



CATACHAN ONE NINE MARK FOUR MARK TWO

REUNION

BY STEPHEN J DUTTON



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4.1 : REUNION

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Returning to Imperial space the soldiers of the Catachan XIX Regiment find themselves pitted against one of humanity's oldest foes. In addition Lieutenant Emilia Wolf finds herself reunited with some old acquaintances, not all of whom are as friendly as she remembered them to be.

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1 .

By the time that the Catachan XIX Regiment arrived in orbit around the world of Valus the rest of their division, the Catachan VII Division, had already been there for five weeks. The travel of the XIX's transport had been disrupted by a warp storm that threw the ship off course and left the regiment on an unexplored world where their arrival had triggered the awakening of an ancient Necron tomb. Fortunately it had been anticipated that after their last official engagement the VII Division would require reinforcements and so amongst the collection of destroyer, frigates, cruisers and troop transports orbiting Valus there was a ship that was bringing fresh troops direct from Catachan that could be used to replace the losses suffered by the XIX Regiment during its detour.

Along with all of the other platoon and company commanders of the XIX Regiment Lieutenant Emilia Wolf, commanding officer of the Fourth Company's Second Platoon had been called into a briefing as soon as the regiment disembarked from its transport. This was intended to bring the officers up to date with the reason for their deployment and the current status of events on Valus. The VII Division was just one of several that had been deployed along with a significant naval task force when the planet's own defence forces had detected a space hulk entering the system and slowly making its way towards Valus. Space hulks were massive collections of derelict craft that had been drawn together during their time spent adrift in the warp. To some these craft were a source of great wealth, any of them could contain a ship packed with ancient technology that had long been lost to mankind and so the first reaction of the Valus defence ships was to attempt to put a boarding party aboard the hulk. However, as the shuttle approached it was revealed that the space hulk was not as lifeless as it had first appeared.

Orks were well known for making use of space hulks to travel between systems, not caring where its random drift carried it to just as long as there was the opportunity for fighting when they arrived and a single hulk could carry millions of the beasts. So when dozens of crudely built Ork attack craft had launched from the hulk and destroyed the shuttle, the system defence ship withdrew back to Valus as quickly as it could to warn the planetary population of the impending threat. The Imperium had reacted by first deploying a naval task force. Rather than attempt to launch an attack on the hulk directly that could have easily resulted in the loss of every ship under his command, the admiral in charge opted to hold his forces back and engage the waves of smaller ships launched from within the hulk. Every wave launched was ultimately destroyed but each attack also resulted in the loss of one or two navy vessels and eventually some of the attacking Ork craft were able to penetrate the navy's perimeter around Valus and land on the planet itself.

This was what had prompted the deployment of the Imperial Guard as well as the Imperial Navy. Valus was considered a death world and beyond the walls of its fortified cities were thick jungles filled with predators of both plant and animal varieties. The Orks landed amongst this and although it was known that many would be claimed by the jungle many more would not and the planetary defence force lacked the capability to sweep the entire jungle and hunt them down. The first divisions of Imperial Guard to have arrived had no more success in the jungle than the local forces had. Though they were more numerous, they lacked the skills to handle the extreme conditions of the jungle and had suffered significant losses without ever seeing an Ork.

That was when the Catachan VII Division had been deployed.

Catachan was also a jungle covered death world and was regarded as the most dangerous of its kind in the galaxy. Conditions there were so harsh that more than half of the human population died before reaching adulthood and those that survived emerged as the toughest jungle fighters in the Imperium and it was known that their skills would prove to be invaluable in the fight ahead.

Wolf often felt out of place in briefings such as this. She was not a native of Catachan, instead she had become separated from her regiment and assigned to the XIX when it proved impossible for her to return. This had proven a difficult transition. Given their upbringing on a world where self reliance was a survival trait, Catachans could be hostile to those they called 'outsiders' and her assignment as the commander of an infantry platoon had been met with suspicion from many and outright hostility from others. The officers she was now surrounded by did not have any hostility towards her, after all she could not give orders to any of them, but at the same time none of them would go out of their way to explain things to her that was considered a basic part of a Catachan's upbringing. If Wolf needed to know something then she needed to know to ask and to do so in a way that made sure she did not look as if she considered herself superior to whoever she asked the question of.

Though briefings of this sort had the potential to drag on for a considerable number of hours this one was over in a relatively short space of time. Given that the Orks that had managed to reach Valus had yet to be met in battle there was no intelligence regarding their strength or weapons. This meant that the only thing to be discussed was the role to be played by the XIX Regiment. The other regiments of the VII Division were

being deployed in their entirety as large fighting formations that would engage the Orks as soon as they were found. But given the losses suffered by the XIX Regiment to the Necrons it would instead be allowed time to rebuild using the reinforcements fresh from Catachan. This was not to say that the entire regiment would be left out of the fighting however, instead small detachments of Catachans would be assigned to the other Imperial Guard divisions on Valus to act as advisers, instructors, and scouts as they continued to try and search the jungle for the Orks. As soon as this was announced it drew groans from the gathered Catachans who knew that it meant being placed under the authority of outsiders and even Wolf winced at the thought. She knew that her authority even over the troops of Second Platoon was fragile enough without having to ensure that they followed orders given to her by the officer of a non-Catachan regiment.

"I know this will tough." Colonel Shryke, the XIX Regiment's commanding officer announced, standing up beside the officer sent from the VII Division's headquarters to give the briefing, "But just remember that without our help these other regiments will continue to lose men for no good reason. Every life we save is one more guardsman to fight the greenskins." Greenskins was a common slang term used for not only the Orks but also the smaller slave castes known as Gretchin and Snotlings as well as the range of animals known collectively as squigs that inevitably accompanied any Ork invasion.

"If an outsider ignores what we tell them and someone gets killed because of it can we shoot them?" a voice with the typical Catachan accent asked from near the back of the briefing room.

"No." the officer from divisional HQ responded sternly, "General Fortnam is no happier about this than you are but he knows that the key to defeating the Orks is for us to be able to use every regiment, whether Catachan or not, against them. Now if there are no further questions this briefing is over. You can return to your units and let them know what is expected of them."

The meeting broke up with grumbling from the Catachans to one another and numerous comments about useless outsiders getting in the way of real jungle fighters. As someone considered an outsider herself, Wolf did her best to avoid any eye contact with any officer expressing such sentiment as she left and headed directly for her tent.

As an officer Wolf was entitled to a tent of her own and as soon as Wolf reached it she sat alone on her bed and began to look at the information stored on her dataslate that she had been given regarding the flora and fauna of Valus. The same information had been given to all of the Catachan officers but Wolf knew that they would regard it as worthy of only a cursory inspection. Their upbringing meant that they instinctively knew the signs to look for that warned of danger.

Yawning, Wolf decided that she had studied enough for one night and put the dataslate down before getting to her feet and starting to undress for bed. But she had just removed her short sleeved top when all of a sudden a head poked around her tent flap and smiled.

"Evening lieutenant." the man said.

"Sergeant Vance!" Wolf exclaimed at her platoon sergeant as she held her top across her chest, "What are you doing here?"

"Hang on lieutenant." Vance replied and his head vanished back outside the tent, "It's okay lads." she heard him say, "She's here." and then Vance stepped into the tent accompanied by Sergeant Grey of Second Platoon's Second Squad and also Sergeant Quinn of its veteran squad. All three men carried with them lightweight folding beds, a blanket and a pillow and as Wolf watched they set down the beds and unfolded them.

"What are you doing?" Wolf demanded again.

"About to go to bed lieutenant." Grey replied.

"But I was getting undressed." Wolf said.

"Oh don't let us interrupt you." Vance said.

"Yeah, you go ahead." Quinn added.

"It's not like you've never been naked in front of us all before." Grey then commented as he lay down on his bed and pulled his blanket over him.

"But why are you all in here?" Wolf asked, "What about your tent?"

"Slight problem there lieutenant." Quinn told her, "Molla."

Molla was First Squad's sergeant and apart from Sergeant Khor, the ogryn who led the squad of bulky abhumans attached to Second Platoon was the only sergeant missing.

"It looks like he met someone in town." Vance added, "A woman."

Wolf groaned.

"I knew it was a mistake letting you guys go out on the town on our first night." she said.

"Too late to worry about that now lieutenant." Grey said, "But if you don't want to share with us then you could always try heading over to our tent. I'm sure Molla wouldn't letting you join in-"

"No." Wolf interrupted, scowling at the thought of what Grey was suggesting.

"Thought not." he said, "Now would you mind turning out the light so we can get some sleep?"

Wolf frowned and pulled her top back on, deciding that she would sleep fully dressed tonight. Then she picked her way between the folding beds to the light switch beside the tent flap and flicked it, turning off the

light. However, as she then tried to make her way back to her bed she tripped on one of the folding ones and squealed as she fell, landing face down on top of Quinn.

"You know lieutenant," he said to her, the smile on his face just about visible in the darkness, "just because you're my superior doesn't give you the right to expect me to share a bed with you."

"And he has witnesses." Grey added.

"Oh shut the feth up the lot of you." Wolf muttered as she picked herself up and felt her way back to her own bed where she lay down and closed her eyes, trying to ignore the presence of the three men close by.

2.

Second Platoon met for breakfast the next morning in one of the large mess tents. Each company of the XIX regiment had its own and the troops sat at tables according to their squads. The only exception to this was that all squad leaders ate at the command section's table with Wolf and the ogryns were not present. The poor hygiene of ogryns could be a distraction even while not trying to eat. Molla was not present at the table with Wolf and the other squad leaders when the only other squad leader missing hurried over and set down a tray.

"Have you heard about Molla?" he asked, looking around.

"Of course we know Bomber." Quinn replied.

"Yeah, this lot turned up at my tent when they couldn't get into their own." Wolf added, pointing an eating utensil at each of the sergeants in turn.

"So Molla wasn't the only one to get some action last night then?" Guardswoman Torrent, Second Platoon's medic, commented with a smile.

"She was all over Quinn the moment the lights went out." Grey said with a smile and Wolf scowled.

"I mean about who he spent the night with." Mayer said.

"Some local woman probably." Vance said.

"Just as long as he doesn't present me with a receipt and try to claim however much he paid her back on expenses." Wolf added but Mayer shook his head.

"I spoke with a couple of guys from First Company." he said, "They had gate duty last night and they said that they signed Molla back into camp along with the woman who was with him. She's an officer."

The room went quiet as the assembled Catachans all stopped eating at the same time and looked towards Mayer.

"You don't mean one of ours?" Wolf asked.

"Not Anna Asswipe?" Quinn added. The officer he was referring to was Fourth Company's quartermaster and commanded its reserve platoon. The combination of Lieutenant Anna Selena's role in supplying basics such as toilet paper and also her diminutive stature had led to the twin nicknames of Anna Asswipe and Short Arse Selena, neither of which she appreciated.

"No." Mayer said, "Not even a Catachan."

"That sly old Catachan Devil, he's done it again." Grey said and Wolf groaned. Growing up on Catachan, Molla had been the son of a jungle guide and he often boasted of how when his father took visitors from off world into the jungle he would accompany them with the sole objective of seducing their daughters, something he proved to be very successful at. Now that he was in the Imperial Guard he claimed that he could seduce almost any woman within a handful of minutes but this was the first time since Wolf had taken over as platoon commander that he had demonstrated the skill.

"So who then?" Vance said.

"The Lyrerian Thirty-Second." Mayer replied and around the table most eyes turned towards Wolf.

"What?" Torrent asked. She had joined the platoon later than Wolf and was not familiar with her previous assignment.

"That's your old lot isn't it lieutenant?" Quinn said and Wolf nodded.

"I had no idea they were here." she replied.

"So will you be transferring back then?" Grey asked.

"Shush." Vance said, holding up a hand towards Grey while still looking at Wolf, "So do you have any idea who it might be?"

"There were a lot of officers in the regiment." she replied, "And there are bound to have been some new recruits since I left."

"So it could be someone new for you to meet when you go back to them." Torrent commented.

"I bet you want know who it is though don't you?" Quinn said and Wolf pressed her lips together tightly and averted her gaze as the other around the table continued to stare at her.

"Oh alright, yes I do." she exclaimed suddenly and Quinn and Vance looked at one another.

"Time for a snap inspection?" Quinn said.

"It's been a while since we last had one." Vance agreed and both looked back at Wolf, "What do you say lieutenant?" he added.

"Let's go." she said and she leapt up from her seat.

Accompanied by everyone else who had been at the table, Wolf hurried from the mess tent to the sergeants' tent. As expected there was an upturned Catachan knife stuck into the ground just outside the tent flap as a sign that whoever was inside was occupied in an intimate manner and did not want to be disturbed. It was

upon seeing that the previous evening that the other sergeants had headed for Wolf's tent instead. In the daylight it was also possible to see that the knife was not the only thing outside the tent. A small, bright red garment that was obviously for a woman to wear as a top was lay on the ground right next to the side of the tent.

"Standard issue for the Lyrerians?" Grey asked as he bent down to pick it up and handed it to Wolf.

"No." she replied, taking the garment from him, "It's obviously civilian clothing worn by someone while off-" and then she stopped as her eyes widened and her jaw dropped.

"Something wrong lieutenant?" Quinn asked.

"This is mine!" Wolf hissed, "Or rather it was." and she held out the garment, twisting it so that the tag on the inside that was marked with laundry instructions could be seen. There someone had taken a marker and written on 'WOLF'.

"They'd probably have written you off as dead." Mayer pointed out.

"Yes, but they could at least have changed the name in it." Wolf replied as she folded the top and then stuffed it under the drab green one she was wearing.

"You aren't giving that top back then lieutenant?" Torrent asked.

"What top?" Wolf responded. Then she looked at Vance, "Platoon Sergeant Vance. Announce me."

"Yes lieutenant." Vance replied before he pulled back the tent flap and stepped into the tent.

"Officer present!" he said loud enough to wake the sleeping Molla, "Everyone to attention."

Startled, Molla rolled out of his bed and picked himself up just as Wolf entered the tent while the others watched through the flap that Quinn held open.

"At ease Sergeant Molla." Wolf said, "And perhaps you ought to put some trousers on."

"Yes lieutenant." Molla replied as he turned around and bent over to pick up his trousers, at which point both Vance and Wolf suddenly looked aside.

"It would seem that there is someone else present lieutenant." Vance said and Wolf looked towards Molla's bed where there was a large lump under the covers, "Stand at attention!" he then yelled.

"I'm an officer." a muffled voice replied, "My ID is in my bag."

"Platoon Sergeant Vance told you to stand at attention." Wolf added sternly, "Then we'll sort out who you are."

"Emilia?" the voice said and Wolf froze.

"Oh no." she said, "It can't be." and then she stepped towards the bed and pulled down the sheet to reveal a head with hair a similar colour to her own and a face with similar features, "Elisa." she added.

"Molla what the feth have you done?" Vance asked, looking at Molla.

"Vance," he replied, "meet Lieutenant Elisa Wolf of the Lyrerian Thirty Second Regiment."

"You slept with my sister?" Wolf exclaimed.

"Perhaps we ought to leave." Vance suggested.

"Yes, perhaps you should." Wolf replied, "All of you." and the Catachans hurriedly departed from around the tent. But as they left Wolf heard Grey speak to Molla.

"Tari," he said using Molla's first name, "I want details. Leave nothing out."

Then Wolf looked at her sister who was now sat up in bed with the blankets wrapped around her.

"Emilia, it's so good to-" she began.

"Elisa do you have any idea how this makes me look?" Wolf snapped before her sister could finished and Elisa looked visibly shocked.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I have to lead these men into battle. I have enough trouble being taken seriously by them as it is without you sleeping them. And Molla of all of them. You know he's not really interested in you? Why did you do it?"

"I'm not sure. But if you'd just been there you'd have done the same thing. He's-"

"Oh don't start about he's got a way with women. I already know that. But what are you doing here?"

"Our regiment was sent to fight the Orks." Elisa replied, "Same as you I suppose." then she frowned, "But did you say that you're a combat officer? Emilia, you were in administration with me."

"Well there weren't any administrative jobs available when I got left behind and they stuck me in charge of a platoon of Catachans. Do you know what they're like? To them we're all just outsiders interfering in their business. Some of them would happily see me dead." Wolf said. Then she sighed and sat down on another bed, "I'm sorry." she said, "It's been what, two years? How have you been?"

Elisa smiled.

"I'm up for promotion. I could be made a captain."

"Not if you keep sleeping with sergeants." Wolf commented, "Sorry. That's the Catachans rubbing off on me. But what about everyone else? What happened to Torian?"

"Oh he's already a captain. He has his own infantry company now." Elisa answered, "But, err-"

"But what?"

"Well, he's with Janine now. Janine Kost."

"Kost?" Wolf exclaimed, "I always knew she had her eyes on him."

"Well about a week after you were left behind-"

"A week?" Wolf interrupted, "He only waited a week before he moved on? I can't believe it."

"But what about you Emilia? What's happened since you joined these Catachans?"

Wolf frowned.

"I've been shot at, had my ribs broken by a traitor space marine, almost been eaten alive by aliens and had to deal with the effects of a mad tech priest waking up a robot army that had been dormant for millions of years." Wolf told her, "Oh and my own side has seen to it that I've drunk urine, been coated in crap, glued into a straitjacket that I now own apparently and also stripped naked and left bound and gagged in a tent with a squad of ogyrns."

Elisa just stared at her.

"Did they do that as well?" she asked, pointing to Wolf's arm where a large skull had been tattooed.

"Oh yeah, apparently Catachans don't do medals. This is their version of the Honorifica Imperialis." Wolf replied.

"You're kidding me."

"No. I got it for going back into a xenos building to trigger a fusion bomb."

Elisa then noticed the time shown on a small clock beside one of the beds.

"I need to go." she said and with the blanket still wrapped around her she began to pick up her clothing, "The transport back to camp leaves soon. Where's my top?" she added.

"I don't know." Wolf replied with a smile, "But I can lend you a jacket that fastens up the back good and tight."

3.

As Wolf was walking back from seeing her sister off at the gates of the Catachan XIX Regiment's camp she was approached by a man she recognised as Company Sergeant Stubbs, the most senior NCO in Fourth Company.

"Lieutenant." he called out to her.

"Yes sergeant?" she replied.

"Major Trent wants you in his tent." Stubbs told her.

"Deployment orders?" Wolf asked.

"I think so. He got back from a meeting with the colonel about an hour ago."

"Okay let's get this over with then." Wolf replied and as Stubbs turned back towards Major Trent's command post she followed him.

Major Trent was not alone in his office when Wolf was shown in. Instead there was a second man in a military uniform that possessed the dark skin tones that were predominant among the inhabitants of Valus.

"Ah lieutenant, come in." Trent said, "Meet Captain Jonas Onell of the Valus planetary defence force. Captain this is Lieutenant Emilia Wolf. She commands my Second Platoon."

"Honoured to meet you captain." Wolf said, snapping to attention and saluting.

"You're not Catachan." he commented, returning her salute, "Your accent doesn't match. Nor might I say does your size." and he glanced at Stubbs and Trent, both of whom towered over Wolf who was barely one and a half metres tall.

"No sir." Wolf replied, "I was with the Lyrerian Thirty-Second but I got separated from them and ended up with the Catachan Nineteenth."

"That's why I chose her for this assignment." Trent added, "She's got the experience you need."

"Excuse me sir, but what experience?" Wolf asked.

"Lieutenant your platoon will be joining a company from the Lyrerian Thirty-Second." Captain Onell replied, "They will undertake a deep patrol into the jungle to try and root out the Orks. Thanks to orbital surveys we know where their ships came down but so far no-one's been able to penetrate that deep into the jungle. It is your job to make sure that they are able to make it through without seeing the kind of losses that other units have suffered on this kind of mission."

"So we're to make sure that they don't get eaten or try to pick and eat any poisonous plants?" Wolf said, "And you think that I'm the best choice because I used to be a part of that regiment?"

"Precisely." Trent answered.

"And what are our orders if we encounter the Orks sir?" Wolf said.

"That will be up to the Lyrerian company commander." Onell replied, "He'll have authority in this. Your platoon is just there to support him."

"Think you can handle that lieutenant?" Trent asked.

"I'm not sure." Wolf replied and Onell looked at Trent.

"You told me she could do the job." he said.

"She can." Trent replied, "Can't you lieutenant?"

"I think so sir. But my men aren't going to like it."

"Look Wolf this is an easy job." Trent said, "You escort a bunch of people you already know how to deal with into the jungle and then escort them back. I have to go to their regimental headquarters to try and get their senior staff to understand deathworld jungle warfare. Now do you think your platoon can handle guiding one company through the jungle?"

"Yes sir." Wolf said, "I can manage that."

"Good. Now go and brief your platoon. Captain Onell is arranging transport to take you to their staging area." Trent told Wolf.

"Yes sir." she said again and she saluted him again before turning around and exited the tent. Then after she had gone a few metres she heard a voice call out from behind her.

"Lieutenant!" Onell shouted and she turned around to see the captain following her.

"Yes captain?" she asked.

"Can I ask you something in confidence?" he said quietly as he walked up to her.

"Of course sir."

"Good. Are the Catachans as good as people say? I've heard tales but this is first time any have come to Valus."

"Yes sir." Wolf replied, "They can handle anything that a jungle can throw at them."

"Good." Onell said and he looked around at the bustling camp, "You know during the Age of Strife when the worlds in this sector were falling into barbarism and depravity Valus was a beacon of light. We were a centre

of civilisation, art and philosophy. The jungles of this world have always been deadly but we built walled cities and separated ourselves from them. Only a small number of us know how to live out there beyond the walls and now because of that all of our civilisation could be destroyed by these Orks. You Catachans could be our last hope." then after a moment's pause he added, "Sorry, I forgot you're not one of them."

"Oh don't worry sir." Wolf replied, "They never let me forget. They may be the best but they know it and that just means that they know everyone else isn't as good as they are. Rank means next to nothing to them. If you're not one of them you're worth less than the lowest guardsman among them."

"Am I to take it that this means you'll be asking to transfer back to you old regiment lieutenant?"

"May I speak freely sir?"

"Of course."

"That's the second time that has been suggested to me today and frankly I'd rather not waste my time worrying about it right now. Not while I've got a job to do."

"I didn't mean to offend you." Onell said.

"You didn't."

"Good. In that case I'll go and sort out some transport. Hopefully you'll be with Captain Larn's company by noon."

Wolf's eyes widened.

"Something wrong lieutenant?"

"That wouldn't be Torian Larn would it?" Wolf asked.

"That's right. Why, do you know him?" Onell said.

"You could say that sir." Wolf replied, "We used to date."

When Wolf returned to her own tent she found that most of the platoon, including all of its senior staff and a squad of seven bulky ogyrns that stood taller about a metre taller than the Catachans were waiting outside to be briefed.

"I hear we're babysitting some of your lot." Grey commented as she approached.

"And where exactly did you here that sergeant?" Wolf replied.

"Word travels fast." Vance commented.

"Especially when someone has either a younger sister or daughter that works in our regimental headquarters yes?" Wolf asked and she looked at Quinn and Molla.

"Pretty much." Quinn replied.

"Well yes, we are about to escort a company from the Lyrerian Thirty-Second into the jungle if that's what you mean. Now transport is being arranged as we speak so as soon as I gather my kit we can get going.

Someone needs to go and fetch the others." Wolf said.

"You're kit's already been prepared for you lieutenant." Torrent said, "We thought it would save time. It just needs packing."

"Thank you specialist." Wolf replied, suspicious of how helpful this was. Catachan officers were expected to work just as hard as their troops and although officers from many other worlds would use an enlisted man to carry out menial duties for them such as preparing kit, such a thing was unheard of among Catachans. But when Wolf stepped inside her tent she found out that her kit had indeed been laid out for her on her bed along with her backpack to carry it all in. Carefully she packed her equipment for the mission ahead, still uncertain as to why any of her troops would have done this for her.

She found the answer when she picked up her flak jacket and underneath it she found a standard Imperial Guard form and pen. The form was one she knew about from her days as an administrative officer in the Lyrerian Thirty-Second Regiment though she had never seen it used.

It was a request for a transfer between regiments.

Someone had gone through the form and filled it in carefully using her details. The entries were written in block capitals in a manner that meant Wolf could not identify exactly who had done it from the handwriting but she had a good idea of the most likely suspects. The destination regiment was listed as the Lyrerian Thirty-Second and all that was missing was her signature in the box at the bottom of the form. The box labelled 'Reason for request for transfer' had been filled in simply with 'GOING BACK WHERE I CAME FROM.'

Wolf just stared at the form. She knew that some of her platoon still felt that she did not belong with them but she had not thought that they were so eager to get rid of her.

"Ready yet lieutenant?" Vance called out from outside the tent.

"Coming." Wolf replied, stuffing the form into her pack with the rest of her equipment and then hurrying outside to join her platoon.

4.

The trucks supplied by the planetary defence force carried Second Platoon out of the city the Catachan VII Division was based in and towards one known as Fort Resolute where the Lyrerian XXXII Regiment was based and deposited them just outside one of the gates in an area that had been cleared of trees to provide the weapons built into the city walls with a clear field of fire should any of the planet's more dangerous animals try to approach. There was no sign of the Lyrerian company when they arrived and so Wolf allowed the platoon to relax while they waited.

"Is this what cities on Catachan look like?" she asked Vance, looking up at the walls.

"Not really," he replied, shaking his head, "This has been here centuries. Nothing lasts that long on Catachan, we're always rebuilding and moving on as the jungle finds a way around whatever defences we can build."

"Troops approaching!" someone called out and Wolf looked at the gateway to see a force of Imperial Guardsmen in the familiar uniform of the Lyrerian XXIII Regiment. At the head of this was the company's command squad led by Captain Torian Larn and beside him strode a commissar, one of the political officers who were responsible for ensuring that orders and regulations were followed to the letter and had the authority to carry out summary executions if they felt that they had been violated. Commissars were generally hated by the men over whom they held the power of life and death, even in non-Catachan regiments. Few others though would dare to arrange for their commissars to suffer 'accidents' that would keep them away from the front lines or even kill them if that was felt necessary. This particular commissar was tall and still fairly muscular despite looking as if he had served the Emperor for several decades.

"Captain Larn," Wolf said, walking towards his company command section, "It's good to see you again. Congratulations on your promotion." Wolf was not sure how she really felt about seeing Captain Larn again now that she knew how quickly he had moved onto another woman after she had been separated but she did not intend to raise the issue with him.

"Thank you lieutenant," he replied formally, "I understand that your orders are to assist my men in getting through the jungle and rooting out the greenskins."

"Yes sir," Wolf said and she looked towards the jungle and pointed towards it, "I suggest that my First Squad under Sergeant Molla and veterans under Sergeant Quinn move on ahead. They can mark."

"Have your platoon fall in behind my company lieutenant," Larn interrupted.

"Excuse me?" Wolf said, "If you'd just--"

"Your men are to assist mine. If we need your assistance then I'll summon you to give it," Larn said, "Now fall in."

"But Torian--" Wolf protested.

"Lieutenant Wolf you have been given an order," the commissar said suddenly, "Now follow it or I will find one of your subordinates who will."

Good luck with that, Wolf thought to herself.

"Yes sir," she said instead and she turned to head back to her command section.

"One moment lieutenant," the commissar called out to her and she stopped and turned back around again.

"Yes commissar?"

"Aren't you a man short?" the commissar asked, looking at each of Second Platoon's squads in turn,

"According to the data supplied to me your platoon also has a single sniper assigned to it for some reason. Where is he?"

"Oh you mean Rull," Wolf replied. Rull had at one time been part of a squad of snipers and their spotters but was now the only one left. Given that his field craft and ability to move through the jungle without being noticed far outstripped even the skills of other Catachans, he had been left to continue operating alone rather than being assigned to a new squad. Now he tended to move around independently of the rest of Second Platoon and warning them of threats ahead as well as picking off high value targets on his own, "He's surveying the area to familiarise himself with the environment," she added. This was a lie and she knew it. Rull had already started heading towards their destination. Sitting around and waiting was not something that came naturally to the sniper and Wolf knew that it was best to leave him to continue as he saw fit.

"Recall him lieutenant," the commissar ordered.

"Of course sir," Wolf said and she reached to her ear as if to activate her microbead headset, "Rull this is Lieutenant Wolf," she said, her finger hovering over the activation switch but not touching it, "Rull come in, you are to return to the platoon immediately. Rull do you read me?" then she lowered her hand and looked at the commissar, "I'm sorry commissar. It appears that Rull's communicator is faulty. I'll send a runner to fetch him and he'll join us at the back of the column."

"See that he does lieutenant," the commissar responded, "Now continue as you were."

Wolf then headed back to her command section.

"Problem lieutenant?" Vance asked.

"Someone needs to warn Rull to make sure he doesn't send any signals that the Lyrerian company can pick up." she replied.

"Why not?" Vance said, frowning in confusion.

"Because my Emperor-damned ex-boyfriend seems dead set on getting his entire company killed before we even catch sight of an Ork." Wolf told him.

Waiting while the entire company of Lyrerian troops marched past gave Second Platoon the chance to see exactly what resources it had at its disposal. The company was much larger than the Catachans' own Fourth Company was, with approaching four hundred men including a group of new recruits attached to one of the five platoons and in addition to the regular infantry squads and veterans were numerous special and heavy weapon squads that could deliver extra firepower where it was needed.

As the company neared the edge of the jungle itself Larn ordered his veteran squads forwards, trusting in their superior experience to enable them to better guide the rest of the company through the undergrowth.

"Are there many jungles on Lyreria lieutenant?" Vance asked as they watched this redeployment from the rear of the column and Wolf shook her head.

"None." she replied, "It's a hive world. Outside the hives is just wasteland. There are a few forests in domes but only the very rich are allowed into them."

"Then I think you're right lieutenant." Vance said.

"About what?" Wolf responded.

"Those men are going to die."

The first casualties occurred less than an hour after the column entered the jungle, by which time the walls of Fort resolute were out of sight and in the total absence of any visible landmarks the Lyrerians were navigating using electronic aides alone. It was the use of a dataslate linked into Valus' orbiting satellite network that led to the death of the sergeant of the leading veteran squad. He had paused to study the device so that he could evaluate the progress that had already been made and whether they were veering off course. But the disturbance to the ground of so many sets of marching feet had served to attract underground predators and when the sergeant activated his dataslate the combination of electronic chirps and flashing lights drew one of the predators right to him.

The serpentine creature burst of the ground, hissing as it spat venom at the man. Most of the highly corrosive toxin, evolved as a means of predigesting food before consuming it caught the sergeant in the chest but some splashed upwards to his neck and face while more was sprayed over his hands. The flak armour he wore was sufficient to prevent the toxin from eating into his chest but where it touched bare skin it burned into it and the sergeant screamed and dropped his dataslate. The creature seized hold of the sergeant by the neck with its fangs as he fell to the ground and tore out a lump of flesh that silenced his screaming before the creature then started to burrow itself into his body.

Instinctively the sergeant's men moved to try and help him, even though he was already dead but all this did was bring them closer to the spot where other predators were gathered and the ground exploded as dozens of the creatures emerged to attack. In response the Lyrerians fired their weapons at the creatures and the air was filled with the sharp 'snap' of las gun fire and the louder booming of shotguns.

"What's happening?" Wolf exclaimed as the sound of the attack reached the back of the column and ahead of the Catachans the Lyrerians reacted as if they had been ambushed, seeking cover and setting up heavy weapons. But in their haste to find cover many of them blundered into patches of stinging plants and although none of these were dangerous enough to cause deaths there were cries of alarm and pain all through the company.

"Just what we expected." Vance replied, "These guys don't have a clue."

"Molla! Quinn!" Wolf snapped, "Forward."

Nodding, Molla and Quinn led their squads forwards, pushing their way through crowds of panicking Lyrerians and behind them Wolf followed with her command section, hoping that this event would make Larn take her platoon's abilities more seriously.

"Flamers!" Larn yelled as Wolf approached him, "Move forwards and cleanse the area."

"No!" Wolf shouted at him, "You've still got men up there."

"And I've got more back here that need protecting lieutenant." he replied.

"At least give my men chance to act." Wolf said.

"I said flamers forwards." Larn shouted, ignoring Wolf's suggestion.

But by this point Molla and Quinn had reached the front of the column and they saw the chaos as the Lyrerian veterans struggled against the tunnelling predators.

"Smoke?" Quinn said, looking at Molla and the other sergeant smiled and nodded. Then both men reached for their webbing and plucked smoke grenades from them. Pulling the pins they hurled the grenades forwards, right into the midst of the chaotic fighting and seconds later there were two sudden 'pops' as they

went off. The clouds of smoke released by the grenades started to expand, blocking the sight of all those involved in the fighting.

"Stay back!" Quinn yelled as a team of Lyrerians armed with flamers hurried forwards, intending to engulf the predators as well as their own men in fire to contain the attack. But the smoke was having the effect that the Catachans had hoped it would. While it meant that the Lyrerians could not see more than a few metres and left them stumbling around randomly and coughing it had a more pronounced effect on the predators. As animals they acted on instinct rather than rational thought and as the smoke flowed around them their instincts told them that there was fire close by and like the vast majority of animals in the galaxy they fled, burrowing back under the ground to escape.

"This way!" Molla yelled into the smoke, "Move towards my voice."

"Come on!" Quinn added loudly, "It's easy." and from out of the smoke the surviving Lyrerians came staggering, coughing and gasping for breath.

"What is the meaning of this?" Larn demanded as he strode towards them and he looked at the flamer team, "Why haven't you burned this area?"

"Because you've still got men here so I told them to wait while we smoked out those snakes and saved them." Quinn responded and Larn glared at him.

"They were following my orders." Wolf added from behind Larn and he turned and glared at her instead.

"A word lieutenant." he said and he grabbed hold of Wolf by the arm and started to pull her away from the column. But as the commissar started to follow he paused, "Privately if you don't mind Commissar Creon."

"As you wish captain." the commissar replied.

"What are you doing?" Wolf asked as Larn led her a short distance away from their troops.

"That's 'What are you doing captain?'" he told her sternly, "Look Emilia what are you playing at?"

"I'm trying to do my job." she replied.

"Your job? Your job is filling in forms, not countermanding the orders of a superior officer. Just because we used to sleep together-

"That's got nothing to do with this Torian." Wolf interrupted him, "I command a combat platoon now and-

"Oh you command a platoon? Well I command a company so I outrank you. Now you and your men were sent here to advise me so until I ask for your advice just stay out of my way. I know all about those barbarians and from the looks of it you've gone native. So don't think for one minute I won't have you brought up on charges or let Commissar Creon put a bolt round through your skull. Now tell me, is that going to be necessary for you to remember your place?"

Wolf was about to protest when all of a sudden she noticed something about Larn. Positioned perfectly over his chest was a tiny glowing red dot where Larn himself would be completely unaware of it and Wolf smiled. Then she lifted her hand to her head as if she was just brushing her hair back when in fact she was activating her microbead headset.

"No, I don't think that will be necessary." she said and the dot disappeared.

"Good, now get back to your men and have them bring up the rear like I ordered."

"Yes sir." Wolf replied, emphasising the word 'sir' and she snapped to attention and saluted him. Rather than returning the salute as he was supposed to however, Larn just snorted and started to walk back towards the column.

Wolf followed him, making her way back to her own command section that waited beside Larn's.

"Well you'll be glad to know that there were only four deaths lieutenant." Vance told her.

"Though there were more than twenty injuries." Torrent added, "Mainly minor." then she noticed the angry look on Wolf's face, "Something wrong lieutenant?" she asked.

Wolf looked towards Larn's command section where the captain was talking to Commissar Creon.

"Captain Larn wants us to continue bringing up the rear." she replied.

"You're kidding me." Vance exclaimed.

"Yeah," Torrent added, "after we just saved his men's asses from being burned alive as well."

"The captain has given his orders." Wolf told them, "We bring up the rear." and she began to walk back towards the rear of the column.

"Where are you going lieutenant?" Commissar Creon suddenly called out and Wolf turned back around to face him.

"Captain Larn ordered my platoon to bring up the rear commissar." she replied.

"Maybe so lieutenant, but after that little example of insubordination I would like you where I can keep an eye on you." Creon said, "Your command section will remain here and accompany the captain's own command section."

"Yes commissar." Wolf replied.

"Company move out." Larn then called out, "As before."

"Oh great." Vance muttered as the column began to move once more, "Now we've got that leash looking to make sure we only do what your ex tells us to." he added, using the typical Catachan slang term 'leash' to refer to the commissar.

"You know," Wolf replied softly, staring at the commissar, "I'm not so sure."

The column's progress following the attack by the underground predators was even slower than it had been before. Now the Lyrerian veterans were being extra cautious about disturbing any further lifeforms that happened to be hiding in the jungle and the frequently brought the entire column to a halt while they investigated potential nesting sites.

"I don't suppose we'll see any Orks before we all die of natural causes will we?" Grey asked, using his squad's vox unit to broadcast the question to all of Second Platoon while ensuring that none of the Lyrerians or their commissar would overhear it.

"This is ridiculous." Torrent added to the command section, "Even she could get us moving quicker." and she looked at Wolf.

"She's right." Wolf said before Vance could suggest that she keep quiet, "I need to get Molla and Quinn up to the front."

"Somehow I doubt that's going to happen with the good captain anxious to make sure that his men get the credit." Vance pointed out.

"I know." Wolf replied, "But fortunately he's not the only one around with the authority to give that order." and then she suddenly walked away from her command section, heading for Larn's company command section.

"Is something wrong?" Larn asked when he saw her approaching.

"Yes." Wolf replied, "Our progress is too slow. My men are telling me that we won't reach the target area in an acceptable time frame unless we can pick up our pace. I'd like to advise that you do something to change this before this mission fails."

Larn scowled. Wolf's advisory role meant that she had not broken any regulations but he had no intention of acting on her say so. He knew that his men were aware of their shared history and some of them had known her when she was a part of the Lyrerian XXXII. If he gave them the impression that she was telling him what to do then he risked a breakdown in discipline.

But in reality wolf's comments were not intended for the captain's ears. Instead she was hoping to provoke a reaction from Commissar Creon and in this she was successful.

"Captain." Creon said quietly, stepping closer to him, "Failure cannot be tolerated. I have also observed that your men are slowing down. Perhaps fatigue is setting in and fresh eyes are needed. Take troops from the rear of the column and move them to the front." then he raised his voice slightly so that the Lyrerian and Catachan troops close by would be able to overhear him as he added, "You've let the Catachans have an easy ride so far and now I think it's time they pulled their own weight."

Larn paused then looked at Wolf.

"Lieutenant," he said, "move your platoon to the front of the column and clear a path through the jungle."

"Yes sir." she replied, smiling and then she pivoted on the spot and returned to her own command section.

Walking up to the squad's vox operator she took the handset from him and held it to her mouth, "Second Platoon," she announced, "advance to the front of the column. We're on point. Guardsman Rull I want you to sweep the area ahead and mark all potential hazards. Wolf out."

5.

The utility vehicle came to a halt outside the government building in Fort Resolute that had been taken over by the regimental command and administration of the Lyrerian XXXII and Major Trent disembarked and stood at the bottom of the steps that led up to the main entrance. Immediately he saw a woman in a lieutenant's uniform approaching.

"Major Trent?" she asked as she saluted.

"That's right." he replied, returning the salute.

"I'm Lieutenant Wolf. The colonel-"

"Wolf?" Trent interrupted and he leant closer, staring at her face, "You're not related to an Emilia Wolf are you? Got left behind on Par Shallon a couple of years back."

"Yes sir. She's my younger sister. Actually I just met up with-"

"Throne." Trent said, ignoring what Elisa was saying, "I can't get away from your family today." then he looked at the building that stood in front of him, noting the emplaced heavy bolters either side of the door and added, "This is a pretty fancy headquarters your colonel has found for himself. So where is he anyway?"

"There's a old bomb shelter beneath it. No-one seems to remember why it was put there but the colonel decided that it would make a good command post." Elisa answered, "If you'll follow me I'll take you to him."

"Lead the way." Trent said, then Elisa started to head up the steps towards the doors.

Guards snapped to attention as Elisa and Trent entered the building and she led him towards a nearby elevator that contained another guard, this one wearing the heavier carapace armour of a veteran guardsman.

"Likes to keep himself safe this colonel of yours." Trent said as the lift moved downwards, obvious having to penetrate a significant amount of ground beneath the building in order to reach the bomb shelter, "I doubt there's anywhere on Valus that's further away from an Ork."

The elevator doors slid open to reveal a large room that was set up in the same way as any number of command posts that Trent had been in, though as a Catachan most of them had been in tents or prefabricated structures in the jungle rather than many metres below ground under armoured concrete. As was to be expected the vast majority of the personnel present were Imperial Guard in the uniform of the Lyrerian XXXII regiment, though there were also a handful of Adeptus Munitorum and planetary defence force staff present as well. Trent even noticed a pair of officers in Navy uniforms, obviously present to liaise between the Lyrerians and the small air support wings present on the planet.

Elisa led Trent around the large strategic planning table in the centre of the room to where the regiment's colonel stood with a commissar close by.

"Colonel Heller." she said, saluting her commanding officer, "Major Trent of the Catachan Nineteenth is here." Heller looked up from his dataslate, studying Trent briefly and giving the impression that he was not impressed.

"As you can see there are two wars going on right now in the system Trent." he said, pointing at the table and then at a large display screen mounted on one of the walls that showed the relative positions of Valus, the Imperial Navy warships in space around it and the Ork space hulk that was getting steadily closer, "The navy are doing their best to maintain a blockade around the planet that will stop the Orks landing more troops to even be in with a half way decent chance of shooting them down before they get close enough to launch drop ships or even bombard Valus the entire fleet has to be too far out to be able to give us any orbital fire support. Of course if that space hulk makes it into orbit then we'll have a much bigger problem on our hands. The Orks will be able to land troops anywhere they want and bombard us indiscriminately and there's not a thing the Navy could do to stop it."

"Well if the rest of your troops are like Lieutenant Wolf then they'll do fine as soon as us Catachans can get them to the greenskins." Trent replied and a puzzled frown appeared on Colonel Heller's face.

"Wolf?" he said and he glanced at Elise.

"I believe he means my sister sir." she said.

"That's the one." Trent agreed, "She may have started off as some rear echelon quill pusher but she's shaped up pretty good for an outsider. Even earned herself some ink for triggering a nuke inside a Necron tomb." but Heller just stared at him.

When Second Platoon was deployed on its own Wolf typically placed only one or two squads ahead of her command section, typically those led by Molla and Quinn while the rest would follow behind it. But given the size of the force that they were being asked to provide with a safe pathway through the jungle she had Grey's squad move forwards as well while Mayer's mortar squad and Khor's ogryns advanced either side of the command section. With more than three hundred Lyrerian troops advancing behind them the Catachans

had no need to worry about maintaining a rear guard.

The well practised skills of jungle warfare that the Catachans possessed allowed them to move through the jungle much quicker than the Lyrerians were capable of. On several occasions they came across patches of dangerous plant life or the lairs of predators. But the telltale signs of these were easy for the Catachans to spot and the liberal use of flamers and grenades cleared out many while others were simply marked and bypassed. Therefore, the previous slow progress of the force was suddenly reversed and instead it pressed deeper into the jungle towards the area identified by the Navy as where one of the Ork vessels had landed. All of a sudden Grey brought the platoon to a halt with a whistle and a raised fist.

"Sergeant Grey." Wolf signalled using her microbead, "Report."

"I think we've got activity up ahead lieutenant." he responded, "Lots of it."

"I'm on my way." Wolf said and then she beckoned for her section to follow her as she went to find out exactly what Grey had found.

Before she even reached Second Squad she noticed a strange odour in the air, a mix of the sharp smell of industry and the stench of rotting meat that made her recoil.

"Orks." Vance commented.

"You can tell that from the smell?" Wolf asked and he nodded.

"My first campaign after leaving Catachan was to deal with a raid on a farming colony." he replied, "They aren't big on hygiene but they do like to build stuff that pumps out big clouds of exhaust fumes."

Wolf frowned.

"You mean we track them by following their smell?" she said and Vance smiled.

"That's right. Farts and fuel. Two things guaranteed to accompany every Ork warband in the galaxy." he said just as they came to Second Squad.

"I take it that you stopped us because of the scent?" Wolf asked and Grey nodded.

"It's even stronger up ahead." he told her, "Rull's gone to see what he can find."

"My guess would be about five thousand Orks." Vance commented.

"The crew of one of their ships you mean?" Wolf said.

"If it's landed by itself then it can't be very big." Grey said, "So about five thousand is as good a guess as any."

"Movement." one of Grey's men suddenly hissed and he brought his las gun up to his shoulder as the rest of the squad did the same. Meanwhile Wolf drew her las pistol and held out her hand towards her squad's vox operator.

"Turner, pass me the handset." she ordered and the guardsman handed it to her, "Captain Larn this is Lieutenant Wolf. Do you read me? Over." she signalled and then waited for a response.

"Go ahead lieutenant. Over." he responded shortly after.

"Captain we have a suspect contact ahead. Suggest bringing company to a halt until it can be confirmed."

Wolf said and then just before signing off she remembered the possibility that there could be thousands of Orks right ahead of them, "Also recommend that heavy weapons be deployed for use. Over."

"Understood lieutenant. Investigate and report. Over and out." Larn replied and then the channel went dead.

"Think he'll listen?" Torrent asked.

"He's got a leash breathing down his neck." Vance pointed out, "He's safer deploying heavy weapons on a false alarm than not doing it where there really is danger."

"But what are we facing?" Wolf asked.

"Molla's probably in a better position to see." Grey suggested and Wolf looked at Vance.

"Go and check." she told him, "Keep it quiet."

Vance just nodded and then he began to sprint towards where Molla's squad had come a halt, effortlessly leaping through the undergrowth as he went.

When he reached First Squad's position Vance found that they too had come to a state of readiness and Molla had even had them set up the heavy bolter in a forward position that gave them the best possible field of fire. If there was a hoard of hundreds of Orks in front of them then the powerful belt fed automatic weapon would give Molla's men the best chance of holding them back.

"See anything?" Vance asked as he came to a stop beside Molla.

"Nothing." Molla replied as he peered into the jungle.

"That's not like Orks." Vance commented, "We ought to be able to hear them shouting at one another."

"Unless it's some of those – what do they call them? Blood Axes? I've heard they can move around pretty quietly when they want to." Molla replied.

Vance considered this. Among the Imperial Guard there were all manner of stories regarding the different Ork clans but how much truth there was in any of them was a secret known only to the handful of specialists cleared to possess detailed information on an alien species. The official position of the Imperial Guard laid out in the Imperial Infantryman's Uplifting Primer was that Orks were little more than animals, incapable of any advanced tactical thought and equipped with technology that was crude, primitive and liable to fail at any moment. The problem was that most Imperial Guardsmen in the galaxy knew that much of what was written

in the Imperial Infantryman's Uplifting Primer bore no relation to reality.

Then there was a rustling sound not far ahead of the Catachan position and both Molla and Vance aimed their las pistols towards the source of the sound just in time to see a figure emerge. This had the same green skin tone as an Ork but stood only about waist high to a Catachan and was thin and wiry rather than heavy and muscular. But even though it was obviously not an Ork it still carried a crude firearm in its hands, in this case what looked like a high calibre single shot rifle.

"Gretchin." Molla hissed. The smaller cousins of the Orks were renowned for being able to move around stealthily, something that was a useful survival trait in a society where Orks saw anything smaller than them as a target.

"Where there's one there'll be more." Vance pointed out and Molla nodded in agreement as Vance activated his microbead, "Lieutenant." he signalled.

"Right here sergeant." Wolf's voice replied.

"Lieutenant we've got a contact."

"Orks? How many?"

"Not Orks. Gretchin." Vance told her, "We can just see the one right now but there's bound to be more of them. Possibly lots more."

"Have you been spotted?" Wolf asked.

"Not yet. But if that thing keeps coming this way then it's going to walk right over us."

"Rull if you have eyes on that Gretchin I want it taken out." Wolf said, adjusting her microbead for a platoon wide broadcast and from where they were positioned Molla and Vance saw the Gretchin's head suddenly jerk backwards as the back of it was blown off by the silenced bullet that entered between its eyes before breaking up and ripping through its brain.

The Gretchin fell backwards, ending up sprawled out on the ground where its rifle now lay beside its corpse and this was the cue for three more of the creatures to appear from within the undergrowth. All three were armed with crude firearms, no two of which were the same as one another or the one carried by their now deceased comrade. For a few moments the trio of Gretchin looked around, pointing their crude weapons ahead of them as they searched for whatever had killed the first Gretchin but they soon gave up and instead turned their attention to the body. With Molla and Vance watching them through magnoculars all three Gretchin began rummaging through every place that the dead Gretchin could have hidden anything of value, removing everything they found no matter how insignificant it may have appeared.

"Doesn't look like a proper patrol." Vance commented.

"No." Molla agreed, "Sentries would have turned and run the moment Rull took out that first one. This is just a pack of scavengers. Possibly even runaways from the Ork army."

"Which means we can take them all out without them being missed as long as we do it quietly enough."

Vance said and he activated his microbead, "Lieutenant, Molla and I are going dark for a few minutes."

"What for sergeant?" Wolf asked.

"We're going hunting." Vance said, "Want some Gretchin skin boots?"

"Not really. Oh and before Molla says anything I don't want any Gretchin skin underwear either."

Vance smiled as he looked at the now frowning Molla.

"I never said anything." Molla said.

"No but you thought it didn't you?" Vance replied, holstering his las pistol "Now come on, Let's get this done." and he drew his knife.

Clutching their traditional Catachan blades in their hands, the two sergeants crawled through the undergrowth towards the trio of Gretchin. Though Gretchin were naturally stealthy creatures these three were too distracted with sorting through their dead comrades belongings to be concerned with staying hidden. The fact that someone had just blown the back of his head off had been put down to natural causes. Gretchin rarely lived more than a handful of years before being shot, stabbed, blown up, set on fire, eaten or sat on and crushed by an Ork who may or may not have noticed them beforehand. The Catachans crawled to within a few metres of the Gretchin before Molla pulled a rock out of the ground and looked at Vance. In response Vance just nodded and then watched as Molla hurled the rock.

Sailing through the air, the rock passed over the closest of the Gretchin before coming down on one of the others, striking the back of the creature's head thanks to its bent pose. The Gretchin let out a scream and staggered backwards, clutching the back of its head as the other two pointed at it and let out a sound that could only be laughter. But the Gretchin struck by the rock was not prepared to accept having a rock thrown at it, especially when it seemed as if it had been thrown by another Gretchin that was now mocking it and the creature shrieked as it charged forwards and leapt at the Gretchin it blamed, the one that Molla had thrown the rock over. Meanwhile the third Gretchin just stood back, yelling encouragement at first one and then the other of the combatants. But with all three Gretchin distracted the two Catachans were able to get even closer until they were within arms' reach.

At this point they burst out of the undergrowth. Vance charged the two fighting Gretchin, swinging the back of his hand at the creature that was currently positioned on top of his opponent. The blow crushed the

Gretchin's prominent nose with a sickening 'crunch' and a spray of blood that make the creature shriek with pain and topple backwards clutching its face. Turning his attention towards the other Gretchin Vance lashed out with his knife before it could lay a hand on a weapon of its own. The tip of the blade sliced into the Gretchin's abdomen and the internal organs contained there suddenly spilled out as the Gretchin looked on in horror. Then to finish the job Vance plunged his knife into the Gretchin's chest, stabbing it through the heart.

While Vance attacked the two brawling Gretchin Molla dealt with the observer. Moving silently out of the undergrowth from behind his target, Molla grabbed hold of the Gretchin by the top of its head and pulled it backwards. Leaning forwards, he looked down into the face of the Gretchin and at the same time he drew the edge of his blade across its throat, producing a spray of blood.

The two Catachans then waited silently to see if any more Gretchin would make their presence known. If there were any more nearby they would react in one of two ways. Firstly they could attack, in which case they would do so quickly and impulsively without bothering to formulate a plan first. Alternatively they could decide to flee as quickly as they could, producing significant noise as they rushed through the jungle and most likely screaming at the top of their voices. But around them were only the usual sounds produced by the jungles of Valus meaning that there were no more greenskins nearby.

Then Molla looked into the undergrowth and saw the trail of damaged vegetation that the Gretchin had left behind them. To the uninitiated there would not have appeared to be much of a trail at all but to a Catachan and particularly one with Molla's experience it stood out clearly.

"Looks like they came from that way." he said to Vance, pointing along the trail.

"Looks like it, yes." Vance agreed, nodding, "Take your squad forward and I'll go let the lieutenant know."

6.

It was Grey's reaction to Vance's approach that alerted Wolf to his return and she called out to him.

"Sergeant Vance, what happened?" she asked.

"Small Gretchin party." Vance replied, "Most likely just scavengers or deserters from the main army rather than an organised patrol."

Grey snorted.

"Typical greenskins." he said, "Everything's so random you can't be sure of anything they'll do."

"Well Molla spotted the trail they left and he's taken his men along it to track them back to wherever it is that they came from, which from that smell in the air I'd say was no more than a few thousand metres away."

Wolf sighed.

"I better go and tell Torian then." she said.

"You don't sound very keen on that lieutenant." Torrent commented.

"I just don't think he'll listen to reason when I tell him that the Orks are close by. He'll probably have his entire company rush headlong into an attack that could get them all killed just to prove that he doesn't need our advice." she replied and Grey snorted again.

"Kind of ironic you thinking that." he said and Wolf glared at him.

"Hold this position sergeant." she told him, "I'll let you know what the captain decides. Command section with me."

Returning to the main body of troops following behind her platoon, Wolf headed straight for Larn's command section.

"Captain." she called out, "My men have engaged the enemy."

"Engaged them?" Larn replied, "I heard no firing."

"Somehow I doubt they used las guns." Commissar Creon commented with a hint of a grin.

"We made it quick and quiet." Vance replied.

"And exactly how many Orks did you engage?" Larn asked.

"None sir." Vance said, "It was a party of four Gretchin. Those are the greenskins slave worker-"

"I know what Gretchin are sergeant." Larn interrupted, "And I'd hardly call four of them a serious threat to disciplined troops."

"They left a trail." Wolf said, "My First Squad is following it now and they'll report where it leads to. But there are other signs of the Orks as well."

"Such as?" Larn asked.

"The smell." Wolf answered, "Whatever the Orks are up to out here they aren't masking the smell that it makes and they are giving off. I think you ought to have your men get ready just in case we can't avoid engaging their main force."

The three dead Orks that Molla's squad came across were typical of their species. Roughly the same size as a Catachan but with much greater bulk thanks to their higher muscle to bone ratio. These particular examples all wore clothing that was a mix of blue and yellow, identifying that in life they had all belonged to the same clan. It was also obvious that they had not been killed in any of the internal fighting that was so common among their society. The first clue to this was that all of their weapons and equipment were still present on their still intact bodies. Any greenskin would have looted them after killing them, including pulling out their teeth and possibly cutting away chunks of meat to consume. But more significant was the precise way in which they had died. Every one of the three had a single small hole between their eyes where a bullet had entered. Unlike the Gretchin that Rull had killed earlier there was no large exit wound on the back of the Ork skulls but this was down to the bone being so thick that after the bullets had fragmented on impact they had lacked the penetrating power to punch all the way through. Instead the bullet fragments had bounced around inside the Orks' heads and shredded the contents, resulting in brain matter now leaking out of their ears and nostrils.

But Rull had not simply shot the Orks and then moved on. Instead he had used their bodies to leave a message for his fellow Catachans that other Orks would be unlikely to notice the significance of. All three Orks had been left lying on their backs and each one had one arm extended out to point in a particular direction.

"I guess there's something down there that Rull wants us to see." Molla said, "Let's go find out what that is."

Unlike the vegetation that the greenskins had passed through, the jungle in the direction that Molla now led his squad was undamaged, indicating that no-one other than Rull had been this way. As they continued the Catachans soon began to hear the sounds of machinery at work, the assorted pounding and shrieking suggesting to Molla that the Orks were at work constructing something on a large scale.

All of a sudden the Catachans came across a mark left in the ground deliberately, an arrow that had been etched in with the heel of a standard Imperial Guard issue boot and Molla changed course to head in the direction it pointed. The noise being made by the Orks became much louder now and as the Catachans continued along this course they came to a cluster of rocks positioned at the top of a steep drop that allowed Molla to observe what was happening at the bottom of this without being seen.

"Throne." he exclaimed as he looked down at the Orks, "What the feth are they doing?"

Molla had seen starships before and so he knew that the one he now studied through his magnoculars was a relatively small one at just over a kilometre long. This was hardly surprising though. Few larger vessels were capable of landing on a planet's surface unaided which was why the bigger cruisers and battleships all had vast hangars for fleets of shuttles and other smaller craft. Like all Ork creations it looked as if it had been thrown together randomly by someone who had been told what a starship was but not how one was supposed to be built. But what caught Molla's attention was what the Orks were doing around this ship that did indeed look to have brought several thousand of them to Valus. They were not as Molla had first assumed building new weapons to help in their campaign of conquest but instead were simply dismantling their vessel and loading the parts onto large tracked conveyor vehicles that were then carrying these off along a road that the greenskins had cleared through the jungle, belching out thick clouds of smoke from their exhausts as they went.

"The lieutenant's going to have to see this." Molla said and he activated the pict-recorder function of his magnoculars so that he could record exactly what he was seeing and replay it for Wolf. He made sure to capture footage of the vehicles that the Orks were using to move the material they were removing from their ship. With no tech priests accompanying the Imperial Guard force Molla also knew that the only way what he was seeing could be shown to someone who had a chance of being able to figure out what the Orks could be doing with the parts from their ship was to transmit it back to Fort Resolute. Molla also focused on what was left of the Ork ship. Like all Ork vessels this had been built for battle and prior to landing on Valus had mounted hundreds of individual weapons. Some of these had already been removed as part of the procedure of dismantling the ship but there were still many more that could conceivably be used as fixed artillery that could cut the Imperial Guard to pieces if they launched a direct attack. Then when he had recorded everything he thought was worthy of it Molla deactivated the magnoculars and returned them to his webbing.

"Okay lads we've seen enough for now." he said and he looked at two of his squad, "Collins," he said looking at one of its female members, "you and Green stay here and keep an eye on things." and he glanced at the squad's vox operator as well, "If anything happens then let the lieutenant know immediately. Understood?" "Yes sarge." Collins responded, nodding before the rest of the squad retreated back into the jungle to tell the main force what they had discovered.

"Lieutenant Wolf." Molla called out as he approached wolf, pushing Lyrerians aside as needed.

"Sergeant Molla." she responded, "What have you found?"

"The Ork ship is about two and a half thousand metres that way." Molla said, pointing back the way he had come with one hand while he reached for his magnoculars with the other, "I made sure to grab some pictures for you."

"Thank you sergeant." Wolf replied and she took the magnoculars from him and plugged them into her dataslate as Vance, Larn and Creon gathered around her. Then she accessed the recording and watched what Molla had seen.

"What are they doing?" Larn said as he watched the images of the Orks dismantling their ship.

"Using their ship for parts for something." Wolf commented, "But what?"

"Keep watching." Molla told her, "I don't know what it is that they're making but they aren't doing it there."

"Those transports are massive." Larn added as the recording reached the point where Molla had aimed the magnoculars towards the cargo conveyor vehicles that the Orks had loaded the materials recovered from their ship onto. Then he reached out and shut off the dataslate before looking at Creon, "Obviously we need to attack." he said, "If we can act quickly enough then we can prevent the Orks from completing whatever it is that they are making."

"Captain," Wolf said, "my platoon can set up an ambush along the route those vehicles are taking. That ought to draw out-"

"That won't be necessary lieutenant." Larn interrupted, "We will attack the Ork ship directly." and the Catachans exchanged nervous glances.

"Captain," Wolf said, "that ship is-"

"Damn it Emilia stop questioning every order I give!" Larn snapped and Wolf flinched.

"The lieutenant is here as an advisor." Creon commented, "She can offer you whatever advice she wishes but the final decision remains up to you captain."

"And my decision has been made." Larn said, "We attack the Ork ship directly." then he reached one hand towards his squad's vox operator. In return the guardsman passed him the handset that Larn lifted to his

mouth, "All platoon commanders report to me immediately." he broadcast, "The enemy have been located and we are going to attack. Have your men prepare. Larn out." Larn then waited for his platoon commanders to gather around him, picking up a long narrow stick from the ground that he used to scratch a line in the ground near his feet, "Thanks to surveillance footage we know that the Ork ship is located at the bottom of a slope. This line represents the top of that slope", he told them before adding an oval to represent the ork ship, "and here is the Ork ship." then he began to make dots along the line representing the top of the slope, "Taking advantage of the high ground available to us we will deploy our heavy weapon squads along here where they will have a clear field of fire at the Orks. Now the ship's weapons may still be active so our mortars will target the ship with smoke rounds to block their line of sight. It is my intention that we will launch a surprise attack that will allow us to inflict heavy casualties on the Orks before they can organise themselves for a counter attack."

"They outnumber us more than three to one." Wolf pointed out.

"And with the advantage of surprise and position that advantage will be nullified. Especially considering the well known inability of Orks to think tactically. Our conscript platoon on its own could defeat those Orks lieutenant." Larn said, "But since it bothers you so much your platoon can position itself here on our flank." and he drew an 'X' in the ground to one side of the positions he had marked for the deployment of his company's heavy weapons, "From here you ought to be able to see if any of the Orks try and escape. Then your platoon can put its ability to move through jungle rapidly to give chase and stop them. The last thing I want is them making it to wherever their construction project is taking place and bringing back reinforcements. Now are my orders clear?" and Larn looked around.

"Yes sir." one of his lieutenants replied as they all nodded.

"Lieutenant Wolf?" Larn added, staring at her.

"Yes air. Perfectly." she said, "Permission to return to my platoon?"

"Granted lieutenant." Larn told her and she turned and strode away, the Catachans hurrying after her.

7.

Second Platoon deployed where Larn had instructed, off to the side of where the main fighting would be expected.

"Mayer," Wolf said as the Catachans found themselves somewhere that they could rest comfortably while they waited to be called into action that also allowed them to cover all approaches to their position.

"Yes lieutenant?" he responded.

"Can your mortars hit that ship from here?" Wolf asked and she looked at where the top of the Ork vessel was visible over the trees.

"Easily. But picking out specific targets may be difficult."

"Good. Then I want you to set up the mortars and target it. Molla can provide target observation if it's needed." Wolf ordered.

"You know that'll slow us down if we have to move." Vance pointed out.

"If we need to move then Mayer's squad can catch up with the rest of us. I've got a bad feeling that we're going to need them here instead." Wolf replied.

"Get to it Bomber." Vance told Mayer and the corporal nodded before returning to his squad.

"I get it now." Wolf said, checking the ground by a tree before she removed her pack and sat down.

"Get what lieutenant?" Vance asked.

"What being an outside means." Wolf said, "I'm just like Torian aren't I? I don't get what it means to be from a deathworld like Catachan."

"To be fair you've adapted quite well." Vance said, "You listen to us and-"

"But I'm still not one of you and I never will be." Wolf interrupted, "You told me so yourself."

"That's right. You've learned a lot but you'll never have the same instincts that we have."

"Well you don't need to worry about it for much longer." Wolf said as she rummaged through her pack and she pulled out the form she had found on her bed. It still lacked only a signature and she produced a pen from her webbing, "This mission is my last with you." and then she signed the form before getting back to her feet and passing it to Vance, pressing it against his chest before starting to walk away, "You can give that to Stubbs when we get back. Assuming I don't get you all killed first."

"Where are you going?" Vance called out after her.

"To check on Molla." she replied, "Call me when the shooting starts." then Vance looked at the form Wolf had handed him and his eyes widened.

"Torrent." he said sternly, "What do you know about this?" and held out the form towards her, "You were the one that offered to prepare her gear. I should have known you were up to something."

Torrent smiled back at him.

"This way everyone gets what they want." she replied, "She goes back to her own regiment and we get an officer that doesn't need their hand holding on every mission."

"Oh really?" Vance replied and he reached for his microbead, "Quinn, could you come see me a moment. There's something you need to see."

"On my way." Quinn replied and soon after he came walking out of the jungle, "what's going on?" he asked.

"This." Vance said and he handed him the form.

"What the feth?" Quinn exclaimed, staring at Vance, "Did you know she was going to do this?"

"Oh it wasn't the lieutenant's idea. The only handwriting on there that's hers is the signature. I think the rest belongs to Guardswoman Torrent here." and he looked at Torrent.

"What the feth are you playing at?" Quinn snapped at her.

"Making everyone happy." Torrent replied, "You ought to be pleased as well. When we get back Vance will call the vote and-"

"Yeah, I know." Quinn interrupted angrily, "The platoon will probably pick me as the new lieutenant. It could have happened two years ago when Silt got killed but Wolf got transferred in instead. Well it may surprise you but I've never wanted to be an officer before and I still don't. But if the vote is called I get no more say than anyone else." then all of a sudden he clenched one and into a fist and drew it back before slamming it into Torrent's face. Surprised by the blow she fell backwards, clutching at her face here blood was now pouring from her nose, "And if you think that's bad just wait and see what happens if I get made an officer." he hissed before handing the transfer request form back to Vance and turning around to storm off in the direction of his squad of veterans.

"He hit me." Torrent said, "I can't believe he hit me."

"I can." Vance replied and he held up the form for her to see, "Perhaps you ought to consider filling one of these in for yourself if he does become an officer. Maybe Lieutenant Wolf will be willing to take you with her."

Larn looked through his magnoculars at the partially dismantled Ork warship and smiled.

"They don't have a clue." he said with a smile. Then he swapped the magnoculars for the vox handset and raised it to his mouth, "All units commence attack." he broadcast.

There were no verbal responses to his order but from the sudden eruption of gunfire to his left and right as well as from behind him as his company's mortars opened fire it was clear that it had been received. All along the top of the slope where heavy weapon teams with direct fire weapons had been deployed the fire was directed down towards the greenskins working on the exterior of the grounded starship's hull, auto-cannons and heavy bolters chewing up Ork and Gretchin alike while the various ramshackle vehicles and other crude machines being used by the hoard were targeted with armour-piercing krak missiles and las-cannons. Meanwhile mortar rounds passed by in the air overhead before arcing back down to burst open against the hull of the Ork starship, creating a thick cloud of grey smoke that soon started to hide the enormous vessel from view.

"Captain! Look!" Larn's vox operator suddenly called out and he pointed down the slope to where a large number of greenskins were now starting to surge towards it.

"What?" Larn said, bringing his magnoculars back up to his eyes and looking at this crowd, "How could they have organised themselves so quickly? Orks are incapable of such efficiency."

"They didn't captain." Creon commented, "Each of them is acting on its own initiative such as it is. All they want is to fight and to do so they need to get up this slope. None of them care who they fight alongside or against."

Larn looked at the vox operator.

"Tell all squads to stand to and fire as soon as the enemy get within range." he ordered. But as the vox operator was relaying the order there was a sudden series of loud booms that filled the air and three massive shells burst among the Lyrerians, "What in the name of Him on Earth?" Larn exclaimed when he realised that these were shots from the huge cannons mounted in the side of the Ork starship, "How could they possibly be targeting us through that smoke?"

"They aren't." Creon replied calmly, "They know our general direction so they're just firing at random and hoping to hit something." and at that point a fourth shell smashed through the Lyrerian lines.

"What's happening?" Wolf said when she heard the shellfire from the Ork starship.

"I think the flaw in Captain Larn's plan has just been cruelly exposed." Vance responded.

"That fire's coming from the ship." Wolf added and Vance nodded.

"There must have been greenskins inside and they're just firing in the Lyrerians' general direction." he said.

"Lieutenant." Grey's voice said through Wolf's microbead.

"Yes sergeant?" she said.

"You know how your ex planned to have loads of time before the Orks got their act together and launched a counter attack? Well he forgot to tell the Orks that was what they were supposed to do. They're on their way up the slope now. Thousands of them."

Wolf looked at Vance.

"We need to do something." she said and he nodded.

"I'm right with you lieutenant." he replied, "What are your orders?"

Wolf thought for a moment.

"We head down the slope." she said, "Except for Second Squad and Mayer's mortar teams. They need to engage those weapon emplacements."

"Mortars and a missile launcher aren't going to put a dent in that ship." Torrent pointed out.

"They don't need to." Wolf told her, "With all the parts that have already been removed I'm hoping that there are enough holes in the hull that we can get some rounds through them and hit something volatile. At the very least they may be able to give the Orks something to worry about."

"But you're sending the rest of us down the slope?" Vance asked and Wolf nodded.

"We'll hit the Orks in their flank. Maybe we can disrupt their charge enough that Captain Larn's people can get organised enough to beat them back. They've still got plenty of firepower at their disposal." then she activated her microbead, "Grey, Mayer, hold your positions and fire on the Ork ship. Target the flashes from the weapons emplacements. Your orders are to suppress the enemy artillery as much as possible. Everyone else with me. We're advancing."

"Ogryns move." a deep rumbling voice called out from close by as Khor ordered his squad to move. Each of the bulky abhumans carried a ripper gun, a large calibre automatic shotgun fed from a drum. Though short ranged this weapon was powerful and rapid firing, giving each ogryn firepower similar to a weapons team with a heavy bolter and Wolf hoped that this would prove decisive as they charged towards the Ork hoard. Second Platoon moved rapidly down the slope and Wolf soon found herself lagging behind her command section as she tried to avoid losing her footing and simply rolling downhill uncontrolled until she either reached the bottom or was stopped by either a tree trunk or an Ork.

"Lieutenant!" she heard Vance yell and she saw him pointing, "Follow the ogryns."

At first she was unsure of what he meant but then she looked towards the abhumans and realised what he was suggesting to her. Like Wolf, the ogyrns did not possess the instinct for moving through jungle terrain unimpeded but what they did have was a large mass and they literally smashed their way through the undergrowth instead, creating a trail behind them that aside from being easy to follow was also free of major obstacles and Wolf headed for it.

Ahead of Second Platoon and as yet unaware of the Catachans' approach was the Ork hoard, still climbing the slope towards the Lyrerians as the company fired down into them. But the sheer number of Orks and Gretchin meant that there was little hope of killing even half before they were able to reach the Imperial lines. "Here!" Wolf snapped, using her microbead to broadcast the instruction to all of the squads moving down the slope and immediately they came to a halt and began to position themselves for maximum effect. Molla's squad set up their heavy bolter while Quinn's veterans concealed themselves among the undergrowth and Wolf rejoined her command section. Over the sound of the Lyrerians' firing and the Orks' roaring and shouting Wolf heard the sound of a missile flying overhead and she looked up to see a single missile fly into the smoke covering the Ork starship before detonating. Obviously Grey's squad had observed the flash of cannon-fire and attempted to target it. The sound of the missile detonation was too far away and too quiet for Wolf to hear but she found herself holding her breath in anticipation as she waited to see if there would be a large secondary explosion but it was not to be.

"Everyone's in position lieutenant." Vance told her, bringing Wolf back to the here and now.

"Open fire." she replied.

The Ork hoard was out of range of the pistols and shotguns carried by many of Second Platoon but the las guns, grenade launchers and heavy bolter carried by others had enough range to reach them and every Catachan armed with such a weapon opened fire. Out of these the heavy bolter was the most destructive, firing from the hoard's flank the mass reactive rounds tore through the lightly armoured Orks and Gretchin. Even those who had obtained thicker slabs of metal and bent it into shape for use as improvised carapace armour found that the protection it offered was not enough against the belt fed weapon. Compared to this the las guns fared poorly. Though a las gun was powerful enough to cut through a human being, Orks were naturally tougher and more resilient to injury so when the energy blast struck them many achieved nothing more than to make the Orks howl with rage and pain before turning towards Second Platoon.

This had been part of Wolf's plan all along, by drawing off some of the hoard she hoped to give the Lyrerians some breathing room so that Larn could organise a better defence. The problem was that now she had several hundred Orks charging straight towards her, Wolf could not help but wonder whether her own platoon would be able to defend itself against them.

"It would appear that Lieutenant Wolf is drawing some of the Orks away from us." Commissar Creon said as he looked down the slope and saw flashes of las gun fire in the jungle.

"If we can't hold the Orks back then what chance does she have?" Larn replied.

"I do not think that is her intention. She is trying to help us." Creon told him, "Again. Perhaps this time you will be more appreciative of it and act accordingly."

"I've followed my orders commissar." Larn said, clearly agitated by the commissar.

"Yes to the letter and to many commissars that would be sufficient. Unfortunately captain, I hold officers such as yourself to a higher standard. I expect results rather than just blind obedience, otherwise we could just put ordinary guardsmen in charge and save the expense of training field officers."

Frowning, Larn reached into his pocket and produced a small silver whistle which he put in his mouth and blew. The high pitched sound carried across the battlefield and every Lyrerian immediately knew what he was expected to do.

"What's that sound?" Torrent asked and Wolf smiled.

"Help's on its way." she said, "Larn just ordered his men to fix bayonets. They're going to charge."

"About time too." Vance added, "Because we've got company." and then he fired his las pistol at an Ork that had come within range.

"Okay this is it." Wolf said, raising her own las pistol, "Fire at will."

The heavy bolter was the primary target of the Orks, but charging straight at it meant rushing headlong into the never ending stream of explosive projectiles it spewed so the Orks did what they so often did and sent the Gretchin in ahead of them as an expendable first wave. Driving the smaller creatures onwards were Orks armed with whips and electrified prods who lashed out at any Gretchin that moved too slowly or in the wrong direction while trained attack squigs strained at the ends of leashes. One of these runtherds as they were known bellowed at his charges while cracking the whip he held when all of a sudden he noticed a red spot on his crude animal hide clothing that he had not seen before and instinctively he tried to wipe it away only to find that the dot was not stuck to him but being projected onto him and he raised his head. But before he could identify the source of the dot a single bullet struck him at the exact spot where the dot was located and the fragments tore through his heart. Even an Ork could not survive this for more than a few moments and

with a look of confusion still on his face he fell forwards.

No longer restrained or acting under the runtherd's control the attack squig he had been holding onto suddenly leapt forwards into the crowd of Gretchin and began to devour the closest of them and realising that the runtherd was dead the rest of the Gretchin pack suddenly scattered, going to ground rather than continuing to face the heavy bolter and las guns in front of them. But although there was now a gap in their living screen the Orks continued to rush forwards as other runtherds acted to try and fill the gap. However, the Catachans were prepared for this.

Quinn watched the approaching hoard carefully. They had closed to within range of the weapons that most of his men carried. These were mainly shotguns but one man also had a meltagun and everyone in Second Platoon could carry a stub pistol if they wanted thanks to a cache of the weapons that they had discovered on a crashed starship. But Quinn wanted to wait until the hoard was also within range of the two most devastating anti-personnel weapons that his squad was issued with. The advantage of flamers was that when used the burning liquid they fired could spread around cover to envelope everything in their path and Quinn wanted to put this to the best possible use.

Allowing the Gretchin to get within range of the flamers, Quinn slowly raised his shotgun and took aim at the runtherd driving them onwards. Then he pulled the trigger and shot the runtherd in the chest.

"Now!" he shouted as the Ork fell and all around him there was the booming of shotgun fire. Moments later however, this was drowned out by the sudden 'Whoosh!' of two flamers firing together and Quinn felt the heat of the flames as their operators moved their weapons from side to side and doused the Gretchin in fire. The effect of this was drastic. Already without a runtherd to keep them in order the Gretchin not blasted with shotguns or roasted by flames panicked and turned to flee, running back into the Orks who just knocked them aside or trampled them underfoot as they pressed onwards.

The Lyrerians stood ready with bayonets fixed and Larn prepared to order them to advance down the slope, leaving their heavy weapons in place to provide cover. But just as he was about to give the order there was yet another loud 'Boom!' from the Ork starship and a massive shell flew overhead before crashing down to the ground and exploding behind his position. The blast tore up dirt and vegetation alike and Larn found himself being hurled forwards through the air before he slammed into a tree trunk and everything went black. "Captain!" his command section's medic exclaimed, rushing towards Larn to see how badly injured he was. "How bad is it specialist?" Creon asked.

"The captain's alive, but he's losing blood." the medic replied and Creon nodded.

"Then take care of him." he said, "And in the mean time I shall lead this charge." and he raised his sword into the air and gave out a yell, "For the Emperor!" and the Lyrerians charged down the slope.

The charge was slowed by the difficult nature of the terrain but the Lyrerian still had the advantage of moving downhill and each time they paused to steady themselves on the uneven ground they took the opportunity to pick out one of the Orks attempting to climb the slope towards them and fired their personal weapons. In their particular situation even a hit that only injured an Ork lightly proved to be enough to cause an Ork to fall and before being able to pick himself up he would roll back down the slope and slow his comrades as they were forced to leap aside or be knocked over themselves.

The Orks on the other hand focused themselves purely on getting up the slope towards their prey. There was some gunfire from their crude weaponry but the poor marksmanship that the species frequently displayed and the lack of anything more long ranged than a pistol or the occasional rifle meant that the few bullets that fired up the slope from pistols hit very little and the flak armour worn by the Lyrerians proved itself quite capable of protecting them from most of the rounds that did find a target.

8.

"Okay this is it." Wolf said when she saw the first Ork through the trees. Like all members of the Imperial Guard she had seen dozens of training films dealing with the creatures that were spread across the galaxy like an infestation that included battlefield footage but this was the first time she had seen a live one for herself, "Forwards."

Then as her command section started to advance towards where Molla and Quinn's squads were already engaging the Orks Khor took a deep breath.

"Ogryns!" he called out, "Charge!" and the seven abhumans surged forwards, all roaring defiantly. As always the ogryns simply smashed their way through the undergrowth and ran right past the Catachans in their quest to get closer to the Orks. But as soon as they drew level with the two forward Catachan squads they levelled their ripper guns towards the Orks and opened fire, filling the air with the sound of heavy fire.

The sudden appearance of the ogryns took the Orks by surprise, scattering more of the leading Gretchin units as their overseer was struck by a blast from a ripper gun that tore the side of his head off. Meeting the Gretchin units first, the ogryns charged straight through them, trampling or kicking them aside along with the occasional runtherd that got in the way until they finally reached the Orks themselves. Orks lived their lives by simple rules such as might makes right and bigger is better. Under normal circumstances this was good enough when facing human armies. An unarmed human was smaller and weaker than a typical Ork and in the vast majority of cases the Ork would emerge victorious from the almost inevitable combat. But the ogryns towered over the Orks just as they did to baseline humans and even a hoard of more than a hundred Orks found the sight of the ogryns towering over them intimidating. This situation became even more serious when the ogryns opened fire again. The loud roar of the ripper guns was just the sort of thing that Orks enjoyed from their own weapons but now they found themselves at a disadvantage in individual firepower as well as physical size and strength. Nor did it help that the ripper guns were powerful enough to shred an Ork while in return the pistols and rifles carried by the Orks were insufficient to bring down a fully grown ogryn in flak armour. Some of the Orks attempted to engage the ogryns in hand to hand combat, being most comfortable with this but as they rushed up to the abhumans they simply swung their ripper guns like clubs and swatted the Orks quite easily, sending several of them flying through the air to land amongst their comrades.

"Ogryns! Grenades!" Khor bellowed as he fired his ripper gun from his hip one handed and reached for his webbing with the other hand. Just as the ogryns' ripper guns were oversized versions of shotguns so the grenades that they carried were oversized versions of the standard Imperial Guard issue fragmentation grenades and the strength of the ogryns gave them the ability to hurl these some distance through the jungle into the midst of the Orks before they exploded.

"Sergeant Quinn." Wolf signalled as her command section approached from behind his squad, "We need to support Khor's ogryns. They'll be overwhelmed if we don't."

"Understood lieutenant." he responded then he looked at his squad, "Okay let's move." he told them, "and show them who owns this jungle." and then he leapt out from behind the tree he was using as cover and fired his shotgun into the Orks as he advanced towards them.

The Orks were somewhat taken aback by the humans reacting by advancing into them rather than falling back as they so often did when confronted with charging mobs of Orks but they were not as intimidated by the Catachans as they were by the ogryns and a group roared as they charged at Quinn's squad.

One Ork leapt at a Catachan and grabbed him by the throat. In response the Catachan pressed his shotgun against the Ork's stomach and fired, but the blast was not instantly lethal and before the Ork died it was able to drive its crude blade through the Catachan's eye and kill him as well.

Blasts of flames drove some of the Orks back, lighting several on fire in the process but the Orks were not as prone to panicking as the Gretchin had been and enough retained their composure long enough to launch another wave of attacks against the Catachans.

It was at this point that Wolf's command section caught up with Quinn's veterans to join the fray and Wolf fired a shot from her las pistol into the face of an Ork while it struggled to reload its own gun. Then among the Orks she noticed one that stood out among the others thanks to it standing almost half a metre taller than most of them. This Ork wielded a large double handed axe and as it made its way towards Wolf it used the weapon to knock even its own allies out of the way. Wolf's training had told her that Orks continued to grow throughout their lives as they won more battles and that with bigger size came higher rank and she guessed that this leader was seeking her out.

"Okay then." she said to herself, "Come and get it." and she drew her knife as well and stood ready to meet the Ork's charge. She knew that physically she was no match for the monster but she also knew that Orks reacted slowly and she hoped to use that weakness against it. As the Ork charged towards her, Wolf rushed forwards, hoping to strike the first blow. But surprisingly to her the Ork did not react to her presence other

than to swing its axe sideways, striking her with the flat edge and hurling her out of the way as it carried on. The strength of the blow would have been enough to smash the ribs of an unarmoured human but Wolf wore a pair of reinforced ceramite plates in the front and rear pockets of her flak jacket, unlike the overwhelming majority of Catachans who generally opted to forego these to lighten the load they were required to carry through the jungle. Thanks to the added protection of these plates Wolf escape serious injury, though she still had the breath knocked out of her when she landed. Dazed and gasping for breath, Wolf looked up and wondered why the ork had acted in such a manner before she realised that it was treating the Catachans in the same way as it would other Orks, it had decided that the larger humans were in charge. Vance himself was at the shorter range of height of most Catachans and so the Ork ignored him as well and instead made for Quinn's veterans where Quinn was shouting orders and marking himself out as a target.

"Quinn!" Wolf gasped, trying to alert him to the danger but she was still out of breath and could not raise her voice enough to make herself heard over the noise of battle. Instead she reached for her ear, intending to activate her microbead but she discovered that it had become dislodged when she was hurled aside by the Ork. Looking around she could not find the device but she did quickly locate her las pistol and knife and picked them up. Then she struggled back to her feet and tried to move as quickly as she could to help Quinn. Distracted by the Orks he was already facing, Quinn would have been unaware of the larger Ork's approach if not for the fact that it made no attempt to approach in a stealthy manner. Instead it rushed towards him and roared as it raised its axe, alerting Quinn and giving him the chance to turn and face his new opponent. He was able to get off a single shot with his shotgun and hit the Ork in its shoulder but the hit achieved nothing more than to tear up some of the Ork's thick muscle tissue and produced a roar of pain before it brought down its axe. Quinn brought up his shotgun, holding it by the grip and muzzle to parry the axe but even though he was successful in preventing the blade from splitting him in half the force of the impact sent the shotgun flying from his grip and he fell backwards.

The Ork stepped forwards as Quinn lay on his back looking back up at it and he reached to his hip where his stub pistol was holstered and he drew the weapon before firing it repeatedly into the Ork. Each hit made the Ork roar in pain again but none of them hit anything vital enough to incapacitate it. Then the slide on the pistol locked back as the last round was fired and Quinn waited for the axe to fall. But instead the Ork roared again and dropped to its knees with blood spurting from one leg. Quinn looked beyond the Ork and saw Wolf as she pulled her knife from the back of the Ork's knee and pointed her las pistol at its head. But before she could fire it the Ork looked around and reached out to grab hold of the weapon, pushing it aside and roaring right into Wolf's face, causing her to flinch. The Ork then reached out with its other hand and Wolf expected it to grab hold of her at any moment. However, as the creature's filthy claws were just millimetres from her face the tip of a blade suddenly erupted out of its throat and as the Ork fell sideways she saw Quinn holding his knife behind it.

"I guess that makes us even lieutenant." he said and she nodded.

Grey stared at the cloud of smoke that shrouded the Ork vessel. Every now and again there was another flash from within the cloud as the Orks fired one of its defensive weapons at the Imperial Guard. Fortunately their usual poor aim was made even worse by their inability to see the targets they were engaging and they were unaware that most of the Lyrerians had moved from their position at the top of the slope to engage the main force of Orks at shorter range and the shells were passing over them. But there was still the chance that one could fall short and land amongst the human troops so Grey continued his efforts to target these defensive emplacements. Of course inflicting any damage on the ship also required the missiles to find an existing hole in the otherwise impenetrable hull. But then something caught Grey's attention as he continued to peer through his magnoculars. Passing through the cloud he could just about make out a narrow red line that disappeared as soon as the cloud ended.

"Rull you magnificent bastard." he muttered to himself. Grey knew that what he was seeing was the targeting laser from Rull's sniper rifle. Normally this would be invisible even through magnoculars but when projected into the cloud it reflected off the smoke particles in the air to produce a visible beam. There was no chance that a round fired from his rifle would be able to inflict any damage on the ship from the outside so he obviously was not trying to take out a target.

He was marking one.

Grey knew that if Rull had been able to enter the Ork ship, which given his ability to conceal himself was quite likely, then he could have located a stock of volatile material located beside a hole in the hull. Through that hole he could have located a suitable hiding point in the surrounding terrain prior to the mortar bombardment commencing and then in turn marked the hole from this hiding place by making a note of the bearing he needed.

"Bomber." Grey said, activating his microbead.

"Yes sergeant?" Mayer replied.

"Can you give me a spotting round I can see through the smoke?"

"Sure. I can rig an illumination round to go off on impact instead."

"Good. Do it." Grey told him and then he waited.

Less than a minute later there was a whistling from over head as the modified mortar round passed over. Grey looked through his magnoculars again and watched for the flash as the mortar round hit the Ork ship and then he activated his microbead again.

"Bomber adjust your targeting ten degrees to the left and about thirty metres in."

"Got it. Do you want another spotting round?"

"No. Centre your shots on that position and fire for effect."

Most of the Lyreian units advancing down the slope acted to give one another mutual support, with one unit moving forwards carefully through the undergrowth while another laid down fire at the Orks. But the large unit of conscripts, newly recruited guardsmen with little or no previous combat experience was struggling to keep up.

"Hold!" Creon bellowed at them as he strode towards them and the inexperienced troops came to a halt, fearful of why the commissar was addressing them, "Form two ranks." he ordered them, "Reload your weapons and set them to semi-automatic only."

The conscripts relaxed when they heard this, knowing that the commissar intended to have them perform one of the most basic of drills rather than select one or more for punishment. The conscripts formed themselves up into two rows that faced the Orks on the slope below them, staggered so that each man was positioned either behind or in front of a gap in the other row. Then when they had reloaded their weapons they waited, crouching down with their las guns point upwards at an angle.

Taking up a position at one end of the conscripts, Creon looked towards the Orks and saw a large group of them climbing the slope directly in front of him.

"Rear rank!" he shouted and the rear rank of conscripts got to their feet and brought their las guns up to their shoulders, "Fire!"

In unison the standing conscripts fired their lasguns into the Orks.

"Advance!" Creon yelled and the standing conscripts moved in front of the front rank and knelt down, "Rear rank! Fire!" Creon shouted again and the new rear row of conscripts got to their feet as ordered and sent another volley of las gun blasts into the Orks, "Advance!"

Though individually weak, the effect of a large number of las gun shots being fired into the Orks in one go was telling and a number of them fell with each volley. But the Orks continued to climb the slope, closing the gap between them and the conscripts. Then came the 'crack' of gunfire as the Orks came within pistol range and started to return fire. Their shooting was less disciplined than that of the conscripts but a few shots still found gaps in armour and a handful of conscripts fell. Knowing that the Orks would soon be able to charge the troops under his command, Creon took action to make it as hard as possible for them to overwhelm the conscripts' position.

"Both ranks!" he shouted and the entire squad got to their feet, "Set for automatic fire." and the conscripts adjusted their las guns and took aim while Creon braced himself and waited for the Orks to get closer, "Fire!" As one the conscripts fired their las guns set on fully automatic, spraying the bellowing Orks with energy blasts and many of them fell under the heavy weight of fire. As Creon knew would happen the sustained firing of the las guns rapidly drained their charge packs and the conscripts were left with no time to reload as the Orks finally reached them.

"Strike back." the commissar shouted as he slashed the throat of an Ork with his sword, "Strike back in the Emperor's name and remove this xenos taint from his world!"

With their bayonets already fixed the conscripts were as ready as they could be to meet the Orks' charge and they struck out at the aliens, stabbing them and clubbing them with the butts of their las guns. But the conscripts' inexperience now showed itself painfully and the Orks who lived their lives violently began to hack their way through the squad. Only Commissar Creon himself was skilled enough to be able to put up a real fight on his own but even his luck ran out as a larger Ork specimen stepped forwards, pushing other Orks aside to reach the easily identifiable commissar.

Creon tried to aim his bolt pistol at the large Ork's head but the alien struck before he could pull the trigger, slashing at his arm with a knife and Creon winced as it cut through the sleeve of his coat just deep enough to break his skin. With his aim spoiled, Creon instead thrust his sword forwards into the Ork but it did little and the alien shoved him backwards. But before the Ork could deliver the killing blow there was a brilliant flash accompanied by a wave of heat and a thunderous roar from the direction of the Ork starship.

Instinctively the Imperial Guard troop threw themselves to the ground before the shrapnel from the explosion began to fall all around them like rain. Few of the Orks thought to do the same, with some instead trying to take advantage of the humans' action to attack while they were vulnerable but although some were able to strike at a prone guardsman most were too slow to act before the shrapnel began to slice through them.

"Forwards!" Wolf yelled to her troops as the rain of twisted metal ended, "Finish them off!" and she got to her feet and darted towards the closest Ork that was howling in pain from having its arm severed at the elbow before shooting it in the head. Then she looked towards the Ork starship and saw that the cloud of smoke

surrounding it was now much darker and extended further up into the sky. Furthermore even through the smoke she could see the flames inside the Ork ship where one of Mayer's mortar rounds had struck something highly volatile and it was obvious that they were spreading.

Turning her attention back to the Orks close to her rather than inside their ship, Wolf saw that the explosion had seriously affected their behaviour. Now despite still having greater numbers the Orks were on the defensive. Many had been injured by the blast and now the heavy artillery that had been supporting their advance had been silenced as the remaining gun crews inside the ship, most of whom were Gretchin rather than Orks, started to abandon their posts to escape the flames now engulfing it. On the other hand the vast majority of the human troops had escaped harm in the explosion and they still had the benefit of supporting fire from their dug in heavy weapon teams. Now isolated Orks found themselves surrounded by guardsmen while wherever they tried to form into groups they were targeted by heavy weapon fire.

Advancing through the jungle with her command section, Wolf spotted Khor and his ogryns charge at one of the larger Orks, mobbing the creature and knocking it to the ground before striking it with the butts of their ripper guns and stamping on it even after it was already dead.

Then came a second large explosion from the Ork starship as the flames spread far enough to ignite another stash of volatile material. Once again the Imperial Guard troops took cover as best they could, lying flat where nothing better was available whereas the Orks suffered yet more casualties and this proved to be the final straw for them.

Looking up from the ground, Quinn saw an Ork come running down the slope towards him and he quickly rolled onto his back and fired two rapid shots from his reloaded stub pistol. Both hit the Ork and it stumbled before falling forwards and then rolling down the slope.

"Here they come." he warned his squad when he saw more Orks behind the first but then the significance of the direction of the Orks' charge dawned on him.

They were retreating.

Second Platoon's advance had brought them into the path taken by the Orks as they climbed the slope towards the Lyrerians and now that the Orks were disengaging they were heading back down towards the Catachans.

"Back!" Quinn snapped, "Get back the way we came. Flamers, I want suppressing fire. Keep those greenskins away from us."

The veterans pulled back just as Quinn ordered them to, with the two flamer armed Catachans releasing short bursts of flames to create fires that drove the fleeing Orks away from them. When an isolated Ork did manage to evade this and came stumbling towards the squad it was met by a barrage of shotgun rounds. Meanwhile Wolf and her command section watched as the Orks fled back down the slope.

"think someone ought to stop them?" Torrent said and when Wolf and Vance looked round they saw her pointing down the slope to where Khor's squad was giving chase to the Orks, shooting and clubbing any that came within range.

Wolf reached for her microbead before remembering that she had lost it.

"Sergeant Vance." she said, looking at him, "Order them back." and he nodded.

"Sergeant Khor, Lieutenant Wolf wants you to stop and come back to us." he said.

"Ogryns!" Khor bellowed, his voice carrying as far as the command section, "Halt." and the other half dozen abhumans ground to a halt, snarling at the Orks as they continued to run.

"Is that them all?" Wolf asked, looking around for any signs of continued Ork activity.

"Looks like it to me lieutenant." Vance answered.

"In that case let's go and see what this battle's cost us." Wolf added.

9.

Given that the Orks had been lightly armed the Imperial Guard forces had escaped the battle with relatively few casualties. Most of these had had been caused when the Orks got close enough to engage in hand-to-hand combat but there were also a number of gunshot wounds being treated as Wolf made her way through the Lyrerians to where Commissar Creon was being treated for minor injuries.

"Ah lieutenant." he said, getting to his feet and standing up straight, "Another victory for the Emperor's forces. His will was obviously with us."

"Yes sir." she replied. It was then that she noticed a tattoo on his arm now visible only through a tear in his sleeve and she frowned.

"And how did your platoon fare?" the commissar asked.

"Not so bad." Wolf told him, looking him in the face again, "My veteran squad lost a man but the others got away with nothing but injuries and damage to equipment. Nothing we can't replace though. My medicae is seeing to our wounded now."

"Well the Lyrerians fared somewhat worse than that. More than forty troops lost and half as many again injured."

Wolf's eyes widened as she took this in. The Lyrerians had lost or suffered injury to almost a quarter of their strength. Undoubtedly some of those would still be able to fight but it was a heavy price to have paid in an engagement that Wolf had advised against.

"What about Captain Larn?" she asked.

"Alive but incapacitated." Creon replied and then he looked past Wolf, "In fact I've told the platoon leaders I want to see them all and here they are now."

Wolf looked around and saw five Lyrerian officers approaching along with a sergeant. The officers she recognised as lieutenants who commanded five of the company's six platoons but the sergeant was unknown to her.

"Gentlemen." Creon said as they gathered around him, "I'm afraid to have to tell you that Captain Larn has been declared medically unfit to continue in his duties. Therefore, it is my duty to inform you that Lieutenant Tasker will be taking over command of the company." and he looked at Tasker who smiled and nodded.

"Of course commissar." he replied and he looked around before pointing past the still burning Ork starship, "In that case I want the company ready to move. We'll follow that same trail the Orks were using for-"

"One moment please lieutenant." Creon said, "It is not for you to be deciding our next course of action."

"But you put me in command." Tasker replied, "I am the senior officer present."

"Your commission is the oldest, yes. Plus you are in command of the company. But I have not placed you in command of this mission." Creon told him. Then he looked at Wolf, "Lieutenant Wolf, that role now falls to you."

"Her?" Tasker exclaimed as both he and Wolf stared at Creon in surprise, "But she isn't even part of our regiment any more."

"But she was. Plus her record indicates that she has experience in leading her platoon on missions deep into jungle terrain without oversight. Just the sort of skill set that is needed in the absence of Captain Larn."

Creon explained, "Now you will turn command of your platoon over to your platoon sergeant and Sergeant Dunn here will take over Fourth Platoon given the death of their lieutenant. But in mission terms Lieutenant Wolf is now in command."

Tasker stared at Wolf in a way that reminded her of the way some Catachans looked at her sometimes.

"Is there a problem lieutenant?" she asked

"Of course not." he replied, knowing better than to challenge the ruling of a commissar. While Catachan regiments did all they could to undermine the authority of commissars the Lyrerians did not and Creon could execute Tasker without fearing any repercussions if he felt he had grounds.

"Then I suggest you all return to your platoons." Creon said, "I'm sure that Lieutenant Wolf will have orders for you shortly."

"Yes sir." Tasker said before he and the other platoon leaders departed, heading back to their own command sections. Then Creon looked at Wolf.

"Now I suggest you take me to your command section lieutenant." he told her.

"Yes sir." she replied and the pair began to walk.

"You have a question lieutenant?" Creon asked when he noticed her glancing at him repeatedly, "Ask it."

"If you insist." Wolf replied, coming to a halt, "How long did it take for you to lose your accent?" she asked and Creon smiled.

"Ah, so you figured it out." he said, smiling.

"You're the only commissar I've ever heard of who backed a junior officer over a more senior one." Wolf

replied, "Regulations are clear that an officer of higher rank is always right."

"Even when he's totally out of his depth and refuses to listen to reason just because of your shared personal history." Creon agreed, "I had hoped he'd see sense on his own after the debacle when he placed his own men at the front of the column. But when he didn't I needed to make sure that he didn't waste any more lives. Especially if there was the chance that one of them could be mine."

"Plus I saw the tattoo." Wolf added and she pointed to Creon's damaged sleeve.

"Yes, a small reminder of home." he said, "I left when I was thirteen. My family was all dead thanks to the jungle of Catachan and I was only too happy to get away. But you can take the boy out of the jungle but the jungle never truly leaves the boy. I'm afraid that my independent streak never really went away."

"Even if the accent did?" Wolf said.

"My instructors were adamant about the need to speak with authority. Something they said was lacking in my voice to begin with. Of course if I hadn't lost it then I would never have been assigned to this mission, the commissariat avoids placing commissars with units from their own worlds. They think that we'll go easier on our own people. But with the way I speak now they've forgotten all about where I came from."

"So you'll always be an outsider." Wolf said, smiling as she used the term that was applied to her by the Catachans.

Second Platoon was gathered together and taking stock of what they had left following the battle. All of the squad leaders, including Mayer and Khor were stood with the platoon's command section and as Wolf approached them with Creon she heard them laugh. However, as soon as Vance spotted her he nodded to the others and the laughter stopped.

"What's going on?" Wolf asked.

"Oh nothing." Quinn replied and then he held out a microbead headset, "Here you go." he told her, "A replacement."

"Thanks." Wolf said as she inserted it into her ear.

"We wiped it after we took it out of Lucas's ear." Torrent said and Wolf paused, knowing that Lucas was the veteran killed in the recent engagement.

"Well where did you think we'd get a new microbead out here?" Vance asked.

"I've got his gun." Quinn added.

"Yeah but you don't have to stick that in your ear." Wolf said, removing the microbead and wiping it again before putting it back in her ear, "Since Captain Larn is incapacitated I've been put in command of the mission." and the Catachans stared at her.

"Seriously?" Molla asked.

"Lieutenant Wolf is most suitably qualified for the role." Creon responded.

"It's my intention to take the force through the jungle on a path parallel to the Ork trail." Wolf continued, "I want to know what the Orks are doing but I don't want to risk the trail itself. But first I want to check in with headquarters and see if there have been any other developments." and she reached out towards her section's vox operator, "Turner, if you wouldn't mind." she said and he passed her the handset, "Catachan On Nine Mark Four this is Catachan One Nine Mark Four Mark Two. Do you read me? Over."

"Lieutenant Wolf? This is Sergeant Stubbs. Over." Stubbs's voice responded.

"Sergeant, is Major Trent there? Over." Wolf asked.

"No, he's still with the Lyrerians. Hang on, I'll have you transferred. Over." Stubbs told her and there was a brief pause while the signal was relayed to the headquarters of the Lyrerian XXXII Regiment.

"Trent here. Over." Trent's voice then said and Wolf smiled.

"Major." she said, "Lieutenant Wolf here, I'm calling to report that-"

"Look Wolf," Trent interrupted, "you've called at the worst possible time. That Ork space hulk is closing fast. Latest estimates put it less than a day away from entering orbit and then we're going to have to contend with greenskins dropping all over the planet. Right now the Navy's making every excuse they can as to why they can't stop it and the locals are panicking so badly that the commissariat is seriously considering removing the governor and declaring martial law. So what do you want? Over."

"Sir we've engaged the enemy near one of their ships." Wolf told him, "It appears that they were dismantling the vessel to provide resources for a large scale construction project elsewhere. It's my intention to investigate what this is. Over."

"You're intention? Wolf, what's happened to Captain Larn? Over."

"Captain Larn has been incapacitated and Commissar Creon has appointed me to take his place as mission commander. Over."

"Feth it must be bad out there." Trent commented, "Look, just make sure you don't get in too deep. With the situation back here continuing to deteriorate there are no support assets available if you get into a jam. Over."

"Yes sir, I understand. Over."

"Good. Now some guy from the Navy just turned up and I'm guessing he's brought more bad news so I need

to go. Oh and your sister says hello. Over and out.” Trent said and then the channel went dead. Wolf sighed.

“Looks like we're on our own.” she said as she returned the handset to Turner, “But that doesn't change my plan.”

“I take it that you'll be wanting your platoon to lead the way lieutenant?” Creon asked and Wolf nodded.

“That's right. We need to move quickly and that means having my men mark a route.” she said.

“I that case I'll go and give them the good news. Carry on lieutenant.” Creon said and then he started to walk back in the direction of where the Lyrerians were gathered.

“What's with the leash?” Quinn asked quietly as the Catachans watched the commissar leaving.

“Yeah, how the hell did you manage to get yourself promoted to mission commander?” Torrent added and Wolf smiled.

“Let's just say that I figured out where he came from originally.” she replied, “And I've experience in dealing with people from his planet.”

“So they're old friends of yours then lieutenant?” Mayer asked but Wolf shook her head.

“Actually the overwhelming majority are ass holes.” she answered. Then she looked at Quinn, “So what were you all really laughing at when I arrived? Come on, you can tell me now that Commissar Creon is gone.”

“Err, I'm not sure we can.” Quinn replied.

“Molla was describing certain features of women he's seen naked and we were trying to guess whether he was talking about you or your sister.” Torrent then said with a large smile and Wolf's face fell.

“Get your kit together.” she said, frowning, “I want us ready to go in half an hour.”

10.

The trail that the Ork cargo conveyors had followed through the jungle had been cleared of all obstacles by the Orks and their Gretchin workers. Obviously this had not been achieved without casualties resulting from accidents, fights and of course the native life that was just as hostile to the greenskins as it was towards humans and the bodies of many of the slain still lay along the sides of the trail. The trail did offer a route through the jungle that was reasonably free of dangerous plant and animal life but Wolf had balanced the added safety of being able to avoid the natural hazards of Valus with the increased danger of her force being discovered by the Orks. Instead the force moved along a path parallel to the trail, close enough that one of Wolf's units could monitor any activity on it while still remaining in visual contact with the rest of the platoon. "Activity." Mayer reported when his squad was monitoring the trail, "Looks like vehicles coming in from another path."

"Try and identify them. But do not engage. I repeat, do not engage." Wolf responded and then she beckoned for Turner to hand her the vox before using it to broadcast to the entire force, "Column halt." she ordered, "There is an Ork force up ahead. Until we know what we're dealing with I don't want them to know that we're here. Stay still and stay quiet. Wolf out."

The force came to an immediate halt and crouched down while they waited for Mayer to report in again. Mayer himself moved as close to the edge of the trail as he dared. Orks were not regarded as being very observant but he was not willing to gamble on that. Instead he concealed himself and waited as the sounds of poorly tuned engines grew louder.

The first vehicles to emerge from the trail that joined onto the one the humans had been following were half-tracked bikes that were surrounded by clouds of dirt ripped up from the ground beneath them. These raced right past Mayer, their riders roaring with excitement as they went. Following these came a swarm of assorted buggies and larger half tracks. Not as fast or agile as the bikes these bounced along the uneven surface of the trail but also continued right past Mayer. Then came the largest ground vehicle that Mayer had ever seen.

General Fortnam commanded the Catachan VII Division, of which the XIX Regiment was just one part from a Baneblade superheavy tank. But even at three hundred tonnes that monster was dwarfed by the enormous tracked cargo carrier that Mayer was now looking at. Essentially just a very large flat platform mounted above numerous track modules that rattled along the trail, the vehicle looked to be operated from a small, open cabin by an Ork with glowing implants in his skull. As with all Ork vehicles the cargo carrier mounted weapons and there were pintle mounted automatic weapons and missile launchers crewed by a mix of Orks and Gretchin all along the side that Mayer could see from his position. But the upper surface was obviously intended for the transportation of cargo and it was piled high with large pieces of metal that Mayer guessed had been taken from another starship like the one the humans had attacked earlier.

"Lieutenant it looks like the Orks are using more than one ship for whatever they're making." he signalled using his microbead, "I'm looking at another of their transports. It's escorted by numerous light vehicles and has numerous weapon hard points of its own."

"Too much for us to take out then?" Wolf asked and Mayer was about to agree when a thought occurred to him.

"The driver appears to be exposed lieutenant." he replied.

A Gretchin clambered down into the cabin where several Orks, including the cybernetically enhanced driver were gathered. The Gretchin had brought with it a jug of a liquid that would have smelt rotten to a human nose but to Orks was pleasing as well as numerous mugs. The Orks smiled when they saw the Gretchin and all but the driver began to huddle around as it began pouring out the fluid into the mugs. After two had been handed out the driver barked an order at the Gretchin, angry at being ignored while doing all the work and so the Gretchin poured the driver a drink and carried it to him. But as the smaller creature handed the drink over it noticed that a bright red spot had suddenly appeared on the surface of one of the driver's cybernetic implants. Before the Gretchin could warn the driver a hole suddenly appeared in the implant right where the dot had been and the results were catastrophic. The driver went from an Ork's natural hunched position to sitting straight up and shuddering as sparks flew from his damaged implant before it exploded, setting fire to the driver's entire head. At the same time he pushed forwards on the controls, a pair of joysticks that controlled the flow of fuel to the engines on each side of the vehicle and tightened his grip. As a result of this the vehicle lurched forwards as it began to accelerate.

The massive vehicle was built for carrying capacity rather than speed but even so it was capable of moving significantly faster than the driver had been pushing it, the risk of losing any of the inadequately secured cargo concerning the driver more than the Ork's innate desire for speed and as it suddenly accelerated the

crews of two of the lighter vehicles were taken by surprise and failed to react before they were crushed beneath the transport's massive tracks.

The uneven surface of the trail meant that the transport's course did not remain straight as it continued on its way while the Ork crew in the cabin did their best to try and regain control by tearing the now dead driver away from the controls. But their actions were too slow to prevent the vehicle from veering off course enough that it ploughed through the jungle, sending large chunks of metal sliding from either side of the cargo deck. Some of these fell far enough from the side of the vehicle that they just embedded themselves in the ground where they landed but others bounced down the transport's side and ripped off any protruding features, including several of the weapon mountings. Initially its massive bulk allowed it to just tear up the trees and surrounding undergrowth, creating another relatively clear trail in its wake, but as the debris built up in front of the transport its progress slowed until all of a sudden one of its forward tracks was thrown, breaking into pieces and flying around as the vehicle finally came to a halt.

From the jungle on the opposite side of the trail Wolf looked at the rear of the transport through her magnoculars.

"Vance," she said, "take a look at the back of that thing. Do those look like-

"Fuel tanks?" Vance interrupted as he studied the vehicle as well and Wolf nodded, "Should go with a bang." he added.

"They're hidden by the cargo deck." Mayer commented, "My mortars can't hit them."

"They might not penetrate them anyway." Wolf replied and she activated her microbead, "Sergeant Grey, bring your squad to my position at the double. Enemy armour to be engaged."

While they waited for Second Squad to arrive, Wolf command section and Mayer's mortar squad continued to watch the Orks, paying particular attention to the lighter vehicles further down the trail. Even with the noise and smoke created by their own vehicles the crews of these could not fail to notice what had happened to the cargo transport and now they were circling back around to investigate. Given how common mechanical failures were in Ork technology they still considered a mere malfunction the likely cause and at this stage were not looking for the source of an attack.

"This could be trouble." Vance commented.

"Only if they stay out there where they can manoeuvre." Wolf replied and she reached out to take the vox handset from Turner's back, "All units stand by to engage the enemy." she broadcast to the entire Imperial Guard force, both Catachan and Lyrerian, "My command section along with Second Squad and Mayer mortar squad will be falling back and leading the enemy into the jungle. Other Catachan units are to provide covering fire until we reach them and then fall back with us. Lyrerian units will then engage the enemy from the flank. Over and out." Then as Wolf replaced the vox handset she noticed Vance smiling, "You approve platoon sergeant?" she asked.

"Oh I do." he replied, "Not that I think you need it."

"Second Squad reporting lieutenant." Grey said softly as his squad then arrived.

"Good." Wolf replied and she pointed to what she and Vance had decided were the fuel tanks of the Ork cargo transport, "Kindly have your weapons team put a krak missile into those fuel tanks."

"Yes lieutenant." Grey said and he turned to his squad's two-man heavy weapon team, "Dean, Michaels. You heard the lieutenant. One round, krak, fire for effect."

The two guardsmen hurried forwards, Dean crouching down and lifting his tubular weapon onto his shoulder as Michaels unpacked a krak missile and then slid it into the back of the launcher.

"Weapon hot." Michaels said, stepping aside, "Clear behind." and moments later there was a jet of flame from the back of the launcher as the missile's engine ignited and shot out of the front, streaking towards the Ork vehicle.

The large fuel tanks were an easy target and the missile struck one of them almost dead centre before detonating. The shaped charge warhead punched a hole through the thick tank and delivered its energy into the contents, igniting all of the stored fuel. The explosion of the fuel tank triggered an immediate chain reaction, first consuming the other tanks before moving forwards underneath the vehicle as the fuel lines that led to the engines driving each track module caught fire and flames erupted either side of the transport, immolating the gunners and their weapons. At the same time the upper cargo deck was blown apart and the massive chunks of metal it carried were hurled off it. Too heavy to become properly airborne, the scrap instead flipped over or rolled off the deck to land not far from the wrecked transport as it continued to burn ferociously.

"I think that got their attention lieutenant." Mayer said, still looking along the trail at the approaching Ork vehicles and moments later there was the rattle of projectile fire as the Orks let loose at the area of jungle they had seen the missile come from.

"Fall back!" Wolf exclaimed, flinching as a heavy bullet ripped splinters from a tree close to her and the Catachans picked up their equipment and began retreating into the jungle. As she fell back Wolf fired her las pistol towards the Orks, not out of any expectation that she could damage any of their vehicles but instead to

make sure that they knew their prey was withdrawing.

The Orks continued to advance down the trail and in their eagerness to reach the humans ahead of them they failed to notice that one by one the bikers now bringing up the rear of their column were falling from their machines with bullet holes in the backs of their heads as Rull expertly picked them off.

The driver of first of the buggies paused when he reached the edge of the jungle where the missile had erupted from, uncertain about taking his vehicle into such terrain. But then two things happened to make his mind up. Firstly there was another shot from a las weapon from within the jungle that passed close by his head and secondly one of the half tracks caught up to him and drove right past, its crew jeering as they headed into the jungle unconcerned.

"They're coming!" Grey shouted as he heard the crashing sounds made by the Ork vehicles as they moved through the jungle.

In such dense terrain there was little room for the vehicles to manoeuvre and even the Orks slowed down as they tried to steer around obstacles. This rapidly led to several minor collisions that rapidly escalated into more serious fights between the crews over whose fault it was. But even as internal fighting reduced their numbers the Orks kept advancing after the retreating Catachans.

Right into the field of fire of those who had been held back.

"Open fire." Molla yelled ordered and there was the pounding of his squad's heavy bolter as it crew targeted the closest Ork buggy. At the same time the guardsman carrying the squad's grenade launcher targeted another with an anti-armour krak grenade and he smiled as the wheel was blown off another vehicle, causing it to flip over. The crew of this second vehicle staggered away from the wreckage, relatively unharmed until First Squad's riflemen as well as Molla himself opened fire with their las weapons, catching the two Orks in a barrage they could not avoid and they both screamed in pain as one blast after another hit them until some finally struck something vital and ended their lives.

As the Orks continued to get closer they came with range of the other Catachan squads as well and as one buggy rounded a large tree there was a mighty roar from behind it as Khor swung his ripper gun by its barrel and struck the gunner standing at the rear of the vehicle in his face, knocking him to the ground. Then as Khor stamped up and down on the helpless gunner the rest of his squad fired their ripper guns on the buggy as it went past and the driver slumped forwards before the buggy smashed headlong into a tree.

A fourth Ork vehicle, this one a half track was caught unaware by Quinn's veteran squad and subjected to a volley of shotgun blasts before the squad's meltagun operator targeted it with a single shot that vaporised both the engine and the driver, turning what was left into a ball of flaming wreckage.

"Time to go." Vance called out as Second Platoon's command section ran past the Catachans who had been lying in wait for the Orks. Acting quickly they too gathered their equipment and started to fall back, Khor's ogyrns and Quinn's veterans bringing up the rear and making enough noise with their weapons that the Orks could not fail to know which way they were going.

In response the Orks behaved exactly as Wolf had expected them to, they followed the Catachans deeper into the jungle until they found themselves in the sights of the Lyrerians.

"For the Emperor!" Creon yelled and the air was filled with the sounds of heavy weapons being fired. Las cannons burned through trees, undergrowth and Orks alike as their crews took a devastating toll on the Orks. Supporting these were missile launchers and auto cannons that chewed up the lightweight buggies and half tracks while the combined fire of more than twenty heavy bolters acting in unison made sure that not a single Ork or Gretchin rigger survived to flee into the jungle. The Lyrerian weapons kept firing even after the last of the Ork vehicles was reduced to scrap until the platoon commanders ordered them to cease. With the Orks no longer chasing them, Vance looked up through the trees and saw the plume of smoke coming from the still burning transport.

"You know that's going to attract attention don't you?" he said to Wolf, "That's the second fire we've started today."

"I know." Wolf replied, nodding, "In fact I'm kind of hoping that it will."

"You want more Orks here?" Torrent asked in amazement.

"Sure. Why not?" Wolf answered, "Firstly we won't be here. We're moving on to see where that transport was going so it means fewer Orks left wherever that is."

"And secondly?" Vance asked.

"And secondly they'll be coming straight down that trail which will make them an easy target for the Lyrerian heavy weapon teams I'm leaving behind."

Leaving behind most of the Lyrerians' heavy weapons allowed the force to move significantly faster through the jungle towards whatever it was that the Orks were building far from prying eyes. Just as Vance and Wolf had predicted a force of Orks did indeed speed past them, heading along the trail towards the location where they had destroyed the transport and its escorts, but with the humans concealed within the jungle they did not spot any of them and the force continued towards their as yet unknown destination.

The first indication that they were getting close to whatever the Orks were building was a deep humming sound that filled the air and seemed to make everything vibrate.

"Feels like all the fillings are going to pop out of my teeth." Wolf commented and she rubbed the side of her face.

"Well you can take it from me that this is not normal for a jungle." Vance replied

"Yeah, I get it." Wolf said before activating her microbead, "Molla, Quinn, I want you to advance and see what you can find. I'll hold the rest of the force here for now."

"Understood lieutenant." Quinn responded and then the two squads began to advance ahead of the rest of the platoon. Normally when assigned to move ahead of the platoon First Squad would take the lead. But that was so that Molla could make full use of his superior tracking skills and on this occasion those were not needed. Therefore, Quinn led his shotgun armed veterans ahead of Molla's troops who could provide the veterans with cover if it was needed. The hum in the air was soon joined by the sound of hammering that made it obvious that the Orks were close at hand.

"Smell that?" Quinn whispered to one of his men and the other veteran nodded.

"Like a las gun discharge?" he said. The discharge of energy weapons was well known to the soldiers of the Imperial Guard for causing a sharp smell in the air, though far fewer of them knew that it was a result of the formation of ozone.

"Exactly." Quinn said, "But you can only smell that for a few seconds and up close. So what in the name of Him on Earth are the greenskins making out here to produce a smell this strong?" the he waved his men onwards and they crept forwards, alert for the presence of greenskin patrols or scavenging parties.

Then from between the trees Quinn saw a pale blue glow and he came to a halt.

"Molla are you seeing that up ahead?" he signalled.

"Nothing yet, just that smell. But I reckon we're about fifty metres behind you. What is it?"

"Don't know, some sort of glow. I'm guessing that the greenies have built themselves some sort of volcano cannon." A volcano cannon was a massive version of the las cannons commonly carried by Imperial Guard heavy weapon teams or mounted on their tanks. But were as a las cannon might take out a single armoured vehicle volcano cannons could destroy entire squadrons of them in a single blast. Even the smallest of them dominated the hull of super heavy Shadowword tanks while the biggest were mounted only in fixed silos or carried by the largest of the Adeptus Mechanicus's titan war machines. Only the lance batteries aboard Naval warships were bigger, "Get up here." Quinn said, "I've a feeling we may need you on this."

"On our way now." Molla replied and a short time later he and his squad joined Quinn's veterans.

Together the two squads then advanced in the direction of the light, a direction that led them to the edge of a massive clearing that the Orks looked to have created around another of their landed starships. Only this ship now looked like it was providing the foundations of an enormous energy weapon that consisted of numerous panels that stretched up into the sky as lightning arced between them. Meanwhile hoards of Orks and Gretchin could be seen moving around the area surrounding the bizarre array as they assembled what looked like a massive defensive barrier around it and here and there they were winching weapon batteries that had been taken from their ships up onto the top of this wall from where they would be able to rain down death into the jungle for miles around.

"Vox. Now." Quinn barked and he was passed the handset for his squad's vox, "Lieutenant Wolf come in." he signalled, "This is Sergeant Quinn, urgent you respond. Over."

"Sergeant Quinn, Wolf here. Report. Over." Wolf's voice responded.

"Lieutenant, the Orks look to have assembled a large energy weapon of some kind. But it's not under construction still, they look to have finished it. Now they're building a wall around it from the metal they've taken from those ships. If we let them finish it then taking out that gun is going to be a whole lot harder. Over."

"Hold your position sergeant. I'm on my way to join you. Over and out."

As soon as she arrived Wolf started to study the alien construction through her magnoculars, recording everything the device picked up. As well as her command section she had brought Commissar Creon forwards with them to see for his own eyes what the Orks had built.

"What blasphemy is that?" he muttered.

"We need to get this back to headquarters." she said, lowering the magnoculars from her eyes, "Maybe they can make something of this." and then she handed the magnoculars to Turner, "Send them everything that's on there." she told him.

In the bunker serving at the Lyrerian XXXII regimental headquarters Colonel Heller and his staff studied the various images that Wolf had sent to them.

"We're going to need tech priests in here to examine these," Trent said.

"Why?" Heller replied.

"Because it might be useful to find out what that thing is supposed to do." Trent told him.

"It's obvious what it's supposed to do major." Heller told him, "It's a weapon system."

"But it's pointed straight up and anyway, even if it could be levelled then what are the Orks going to fire it at? The curvature of the planet makes a direct line of sight weapon useless that far from any settlement."

"Obviously it is intended to engage our fleet." Heller said and he looked to one of the Naval advisers who nodded in support, "That space hulk is only hours away from making orbit around Valus and this will provide cover for it from the surface while they bring their troops down."

Trent snorted.

"That space hulk has more than enough weapons to cover itself and level every city in a hemisphere at the same time." Trent pointed out, "One surface battery isn't going to make a difference."

"Excuse me colonel." the Naval adviser closest to Heller said, "It could be a teleporter."

"Yes, that makes sense." Heller said, forgetting all about his insistence that the construction was a weapon of some sort, "When the hulk enters orbit the greenskins will be able to teleport thousands of troops to the surface. Those walls are securing a staging ground."

"Why build the teleporter on the surface?" Trent asked, "That means they can only bring troops down to that one location. Building it aboard their hulk enables them to teleport to whatever location they want. Plus it's more secure." then he looked at Elisa, "Lieutenant, go and get us a tech priest." he told her, "A proper tech priest, not one of these lay members." and he looked towards one of the Adeptus Mechanicus technicians present.

"Lieutenant remain right where you are. That is an order." Heller said sternly and then he looked at one of his aides, "Inform this Catachan lieutenant that she is to engage the Orks. Make use of whatever resources she has to sabotage that teleporter before the Orks can put it to use."

A crude map of the Ork camp had been drawn in the ground when Wolf gathered together all of the Lyrerian platoon commanders along with Creon and her own command section and squad leaders.

"Okay," she told them, "Rull had been all around the Ork perimeter and as you'd expect it's full of holes that our troops can exploit. Now the Orks have done a good job of clearing the terrain all around it so there shouldn't be any problem for any of the Lyrerian troops in getting in and out without my platoon there to guide them."

"And what will your platoon be doing while we're fighting the Orks lieutenant?" Tasker asked, "Watching from the sidelines?"

"No actually." Wolf answered, "There are far too many Orks in that camp for us to have a chance of fighting our way through them to that teleporter so my platoon will launch a direct attack on the Ork camp where their wall is not yet in place.

"Our estimate is that there are more than thirty thousand Orks in that camp." Creon commented, "What do you intend to do against them?"

"Not much." Wolf replied, "But if we can just take a few of them out and get their attention then they'll do what Orks always do."

"Come running right at us." Grey muttered and Wolf smiled.

"At which point we fall back into the jungle." she said, "Leading the Orks into the most dangerous terrain we can."

"A few traps along the way should help as well." Molla added.

"Indeed." Wolf said and she looked at the Lyrerian officers, "And while the Orks are busy chasing us you will sneak into the camp through the gaps in their perimeter that we've identified. Get your engineers to anything that looks like a generator or power conduit servicing that teleporter and set demo charges. Then get out of there and blow them."

12.

The sun was setting by the time the traps that would be used to cover the Catachans' retreat were ready and as Wolf led her platoon to the edge of the clearing in which the Orks were still hard at work the bizarre array they had constructed at the centre was silhouetted against the evening sky.

"Ready?" she asked, looking around as the platoon set up its heavy weapons ready to strike at the Orks and one by one the squad leaders indicated their readiness, "Here goes." she muttered before in a clear voice she spoke one more word, "Fire."

The heavy bolter and missile launcher of First and Second Squads were the first weapons to find their mark with an anti-armour missile striking a crane being used to hoist up a cannon taken from an Ork starship while at the same time First Squad's heavy bolter tore through a cluster of Orks that were gathered around camp fires and cooking meat for their evening meal. Following this Mayer's mortar squad began landing shells in the Ork camp seemingly at random. With so many of the various types of greenskin inside, no matter where a shell landed and went off it was likely that at least a handful of the aliens would be hit.

At first it was just the Orks closest to the Catachans that realised where the attack was coming from and as they moved to attack Molla ordered the heavy bolter directed towards them while Grey had a second missile fired into the crane that resulted in it toppling over, crushing several vehicles as it and the cannon it was lifting landed on them. The explosions this caused made more of the Orks turn their attention towards the Catachans and as they started to gather together, rushing headlong from their camp their let out a cry in unison that sounded eerily like a call to arms.

"Waaargh!"

"Time to leave I think." Wolf said as she looked at the oncoming horde of Orks that looked as if it numbered in the thousands.

"I agree." Vance responded as Wolf took the Vox handset from Turner.

"Catachan Second Platoon is falling back." she broadcast, informing the Lyrerians that it was now up to them to infiltrate the Ork camp.

This they did with considerable efficiency. Taking advantage of the poor light they darted from the jungle across the uneven ground to where the Ork perimeter had been identified as weakest. Some of these had actual gaps in the wall that the human troops could squeeze through while others were just of weaker construction and required the use of melta bombs to blast through. Fortunately these explosives operated on the same principles as melta guns and as such produced far less noise than a fragmentation or Krak grenade would and after being triggered the guardsmen outside the wall needed to wait only a few second for the metal around the hole to cool down enough for them to crawl through.

Once inside the wall the Lyrerian troops all made their way towards the Ork starship that formed the base of the strange construction they had assembled. The company's veteran squads led the way, using knives to quietly eliminate the handful of greenskins that got in their way.

When they reached the Ork ship most of the Lyrerians took up positions in and around the main entry points to prevent more greenskins from gaining access to it while the veteran and engineering squads headed inside in search of suitable places to set demolition charges. Commissar Creon himself remained outside, not wanting to get in the way of the teams working inside the ship and believing that he would be better off making sure that the rear guard did its job properly.

The tech priest had entered the bunker to deliver a report to Colonel Heller on the state of the regiment's vehicles, a task that the colonel insisted be carried out by a tech priest in person so that he could get a proper explanation if he was dissatisfied with the report he got. However, Major Trent saw the tech priest first and hurried over to him with a dataslate holding the images and video footage sent to him by Wolf.

"Enginseer." he said, "I need your evaluation of this urgently." and he held out the dataslate.

"Interested." the tech priest responded, his voice echoing unnaturally when he saw the first image on the device's display. However, rather than take the dataslate from Trent the tech priest simply extended one of the flexible mechandrines built into his spine and plugged into a port located on the side of the device, downloading the entire contents into the data storage devices built into his own body and then accessing them all simultaneously with a thought.

"Well?" Trent asked.

"You will have to be more specific." the tech priest said and Trent scowled, an expression that was lost on the emotionless cyborg.

"Can you tell me what that thing is?" he said, glaring into the tech priest's glowing red eyes.

"The picture quality is poor and the images were recorded by an individual obviously not qualified in the production of-"

"Yes I know all that. But my officer is currently risking her life along with dozens more of my men and several hundred of the colonel's to take that thing out." Trent interrupted, "So knowing exactly what it is could be important."

"The technological constructions of the Orkoid xenos classification are haphazard at best and the definitive identification of many of their devices is difficult without seeing it in operation."

"We're hoping to destroy the fething thing before the Orks can start it up." Trent said, "Give me your best guess."

"If you insist. Though I must caution you that the margin of error in my predictions will increase." the tech priest replied, "The general structure is highly reminiscent of the weapon type known by the xenos who create them as a 'tractor cannon' or 'lifter-dropper'. However, these weapons are generally encountered as light artillery pieces or mounted on medium to heavy vehicles. A few larger examples have been identified on the blasphemous imitations of our own titans that the Orks are known to produce but those too are much smaller than the mechanism illustrated in this footage."

"I'm not exactly familiar with xenos weapon systems. What do they do?" Trent asked.

"They manipulate gravity to exert a force on a target. They are typically employed to drag or lift a target into the air before releasing it from a significant height."

"What sort of range are we looking at?"

"Variable. But if the average recorded ranges of such devices is taken as a base point and is then scaled up by the same ratio as appears to exist between the typical size of these devices and this particular example before applying a variance of plus or minus twenty percent to allow for potential differences in efficiency and reliability then we arrive at a result of between three thousand two hundred kilometres and four thousand eight hundred kilometres." the tech priest told him, "Though there is chance that-

"That's out of the atmosphere." Trent said, ignoring the qualification to his estimate that the tech priest was attempting to explain, "We need to tell the colonel."

The Orks pursuing Second Platoon made a great deal of noise as they charged through the jungle behind the Catachans. Much of this was made up of shouted warnings and threats in their own crude language but there were also screams of pain as they ran into assorted pit and spike traps. The Catachans had been under significant time pressure when these were set and so the usual level of concealment was impossible and only shallow pits could be dug but it was enough. For the Orks to look for signs of traps such as disturbed ground or obvious wires in trees would have required them to slow down while chasing the humans and so they blundered right into the traps set for them.

"Lieutenant, Commissar Creon is calling." Turner said as he ran alongside Wolf, "He says that the charges are set and the Lyrerians are withdrawing from the Ork camp under fire."

"Tell him I want the charges detonated as soon as the engineers consider it suitable to do so." Wolf replied, with Turner relaying the message to Creon.

"A tractor beam?" Heller said as the tech priest explained his conclusions.

"One big enough to grab hold of a target in space." Trent added.

"So it is a weapon. The Orks think that they can just pull our ships and satellites out of orbit." Heller said.

"That would be a most inefficient methods of attacking such a target." the tech priest pointed out.

"They aren't planning on using it on our ships they're going to use it on that." Trent said and he pointed towards the nearest display that showed an image of the Ork space hulk, "They can use the tractor beam to control its descent through the atmosphere and land it on the surface. An entire hulk full of Orks delivered right to our doorstep."

"Then it must be destroyed before the space hulk can enter orbit." Heller said.

"Are you being deliberately stupid?" Trent yelled and Heller straightened up, scowling as a nearby commissar reached a hand towards his weapon, "The tractor beam makes it easier for them to get their troops to the surface but it also means that they'll all be concentrated in one place that can be easily targeted."

"The major is correct colonel." the tech priest added, "Once on the ground the space hulk's weapons will not function well enough to be able to fire on a target orbiting above it and lacking the ability to evade bombardment the Naval task force in the system ought to be able to destroy it most efficiently using suitably delivered fusion warheads."

"And the problem goes away." Trent said, "But only if we let the Orks land that thing."

Heller stared at the display showing the Ork space hulk, now only minutes away from entering orbit around Valus.

"Call off the attack." he ordered.

The sound of the demolition charges going off was barely noticeable at the distance Second Platoon had reached when the explosions occurred. But following the distance explosions there was another sound that grew steadily louder, a groaning sound as the supports for the upward pointing tractor beam array started to

give way after being weakened by them. This groaning became a tearing as the elements of the array started to break free and finally came down to the ground with a series of almighty crashes that could be heard easily by the Catachans.

Behind them the Orks reacted with fury and many of them turned around, heading back to the camp to see what could be salvaged.

"Lieutenant, headquarters is calling." Turner reported and Wolf grabbed the handset from him.

"Wolf here." she said, "Target has been-"

"Wolf call off the attack." Colonel Heller ordered.

"But sir it's too late. The charges have already gone off. Over." Wolf replied but there was no reply from the colonel, "Hello colonel? Are you there? Over." but once again there was no answer and before wolf could attempt to re-establish contact again there was a sound like thunder as the already dim twilight sky rapidly darkened.

At more than forty kilometres long the Ork space hulk was not suited to sub orbital flight and it shook violently as began its entry into the atmosphere of Valus. Cobbled together out of lost starships over many centuries the hulk also had a variable level of drag to the air that flowed over it so fast that parts of the outer surface started to glow. This caused parts of the hulk to crumple and bend, weakening the bonds between different sections until all of a sudden it split in two. The rear portion of the hulk tumbled downwards in a steep dive before slamming into the ground near to the coast and the night sky was lit up as the impact triggered an explosion that sent millions of tonnes of debris into the air. Meanwhile the remaining section of the hulk remained on a trajectory not much different from its previous one. Only where the Orks had intended to be able to slow its descent and bring it into land relatively safely deep into the jungle the segment now hurtled along a purely ballistic course that took it directly towards Fort Resolute.

Striking the ground at a much shallower angle than the rear section, the front section did not explode on impact. Instead it continued to travel towards Fort Resolute, gouging a massive trench as it went and leaving behind it a trail of destruction as more pieces continued to fall off.

In the bunker beneath Fort Resolute the occupants of the regimental command centre watched the various displays in horrified silence until there was a distant rumbling sound that steadily grew in intensity.

"What's that?" Elise asked as she looked upwards.

"That's the sound of a space hulk about to crash into the city above our heads." Trent replied flatly.

"We need to evacuate." Heller said suddenly.

"There is no time." the tech priest said, "Even to announce an evacuation would take longer than the time available before the xenos vessel crashes into the city."

It was then that the rumbling sound became so intense that the very room itself started to shake and dust fell from the ceiling. Then there was a creaking sound as the structure overhead began to fail and monitors started to go black as their source feeds went off line.

"Down!" Trent snapped as he saw one of the reinforcing beams running across the ceiling crack and he dived into Elise, pushing her to the floor just moments before the beam fell and the entire bunker went black.