull." Quinn said and Torrent's eyes widened, "The Orks will have put up everything they can to try and shoot us down."

"Your short cut to the ground?" Vance asked.

Although most of the XIX Regiment was seated in their dropship's hold, Colonel Shryke and a handful of his command staff had been assigned seats in the cockpit so that they could keep aware of the craft's progress through the atmosphere.

"Looks like we've lost the Orks colonel." the dropship's captain said, "Our escorts have driven them off."

"How long can they stay with us?" the XIX Regiment's commissar, Garratt, asked.

"All the way down unless we encounter a lot more resistance." the captain answered.

"How long until we land?" Shryke added, "If you call what this ship does a landing."

The long tapering shape of the dropship's hull not only served to provide lift as the craft hurtled through the atmosphere, it was also intended to allow it to survive a crash landing on the surface of a planet. To save considerable weight and space, the craft lacked landing gear and was designed for just a one way trip. At the end of this the ship would be crashed, skidding along the ground on its armoured belly and if it survived it would be recovered by a transport vessel as soon as it was safe for such a cumbersome vessel to land.

"About ten minutes colonel." the captain said and Shryke checked his watch.

"Ten minutes and my troops can finally do their job." he said softly.



### 3.

The landing of each of the four dropships was heralded by a loud crashing sound as they struck the trees of the thick jungle they were to set down in. Even the thickest of tree trunks was unable to withstand the impact of such massive craft though and the drops cut channels through the jungle more than a hundred metres wide as they ploughed onwards while the heat from their hulls started numerous small fires as any dry combustible material ignited. Thankfully the jungle was wet enough to limit the spread of the flames or the entire region would have quickly become an inferno that would have trapped the Catachans inside their dropships while they all roasted to death. The noses of the dropships dug into the ground and sent dirt and vegetation flying up into the air over their hulls as they travelled, this helping to slow them down and bringing them to a halt after just a few kilometres of travel that left a trail of devastation behind them.

Inside the dropships, the passengers were buffeted about wildly and only the thick padding of their seats and strong safety harnesses prevented them from being thrown about and killed. Then when all four of the craft had finally come to a halt their hatches burst open and the same order was given over the public address systems of them all at almost the exact same time.

“Out! Out! Out!”

In the passenger compartment of the XIX Regiment's dropship Wolf reached for the release clasp for her harness.

“Second Platoon out.” she ordered and around her her troops began to get out of their seats. However, the clasp of her harness would not open, no matter how hard she tried to turn it.

“Need a hand captain?” Torrent asked and Wolf looked up at the Catachan woman.

“No thank you specialist. I know what to do.” she said, drawing her long Catachan knife from its sheath and using it to slice through the harness before getting up,” See? I can act like a Catachan too if I need to.” she said as she returned the knife to its sheath and began to head for the nearest. However, this path took her past where the ogryns had been sat and she suddenly felt her feet slip from under her as she inadvertently stepped in the pool of vomit and fell forwards.

“Piece of advice captain,” Grey said, reaching down and lifting Wolf back to her feet, “Catachans try not to slip in puke.”

Too distracted by the disgusting smell of the vomit now covering her shirt, Wolf did not reply.

Outside the dropships, each company command unit hoisted its standard so that all of their squads could see where they needed to be. With his command squad, Trent took the handset of his unit's vox and broadcast his orders.

“Fourth Company to me. We are to push five hundred metres north west and dig in. We're the cover while our camp is set up.”

Hearing this through her microbead headset, Wolf checked the map on her dataslate. Detailed maps of the surrounding terrain had been uploaded to this before the Catachans had boarded their dropship and although there would undoubtedly be some differences between the map and the terrain where it had been altered by the Orks, it still gave her a good idea of what lay ahead.

“Second Platoon advance.” she called out, not needing any wireless communication while all her troops were still relatively close to her, “Corporal Mayer I want our mortars set up one to two hundred metres behind our line. You may chose your own ground. Molla, Quinn, take the lead. Everyone else behind them.”

“You know captain,” Molla responded from close by, “if you don't want to have to put up with that ogryn puke staining your.”

“No sergeant Molla.” Wolf interrupted, “I am not taking my shirt off in front of you.”

Around Second Platoon the rest of Fourth Company deployed as part of the XIX Regiment's defensive formation. The other three regiments that made up the VII Division were also disembarking from their dropships. The XII and XXV Regiments, both infantry regiments, also spread out to establish a perimeter around the dropships while the XIV Armoured Regiment as well as the division's command unit in its super heavy Baneblade tanks unloaded from the fourth dropship. The manner of the dropships' landing had blocked some of the hatches from each of the craft and although the infantry forces and their limited vehicle support could simply make use of different hatches it was a different matter for the XIV Armoured Regiment that could not easily reorganise within the dropship's heavily laden hold so instead earth moving equipment was brought in to clear the blocked hatches.

Molla and Quinn spread their men out in a line side by side as they advanced into the jungle, counting the paces they took until they reached a suitable distance from the dropships.

“This is far enough.” Molla said as he checked their surroundings. Close by he noticed what looked like a small ruined structure that was possibly left over from before the Ork conquest of this world and he pointed it out to his squad, “Steyr, Hooper, I want that heavy bolter deployed there. Reinforce the wall with sandbags but keep them inside. There's no sense in giving away your position before you get to fire at the greenskins.”

The rest of First squad deployed with the heavy bolter at their centre, unfolding entrenching tools to dig in and provide themselves with better cover where needed while Quinn's veterans inside located existing cover in the form of undergrowth and tree trunks that would allow them to rapidly break cover and move into range of their shotguns, flamers and meltagun if attacked.

"Sergeant Grey, take Second Squad to the right of Quinn and Third Squad." Wolf ordered as she saw the platoon deploying and then she looked back in the direction of the dropships to check on Corporal Mayer. As she had ordered his six man heavy weapon squad had halted about a hundred metres back from her position and were setting up their three mortars. Khor and his ogryns were with the heavy weapon squad as well. The massive abhumans were able to carry much heavier loads than ordinary humans and so Second Platoon made use of this strength by having them carry far more extra ammunition for the mortars than Mayer and his men could manage on their own. Now the ogryns were unloading this ammunition as well as helping Mayer and his men dig in, constructing a reinforced position surrounded by a sandbag wall to protect them.

"Captain." Quinn's voice said through Wolf's microbead and she raised a hand to her ear.

"Yes sergeant?" she responded.

"Captain Rull just reported a trail about fifty metres in front of us. He says it looks well travelled by infantry and vehicles. Orks." Quinn told her. Rull was Second Platoon's sniper. Some time before Wolf had joined the XIX Regiment he had been part of a six man squad that paired three snipers with three spotters but he was now the only survivor out of them all. His skills at field craft, scouting and sharpshooting enabled him to operate far better independently than as part of a team and so he had been allowed to remain as a solo operative, moving ahead of Second Platoon and providing support as necessary.

"Understood sergeant." Wolf replied, "I'll pass that along." then she heard the sound of an approaching vehicle from close by her and she turned to see a group of four lightweight Sentinel scout walkers heading towards her. Three of the vehicles were armed with heavy flamers for close assault use while the fourth carried a support missile launcher for longer ranged and anti-armour fire. Wolf waved to these and the female sergeant commanding the reconnaissance squad halted her unit beside Wolf's command section.

"Captain." the sergeant said.

"Sergeant Gant, I've received a report of a trail up ahead about fifty metres beyond our line." Wolf said and Gant smiled back at her.

"Rull?" she asked and Wolf nodded.

"He says it shows signs of heavy use." she said.

"In that case I better check it out. I'll vox if we find anything. It's a fair bet that every Ork for at least a hundred kilometres knows we're here so there's little point in avoiding them."

"Don't take any chances sergeant." Wolf said.

"Not my style captain. We'll pull back if we encounter any serious resistance." Gant said and then she started her Sentinel walker moving again, the others following as the machine strode through the undergrowth and through the Catachan front line to scout out the jungle beyond it.

Wolf watched the Sentinels disappear from view in the jungle and then sat down against a tree and took out her dataslate to check on Second Platoon's exact position.

"BONEHead Khor and squad reporting captain!" Khor's voice said loudly as his shadow fell upon Wolf and she looked up to see the abhuman and his squad standing at attention in a rough line, all looking straight ahead and saluting exactly as regulations demanded. Wolf knew that the ogryns would do nothing more until she returned their salute and so she got back to her feet.

"At ease sergeant. I want you and your squad to remain here in reserve. If we're attacked I want your squad to either reinforce any gaps that appear in our lines or exploit any that appear in the enemy's." Wolf said, saluting Khor in return.

"Yes captain." Khor said, then he turned to the other abhumans and added, "Ogryns wait." after which they all found somewhere to sit down while they waited for further orders.

Second Platoon had not long deployed when there was the booming of an artillery gun being fired, followed moments later by another such sound and Vance looked towards the source, a battery of Basilisk self propelled guns belonging to the XXV Armoured Regiment.

"That didn't take long." he said and then before he could continue there was a whistling sound as the shells fired by the Basilisks flew overhead.

"No and they're heading over us." Wolf said, knowing that this meant whatever target had been identified to the artillerymen was approaching the Catachan position from their direction.

The sound of the artillery shells exploding in the distance was followed by the sounds of small arms fire from elsewhere on the Catachan perimeter and Vance took out his magnoculars, searching for the source.

"That's not us. I think that's the Twelfth." he said.

"Then they're coming from more than one side." Wolf replied.

"That's good. It probably means that it's just local Orks turning up to see what all the noise was about and looking for some loot." Vance said.

"We should be ready just in case." Wolf said and she activated her microbead, setting it to broadcast to her entire platoon, "Second Platoon stand by. We don't have contact with the enemy yet but they could be close." "Colonel Vorris is moving his tanks." Torrent said when she heard the rumble of powerful engines and the Lemman Russ tanks of the XXV Armoured Regiment began to move, circling around the dropships.

"Yes and they're moving this way." Vance said as the battle tanks stopped turning and began heading directly towards the section of the perimeter held by Fourth Company.

"This is Major Trent to Fourth Company," Trent's voice announced over the company's communication net, "we have confirmed enemy armour approaching our line. The Twenty-fifth is moving to support us so be ready to move out of their way. Trent out."

"Sergeant Grey did you get that?" Wolf transmitted using her microbead at the same time as she took out her magnoculars and began to search the jungle for signs of the enemy vehicles.

"Confirmed captain. We're preparing krak rounds for the missile launcher. The grenade launcher too. A lot of Ork vehicles are light enough that they should be enough to blow a few chunks off them." Grey replied.

"Very good sergeant. Don't wait for an order. If you identify an enemy target then you are free to engage. Sergeant Molla, that goes for second squad as well. Use your own grenade launcher and heavy bolter to engage any light targets." Wolf ordered.

"Yes captain, we'll give them a warm welcome." Molla responded.

"Contact. Incoming dreadnoughts" Quinn announced suddenly and Second Platoon's front line all searched for targets, "Wait, check that that. It's Gant's squadron." he corrected himself as he saw the first of the four lightweight scout vehicles emerge from the jungle. These rushed through Second Platoon's line and came to halt where Wolf's command section was readying itself for battle.

"Sergeant Gant, I thought you were going to let us know by vox if you saw anything." Wolf said.

"I didn't see an Emperor damned thing." Gant said back in a frustrated tone, "We had just about got to the trail when Major Trent ordered us back. The Navy flyboys spotted a large Ork armoured column heading this way and-" and then she was interrupted by the sound of aircraft flying low over the Catachan camp as a flight of Marauder bombers flew towards the approaching Orks and shortly after there was the sound of more explosions as they dropped their payload on the aliens.

The next explosion was much closer, barely a hundred metres beyond the Catachan perimeter and Wolf ducked when she felt the blast.

"Throne!" she exclaimed.

"That was incoming." Vance said, "They're coming."

"Are you staying with us?" Wolf asked, looking up at Gant but the woman piloting the Sentinel shook her head, "Sorry captain, Major Trent has ordered me back to his company command post. I think we're going to be your reserve."

"Then go." Wolf said before there was a 'whoosh' sound from close by.

"Contact." Grey reported at the same time as the missile was fired and then there was an explosion as the armour piercing weapon struck the armoured half track that had just come crashing into sight through the jungle, a large plough cutting its way through the undergrowth and clearing a narrow channel that lighter vehicles could follow. The missile hit the plough head on and the warhead sent a jet of molten metal not only through that but also the housing of the vehicle's engine located just behind it. As well as cracking the engine wide open, this jet also ignited the fuel being pumped into it in an uncontrolled manner and there was a secondary explosion as the front of the half track caught fire and it ground to a halt. Hatches on the burning vehicles were thrown open and the Ork crew bailed out. They were met by a sustained burst of fire from First Squad's heavy bolter, the belt fed weapon sending a continuous stream of mass reactive explosive rounds at the Ork crew and they were ripped apart before they could even get off a single shot.

Behind the wreck of the half track a squadron of lightweight Ork buggies veered around it and sped on towards the Catachan lines. Each of these vehicles was manned by two Orks, a driver and a gunner positioned either beside or behind the driver depending on the exact configuration of the vehicle. No two Ork vehicles were identical but these buggies all fulfilled the same roll. Although the small and lightweight vehicles were manoeuvrable enough to be able to weave between the jungle's trees they lacked the weight necessary to simply smash their way through the undergrowth between them and when one of them drove over a large exposed tree root it became snagged on the chassis and the entire vehicle was thrown into the air as it flipped over. The buggy's gunner was thrown free and screamed as he flew through the air until he struck the side of a tree and was impaled on a branch. On the other hand the driver was strapped into his seat and could not escape and the buggy came back down upside down and he was crushed beneath it.

The destruction of this buggy did nothing to dissuade the other Orks from driving so quickly, their obsession with speed trumping any thought of self preservation. The colour scheme of their vehicles did not help their survivability either. All of them had been painted in various shades of red, making them easy for Second Platoon to spot and the Catachans opened fire with every weapon at their disposal. With the buggies being open topped and their crews exposed, even the Catachans' las guns could be effective if they hit either the driver or gunner. Second Platoon's heavier weapons were still more effective though and the Catachan from

Second squad armed with a grenade launcher sent a Krak grenade into the engine at the front of a buggy heading straight towards him. The shaped charge round blew the engine apart and sent fragments of it flying back into the driver, slicing open his throat. Instinctively the Ork clasped his hands to his wound and in doing so he let go of the buggy's controls, sending it careering into another of the vehicles and bringing both to a permanent halt. The surviving crew of these two buggies crawled from the wreckage with weapons in their hands but before they could use them they were gunned down by the rest of Second Squad with several volleys from their lasguns.

This left just two of the Ork buggies racing towards Second Platoon but the overwhelming odds against them did not dissuade the Orks and they carried on regardless. Their advance brought them close enough to Second Platoon's line that they came within range of the weapons carried by Sergeant Quinn and his veterans and Quinn wasted no time in giving the order to target them.

"Straker! Meltagun!" he yelled and the Catachan veteran armed with the squad's most powerful weapon took aim and fired. The intense beam of energy set fire to the undergrowth as it blasted its way through to the closest Ork buggy. The Ork driver swerved at the last moment and instead of hitting the buggy head on the beam struck it at the side and as the buggy continued on its path the beam burned along the length of the vehicle. The driver screamed in agony as the beam burned through his leg, cauterising the wound before he could bleed to death. As the beam continued to slice effortlessly through the buggy it cut one of the mounts supporting the belt fed weapon mounted on it and the weapon suddenly collapsed at one side, spoiling the gunner's already poor aim and he howled with rage as the burst he had been firing well over the heads of the Catachans in any case went up into the jungle canopy instead. Before he could attempt to fix the problem though the beam from the meltagun struck one of the cases of ammunition strapped to the side of the vehicle and the intense heat triggered all of the propellant at once, turning the crate into a bomb that blew the entire side from the vehicle and killed both its crew, peppering them with fragments of bullets and casings.

The final buggy was right behind this and one of Quinn's men fell as its gunner fired a sustained burst from its twin mounted automatic weapons. The shotgun armed veterans began to fire their weapons as rapidly as they could work the pump actions but only a few of the pellets hit either of the Ork crew and these did nothing more than anger the even further than they were already. Before the buggy could crash right through Quinn's men one of the two armed with a flamer unleashed a jet of burning promethium and the incendiary chemical coated both the vehicle and its crew. Even Orks could not ignore being set on fire and the gunner immediately leapt from the back of the buggy and began to roll around on the ground in a vain attempt to put out the flames now engulfing him. Although the Catachans would have all been content to watch the alien burn Quinn did not want to leave any of the Orks alive longer than necessary and so he turned his shotgun on the burning gunner and fired a single blast that brought its cries and struggling to an immediate end. Quinn and several of his men were then forced to throw themselves aside as the burning buggy and the screaming driver still trapped in his seat came racing through the jungle past them, speeding on until it was brought to a sudden halt as it crashed into a tree thick enough to bring it to a stop at which point the flames finally reached the vehicle's fuel tank and it exploded.

This was the last of the Ork forces current assaulting Second Platoon's position but there was still the sound of one of the aliens calling out in their crude language from not far ahead and Wolf frowned as she tried to locate the Ork before it could cause them trouble.

"I can't see it. Can you?" she said, glancing at Vance and he looked through his own magnoculars and then shook his head.

"Sorry captain." he said.

"Then we'll have to go out and find it before it gets the chance to attack." Wolf said, "Torrent I want you to go and see to the injured." she continued before activating her microbead, "Sergeant Molla, take one of your squad and find the Ork that's making all that noise. I want it silenced." she transmitted.

"Understood captain." Molla responded and he looked at one of his squad, a young female guardswoman, "Okay Berlin, you're with me." he told her and the pair of them emerged from cover and began to pick their way through the jungle towards the source of the sound.

As Catachans they were both able to move rapidly through the jungle but Molla's history as the son of a guide who had spent most of his childhood in the deep jungle far from the established settlements meant that he easily outpaced Berlin until he came to a sudden halt when he found the Ork.

The gunner from the buggy that had flipped over when it was caught on a tree root was still pinned to the tree he had struck and the branch on which he was impaled stuck out from his abdomen just beneath his ribcage. The Ork had dropped both his crude blade and bulky pistol and now was attempting to use his fists to break the branch that was keeping him trapped, his feet half a metre above the ground while his legs kicked out at random. However, the branch was too thick and it was obvious that the Ork would not be able to free himself.

"Well would you look at this?" Molla said, grinning as he looked up at the Ork, "Come here Berlin, this is what makes Orks so tough to fight, They're too stupid to realise when they're dead."

"What's that sarge?" Berlin said as she walked up to him and then saw the Ork.

"You see that's a wound that would kill a person and if we leave that thing up there then it'll probably die too." Molla said, pointing up at the struggling Ork, "But for now all it wants to do is get free to try and kill us." "So we kill it first, right sarge?" Berlin said and she brought her lasgun up to her shoulder, ready to fire it at the Ork.

"Hold on private." Molla said, using his long Catachan knife to push down on the barrel of the lasgun, "Why waste the ammo?" and then he stepped closer to the Ork and swung his blade out in front of him. The sharp edged weapon cut through the Ork's abdomen from side to side, creating a wide split that the alien's intestines came tumbling out through and there was a spray of blood that splashed across both Molla and Berlin.

"Throne sarge!" Berlin exclaimed as she leapt back, wiping alien blood from her face.

"Squeamish?" Molla commented with a smile and then he looked around. The sounds of battle could still be heard through the jungle but Molla could not see any signs of living Orks now that the one impaled against the tree hung limply from it, "Come on, let's get back in position. These were just the first wave. I'll bet that there's a whole army of the xenos bastards out there on foot as well somewhere."

"Sure thing sarge." Berlin replied and she turned to start back to the rest of First Squad but before she could take even a single step she let out a sudden gasp and Molla spun around to see what was wrong, his las pistol raised.

## 4.

Second Platoon had been hit by just the extreme flank of the Ork attack while the bulk of their forces struck elsewhere. A swarm of crude tanks that appeared to have been constructed from the wrecks of Imperial vehicles lumbered through the jungle and bombarded the Catachan lines with an assortment of heavy cannons that fired a mix of explosive and solid rounds.

It was towards these vehicles that the tanks of the XIV Armoured Regiment drove and they opened fire as soon as they had targets to attack. Although they were all being used as battle tanks, not all of the vehicles that the Orks had based theirs on had been genuine tanks and many of them had been lighter vehicles such as Chimera troop carriers or even wheeled trucks that now had extra armour plates bolted onto them. Although this improved the level of protection they enjoyed against lighter weapons, the armament of the Imperial Leman Russes was easily able to penetrate this armour and many of the vehicles were blasted apart by battle cannon rounds and blasts from las cannons.

As was often the case with Orks they based their attacks on the sheer strength of their numbers, using large swarms of vehicles to overwhelm their opponents and for each of their tanks that was destroyed another one came rumbling forwards to take its place.

"Don't get too far forwards." Colonel Vorris ordered from the turret of his own Leman Russ battle tank, "There are too many of the Orks out here. If we get too close then they'll be able to get around us and hit us from the sides and rear."

"Colonel Vorris this is Captain Kane," the voice of one of his company commanders responded, "I have several large contacts coming up from behind the first wave. Bearing two four one. Range about nine hundred metres."

Rather than rely on the limited vision he had from inside his tank Colonel Vorris threw open his hatch and climbed up to look out of his turret. Using his magnoculars he then looked in the direction Kane had given to him and to his horror he saw a number of Ork vehicles so massive that even the thickest of trees was being knocked down and crushed by them as they advanced.

"This is Colonel Vorris to General Fortnam, we have Ork battlefortresses approaching. We need urgent reinforcement."

"Understood colonel. I am on my way." Fortnam replied.

General Fortnam led the Catachan VII Division from his personal tank company. This company was not equipped with the common Leman Russes of the XIV Armoured regiment however, instead it consisted of only three vehicles, each one a three hundred and sixteen tonne Baneblade super heavy tank that mounted more firepower than an entire squadron of ordinary tanks. Due to their massive bulk these had been among the last of the vehicles unloaded from the dropship they had shared with the XIV Armoured Regiment but now they were ready for battle and the trio of monstrous vehicles lumbered towards the front line.

The mega battle cannon on General Fortnam's own Baneblade was the first of the company's weapons to fire when the gunner sighted a pair of Ork tanks that were in the process of circling around the XIV Armoured Regiment's tanks to try and strike at their weaker side armour. The massive shell exploded between the two vehicles and the shock wave split both of them wide open.

"Two kills by the Emperor." Fortnam exclaimed as he saw the two Ork vehicles now burning brightly, "Excellent work." then he saw the outline of an Ork battlefortress coming at them through the smoke, "Super heavy target sighted. All weapons engage." he ordered.

To Orks size meant everything, with the largest of their species holding positions of authority and they applied this standard to their enemies as well. Therefore, the arrival of the Baneblades provided the Orks with targets that they could not resist and the super heavy battlefortresses that had been pushing the tanks of the XIV Armoured Regiment back all turned towards these instead and began to focus their fire on them. However, although the battlefortresses mounted many weapons, more per vehicle than each of the Baneblades, these could not match the sheer firepower of a Baneblade's main gun. The same was true of their armour protection and once again the Imperial vehicles had the advantage. These advantages were soon laid bare when the Baneblades fired a salvo of shells from their mega battle cannons at one of the Ork super heavy vehicles that was quickly followed up by blasts from their sponson mounted las cannons. Despite its size the battlefortress was rocked by the impact of the shells and numerous parts such as externally mounted weapons and brightly coloured totems simply fell off due to the combined shock waves of the triple blasts. The battlefortress' armour was fractured in several places by the multiple hits and when the las cannon blasts then struck these weakened points the battlefortress' hull was penetrated. With almost every internal space being used to store ammunition for the vehicle's multitude of weapons it was inevitable that the las beams that burned their way inside would then hit something volatile and a section of the battlefortress promptly exploded and the massive vehicle ground to a halt as Orks hurriedly abandoned it before the flames could reach them.

General Fortnam watched these Ork crewmen bailing out of their vehicle as they were shot down by the multiple heavy bolters mounted on each Baneblade, searching for the advancing Ork infantry that he expected them to join before fighting on with them. However, the Orks instead appeared to be running towards other vehicles and attempting to get aboard them and the general activated his vox, broadcasting to every officer in his division.

"Then is General Fortnam. Has anyone sighted Ork infantry?" he said.

"General this is Colonel Mann. The Twenty-Fifth has been attacked by some enemy infantry but only in platoon strength." the commander of the XXV Regiment responded but no-one else replied.

"That's weird." Wolf said.

"What is captain?" Vance asked.

"General Fortnam just asked if anyone had encountered Ork infantry yet." Wolf said.

"We've been hearing small arms fire from all over." Torrent commented.

"I know. But we've fired light weapons at the Ork vehicles on the off chance that we'd hit an exposed crewman and it sounds like that's what's happening all over. Colonel Mann's reported seeing a few Orks fighting on foot but nothing like you'd expect." Wolf told her.

"You mean a carpet as green as the jungle only with guns and swords?" Vance said and Wolf smiled and nodded.

"Second Platoon does anyone have eyes on the enemy?" she asked, using her microbead to broadcast to all of the nearby squads in the platoon.

"Captain this is Molla. I just met Rull outside the perimeter. He crept up behind me and Berlin and put the fear of the Emperor into her. He wanted me to pass on that there's a large force of Ork infantry massing about two kilometres outside the perimeter numbering in the thousands. He says they're keeping under cover and it looks like they're waiting for something." Molla responded.

"Thank you sergeant." Wolf said, frowning.

"Now I know something is wrong." Vance said.

"Molla just gave me a report from Rull. There are thousands of Orks just waiting out there." Wolf said.

"Waiting? Waiting for what? They must know we're here." Torrent said.

"That's what worries me." Wolf replied and then she looked at the guardsman that carried her command section's vox set, "Corporal Kline give me that vox." she said, holding out her hand for the handset. Then when he passed it to her she held it to her head and activated it, "This is Catachan One Nine Mark Four Mark Two calling General Fortnam. Over." she said.

"Go ahead one nine mark four mark two." the general's voice responded.

"Sir I have a scout outside our perimeter and he reported the presence of a force of Ork infantry numbering in the thousands apparently waiting for something. Over." Wolf said. Initially there was no reply to this and Wolf consider that the general may not have received her report, "General did-" she began before General Fortnam interrupted her.

"Yes I heard you." he said, "Captain Wolf I want you to take a small force outside the perimeter. Attempt to locate this Ork force and report back. Do not leave the perimeter unguarded though. Take only part of your platoon. Do you understand?"

"I do general. Catachan One Nine Mark Four Mark Two out." Wolf said and then she gave the vox handset back to Kline, switching back to her microbead, "Second Platoon I have been ordered to take a small scouting party outside the perimeter. This force will consist of my command section and the members of First Squad except for Steyr and Hooper. The rest of the platoon, including First Squad's heavy bolter will remain in place to protect the perimeter. Sergeant Quinn, while I am gone you have command of the platoon. Does anyone know where Rull is right now? If he's close by I'd like him to join us as well."

"Sorry captain, he said he was heading north to see if there were any more groups like the one he's already found."

"Very well, in that case its just my command section and first squad."

Ahead of Wolf where Second Platoon's squads were deployed Grey looked towards Molla.

"Hey Tari, the outsider's taking you on a jungle patrol. Good luck with that." he called out, smirking.

"Shut it Tyler." Molla replied.

## 5.

Advancing through the jungle past the Catachan lines the patrol made its way towards the trail that Rull had earlier reported finding. The sniper was not the sort of person to use such an obvious means of travel but it offered the patrol a landmark. Just as Rull had reported the trail looked well travelled although the only tracks on it now were from vehicles, suggesting to Molla that it had been used by the Orks to bring up their armour to attack the Catachans.

"From Rull's report the Orks should be up ahead." Wolf said, "Sergeant Molla I want you to lead the way. Look out for any sign of enemy activity, no matter how small. Understood?"

"Yes captain." Molla replied before he turned to his squad, "Okay First Squad, we're up." he told them and the Catachans headed off the trail into the jungle.

"Going to stay at the back captain?" Torrent asked and Wolf glared at her.

"Are you suggesting that I'm a coward specialist?" she asked angrily.

"On no captain. That mark on your arm proves you're no coward." Torrent said, referring to the large skull tattoo on Wolf's arm that was the Catachan equivalent of the Honorifica Imperialis, the Imperial Guard's highest award for valour, "I was just suggesting that you were recognising that you lack the jungle skills the rest of us have."

"Get moving." Wolf ordered and Torrent began to walk.

The Catachans heard the Orks Rull had discovered well before they saw them, the sound of strange shouts in the aliens' own language coming through the jungle and Molla brought the patrol to a halt when he heard this, taking out his magnoculars to search the ground ahead.

"Okay I see one." he reported using his microbead.

"Just one? Are you sure sergeant?" Wolf asked, knowing that Orks tended to move in groups as large as possible.

"Yes I'm sure captain. It's not an Ork though. It looks like one of their Gretchin slave caste." Molla told her.

"A picket." Vance said, "The Orks use them as sentries because they are better at sneaking about." and Wolf nodded in agreement.

"Has it seen you Sergeant Molla?" she signalled.

"No captain. It's heading away from me, back towards the source of all the noise we're hearing." Molla told her.

"Then let's follow it. It might just lead us right to them and reveal where the other pickets are." Wolf ordered.

"Yes captain." Molla replied as he continued to watch the Gretchin.

The diminutive creature had the same basic shape as an Ork but was much shorter. To some uneducated humans Gretchin were dismissed as being juvenile Orks but the truth was that they were a different branch of the Orkoid species altogether and unlike the Orks their growth was limited, with the typical height of a Gretchin being about a metre tall. The example that Molla was looking at carried a stubby looking rifle that was crude even by Ork standards along with several magazines of spare ammunition on a bandolier.

Gretchin were known to be better marksmen than their larger Ork cousins but their weapons were often less effective, being old guns no longer wanted by their previous Ork owners and thrown away. However, on occasion some Gretchin would be given a much better weapon by their ork masters and sent out to act as a sniper. Molla doubted that this was such a creature but he did not want to take the chance on being shot so he watched how the creature acted for a short while before he began to follow it.

The Gretchin led the Catachans to a steep sided gully where running water could be heard from the bottom. The spot that the Gretchin had chosen to approach this feature was marked by a tree trunk that had either fallen across the gully to bridge it naturally or had been deliberately felled to create a crossing. From the moss that had grown on the tree it was clear that however it had got where it was, it had done so a long time ago. The Gretchin then began to cross, not bothering to check if it was being followed before starting to walk across the fallen trunk and concentrating only on getting to the other side before it picked up its pace again and carried on its way.

"There's a gully." Molla reported using his microbead, "There's a crossing but it looks tricky. We'll have to go one at a time."

"Understood sergeant. Lead the way." Wolf ordered.

Molla was already on the far side of the gully with two of his squad when Wolf and her command section arrived and Wolf halted when she saw what she was expected to walk across.

"Nervous captain?" Torrent said, "See, any Catachan can get across." and she pointed to the trooper from First Squad armed with a grenade launcher who was darting across the trunk to the other side.

"Just take it slow. Crawl if you want, it'll give you a better grip." Vance suggested but Wolf shook her head.

"Thank you platoon sergeant but I think I've spent enough time being trained by all of you to do this." Wolf said and then she strode to the start of the trunk so that she would be the next one to cross the gully.



She climbed up onto the trunk when the previous Catachan reached the far side and jumped down to the ground.

"Captain I think going on all fours-" Vance began but Wolf glared at him.

"I'll be fine platoon sergeant." she said and when she turned away Vance shrugged and sighed.

"Well you can't say I didn't try." he said to the rest of the command section.

"Just like I'm always saying, an outsider shouldn't be with us." Torrent commented.

Wolf meanwhile was beginning to make her way across the tree trunk bridging the gully.

"Just look at me captain." Molla called out from the other side and he moved to stand at the far end of the trunk, beckoning her towards him, "Don't look down." however, as soon as he said that Wolf looked down into the gully. It was obvious that the sides of this were steep, not far from being vertical but the bottom was hidden from view by thick vegetation that grew from either side and formed a canopy, "Captain you-" Molla said when he noticed the extent to which she was leaning to the side as she looked down.

"Sergeant Molla, I'm fine." Wolf replied, looking up and turning towards Molla, "I can-" and then she took another step forwards without looking where she was stepping and her foot came down on a patch of moss that was already on the verge of falling off the trunk. Wolf's weight was enough to rip the moss from the tree trunk and she squealed as she slipped, falling over the side of the trunk. She was quick enough to be able to grab the trunk as she fell but this still left her dangling over the side and the Catachans on both sides of the gully rushed forwards to the edge.

"Captain hold on. I'm on my way." Molla said as he climbed back up onto the trunk.

"No. I can do it myself sergeant. I can-" Wolf began before she tried to pull her self up by grabbing hold of another patch of moss that again broke free and she plummeted into the gully below.

Having only just started her crossing, Wolf struck the side of the gully close to the top and began to tumble down it until she reached the vegetation that covered the bottom and there was a 'crash' as she smashed through this and continued to fall. With only limited light penetrating the canopy Wolf could barely see her surroundings as she fell but she was able to make out a cluster of rocks below her and she gasped as she pictured herself landing on these.

Moments later Wolf heard a snapping sound as she landed on her back on one of these rocks but there was none of the agony she had expected. Instead she rolled off the rock and landed in the mud beside it. Her back was sore from the impact but she was still able to stand and she began to remove her body armour.

"Captain Wolf, are you injured?" Vance asked, using his microbead to avoid having to shout too loudly when there could be more Gretchin pickets close by.

"Nothing hurt but my pride sergeant." Wolf said, angry at herself for letting herself be goaded into taking risks by Torrent. Then she took the carapace armour plate out of the back pocket of her armour and she saw that it had broken in half when she landed on the rocks, absorbing enough of the energy of the impact to protect her from injury just as it was supposed to do, "Looks like that carapace plate I requisitioned when I thought all of you were going to kill me did manage to save my life though. Or at least my spine."

"We'll never get a line through that plant cover." Molla's voice added as he studied the vegetation covered the bottom of the gully, "I'll have to climb down and bring you back up.

"No." Wolf responded as she looked around and she saw a shaft of daylight coming through the vegetation above her not too far away, "We may not have time for that. I can see light further down the gully. That could be another way out. I'll see if I can make my own way out and catch up with you. You keep going and find out what those Orks are up to. Leave markers for me to find, okay?"

"If you insist captain. But don't take too long about it." Vance replied.

As the rest of the patrol was crossing the gully Wolf tossed aside the damaged carapace plate and put her flak jacket back on before she began to make her way along it, heading towards the daylight she could see coming through from above. Getting closer to this she could see that the side of the gully was just as steep here beneath the hole in the covering of vegetation but the surface was covered in protruding tree roots that offered numerous handholds and places where she could put her feet without worrying about them giving way. She tested the strength of one of these exposed roots anyway, pulling on it to see if it held and when it did she smiled, looked up the steep side of the gully towards the daylight above and began to climb.

The plentiful availability of hand and footholds made the climb up the side of the gully straight forwards if still somewhat tiring but it was not long before she emerged through the hole in the vegetation not far below the top of the gully and was able to pull herself out of it, now on the far side from where she had started.

However, as Wolf was picking herself up and trying to get her bearings she heard a rustling sound from the undergrowth. Turning towards this she saw a single Gretchin emerge clutching a sack in one hand and a crude knife in the other. Acting quickly Wolf drew her las pistol but before she could fire it four more of the creatures appeared. None of the Gretchin looked to be carrying a gun and this suggested to Wolf that rather than a group of pickets for the Orks she was looking at a party out foraging for food.

The problem was that Wolf had no intention of being on the menu.

"Get back or I'll shoot." she said as the Gretchin all began to advance. By their nature Gretchin were cowardly creatures but as well having the advantage of numbers these Gretchin could see that Wolf was not

very large by human standards, being barely one and a half metres tall. To the Gretchin as it would be to Orks this was a sign of weakness and so they started to come towards her, none of them understanding her threat.

Wolf did not hesitate and as soon as the Gretchin began to close in on her she picked one at random and fired her las pistol. The blast hit the creature and it let out a high pitched scream as it died but then the other four suddenly rushed forwards in unison. Wolf turned her pistol towards another of the Gretchin but before she could fire it a third leapt at her, pushing her to the ground and screeching as he tried to wrestle her las pistol from her grip. The weapon went off again in the struggle but the blast went upwards, hitting nothing and then the Gretchin opened his mouth widely before biting down on her arm and Wolf screamed as she let go of her las pistol and it fell to the ground. The Gretchin with the sack promptly scooped the weapon up off the ground and stuffed it into the sack while the two remaining creatures both dived at Wolf, grabbing hold of her other arm and her legs to pin her to the ground. She kicked at the Gretchin trying to restrain her legs and the heel of her boot struck the creature in his face, causing him to fall backwards and land spread eagled across the ground where he lay still. Whether he was dead or merely knocked out did not matter to Wolf, all that she cared about was that now she only faced three of the Gretchin. These three were still enough to be able to roll her over onto her stomach and push her face into the dirt, however and once they had done this they pulled her arms behind her back so that her forearms ran alongside one another horizontally. The Gretchin with the sack then produced a length of rope and the three of them began to bind Wolf's arms behind her.

Wolf screamed as they pulled the ropes tight and this obviously concerned the Gretchin enough that one of them clamped a hand over her mouth to silence her but Wolf responded by biting this hand and the Gretchin screamed instead as he pulled his hand away. Wolf then felt a tugging at her shirt and heard the sound of cloth being cut as first her flak jacket was cut open at the sides and then her shirt itself was ripped away from her body. One of the Gretchin holding Wolf down then lifted up her head while a second forced a large piece of cloth from her shirt into her mouth to keep her quiet. The Gretchin were still not done with Wolf though and as soon as another strip of cloth had been tied around her head to cover her mouth the one with the sack began to claw at her belt, releasing the clasp and putting it along with all the equipment it carried into the sack with her las pistol.

With one Gretchin busy securing Wolf's belongings in the sack and a second still clutching its bleeding hand this left only one of them hold Wolf down and she took advantage of this to roll over, pushing the Gretchin aside towards the gully and she heard a sudden scream that was followed by a crashing sound that told her the creature had been pushed over the edge into the gully. Wolf then began trying to get back to her feet while the two remaining Gretchin advanced towards her once more. With her arms bound only Wolf's legs posed a problem to the Gretchin and they dived at her, grabbing one each before they began to claw at her trousers, ripping them open to see if there was anything else worth stealing inside her pockets.

A shiny metal pocket flash light fell from Wolf's trousers as they were shredded by the Gretchin and one of the creatures leapt on this, claiming it for its own. However, the second Gretchin appeared dissatisfied with this claim of 'finders keepers' and snarled as it now hurled itself at the one holding the flash light. The Gretchin with the flash light dived aside at the last moment though and as his former comrade was picking himself up he drew his knife. The second Gretchin also drew his knife and the two creatures then hurled themselves at one another in a frenzy, stabbing, kicking, punching and biting at one another as they rolled around on the ground.

Wolf found herself unable to tell one combatant from another very quickly but it mattered little to her anyway and she tried to use this distraction to struggle free of the ropes digging into her arms but without success. The battling Gretchin then rolled into the side of Wolf's legs and she snarled as she kicked them back as hard as she could. This blow pushed the two creatures right up to the edge of the gully and with both of them too occupied in fighting one another neither one was able to reach out and stop themselves from both rolling over the edge and Wolf heard them both scream as they plummeted downwards.

There were no more Gretchin left but this still left Wolf alone with her arms bound and wearing only her combat boots and the bodysuit she wore under her uniform. She still had her microbead headset on but could not reach it to turn on the transmitter and could not speak into it to summon help in any case. Looking around she saw the sack that contained her belongings, knowing that if she could get to her knife then she could easily free herself. However, the sack had been tied shut and the way in which Wolf's arms had been bound meant she could not untie the knot. Frowning at her misfortune Wolf dragged herself across the ground until she was able to grab hold of the sack and then struggled back to her feet before she set off through the jungle in search of her troops, aware of the mockery she would receive when she found them.

## 6.

The patrol had halted and both Molla and Vance searched the jungle using their magnoculars..

"There's nothing out there." Vance said.

"I'm telling you I heard a shot. A las weapon." Molla replied.

"And how long have we been looking? We need to get a move on." Vance said, lowering his magnoculars.

"Maybe you're-" Molla began but as he turned his head to look back the way the patrol had come he stopped and a smile spread across his face, "Oh that's nice." he said, "Very nice."

"What? Is it Orks?" Vance asked as he raised his magnoculars again.

"No, not Orks. The captain's back." Molla answered just as Vance saw Wolf for himself.

"Throne, what has she done now?" he exclaimed.

"What? Let me see." Torrent said, reaching out her hand and Vance handed her his magnoculars, "Him on Earth!" she added when she saw Wolf heading towards them in her underwear still bound and gagged.

"And that specialist isn't much different to how she looked when we first met her." Molla said.

"Actually she still had all her clothes then." Vance pointed out.

"Yes, but she got rid of them pretty quickly." Molla said and then he got to his feet and waved at Wolf, beckoning her towards them without calling out and risking giving away the Catachans' position to the Orks. Emerging from cover the Catachans walked towards Wolf while she stopped and stared at them.

"Glad you could make it captain." Vance said, smiling at her, "So how did climbing out of that gully go?"

Wolf glared at Vance as he and Molla stood in front of her, acting as if nothing was out of the ordinary.

"I've managed to keep on the Gretchin's trail captain and we can proceed on your order." Molla added and Wolf then walked right up to him and went to kick him in the shin. Molla moved quicker though and leapt back out of reach.

"Okay joke's over." Vance said, raising his hands, "Turn around and I'll cut you loose captain." and as Wolf turned her back on him he drew his blade. Then with one swift stroke he cut through the rope binding Wolf's arms and she felt the tension in them fall, enabling her to wriggle her arms free before pulling the gag from her mouth.

"Thank you platoon sergeant." she said, "Now who has some spare clothes I can borrow?"

"This is just a short patrol and we came straight from spots on a defensive line captain. Spare clothing isn't something we're carrying." Vance pointed out.

"What did happen to your clothes anyway captain?" Torrent asked and Wolf sighed.

"I ran into a party of Gretchin. I think they intended to take me back to the Ork camp either as a prisoner or a meal. I'm not sure which." she replied, "Obviously they decided that neither of those needed clothes. I'm just glad I'm wearing this one piece. Anything less and I expect they'd have been able to just rip that right off without a second thought. Now who's going to lend me a shirt?" she added and she looked around for a volunteer, However, none of the Catachans whether male or female stepped forwards.

"Being without proper uniform violates regulations captain." Molla pointed out and Wolf scowled at him.

"Besides, who here is your size?" Torrent added.

"Fine." Wolf hissed, picking up the sack that held her belongings and now that her hands were free she was able to untie this and take out the belt on which her equipment was mounted and wrap it around her waist. For a moment she considered cutting arm and neck holes in the sack but its coarse material felt itchy and she did not want to deal with that distraction for the rest of the patrol. Then as she took out her las pistol and holstered it she added, "In that case I'll just finish the mission like this. One thing though, Sergeant Molla hand over your magnoculars."

"What for?" Molla asked.

"Just do it sergeant." Wolf ordered and Molla passed her his magnoculars. Taking the device Wolf began to manipulate the controls.

"What are you doing?" Vance asked.

"Deleting the memory." Wolf replied, "I know Molla will have recorded me in my underwear so I'm getting rid of the footage." and then she handed the magnoculars back to Molla, "There you go sergeant, now please carry on with the mission and remain in front of me. I don't want you staring at me the whole time."

"Of course captain." Molla replied, smiling and saluting before he turned and returned to his squad. Along the way he passed by Torrent who was still holding Vance's magnoculars, "You got a recording, right?" he whispered and she nodded.

"It's saved." she said and then the pair of them subtly swapped their magnoculars while Wolf and Vance were distracted talking to one another.

As the patrol continued Molla found that the trail he had been following blended into an increasing number of others, most left by infantry and an increasing number of these from Orks judging by their size.

"Captain I think we're getting close." he said into his microbead, "We've got a lot of tracks here from humanoids in boots. Gretchin tend to be barefoot and a lot smaller." then he looked around and saw that the ground close by sloped upwards. The tracks did not head in that direction but the slope suggested that there was a vantage point close by, "I'd like permission to move on ahead and take a look around."

"Granted sergeant. But keep in contact." Wolf replied and then while the rest of the patrol stayed where they were Molla dashed forwards and headed up the slope.

The slope continued to climb enough that Molla was able to look through the jungle over the thick undergrowth but without the canopy blocking his view as well and he froze when he saw what lay ahead of the small patrol. Thousands of Orks waited in the jungle, their clan based clothing creating patches of colour that stood out against the green of the jungle. They were still a significant distance from Molla's position but he could just about hear the noise they were producing with various chants and what seemed to be random bellowing at one another.

"Captain I've found them. You need to get up here and see this." Molla signalled with his microbead.

"Confirmed sergeant, we're on our way." Wolf replied and while he waited for the other Catachans to join him Molla took out his magnoculars so that he could get a better look at the Orks.

"What have you found Sergeant Molla?" Wolf asked as she and the rest of the patrol arrived and she crouched beside him.

"Right over there captain." he replied, pointing through the trees and looking at her.

"My order still stands sergeant. Eyes front." Wolf said as she raised her own magnoculars and looked towards the Orks, "Him on Earth." she exclaimed when she saw the army that the Orks had assembled, "I've never seen so many of them."

"Yeah, Rull's estimate may have been on the low side." Molla said.

"That lot looks like a tempting target for an artillery barrage." Vance commented as he studied the Ork army through his magnoculars as well.

"Wait, I don't think so platoon sergeant." Wolf said, "Check out bearing one nine six."

"One nine six. Check." Vance replied as both he and Molla turned to see what Wolf had found.

They found themselves looking at one of the largest Orks any of them had ever seen, clad in some sort of thick powered armour that was painted bright yellow with some blue patches. Surrounding this massive Ork was a cluster of other large members of the species, though not as large as the one in yellow power armour. Appearing to be some sort of honour guard, these Orks were armed with a variety of weapons and instead of the yellow worn by their leader they were all clad in clothing patterned with a crude version of human camouflage.

"The warboss." Wolf said, smiling, "The Ork we came here to kill."

"Looks that way." Vance added, "Mind you it'll be tough going for that Astartes kill team to fight their way through all of that lot."

"That's what they're trained for." Wolf commented, "Although I wish we had Rull here with us. He could take that thing out on his own."

"Now that's weird." Molla said as he looked back at the rest of the Ork army, focusing on the larger individuals scattered around it.

"What is?" Wolf asked.

"Take a look at the leaders. All of them, not just the ones around the warboss. Check out the rest of them as well." Molla told her and both she and Vance began to search through the hoard of Orks picking out the larger examples.

"They're all the same." Wolf said, "Well their features are different obviously and they have different weapons but all of them are dressed the same."

"Camouflage. Just like that pet Ork the inquisitor has helping him." Vance said.

"He helped us too once." Wolf pointed out.

"Maybe but that was when he had as much to gain from it as us. What do you think he'll do when he finds out that his mates are running this entire army?" Vance pointed out.

"More to the point why aren't there any larger Orks wearing other colours?" Molla said, "I thought that they were supposed to stick with their own tribes or clans or whatever they're called."

"I need to call this in." Wolf said, "Kline give me that vox."

"Here you go captain." Kline replied as he passed her the handset. However, the moment she tried to activate the vox it let out a sharp squealing noise, "Throne!" she exclaimed, dropping the handset.

"They must be jamming our vox." Vance said.

"That's damned smart for greenskins." Molla commented.

"Maybe so but it doesn't change the fact that General Fortnam needs to know about this army." Wolf said, and she got back to her feet, "Okay that's it. We've found what we were looking for. Now we're going to head back to our lines and report in."

"And quickly I think. Look." Vance said and he pointed down at the Ork army at where a group of several hundred of the creatures under the command of one of the larger Orks had broken off the rest and was now

heading right for the patrol.

"They must have detected the vox." Molla said.

"Who cares? They're heading this way which means we need to leave." Wolf replied.

The Orks behind the Catachan patrol were making enough noise that the Catachans did not need to worry about stealth, any noise that they made in escaping was drowned out by that made by their pursuers. This included gunfire and when a Gretchin picket unexpectedly appeared in front of them Vance wasted no time in shooting it with his las pistol.

"Are there any more?" Wolf asked, pausing to search the jungle around them.

"Nervous you'll loose what clothes you've got left captain?" Torrent commented as she rushed past her.

"Never mind if there are any more. We're almost at the crossing. We can lose the Orks there." Vance replied and Wolf began to run again.

As Vance had said, the tree trunk that bridged the gully was not far ahead of the patrol and being the first of the Catachans to reach it, Molla came to a halt beside it and turned around to watch the jungle behind them.

"After you captain." he said to Wolf.

"I don't think so sergeant." Wolf replied, "You take point." and she pointed across the trunk.

"As you wish captain." Molla said and he jumped up onto the trunk before he started to walk across.

"What's the matter captain? Nervous about falling off again?" Vance asked and Wolf smiled at him.

"No platoon sergeant. I'm going to take your advice and crawl across this time. I just didn't want Molla following me and staring at my ass." she said and then she climbed up onto the trunk and began to follow Molla, crawling on her hands and knees rather than risking walking upright across it this time around.

As soon as he reached the other side Molla leapt back down to the ground and took a krak grenade from his belt.

"Get a move on." he called out, "I'll blow this thing the minute everyone's across."

"Quickly." Vance added, "Don't wait for the previous person to get across. The trunk should hold three at a time easily. Okay Torrent, you're next."

"I want a firing line." Wolf ordered as she climbed down from the trunk, having successfully crossed the gully this time.

"Covering fire?" Molla asked and Wolf nodded.

"If anything green comes out of that undergrowth then I want it shot." she answered.

It was then that the first of the Ork chasing after the Catachans burst out of the jungle, three of them dressed in dirty blue clothing. Hearing the noise they were making, Vance had plenty of warning of their approach and he spun around on the spot to shoot the first of them in the head. This was followed by several rapid bursts of lasgun fire from the other side of the gully as the Catachans already across it opened fire and downed the other two.

"There's more on the way." Vance called out as he plucked a fragmentation grenade from his webbing and then hurled it into the undergrowth that the Orks had just emerged from. The sound of the explosion was accompanied by screams of pain from several more Orks who had been just behind them.

"Last man platoon sergeant." a Catachan rifleman told Vance as he climbed onto the trunk, leaving only him on that side and Vance nodded.

"I'm right behind you." he said as he holstered his las pistol prior to climbing onto the tree trunk himself.

As Vance crossed the trunk more Orks began to emerge from the undergrowth but these were felled by concentrated lasgun fire as well as more fragmentation grenades fired by the two launchers the patrol had at their disposal, "Blow it Tari!" Vance yelled when he finally reached the far side of the trunk and leapt down from it. In response Molla just primed his krak grenade and then thrust it into a hollow in the tree trunk so that the blast would be directed through the wood.

"Fire the hole." Molla warned the other Catachans.

"Fall back." Wolf ordered and the Catachans ceased fire and began to retreat away from the gully into the the jungle.

Seconds later the krak grenade exploded and the blast ripped a large section from the tree trunk, leaving only a small thickness to keep it in place. This thickness was not quite enough to support the tree trunk and there was a groaning sound as it was placed under strain by the weight of the wood it was trying to hold up. However, it was not until the first of the Orks reached the tree trunk and jumped up onto it with the intention of following the Catachans across the gully that it finally gave way, snapping the tree trunk into two unequal halves that promptly plummeted down into the gully and taking the screaming Ork with them.

The remaining Orks gathered by the edge of the gully, shouting insults in their own crude language across it as well as firing a few desperate gunshots even though the Catachans had already disappeared from view.

While the brightly dressed Orks wasted their time and ammunition on non-existent targets two other Orks that were both larger than the others and also both dressed in clothing marked with simple camouflage patterns stood behind them and then grinned at one another before ordering the Orks under their command to withdraw.



## 7.

The Catachan base camp was still surrounded by a ring of dug in infantry but now there were numerous squads beyond this perimeter searching the undergrowth and the burned out wrecks of Ork tanks that now littered the jungle for any signs of survivors from the crew. Among these squads was Quinn and half of his veterans and when the patrol appeared out of the jungle he initially raised his shotgun until he saw that they were human.

"You're back." he said to Molla, "How did it go?"

"Rull was right. The Orks have an army out there." Molla replied.

"More than one it seems." Quinn said and Molla frowned, "Rull checked in after heading north. There's another large formation waiting up there and some Navy hotshots spotted a large group to the south east."

"So we're surrounded then? That didn't take them long." Molla said.

"No it didn't, in fact some people are saying how it's kind of like the Orks were waiting for us. That they knew where we'd land." Quinn said.

At that moment Wolf rushed past.

"Out of my way, I need to talk to the general." she said as she hurried onwards and Quinn's jaw dropped when he saw her.

"Do I need to ask?" he said, pointing at Wolf as she continued towards the Catachans' divisional command post.

"Best not to." Molla told him, "I've got a video you might want to see though. Grey definitely will."

With all three of the Catachan VII Division's super heavy tanks parked right beside it, the divisional command post was easy to locate and Wolf rushed straight inside the pre-fabricated structure.

"Where the hell do you think you're going?" a man who was large even for a Catachan asked as he and a second man stepped into Wolf's path.

"To see the general." Wolf told them, "I am Captain Wolf of the Nineteenth Regiment and I have urgent information for him."

"Well the general is in a meeting outsider." the Catachan said, knowing from Wolf's accent that she was not a native Catachan, "You need to make an appointment."

Wolf was about to argue the point when all of a sudden someone called out to her.

"The Wolf!" the voice shouted and Wolf turned to see one of the Deathwatch space marines that Inquisitor Tobias had brought with him striding towards her. The marine still wore his helmet but Wolf recognised the chapter pattern on one of his shoulder pads as a design she had seen before. It belonged to a chapter known as the Space Wolves and when the marine walked up to her and removed his helmet she recognised his face immediately.

"Sergeant Onund." she said, remembering the marine from their encounter with the Drukhari, or Dark Eldar.

"The Wolf." Onund said again and the giant man reached down to wrap his arms around Wolf's waist, hugging her as he lifted her up off the floor and laughed, "I heard they made you a captain now." he said and Wolf nodded.

"Yes." she croaked, finding it hard to breathe while he embraced her.

"So why are you here little Captain Wolf?" Onund asked as he set her down again.

"I need to see General Fortnam. I have vital intelligence for him." Wolf said and Onund grinned.

"Then in we go." he said, pointing to the door to the command centre itself.

"The general is busy." the Catachan guard said again.

"Then the general can throw us out." Onund said, "But you two aren't stopping us from going in there. Or would you like to try?" and he grinned at the two guards.

Despite the larger than average size of Catachans compared to the average human a space marine like Onund still towered over them, an effect magnified by the bulk of his powered armour and the two guards stepped aside without a word.

"After you little Wolf." Onund said, holding the door open for Wolf to enter the command centre.

Rushing into the command centre Wolf saw General Fortnam and all four of the division's regimental commanders, Colonel Mann of the XII Regiment, Colonel Shryke of the XIX Regiment, Colonel Hatch of the XXV Regiment and Colonel Vorris of the XIV Armoured Regiment all gathered around a large holographic display unit. With them were their regimental commissars, Inquisitor Tobias and a pair of Deathwatch marines, senior members of the Adeptus Mechanicus, Naval officers and a number of administrative personnel from each regiment. Among the latter Wolf noticed Bess Quinn and her own sister. All of these stared at Wolf as she rushed up to the table.

"Emilia-" Elisa began but Wolf held up her hand.

"Not now, I know I'm interrupting." she said.

"But Emilia-" Elisa said.

"Look I've got something I really have to show the general." Wolf said before her sister could finish.

"I think you've already shown us a lot Captain Wolf." Colonel Shryke said and only then did Wolf remember that she was still in her underwear.

"Throne." she said, looking down at herself.

"Here. If the General will allow it, I will lend you my coat." one of the naval officers said, glancing at General Fortnam and when he nodded the officer removed his sash and coat, handing the coat to Wolf who eagerly took it and put it on despite it being far too large for her.

"Perhaps you should just tell us what you have to say." Inquisitor Tobias said.

"Here." Wolf said, holding up her magnoculars, "Under the general's orders I took a patrol out into the jungle to check on reports of a large concentration of Ork infantry. We confirmed not only the presence of the Ork troops but also identified an individual of significant physical size that I believe to be the warboss."

A nearby tech priest reached out with a mechandrite tentacle that had been attached to their spine and took the magnoculars from Wolf.

"Time index." the tech priest said, the combination of robes and extensive cybernetic modification making it impossible to tell if they were male or female.

"About two hours ago. It should be the last thing on there." Wolf said.

"Confirmed." the tech priest announced, "Data shows a significant gathering of xenos troops, including their leadership caste."

"Put it on the main display if you would magus." General Fortnam said and the collection of maps that the gathered officers had been studying was replaced by the footage that Wolf had recorded of the massive Ork army.

"There." Wolf said when the largest of the Orks appeared in the footage and the tech priest paused the playback.

"An Ork warboss of the Bad Moon clan in mega armour." Tobias said, "Can your men handle that target Captain Aetus?" and he looked at one of the marines standing beside him.

"The armour will require specialised weaponry to penetrate in the limited time we will have before the Orks' numbers can overwhelm us inquisitor." the marine officer responded.

"My patrol noticed that the Ork officers serving the warboss were all wearing camouflage clothing inquisitor. Is that odd?" Wolf asked.

"Blood Axes." Tobias replied.

"You mean like those greenskins you brought along with you that my men have under guard?" Colonel Hatch said and the inquisitor looked at her.

"Yes colonel. Just like them. Though I doubt that we would be able to bribe the numbers that there appear to be here on Rema Anta into our service like I did with Korothe and his commandos." he said.

"But is the number of them peculiar inquisitor?" General Fortnam asked.

"I've not seen any mission reports that have them present in this number. What about you captain?" Tobias answered and he looked at Captain Aetus again.

"Never. Nor in this pattern." the massive armoured marine replied, pointing at the frozen image in front of them all, "All of the Blood Axes are of the size range known as nob. There are no ordinary troopers from the Blood Axe clan. Nor are there any officers from the other clans. It appears that the Blood Axe clan is being used by the warboss to control his army."

"Yes, the Blood Axe clan are disciplined. Perhaps that level of discipline is needed to keep the army from rushing headlong to engage us." Tobias said.

"Do we have any ideas why they aren't all engaging us yet?" Wolf said.

"They don't have enough troops." Colonel Mann told her, "Our defensive position is too strong."

"That was the purpose of the armoured attacks. They were probing our strength before bringing in their army." Colonel Shryke added, "Now they are probably waiting for reinforcements from elsewhere on the planet."

"Which makes taking out the warboss quickly of prime importance." Tobias said, "Killing him will cause the Orks already here to turn on one another. The same goes for any reinforcements. The Orks will fight among themselves until another can establish itself as the strongest. That is when we will stage our breakout."

"We'll have to carry out an airborne insertion." Captain Aetus said, "Our Corvus will get us to the enemy far faster than any ground transport and we can deploy directly in position to attack the target."

"You'll be starting off surrounded by the enemy." General Fortnam said, "Inquisitor, perhaps a small force of my troops should be despatched along with your kill team. They could launch a diversionary attack that will draw off as many of the Orks as possible."

"The Wolf!" Onund exclaimed suddenly and Wolf staggered forwards, steadying herself against the holographic display unit as the Space Wolf marine slapped her on the back, "Inquisitor I saw her platoon fight their way out of Commorrhagh, the city of the Drukhari. If anyone can distract an army of Greenskins then it's them."

"Captain Wolf's platoon is part of the Nineteenth Regiment. Is that acceptable to you Colonel Shryke?"



General Fortnam said.

"It is general." Colonel Shryke replied and Wolf winced.

"I can have a Valkyrie squadron ready to go within the hour." the naval officer who had leant Wolf his coat said, "I'll have them outfitted for anti-infantry operations. Rocket pods and door mounted heavy bolters."

"That will increase the odds of our success significantly inquisitor." Captain Aetus said and Inquisitor Tobias nodded.

"Thank you colonel. Your regiment's help is greatly appreciated." he said.

"Captain Wolf." Colonel Shryke said and Wolf stood to attention.

"Yes sir." she said.

"Captain get your platoon ready to deploy within the hour. Give details of what transport you need to the Imperial Navy and for the Emperor's sake put some proper clothes on." the colonel ordered.

"Anna?" Wolf called out as she entered Fourth Company's supply tent and Lieutenant Selena, the company's supply officer appeared from behind a set of shelves and gasped when she saw Wolf standing there in her underwear.

"What in the Emperor's name happened to you?" she asked.

"I had an encounter with some Gretchin. A naval officer leant me his coat but I had to return that." Wolf replied, "Do you have a spare uniform that will fit me? You're the only Catachan in our company that's my size."

Selena was much shorter than most Catachans and as such had acquired the nickname 'Short Arse' Selena, although she was also sometimes known as 'Anna Ass Wipe' owing to her role in supplying toilet paper to the company.

"You know we managed to get the barracks deployed while you were gone. Your spare clothes will be there."

Selena pointed out and Wolf sighed.

"I would like to think that but I know my platoon. I headed straight into a meeting with General Fortnam when I got back so I expect that my tent will have been plundered and the only item of clothing left in there will be that straight jacket you tricked me into signing for." she said and Selena frowned.

"What? You still have that thing? It's scrap." she said.

"But it's scrap that you put a significant value on. If I lose it I have to pay for it."

"But why bring it with you? Leave it on the transport." Selena suggested.

"If I bring it with me then there's always the chance that it will be destroyed by enemy action. Then it's gone and I don't need to pay for a replacement." Wolf explained.

"Ah, very smart. I guess that's how you get to be a captain. That and taking on an army of Orks in your skivvies." Selena said and then she turned to a nearby shelf, "Well this is where I've got the spare uniforms and I always make sure I have a few sets in our size. Here we go. Have a spare set as well." she added as she pulled two pairs of trousers and a pair of shirts from the boxes on the shelf and tossed the clothing to Wolf. Then as Wolf was putting on one of these uniforms Selena asked, "So how did the general react when you turned up half naked?"

"Pretty well I suppose. Especially considering that I burst in declaring that I had something to show him."

Wolf responded as she hurriedly got dressed, "Well thanks for this. I'll get them back to you I promise." and then she left the tent.

Selena then walked over to her desk and sat down, picking up her dataslate.

"Looking for something lieutenant?" one of her staff asked when he then entered the tent in the company of a servitor that was carrying several heavy boxes stacked on top of one another.

"Just checking order numbers of something I think we might need." she said and the other Catachan frowned when he walked over and saw the screen.

"Straight jackets? What do we need them for?" he said, confused.

"Oh I just want to make sure that if any get lost due to enemy action then we can issue a nice shiny replacement. Of course the trick then will be to get her into it while she's asleep without waking her up."

Selena said.

"Throne Bomber. I thought we got the lot." Molla said to Mayer, folding his arms as he watched Wolf heading back to Second Platoon's position, approaching the mortar position first where Molla had been talking with Mayer.

"We?" Mayer commented.

"Okay then, me. But that was a waste of time. I wonder where she hid a spare uniform?" Molla said and then he smiled and waved.

"Captain, good to see you ready for action again." he said and behind him Khor and his ogryns all snapped to attention.

"Officer present!" Khor yelled.

"At ease Sergeant Khor. Sergeant Molla, Corporal Mayer, where are Vance, Quinn and Grey?" Wolf asked,

returning the ogryns' salute so that they would relax again.

"Over there captain." Mayer answered and he pointed towards the perimeter. Between the mortar position and the forwards positions Wolf then saw the other squad leaders of Second Platoon gathered together with two young women that were not part of the platoon. One of them was Molla's adult daughter Jenni while the other was Bess Quinn.

"Not spending time with your daughter sergeant?" Wolf asked Molla.

"I'd just come over here to invite Bomber to join us." he replied.

"Well I need to speak to you all so let's head over there now. You too Sergeant Khor." Wolf said and Khor snapped to attention again.

"Yes captain." he responded and as she and the two Catachans began to move he marched along behind them.

"I take it that you've already heard." Wolf said as they got close to the other squad leaders, suspecting that Bess Quinn would have let them in on her orders to take Second Platoon back into the jungle to engage the waiting Ork army.

"Yes, it's an interesting offer for a general." Grey replied.

"Offer? What have you heard? It's an order sergeant." Wolf said.

"Really?" Quinn commented, "Don't let us hold you up then. Let's see it."

"See it? See what?" Wolf asked.

"Whatever it was you wanted to show the general while only wearing your underwear." Jenni Molla said, grinning and Wolf sighed.

"Okay so that's what you both came here to tell them. I should have known." she said.

"I wouldn't want to circumvent the chain of command captain." Bess Quinn replied.

"Yes you would. You just did five minutes ago." Vance said and turning to Wolf he added, "Yes captain, we know that we're being deployed to act as decoys while the marines take out the warboss."

"Rull's already gone on ahead on foot. He reckons he can get there within the hour." Grey said.

"That's what Sergeant Molla was discussing with me." Mayer added, "I can have my mortars packed and ready to move in ten minutes."

"Good." Wolf said, "I want everyone at the airfield in half an hour ready to ship out. The navy are expecting us."

## 8.

As promised by the Imperial Navy officer present at the meeting, a squadron of Valkyrie airborne troop carriers was ready and waiting for Second Platoon when they reached the airfield that had been set up between two of the dropships. These craft had a secondary role as attack gunships and their nose mounted multilasers had been augmented with anti-infantry rocket pods beneath their wings and heavy bolters in mounts that enabled them to be fired from the aircraft's side doors by the cargo crew. At the end of the row of Valkyries painted in jungle camouflage colours was a single aircraft of a different type. This had the twin tail design that was common among Imperial aircraft but was not one that belonged to the Imperial Navy. This was the Corvus Blackstar that belonged to the Deathwatch and would carry their kill team into action. Like the Valkyries this craft was heavily armed so that after deploying its passengers it would be able to remain on station and provide fire support from the air.

A squad of ten Deathwatch marines was lined up outside this craft being inspected by Captain Aetus while another of their number was visible in the cockpit. It was a testament to both the skill of the marine pilot as well as the advanced nature of the aircraft's machine spirit that it took just one individual to not only fly the Corvus into combat but also direct all of the weapons it carried.

"Get everyone aboard the Valkyries platoon sergeant. I'll join you in a moment." Wolf told Vance before she walked towards the marines. The last time Wolf had fought alongside space marines of the Deathwatch they had been armed in a similar way to her own troops except with superior weapons, with most of the marines carrying a bolt gun while one of their number had a flamer and another a heavy bolter. However, this time the weapons carried by the marines made them resemble the armoured knights of medieval worlds. Each of the marines had replaced their bolt gun with a storm shield, a large shield that included an integral power field generator to provide far greater protection than the armoured metal itself could manage and some form of close combat weapon. Most of these close combat weapons were swords but Wolf could see that Sergeant Onund instead wore a bulky gauntlet fitted with a set of long claws while two of the other marines carried large hammers over their shoulders. As with the shields the marines carried for protection, Wolf knew that the weapons they carried were more than mere blades and hammers. These also included the technology to wrap their striking surfaces in energy fields that would enable them to pierce armour more easily than the ordinary blades carried by the Catachans could.

"Captain Wolf." Captain Aetus said, turning towards Wolf as she approached him, "What can I do for you?"

"I just wanted to know if there was anything else you needed from my platoon." Wolf replied.

"You will engage the enemy army and draw as many of them away from their warboss as possible. I will then lead my men against it. There is nothing more you need to know." Aetus told her.

"I was wondering whether you had an alternative plan just in case anything went wrong with the main one. What happens if you need extracting before the warboss is killed?" Wolf asked.

"We will not. We will fight our way to the warboss no matter what the odds. If I fall then Sergeant Onund will take my place. We will leave only when the warboss is dead." Captain Aetus answered. While technically both Wolf and Aetus held the same rank there was no doubting that he was the superior officer on this mission and even if he did become a casualty then Wolf knew that she would not be giving any orders to the other marines. The Adeptus Astartes operated independently of all of the other branches of the Imperium's military forces and it was a brave Guard or Naval officer that attempted to give an order to even an ordinary space marine, let alone one of their officers.

"Very well. In that case I'll bid you good hunting and hope to see you later captain." Wolf said, nodding but Aetus simply turned back towards his own troops before Wolf turned around and headed back to the Valkyries that Second Platoon were now loaded aboard ready to depart, "Is everyone aboard?" she asked as she was helped aboard by one of the door gunners aboard the Valkyrie transporting her command section.

"Yes captain. All craft report loaded." the gunner replied and then he smiled as he added, "The one carrying your ogryns is pretty crowded it seems."

"I expect so. Could you tell the pilot that we are ready to leave as soon as he is?" Wolf said and the gunner nodded.

"We were just waiting on you captain." he said.

The engines of the Valkyries roared as each aircraft rose up off the ground and then sped away from the Catachan base camp, heading out over the jungle towards the warboss' last known position. While it had taken more than an hour for Second Platoon to cover the distance on foot it took just a few minutes for the Imperial Navy transports to make the same journey.

"The pilot says that there's a small clearing visible about three hundred metres from where you'll be deploying captain." the door gunner Wolf had already spoken to told her as the Valkyrie began to slow down said to her, "We're going to set down there."

"That puts us less than a kilometre from the Orks. Won't they hear us coming?" Wolf asked.

"Most likely, yes. That's why I've been told to suggest that you move into position quickly." the gunner answered.

"Very well. Tell your pilot I want this craft to set down first, followed by the one carrying Corporal Mayer and his mortar squad." Wolf said.

"Yes captain." the gunner responded.

The rear ramp of the Valkyrie opened while the aircraft was still above the level of the trees and Wolf and her command section readied themselves to disembark as it continued to descend, one of the two gunners peering out over the side of the ramp.

"Go! Go! Go!" he yelled the moment that the Valkyrie touched down and Wolf and her command section charged down the ramp, running as quickly as they could until they heard the sound of its engines grow louder again. Knowing that this meant the Valkyrie was about to take off again the command section all dropped to ground and let the blast from the engines pass over them instead of it knocking them over. Then once the Valkyrie was safely back in the air they got back up and ran the rest of the way to the jungle surrounding the clearing as the next one came into land.

Mayer and his squad, along with two of the ogryns from Khor's squad that would not fit in their own Valkyrie emerged from the next craft, carrying with them their mortars and in the case of the ogryns as much ammunition for the heavy weapons as they could manage between them. The ogryns copied Mayer and his men when they threw themselves to the ground to avoid the engine back blast when their transport took off.

"Corporal Mayer I want you to wait until the entire platoon has arrived and then set your mortars up in this clearing. We'll provide you with fire co-ordinates when we are in position. I want a single red smoke round ready for firing and then as much high explosive as you can manage. Do you understand?" Wolf ordered.

"Yes captain. Mark the target, then fire for effect." Mayer replied.

"Excellent. Now we're going to our position. Tell Sergeant Molla to lead the rest of the platoon to us when they're all on the ground. Carry on corporal." Wolf said and then she beckoned for her command section to follow her.

The command section made its way through the jungle the short distance to the same section of high ground that they had observed the Ork army from previously and it was soon obvious that the Orks were still right where they had been. Now though, instead of appearing to be an army resting between battles the Orks appeared to be getting ready for it, the larger members of the hoard organising the other brightly dressed Orks into groups that could cover all approaches to their position. Thankfully although the Orks could hear the sound of the Valkyries circling overhead their flight pattern was wide enough to prevent the aliens from determining which direction the Catachans would attack from and they could not pick out the specific sound as each Valkyrie in turn landed just long enough to deploy its passengers.

"That's still a lot of Orks." Vance commented as he watched them.

"And just one platoon of us to take them all on." Torrent commented.

"The warboss is still right in the middle of them." Wolf said as she looked through her magnoculars at the heart of the Ork army and saw the mega-armoured warboss surrounded by his Blood Axe bodyguards.

The sound of movement alerted Wolf and her command section to someone approaching and they looked around to see Molla leading First and Second Squads up the slope towards them.

"Sergeant Molla, glad you could join us. Get your heavy bolter set up. Sergeant Grey the same goes for your missile launcher team. Where are Quinn and Khor?" Wolf said and Molla pointed back down the slope.

"I left them at the bottom." he said, "I figured that was the easiest route for the Ork to come at us from. Now they can either try fighting through them or come at us directly up the steeper ground." and Wolf nodded.

"Good. Then everyone's in position." she said and she looked at Kline, "I need the vox." she told him and he passed her the handset. Wolf expected the Orks to still be jamming local transmissions but she hoped that the vox set would still have the power to be able to send to Mayer just a few hundred metres away. As she held the vox handset to her head Wolf also looked through her magnoculars, noting the range to the approximate centre of the Ork hoard, "Corporal Mayer fire smoke round range seven hundred metres." she transmitted.

Wolf did not receive a response from Mayer over the vox but there was no way of telling if this was because his microbead was unable to penetrate the jamming or if he had simply not bothered trying, however moments later there was a whistling sound from overhead as a single mortar bomb flew over the Catachan position. This was followed by the sound of the bomb smashing through the jungle canopy before it landed among the Orks and Wolf saw it burst open to release a cloud of red smoke. A plume of this smoke rose up through the canopy overhead and into the sky where it was easily seen by the pilots of the circling Valkyries. Then despite having no visual contact with the Ork army they stopped circling in their holding pattern and turned towards the smoke before unleashing the firepower they carried into the jungle.

Fire from the Valkyries' nose mounted multilasers hit first, starting fires among the canopy as the energy beams ignited the vegetation as they burned through before randomly striking the Orks underneath. This was followed by a barrage of rockets from the pod mounted beneath the Valkyries' wings and the jungle was rocked by multiple explosions that tore apart whole squads of Orks as well as sending enough shrapnel up

into the canopy that large holes began to appear in the covering layer of vegetation. These holes were large enough to allow the crews of the Valkyries to finally see the Ork army they were shooting at and the door gunners now joined in as well, raking the ground below with fire from their heavy bolters. Just about audible among the cacophony of fire from the sky were more whistling sounds as Mayer switched from his initial smoke round to conventional high explosives and began to bombard the Ork army with them.

The Orks responded as best they could, firing personal weapons up into the air. However, the vast majority of these were unable to penetrate even the lightly armoured fuselages of the Valkyries while the handful of rockets that could be capable of downing the aircraft were fired so inaccurately that none of them managed to hit their targets, instead falling back to the jungle when they ran out of fuel and exploding harmlessly out of range.

"We need to draw them away, not just thin them out." Wolf said, "All heavy weapons fire at will."

First Squad's heavy bolter began to rattle as its crew unleashed a sustained burst of explosive rounds while a sudden 'whoosh' signalled the firing of a missile from Second Squad's launcher. Both these weapons were directed towards the nearest Ork units. This exposed the presence of the Catachans on the ground and one of the camouflage clad Ork leaders pointed towards them and roared, triggering a charge towards them.

"This is Captain Wolf, the enemy is moving to engage us." Wolf said into the vox handset and then she returned it to Kline.

"Think that signal will have got through the jamming?" Vance asked.

"I guess we'll find out in a few minutes." Wolf answered, drawing her las pistol and she looked around at the Catachans either side of her and added, "Fire at will."

In typical Ork fashion the alien horde charged towards Second Platoon's position on the high ground directly without any thought to their own safety and this made them easy targets for the Catachans who barely needed to aim their weapons as they fired into the midst of the charging Orks. The heavy bolter inflicted the greatest damage, cutting through the horde as the gunner fired long, sustained bursts into it and only pausing to prevent the weapon from overheating too rapidly.

Among the Orks were a number of the larger Blood Axes in their camouflaged clothing and these urged their smaller kin onwards. However, one by one these leaders began to fall as they were picked off by an unseen foe, the only indication that he was about to strike being the tiny red dot from his rifle's laser sight marking out his next chosen target.

A large group of Orks, seeing that the direct route to the human troops was crowded decided that it was going to break off from the main attack and instead move around the human flank where the ground was not as steep. Fortunately for Second Platoon this brought them right into the sights of Quinn's veteran squads and their shotguns boomed as they emerged to fire on the aliens.

"Khor, get your squad in." Quinn called out and Khor grinned.

"Ogryns attack!" he bellowed and the seven abhumans moved forwards, levelling their ripper guns and opening fire. Ripper guns were nothing more than large calibre automatic shotguns, fitted with burst limiters to prevent their simple minded owners from emptying the entire drum of ammunition in one go. However, even with their rate of fire limited by this the ogryns' powerful weapons could still each produce a similar volume of fire to a heavy bolter at short range and the combination of seven such weapons tore through the Orks. The range of the ripper guns was limited, however and even with the burst limiters their ammunition became depleted. Therefore, with the Orks getting closer and knowing that there would not be enough time for his squad to reload, Khor raised his weapon into the air and gave another yell, "Ogryns charge!"

Obediently and without fear of the massive numbers of Orks facing them, the ogryns charged forwards to meet the flanking force and began to swing their strongly built ripper guns like clubs, smashing a path through the Orks.

However, despite their attempt to outflank Second Platoon being blocked the Orks were so numerous that it was clear there would still be enough of their main force left when they reached the Catachan position to simply overwhelm it. Therefore, it came as a great relief to Wolf and the Catachans when they heard the sound of an aircraft flying much lower than the Valkyries and the Deathwatch Corvus Blackstar appeared through one of the holes blasted in the jungle canopy and its hatches opened to disgorge the marine kill team it carried.

## 9.

Each marine simply leapt from the transport, arrester cables fixed to their armour limiting the rate at which they fell to one that would not injure them when they landed and at that point the cables automatically detached and retracted. The marines struck at the Orks closest to them immediately and their power weapons sliced right through even the durable Ork bodies as they fought their way towards the warboss. To Orks the marines of the *Adeptus Astartes* were regarded as a favoured foe and the greatest leaders of the species would display the helmets taken from marines in battle as trophies. Thus when given the opportunity to do battle against space marines the Orks were not shy about taking it and as soon as they realised that the Deathwatch were among them the army turned its attention towards them.

Of course the Deathwatch had expected such a reaction and as Orks charged towards them they were ready to strike, cutting through them with power swords or using their thunder hammers to smash the aliens' bodies open with a single swing. Those Orks that survived long enough to attack back with their crude knives and axes found that their weapons lacked the capability to penetrate the marines' ceramite powered armour even without the added protection of the storm shields that the marines employed to push Orks out of their path before striking them down.

This changed when the first of the larger Blood Axe Orks charged at the Deathwatch squad. The Ork fired his pistol as he ran and bullets bounced off the marine's armour. Then the marine struck back with his power sword, cutting off the hand that held the pistol and causing the Ork to roar in pain. However, the alien was not done yet and he swung his other arm at the marine. This arm was clad in a thick gauntlet that ended in a trio of metal claws that crackled with energy similar to that which coated the marines' power weapons. The Deathwatch marine was unable to bring his storm shield around in time to parry this blow and instead the power claw smashed through his chest plate as if it was made of paper. Even the enhanced biology of a space marine could not withstand such injury and the marine toppled backwards, dead before he hit the ground.

The Ork did not have long to celebrate his victory, however as Onund dived at him

"Close up. Don't let the xenos separate us." Captain Aetus said as he impaled another Ork on his blade and then he saw the massive form of the warboss lumbering towards them, its heavy suit of armour limiting its rate of advance, "There is the alien leader. Squad forward." he ordered.

The Deathwatch marines formed a 'V' shaped formation as they fought their way towards the warboss, moving to confront him head on. Captain Aetus took the lead position in this formation while Sergeant Onund positioned himself immediately to one side of the captain to be best placed to take over should anything happen to the captain himself and the two marines armed with thunder hammers were placed in the centre of each side of the 'V' where they would have the support of their battle brothers armed with lighter weapons while they readied further strikes with the more cumbersome thunder hammers.

By placing their storm shields close to one another the marines created an armoured barrier between them and the Orks that deflected most of the gunfire directed towards them as they pressed on towards the warboss, striking down dozens of Orks that hurled themselves at the marines but they were still not completely invulnerable and when an alien stick grenade span through the air and landed at the feet of one of the marines the shrapnel was able to pierce his armour at its vulnerable knee joint and he collapsed. Seeing an opportunity numerous Orks rushed to the marine and attacked him before his comrades could pull him clear and get him back to his feet. Most of the blows that rained down on the fallen marine could not penetrate his armour and while they were focused on him, several more Orks were cut down by the other marines seeking to rescue their comrade. Before the marines could get their injured comrade back to the safety of their formation one of the large Blood Axes charged forwards bearing a large axe that was fitted with a motorised chain blade on its head and the alien brought this down on the vulnerable marine's helmet. At first there was just a shower of sparks and a screeching sound but then the blade began to dig into the helmet and cut through into the marine's head inside.

There was no time for the other Deathwatch marines to stop and tend to their fallen battle brother but he was swiftly avenged by one of the thunder hammer armed marines, the heavy weapon splitting open the Blood Axe Ork's skull with ease before the marines closed up the gap in their formation and continued on their way. However, between them and the warboss still lay his inner guard that consisted of a dozen of the larger Orks, most of them armed with large powered close combat weapons that could potentially cut through the marines' storm shields and powered armour. With their quarry just beyond these large Orks the marines pressed on anyway and Aetus decapitated the first of the alien bodyguards to charge at him.

"Sergeant Onund, I want you and the rest of the squad to engage the inner guard. Keep them off me. I am going for the warboss." Aetus ordered and Onund nodded.

"It will be done captain." he responded, leaping forwards to slice open the chest of another of the Blood Axes, "Come on Trethor." he shouted at another of the marines who where Onund's shoulder displayed the

emblem of the Space Wolves, his armour had a dark green shoulder pad marked with the winged dagger of the Dark Angels. For thousands of years reaching back to the dawn of the Imperium the two chapters had been rivals but serving with the Deathwatch had brought Onund and Trethor together in the same squad, "That's another one to me. Your lion is losing out to the wolf."

The Deathwatch marines met the Ork bodyguard head on, driving into the centre of the group and in doing so they split it in two and opened a clear path for Aetus to charge along to get to the warboss who had been easily outpaced by his more lightly equipped bodyguards. The massive alien was armed with both a short barrelled machine gun and a power claw that were built into his bright yellow armour and as Aetus charged at him he fired the machine gun in one long burst. Seeing the weapon come up slowly towards him Aetus placed his storm shield in front of him and as the machine gun fired he heard the sound of the bullets ricocheting off the power field that covered the front of the shield.

The machine gun emptied just as Aetus reached the warboss and before the alien could strike with his power claw Aetus struck with his sword. The blade cut deep into the alien's armour but the warboss made no sound, as it had not made any since the battle had begun. Instead as a shower of sparks erupted from the damage to its armour he pushed Aetus back and the Deathwatch captain staggered as the alien pulled back the arm that now ended in a power claw and prepared to strike. Expecting the blow, Aetus once again used his storm shield to protect himself but the strength of the attack was much more than even he had expected and the shield was sent flying from his grasp, its links to his armoured hand failing under the force of the impact. With one hand now free Aetus reached for the bolt pistol holstered on his belt at the same time as he swung his sword at the warboss again. This time his attack caught the alien's power claw and there was another shower of sparks and several small flames as the power field generator built into the weapon failed and it spluttered and died.

The sheer size and sharpness of the blades on the power claw still made it a lethal weapon in the hands of the warboss though and the alien struck back again, grabbing hold of the arm Aetus was now using to hold his bolt pistol and tightening his grip as the warboss lifted Aetus off the ground by his arm. The warboss then hurled Aetus back down towards the ground with such force that the marine dropped both his weapons as he landed on his back and inside his helmet his armour began to report system failures throughout. Slowly the warboss raised one of its armoured feet and then he brought this down onto Aetus' chest, triggering yet more alarms from his armour and the marine knew that another such blow would undoubtedly crack his armour wide open and result in his being crushed under the warboss' feet. Just as the warboss was poised to strike though, Aetus noticed something odd. A tiny red dot appeared on the warboss' exposed head right between his eyes. Then moments later a single bullet punched its way through the alien's skull.

Rull had chosen a special round to deal with the warboss, filled with a volatile mix of chemicals that started to mix on impact the bullet suddenly exploded inside the alien's skull and produced a ball of flame that boiled away his brain and created a shower of burned flesh and sparks as the warboss' cybernetically enhanced head exploded.

The headless warboss rocked back and forth for a moment, his leg still poised to come down on top of Captain Aetus. Then the corpse fell backwards and crashed to the ground. The first of the warboss' Blood Axe bodyguards to realise what had happened to the warboss called out to the others, pointing at where their leader now lay dead. However, in turning his focus away from the Deathwatch marines he made himself vulnerable and Trethor lunged forwards to drive his power sword up under the Ork's ribcage and through his heart.

The other Orks from the warboss' bodyguard began to shout at one another in their crude language and at the same time they began to pull back from the Deathwatch marines, who in turn were happy to follow and keep striking at them. The shouts of the bodyguards spread through the army as more of the Blood Axe leaders began to order the troops under their command to withdraw. Retreat was not a natural instinct for Orks, especially when their army still vastly outnumbered their combined marine and Catachan foes, however when gunfire began to be exchanged between different groups of Orks instead of being directed purely at their human enemies, withdrawing to determine exactly who they were supposed to be fighting began to seem like a much better idea.

The marines of the Deathwatch kill team held their ground as the Orks withdrew, advancing just far enough to link up with Captain Aetus again before placing their shields side by side to create a single, long barrier that then used as cover while switching from their melee weapons to their bolt pistols so that they could continue to harry the retreating Orks without needing to chase after them. Equipped with longer ranged weaponry, the Catachans of second platoon were able to remain in position and still keep firing on the Orks who made easy targets as they ran away. Only at the bottom of the slope were the retreating Orks chased, Khor and his ogryns continuing to fight even after the aliens had given up. The simple minded abhumans continued to swing their ripper guns like clubs, finding it much easier to deal with the Orks now that they were no longer focused on attacking. Seeing the ogryns pursuing the Orks, Quinn knew that they would not give up of their own accord and needed reigning in before they could become cut off from the rest of second platoon and vulnerable to an Ork counter attack.

"Khor, pull your squad back." Quinn shouted but the cybernetically enhanced abhuman did not hear him so Quinn tried his microbead instead, "Sergeant Khor return to your position." he signalled.

The transmission was not affected by any Ork jamming and Khor ground to a sudden halt, raising his fist into the air.

"Ogryns halt!" he shouted and then as they turned towards him he waved for them to follow him back to their starting position.

"Captain Wolf," Aetus said as the last of the Orks disappeared into the jungle and the Imperial forces ceased fire. His voice surprised Wolf when she heard it clearly over her microbead, "Techmarine Desus has informed me that the Ork jamming has ceased. You may wish to contact your superiors for further orders."

"Yes captain." Wolf responded and she reached for the vox handset on Kline's back, "That was Aetus." she told her command section.

"Did he say thanks to Rull for stopping him getting stomped on?" Vance asked, "The inquisition sent all those marines and in the end all we needed was us."

"You'd think they'd learn that Catachans are the best troops for jungle warfare." Torrent commented, "Including marines."

"He was suggesting that we check in." Wolf said, lifting the handset to her face, "This is Catachan One Nine Mark Four Mark Two calling Catachan One Nine Mark Four. Over."

"Wolf, is that you?" Major Trent's voice responded and Wolf smiled.

"Yes sir, it's me. I'm calling to report that the Ork warboss is dead. Over." she said.

"Yes, we've already heard. Word came down from Divisional command that the marines completed their mission. Over." Trent said and Wolf frowned.

"Well actually sir it was Guardsman Rull that fired the fatal shot. Over."

"Never mind that now captain. The division is preparing to move out. Word of the warboss' death must have spread quickly because the navy have reported that the other forces gathering around us are all falling back. This is what we've been waiting for so we're going after them. The second wave should be able to start its landing within a day. You're platoon has done well captain. Over." Trent told Wolf.

"Yes sir. Where will we be linking up with you? Over." she asked.

"You won't captain. We need the Ork bodies disposing of properly before they can release spores and reproduce. Second Platoon is to gather up all the bodies and burn them. Do you understand? Over." Trent ordered and Wolf sighed before responding.

"Yes sir, I understand. I'll check in when we're done. Catachan One Nine Mark Four Mark Two out." she said before shutting off the vox.

"Something wrong captain?" Vance said as she returned the vox handset to Kline.

"We're on grave duty." Wolf said.

"But we didn't lose anyone. The ogryns suffered a few scratches but that's it." Vance said.

"Not us. Them. The Orks." Wolf replied and she pointed to the hundreds of Ork corpses that lay strewn on the ground where they had been killed by Second Platoon, the Deathwatch marines and also the naval air squadron that was now giving chase to the retreating Orks, "Those bodies need disposing of before they can give rise to a new generation of Orks."

"Look at it this way captain, at least these greenskins aren't going to be leaving you in your underwear." Torrent commented, grinning.

"Captain Wolf." Aetus called out as he walked up the slope towards Wolf and her command section.

"Yes captain." she asked in response.

"You have received orders?" Aetus said.

"We have. We're to gather and incinerate the Ork bodies." she told him.

"Good. My men are withdrawing. We will be picked up by our transport and returned to the landing zone. Inquisitor Tobias will determine whether there are any more targets for us." Aetus said.

"I understand." Wolf said, "I suppose grave digging is a bit beyond the Astartes."

"Quite." Aetus said.

"Oh and you're welcome by the way." Wolf added.

"Welcome?" Aetus replied.

"Yes, I'm sure that when I pass on your thanks to Guardsman Rull for saving your life that he will say that you are welcome." Wolf said but Aetus just stared at her for a few moments.

"Carry on Captain Wolf." he said eventually before he turned around and started to walk away again.



## 10.

The VII Division base camp was a hive of activity as all four of its regiments prepared to move out in pursuit of the fleeing Ork armies. Surveillance by Imperial Navy aircraft had indicated that the large Ork forces that had been gathering were now breaking down into smaller units as they fell back. On the other hand General Fortnam resisted the temptations to despatch his forces in small groups to hunt down each individual unit of Orks. Instead he had each of his regiments deploy as single forces, with the lighter elements of each regiment being deployed forwards of the heavier ones to seek out the Orks and guide the more powerful units to them. The general himself remained at the base camp along with his trio of superheavy Baneblade tanks. Although these were the most powerful weapons at his disposal he knew that their low speed meant that they would struggle to keep up with even the division's troops on foot and so he instead opted to stay in his command centre to co-ordinate the division's actions.

"General we're getting the first reports of engagements from the Twenty-Fifth." one of the general's staff reported and he handed General Fortnam a dataslate.

"Colonel Hatch's scout company has caught up with a unit of Ork infantry." the general said.

"Any indication of numbers general?" Inquisitor Tobias asked.

"No. All this tells me is that the Orks are continuing to pull back and that our forces are continuing their pursuit." General Fortnam answered, "In my experience Orks only run after suffering exceptionally heavy losses. I can see how taking out their leader could have some disruptive effects over a limited area but what we're seeing here inquisitor is the rout of an entire army. Most of them weren't even present to see the warboss killed. How did they even know it had happened? Are the Orks on this planet using vox communications now?"

"I wish I could tell you general but I can't." Tobias replied.

"Perhaps we should try asking that Ork you brought with you." General Fortnam suggested and the inquisitor nodded in agreement.

"I think so. Perhaps Koroth can shed some light on this." he said.

"Bring the Ork in here." General Fortnam ordered and one of the Catachans on guard just inside the door of the command centre hurried from the room, returning a short time later in the company of a full squad of Catachans as well as Koroth Nightkilla.

"Ya wanted to see me?" the Ork said in oddly accented Gothic, the language of the Imperium.

"Yes Koroth, our forces are reporting that all of the Orks that had been gathering are continuing to fall back away from us. One group will have witnessed the death of their warboss but we don't yet know how the others even knew it had happened, let alone why it caused them to withdraw. General Fortnam's division is pursuing them but we'd like to be able to understand what it is that they are doing and why."

"Where is dey now?" Koroth said and Fortnam used the holographic display unit to show a map of the wider area around the base camp.

"The blue marks out where our forces are. The red where the Orks are." General Fortnam said and Koroth grunted.

"Red'll make 'em go faster." he commented before he added, "Is dey shootin' one another?"

"We've not had any reports of Ork versus Ork engagements since the Deathwatch slew the warboss. There was some factional fighting before they began to withdraw but since they then seem to be concentrating on getting away from our forces." Tobias told Koroth.

"Den dey wants to fight ya some place else." Koroth said, "Dey is movin' and you is goin' after dem. At least dat's what a Blood Axe would be doin'. Da other clan would just rush ya."

"We've seen a lot of Blood Axe Orks in leadership positions." General Fortnam said.

"But the warboss wore the colours of the Bad Moon clan." Inquisitor Tobias added, "Blood Axes were observed acting as unit commanders."

"Dat's not 'ow it normally works." Koroth said, "If da warboss was a Blood Axe den 'e might sure dat 'e 'ad loads of 'is lads about to make sure dat da others did wot dey was told, but not a Bad Moon."

"Well whatever plan the warboss had it failed with his death." Inquisitor Tobias said, "General Fortnam have your forces continue their pursuit but have them report any further strange behaviour from the Orks."

"Of course inquisitor. You are the expert after all." General Fortnam replied, the tone of his voice leaving the inquisitor uncertain of whether or not the Catachan officer had been insulting him.

The Orks being pursued by the XIV Armoured Regiment had fled over a bridge across a wide river that had stood since before the invasion. The waters of the river were not particularly fast flowing so the regiment's infantry units in their amphibious Chimeras would be able to cross the water directly but it was too deep to ford and so the heavier units would all need to use this bridge unless another crossing point could be identified. However, the difficulty in using the bridge was Colonel Vorris did not know whether or not it would

be able to take the weight of his tanks. Therefore, he had brought his regiment to a halt and was waiting beside his own tank with a mug of recaf in his hand while several of his tech priests examined the structure and if necessary performed the correct blessings to get the Catachans across it safely.

"Well?" Vorris asked as a pair of the red robed engineers approached him from the bridge.

"I assume that you are questioning whether the bridge will support your vehicles Colonel Vorris." one of the tech priests replied.

"Assume away." Vorris told them.

"In that case my response is 'yes'. The structure of the bridge remains sound and it will take the pressure of at least eight of your vehicles at once based on the units with maximum mass. The only concern is that the Omnissiah's blessing have been allowed to lapse. Engineer Lucas THX-one-one-three-eight is currently renewing these and once he is finished you may proceed."

"Very good." Vorris said, nodding and he tipped away what remained of his drink before climbing back into the turret of his tank. As soon as he was inside he put on his vox headset so that he could address his entire regiment, "This is Colonel Vorris. I have just been given the go ahead to begin our crossing of the river. The bridge is rated to take eight, I say again eight vehicles at once. Therefore, we will cross by squadrons with two squadrons crossing at once. To ease congestion I want all amphibious capable vehicles to swim the river instead. First Company will lead the way across the bridge, followed by my own command units. After that proceed in company order. Colonel Vorris out."

Engines that had been idling while the XIV Armoured Regiment waited for the clearance to cross the bridge now roared as the first of the Lemman Russ tanks rumbled towards the bridge and other vehicles moved into place for their crossing as well. The tech priest who had been performing the blessing of the bridge now rushed out of the path of the first tank to drive onto the bridge. This was the tank of the company commander and another six of the heavy tanks followed the first, the bridge was too narrow for more than one to cross side by side and so the tanks were forced to travel in a single column as they made their way across.

At the same time as the tanks were driving over the bridge the Chimera troop carriers and Salamander scout vehicles that belonged to the regiment drove straight into the river and they began to slowly swim across the water to the other side, the design of their hulls kept them afloat while the movement of their track produced enough of a pushing force to send them across. However, before the first of these amphibious vehicles was even half way across the river there was a massive explosion from the water that lifted a Chimera up out of the water and flipped it over before it came crashing back down, the large hole in the front of its hull letting water flood in and the vehicle began to sink.

"Throne! What was that?" Vorris demanded when he heard the blast but before anyone could respond there was another loud explosion and a second Chimera was holed and began to sink. This time some of the occupants obviously survived the explosion because they scrambled to get out of the doomed Chimera, leaping into the river and swimming for their lives.

"Mines!" a voice called out over the vox system, "The Orks have mined the river."

Colonel Vorris was about to order the amphibious vehicles currently swimming the river to retreat but before he could issue the instruction he heard the sound of more explosions as Orks in hidden positions on the far side of the river targeted the tanks crossing the bridge. The poor marksmanship of the greenskins meant that more of these missed their targets than hit them but the lead tanks were still struck multiple times. The tank at the very front of the column exploded in a massive ball of flame that sent shrapnel flying in all directions while the two tanks following it were reduced to burning wrecks that now blocked the bridge.

Sergeant Gant's Sentinels bounded through the jungle in pursuit of a group of several hundred Orks.

Although the aliens had begun with a significant head start over the Catachans that had been rapidly eroded and now they were so close that Gant could hear their shouts from between the trees.

"Stand by." she broadcast to her squadron, "Don't wait for an order from me, light those xenos up as soon as you see them."

"Sergeant my auspex is picking up heat signatures from up ahead. I've also got an increasing level of pollutants in the air. I think the Orks may have vehicle support." the pilot of the Sentinel currently on the squadron's right flank reported and Gant frowned as she checked her own auspex readouts.

"That's weird. If they had vehicles then why not?" she began.

"Dreadnought! Ork dreadnought dead ahead." the same pilot interrupted and this was following by the rattling sound of Ork heavy stubber fire. The power rounds struck the Sentinel on the right repeatedly. Designed only as lightweight scouting vehicles, the Sentinels lacked the thick armour necessary to protect them from this kind of fire but most of the rounds still failed to inflict any serious damage to the walker. However, when just one round flew into the cockpit it was enough to kill the pilot outright and the still moving walker suddenly came crashing to the ground right as a group of half a dozen crude walking machines that mounted not only a wide assortment of ranged weapons but also pairs of vicious looking mechanical claws lumbered into view. Acting on Gant's order to fire as soon as a target presented itself the pilot of the missile armed support Sentinel fired an anti-armour missile towards the advancing alien machines. This struck a dreadnought in the

centre of its barrel shaped torso and split it wide open. More significantly though the missile blasted the pilot to pieces and the dreadnought collapsed in a heap of twisted metal.

"Retreat. There are too many of them." Gant said, seeing that the large number of Ork dreadnoughts was a force too powerful for her three remaining machines, only one of which was equipped to deal with armoured vehicles like the dreadnoughts. However, even as she was turning her Sentinel around there was a flash of light as one of the Sentinels fired a powerful energy weapon. The blast from this struck Gant's Sentinel in one of its knee joints and the leg promptly gave way. Despite the safety cage surrounding the cockpit and the harness securing Gant in place she was still stunned when her Sentinel fell and struck the ground and for a few seconds she was unable to do anything while she recovered her senses. During this time the pilots of the Ork dreadnoughts opened fire again, bringing down the support sentinel while the final flamer armed vehicle evaded the gunfire long enough to be able to flee, its Catachan pilot easily able to outrun the lumbering Ork machines in the jungle.

As Gant recovered she saw that the Ork dreadnoughts were not concerned with checking for survivors among the Sentinel pilots and instead they continued to head after the lone surviving Sentinel, heading towards the rest of Fourth Company.

Company Colour Sergeant Stubbs rested on the company banner he carried while Trent checked the map on his dataslate. Fourth Company had been deployed to cover the XIX Regiment's flank as it advanced and so far the only resistance it had encountered had come from a few scattered units of Orks that had failed to keep up with the retreat of the main body of the aliens. Trent's concern with the terrain was that if the retreating Orks suddenly encountered something that they could not cross then they would be forced to turn and fight instead and he wanted to know if this was likely to happen.

"If this is right then we've bypassed the gully Second Platoon had to cross entirely so there's no danger of-" Trent began before there was the sound of lasguns being fired, "Throne, what now?" Trent added.

"Orks! Ork dreadnoughts!" someone shouted out right as the first of the alien walking machines burst through the undergrowth and unleashed a volley of fire at the Catachans.

"Feth! It's an ambush." Stubbs exclaimed as he ducked, still managing to hold the company banner vertically.

"Fourth Company stand to." Trent ordered as he drew his las pistol. The weapon was useless against a target like a dreadnought but he drew it anyway as a second of the alien machines appeared behind the first. Defiantly Trent fired his las pistol at the newly arrived dreadnought and he charged towards it, racing ahead of his command section even as they followed him. As expected each shot that he fired bounced harmlessly off the hull of the dreadnought but this was still enough to attract the pilot's attention and he turned his vehicle towards Trent. The Ork opened fire with the heavy stubber mounted on one of the dreadnought's four arms but the entire burst missed, passing through the gap between Trent and the rest of his command section as he pulled a melta bomb from his webbing. Diving at the dreadnought he held the powerful explosive out in front of him and heard the reassuring 'clunk' as it adhered to the machine's engine block before he twisted the handle to arm it and leapt away.

Inside the dreadnought the Ork pilot knew that something had just been attached to the side of his vehicle but being surgically implanted into it meant that he could not even throw open a hatch and see what it was. Therefore, the first idea he had of just how much trouble he was in was when the melta bomb exploded against the dreadnought's engine and the entire machine was blown apart.

Trent was still fairly close when this happened and the shock wave from the explosion lifted him off the ground at the same moment as he was struck by a large piece of a claw on the back of his head and when he fell back to the ground he lay still.

Smoke from the pyres of dead Orks filled the air as Second Platoon dragged more corpses together so that they could be disposed of before their bodies could break down and release the potentially millions of spores they each contained, any of which could develop into a new generation of greenskins. Undoubtedly some of these spores would already have been released but the smoke in the air would also help kill these off before they could settle in a more fertile location.

Most of the bodies could be dragged by a lone Catachan, even the larger Ork nobs were not so heavy that two people could not move one on their own. On the other hand the remains of the warboss in his mega armour were so heavy that it would take a number of the ogyrns to lift and carry him to the nearest pyre and Mayer was given the job of directing.

"Lift." he told the two ogyrns assigned to him for this purpose but the two abhumans just stared at him,

"Ogyrns, lift." Mayer repeated and to demonstrate he reached down to lift up one of the warboss' arms and pulled on it, at which point it promptly broke free of the rest of the body, "Feth!" Mayer exclaimed as he lost his balance and tumbled backwards, still holding the arm. Then when he looked up he noticed the lack of blood coming from the end of the severed arm and he frowned, "Sergeant Vance. I think you should take a look at this." he called out as he looked more closely at the body of the warboss, concentrating on the shoulder where the arm had been ripped from. Here, instead of a bloody stump he instead saw a bundle of

wires and narrow metal pistons.

"What is it Bomber?" Vance asked as he walked over to the warboss.

"Something about this body isn't right." Mayer told him, "Look, this arm just fell away and left that." and he pointed to the wires and pistons.

"Now that is weird." Vance agreed, crouching down and drawing his traditional Catachan blade so that he could use it to poke at the shoulder joint.

"Something wrong sergeant?" Wolf asked as she spotted what he was doing and headed over to him.

"Maybe." Vance replied, "Do you mind if I cut this thing's head open?"

"More than Rull managed with that hellfire round? Be my guest." Wolf said, nodding.

"Thanks." Vance replied and he suddenly thrust his blade up underneath the dead warboss' jaw and cut across. Then Wolf winced as Vance reached out to lift up the head and there was a tearing sound as he pulled it free, "Now that is definitely not what I would call normal." he commented.

"What isn't? Let me see platoon sergeant." Wolf said and Vance held out the severed head so that Wolf could see inside it.

"I know we're told that Orks are dumb but in my experience they still generally have an actual brain." Vance said as Wolf looked into the skull and saw only the back of the two fake eyes and the trailing bundle of cables coming out of them.

"Ugh." she said. Then she turned around and gave a shout, "Specialist Torrent. Over here." she called out.

"Yes captain?" Torrent said as she walked over, lowering the scarf she had been using to cover her nose and mouth to try and keep out the smell of the burning bodies.

"I need your medical opinion specialist." Wolf said.

"Fine. Show me what's swollen, bleeding or oozing with pus." Torrent responded.

"Not me. That thing." Wolf said, frowning as she pointed at the corpse of the warboss.

"I've got the head and Bomber has the other arm." Vance said, passing her the skull.

"So where's the brain?" Torrent asked, "I know a hell fire round doesn't leave much but there ought to be something."

"Exactly." Vance said.

"Let me get a closer look." Torrent said and Vance got up so that she could inspect the corpse more closely, shining a light into the holes in the armour where the missing arm and head had come from.

"Well?" Wolf asked.

"Well it's not just the brain that's missing. I don't see any internal organs at all. In fact I'd say that this was even less of an Ork than a servitor is a human being. Apart from the bits of flesh that had to show this thing is a robot. You need a cog boy, not a medicae."

"So this was a decoy?" Mayer suggested.

"Something to keep us focused on it while the real warboss was elsewhere." Wolf added.

"The Orks still ran when Rull put a bullet in this though." Torrent pointed out and Vance smiled.

"Yes they did. All of them, not just the ones that were here." he said.

"Do you have a point Platoon Sergeant Vance?" Wolf asked.

"The Orks jammed our communications, right?" Vance said and Wolf nodded.

"Yes. All our long range vox signals were blocked." she said.

"But that jamming stopped when this fake warboss was killed and from what we've been told all the other Ork units seemed to know immediately that it had happened. Supposing that jamming signal wasn't intended as jamming, it was just a signal so strong that it blocked out other nearby wireless signals." Vance said.

"A beacon to tell the other Orks that their fake warboss was working." Mayer said.

"Exactly bomber. Then when Rull shot it the signal was cut off and all the other Ork forces knew that it was time to pull back." Vance said.

"Knowing that we'd follow them, splitting our forces up and drawing them away from the landing zone." Wolf added.

"General the Twenty-Fifth is now reporting being engaged by large numbers of Orks that appeared to have been lying in wait for them as well." one of General Fortnam's aides told him.

"General!" one of the command centre's vox operators called out, "I have a message from Admiral Tashimoto. His squadron has detected a number of launches from airfields that had been believed to be out of commission."

"Believed to be out of commission? Why?" General Fortnam asked.

"No aircraft were sighted at them earlier but now it appears that the Orks were using underground hangars to conceal them." the vox operator said.

"Cunnin'." Koroth commented and General Fortnam slammed his fist down on the table in front of him.

"Orks that can lie in wait for our troops and hide their aircraft in underground hangars? Where are the savage brutes we were supposed to be fighting inquisitor?" he demanded.

"General all of this is most peculiar." Inquisitor Tobias responded, "I assure you that I am as surprised as you are."

"Your assurances mean nothing to me inquisitor." General Fortnam said.

"General, auspexes have picked up the enemy aircraft." another of the command staff announced.

"Where are they heading?" the general asked.

"Here general. They're heading straight for us."

"General perhaps you should recall your troops." Inquisitor Tobias suggested and General Fortnam glared at him.

"Get out." he hissed, "Get out now. I need no advice on how to conduct a war from an outsider. Your marines will still follow your orders I expect so go and tell them what to do."

"General I-" Tobias began before he noticed the pair of shotgun armed Catachans approaching him from behind, "Very well general. I shall leave you to proceed how you wish." and he turned around and walked calmly out of the command centre, heading all the way outside and then making his way to where the Deathwatch's Corvus Blackstar was landed, "Techmarine Desus." he called out and the red armoured techmarine appeared in one of the craft's hatchways.

"Yes inquisitor?" he asked.

"Does this craft have sufficient fuel reserves to reach orbit?" Inquisitor Tobias asked.

"Yes inquisitor. But the Orks-" Desus began.

"Never mind the Orks for now. Return me to the lord marshal. Our strategy here needs to be reassessed." Inquisitor Tobias told him.

"Yes inquisitor." the techmarine replied before he went back inside the Corvus Blackstar and made his way to the cockpit. Meanwhile Inquisitor Tobias sat down in one of the seats in the transport compartment and had just finished fastening himself in when the craft rose up off the ground and headed skywards.

The aircraft heading toward the Catachan base camp were of a mixed variety. Most of them were fixed wing jets varying in size from fighters up to larger bombers and heavy ground attack craft but there were also a large number of single seat attack gyrocopters and also a number of twin rotor troop carrying helicopters transporting squads of Blood Axe commandos.

The fast jets flew ahead of the other aircraft, overwhelming the air cover provided to the Catachans by the Imperial Navy and shooting the human aircraft out of the sky. Some of the Ork aircraft carried out opportunistic strafing runs against the Catachans on the ground but these were limited in scope and the Catachan troops were able to drive them off with minimal loses on both sides. Meanwhile the Ork transport helicopter flew over the Catachan regiments before coming to a halt in the area between them and their base camp, at which point the troops they carried deployed from their transports to not only cut the Catachans off from their base camp but also launch attacks at them, supported by the lighter gyrocopters, from the one direction that they had considered safe.

This left just the heaviest of the Ork aircraft and these continued on their heading for the Catachan base camp. Some of them carried stand off missiles and arrays of heavy guns that opened fire as soon as they came within range. In response the Catachan anti-aircraft defences returned fire with quad auto cannon arrays and specialist missiles but they were heavily out gunned and were unable to prevent the Orks from unleashing the next wave of their attack.

Not all of the bombers were laden with conventional munitions though and when some opened their bomb bay doors it was instead to permit the squads of Orks wearing crude rocket packs to leap out of them. Inevitably some of the rocket packs failed and the Orks wearing those plummeted to their deaths on the ground hundreds of metres below. However, the vast majority of the rocket packs functioned and the Ork stormboys dropped out of the sky to land all around the Catachan base camp. Not expecting such an attack

the Catachans were ill prepared to face it and the limited number of troops available were still rushing to arm themselves and get to the prepared defensive positions as the stormboys were bursting through their perimeter, shooting and hurling grenades at anything that moved. A number of the Orks were armed with larger mines designed to be fixed to vehicles before exploding and these targeted the three Baneblade tanks that were still parked close to the centre of the camp. Most of this group of Orks were shot out of the sky before they made it as far as the Baneblades but enough of them landed close enough to be able to attach their anti-tank mines before being killed that all three of the Baneblades were turned into burning wrecks before their crews could reach them.

"Inquisitor Tobias is gone. He has taken the Corvus Blackstar and is returning to space." Captain Aetus announced as he entered the command centre, "My squad is fighting on but the Orks are too many."

"I know." General Fortnam replied as he checked his las pistol, "I've given the order to evacuate."

"Evacuate? To where?" Aetus asked.

"Out there. The jungle." the general answered, "The jungle is our home Captain Aetus. Any jungle. Compared to Catachan itself, surviving here will be easy. My orders are for all our troops to scatter, evade the Orks for as long as possible and await further instructions. If the lord marshal decides to land another force then we will attempt to link up with that. If not then we will fight the Orks in whatever way we can."

"It is not for marines to run away." Aetus said.

"Have it your way captain. Make your last stand here if that is what you want but don't get in the way of me or any of my people." General Fortnam said before a massive explosion rocked the command centre and all the lights went out.

"What's happening?" Molla asked as Second Platoon gathered around Wolf's command section while she listened to transmissions on the vox.

"It's hard to tell." she said, "The Orks are everywhere it seems. They were just lying in wait for us to leave our base camp."

"They got us to split our forces." Grey commented.

"And now they've cut us off from one another." Wolf said, nodding in agreement, "Divisional command has just given a general retreat order."

"Retreat? To where?" Vance said and Wolf shrugged.

"Anywhere." she said, "Split up and go to ground."

"So what are your orders captain?" Molla said and Wolf looked around.

"We do just that." she said, "If more Orks are on the way then we need somewhere that we can keep out sight for a while until we can find a good defensible spot. Then we'll do as the general said and wait."

In a cave set into the side of a high cliff that overlooked a wide area of jungle a massive Ork clad in camouflaged clothing grinned as he saw plumes of smoke rising from multiple places in the distance. The warboss had planned every detail of his campaign carefully and in the face of fierce opposition from Orks from more conservatively minded clans than his own Blood Axes. Now though it appeared that he had his victory to prove himself right. Of course he would not be able to rub this fact in the faces of many of his opponents given the brutal ways in which he had killed them to enforce his authority over other opponents but he had been proven right anyway. The fighting was too far away for the sounds of explosions to carry this far but every new flash of light or puff of smoke produced loud roars of celebration from the Ork nobbs of various clans that were gathered around their warboss.

"Boss we just got a messenger back from da fightin'." an Ork said as it rushed up to the warboss.

"So don't make me wait. Wot did 'e say?" the warboss asked without taking his eyes off the view outside the cave.

"'E says dat da gits is all runnin' away boss. Dey 'as 'ad enough." the other Ork replied.

"Ya did it boss. Da gits did everythin' dat ya said dey would do." one of the gathered Ork nobbs said and it was then that the warboss turned to face his subordinates, focusing on those in the colours of clans other than his own Blood Axes.

"Ya 'ear dat?" he said, "Da gits did everythin' dat I said dey would. So I was right and all of ya wot wanted to go chargin' in as soon as dey landed was wrong."

"Maybe, but ya aint done yet." a voice said from the back of the cave and the other Orks present all turned to where a single Ork in ragged clothing sat leaning on a copper staff that he gripped tightly.

"If I aint doen yet, den wot's left? Ya readin's told me where da gits would land and wot dey would do. So wot does dey say now?" the warboss said and the ragged Ork reached under its cloak and produced a small ebony coloured box that it set down on the floor of the cave and opened to reveal a deck of cards. These were no ordinary cards, however and they were not created by Orks. The Emperor's Tarot consisted of seventy eight psycho-reactive cards that were believed by humans to tap into the mind of the Emperor himself, enabling a properly trained user to divine the future.

Now the Ork weirdboy took the cards from their box and shuffled them, laying out several in a row on the floor before staring at them intently.

“So wot does ya see weirdo?” an Ork nob demanded.

“Da fightin' aint done.” the weirdboy said, “Dare's more comin'.”

“Da gits still in space. More of 'em is goin' to land.” another Ork nob said but the weirdboy shook his head.

“No, dat ain't wot I is sayin'. Da fightin' 'ere on da ground aint done yet. Da gits aint finished.” he said.

“So tell me wot ya sees weirdo.” the warboss said, advancing on the weirdboy who in return looked up and smiled at the massive Ork.

“Dey is comin' for ya boss.” he said.

“Who is? Who do ya see?” the warboss demanded.

“I sees a traitor,” the weirdboy replied, “I sees an assassin and I sees a wolf.”