



CATACHAN ONE NINE MARK FOUR MARK TWO

# RITUAL OF DARKNESS

BY STEPHEN J DUTTON



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## **2.2: RITUAL OF DARKNESS**

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Pursuing the treasonous XIV Kordonian Regiment into the jungles of Lyannus Prime, the platoon led by Lieutenant Emilia Wolf discovers evidence that they are interested in the ruins that date back to before the Imperium's rule of the world. Then when Fourth Company is sent to investigate these ruins they find themselves cut off from the rest of their division just as the Kordonians' plan is about to come to fruition...

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# 1 .

Since being forcibly transferred to the Fourth Company of the Catachan XIX Regiment most of the places that Lieutenant Emilia Wolf had walked had been covered in jungle that limited the speed of travel to how fast the undergrowth could be avoided or hacked through. Therefore to be marching along an actual road was almost a relief, though given the distance that she had walked since the start of the day the novelty was wearing off and she paused to take a drink from her canteen, turning her head to watch the heavily armoured Lemman Russ battle tanks rumbling past on the other side of the road.

"I thought you outsiders liked roads," the Catachan woman who was Wolf's platoon medic. 'Outsider' was the Catachan term for anyone not born on that jungle covered world and was generally used as an insult.

"Be fair now Torrent," a nearby sergeant called out to the woman, "with those short legs she's had to take twice as many steps as the rest of us."

Wolf frowned. On average Catachans tended to be tall, whereas even by normal standards Wolf was well below average height.

"Oh ha ha. Very funny Sergeant Grey." Wolf responded. Technically the Imperial Guard's code of conduct for enlisted men gave her the right to have Grey brought up on charges and flogged for his insubordination. But Wolf had rapidly found out that such things mattered for little in Catachan regiments and nothing when it concerned outsiders.

"Lieutenant Wolf!" a voice called out from the other side of the road and she looked up to see Colonel Vorris, the commanding officer of the Catachan XIV Armoured regiment looking down at her from the turret of his Lemman Russ.

"Yes colonel?" she asked.

"The navy has spotted ruins about three kilometres that way," the colonel told her, pointing off the road into the jungle, "Take your platoon and make sure that the enemy isn't using them."

"Yes colonel." Wolf repeated, this time as an acknowledgement rather than a question though. Then as she looked back at her platoon she said, "Okay, you heard the colonel. We're-" and then she realised that they had already left the road.

"Take your platoon lieutenant. Not send it without you." Vorris said from his turret as his tank pulled ahead of her.

"Yes sir." she replied, darting into the jungle, "Hey! Wait for me!" she shouted.

Fortunately for Wolf one of the squads in her platoon was made up of ogyrns. The massive abhumans stood around three metres tall and the mix of their limited intellect and massive bulk made stealthy movement by them impossible. Therefore they produced both a loud crashing sound as they smashed their way through the undergrowth and a trail of destruction that Wolf could follow.

"Sergeant Vance! Slow down!" she shouted when she saw her own command section ahead and her platoon sergeant brought the unit to a stop and smiled at Wolf.

"Best to try and keep up lieutenant." he replied when she rushed up to him. Then he looked around and added, "Especially since we can't be too sure that we're alone out here."

The Catachan VII Division, consisting of the XII, XIX, XXV and XIV Armoured Catachan Regiments had been deployed to the Imperial world of Lyannus to support the XIV Kordonian Regiment. This had seemingly been caught up in a growing revolt by cultists from the jungles outside the capital city when in fact they had been the cause of it, supplying the cultists with weapons and helping them gain access to the city to launch attacks. Once exposed by the actions of Wolf's platoon the Kordonians had been forced to flee into the jungle to join their cultist allies, however. Against both the planetary defence and other security forces in the capital backed up by a full division of Catachans they had no chance of victory in a conventional battle. Unfortunately for them, the Kordonians also stood little chance of being able to defeat the Catachans in a guerilla campaign in the jungle either and now the VII Division was moving deeper into the jungle to root them out and exterminate them.

Wolf frowned.

"You ought to wait for me to say how I want the platoon deployed." she said.

"Sorry lieutenant." Torrent commented, "We were just following the colonel's orders to move out."

"Quinn's got his veterans on point." Vance added, "Molla's squad is on the left flank and Grey's is on the right. Then Khor's ogyrns and Bomber's mortars are here with us." he went on and as Wolf looked towards the six man mortar squad its leader Corporal Mayer, better known as Bomber, looked back at her and smiled and waved, "Would you like any of that changed?" he then asked in conclusion.

"No. No, that's fine." Wolf replied. Then she smiled, "But what about Rull?" she asked.

Rull was the platoon's sniper. At one point before Wolf had joined the platoon he had been part of a squad, but losses in combat had left him operating alone. Rull's ability to move through the jungle and track a target

was unrivalled, even Sergeant Molla who's parents had been guides on Catachan could not match him and he rarely remained within eyesight of anyone else in the platoon.

Vance glared at her.

"Okay, stupid question." Wolf said, just as Torrent moved a branch out of the way to move past it and then released it just in time to allow it to spring back into place, hitting Wolf in the face, "Ow!" she cried out.

"Oops. Watch where you go lieutenant." Torrent commented.

"Did she do that on purpose?" Wolf asked Vance, but he just shrugged.

The roar of engines from overhead made Wolf stop and look upwards. Through the canopy she could just about make out the shapes of the three Imperial Navy vulture gunships that were acting as aerial scouts for the Catachan force.

"Abbot." Wolf called out, "Pass me the vox."

The command squad's vox operator unhooked the handset and passed it to Wolf as she checked the map on her dataslate.

"This is Catachan One Nine Mark Four Mark Two to vulture leader." she said, "We are at six four two by eight one nine. Please confirm heading for ruins. Over."

"Copy that." one of the vulture pilots responded, "Ruins are at bearing one four east. Distance two eight zero zero. Be warned, we've got a heat bloom on auspex. Could be a generator. Over."

"Understood vulture leader. Proceeding one four east. Over and out." Wolf said and she returned the handset back to Abbot before turning to Vance.

"We're already going that way." he said before she could speak, "We'll be there in about an hour and a half."

Before the Imperium had reached Lyannus the planet had been home to a human civilisation that had been cut off from the rest of humanity for thousands of years. During that time they had developed customs that were incompatible with Imperial beliefs and the Imperium had reacted as it always did to such things. It destroyed them.

The settlements on Lyannus had been reduced to ruins by air and artillery strikes that drove their inhabitants into the jungles where they still survived today while the Imperium brought in new colonists to settle the world. After that the ruined settlements had become overgrown and the natives avoided them, preferring to remain hidden in camps that were easily moveable. However, when the Kordonians had arrived and made contact with them to help rebuild their old system of dark worship the ruins had once again become significant and both native and Kordonian forces made use of them.

Sergeant Quinn's veteran squad was the first to enter the ruins, stepped cautiously from the jungle before darting to take cover behind the first structure they came to. Then Quinn himself peered around the corner of the ruin, moving his shotgun to keep it aimed where he was looking. In an instant he was able to pick out every position where a sniper could be lurking or a booby trap could be placed. But in addition to this he saw a thin grey plume of smoke rising up from beyond more of the ruins.

"Okay stand by." he said softly, ducking back behind the ruin but not bothering to look round at his men, "There's smoke about fifty metres ahead. That could be the heat signature those navy fly boys spotted and we need to check it out." then he activated the microbead communicator clipped to his ear, "Lieutenant, this is Quinn." he transmitted.

"Go ahead Quinn." Wolf's voice replied.

"We're at the ruins now and I've spotted smoke about fifty metres from my position."

"Understood sergeant. Proceed with caution. I'll order Mayer's squad to deploy now. If you need fire support just call it in."

"Cheers lieutenant. Quinn out." Quinn said, before shutting off the microbead. Then he glanced at his men and waved them forwards.

Quinn was the first to leave cover, taking a path that limited his exposure to any of the positions where a sniper could be concealed or anywhere that he could be trapped. Behind him the rest of his squad followed his example, varying their paths only slightly. Most of the other veterans were armed with shotguns like Quinn's, the short ranged weapons could be lethal in the close combat that was often a feature of jungle warfare but they were of limited usefulness against some targets so the squad was also equipped with a pair of hand held flamers and a meltagun that could fire a blast of superheated energy powerful enough to punch through the heaviest armour plating.

Moving closer to the source of the smoke Quinn waved at his squad to spread out. The ruined nature of the ancient settlement they were moving through now meant that there were plenty of different ways to approach their target and by moving in from as many different directions as possible Quinn hoped to be able to limit the options of whoever was there. There was a low wall between Quinn and the source of the smoke and he ducked down as he crept towards it before pressing himself up against the wall and looking around. Seeing that his entire squad was now in position he paused to listen, hoping to get some idea of how many of the enemy were on the other side.

However, all he could hear was a rustling he guessed to be someone opening ration packets and consuming the contents. He held up his hand with his fingers outstretched and looked at his men, then slowly he counted down by folding down his fingers until none were left. At this point he leapt to his feet, bounding over the wall and yelling.

“Imperial Guard! Drop your weapons!”

The rest of his squad moved in at the same time also shouting demands for surrender. However, the expected traitor forces were not present on the other side of the wall. Instead there was a smouldering camp fire and an open crate of ration bars that had a number of small local primates rummaging through and tearing open the packets to get at the contents. The sudden appearance of the Catachans, yelling and shouting panicked the creatures and each let out a high pitched shriek before fleeing. They rapidly scaled the ruins and leapt from one ancient structure to another, making their way back into the perceived safety of the trees.

“At ease.” Quinn told his men, scowling as he looking around. The presence of the jungle creatures indicated that whoever had built the fire and left behind the crate was long gone. Frustrated, he activated his microbead again, “False alarm Lieutenant. Just some local wildlife. We'll need the rest of the platoon to fully search this place, but I'm betting that nobody's home right now.”

The ruins covered only a small area and when the rest of the platoon reached them it did not take long for them to complete a sweep through the entire area.

“What about hidden tunnels or underground chambers?” Wolf asked, remembering how the traitors had made use of an underground temple for their worship and to carry out human sacrifice away from prying eyes.

“No.” Sergeant Molla replied and he put his hand up to a nearby wall, “This place hasn't seen any use for a long time, that's why the walls are all covered in plant growth. None of which is disturbed. If anyone had been opening secret doors then they'd have had to clear the plants out of the way to get through.”

“And I don't suppose that whoever was here left behind anything of more value than some randomly flavoured ration bars?” Wolf added.

“Nothing.” Grey said.

“Maybe they knew we were coming and cleared out ahead of us.” Mayer suggested, but Quinn shook his head.

“That fire was extinguished at least two hours ago.” he said, pointing to what remained of the camp fire, “No one could have known we were coming that far in advance. We hadn't even left the road then.”

“But they may have known about the armoured column.” Wolf pointed out.

“Armour couldn't get here. That's why the colonel sent us instead of a squadron of Hellhounds and Leman Russes.” Grey replied.

“Maybe they weren't running away from any of us.” Vance said suddenly.

“Oh no.” Wolf responded, “You mean that maybe they were heading towards the column?” and Vance nodded.

“They're getting ready to stage an ambush.” he said.

Wolf was about reach for the command squad's vox set again when there was a rumbling sound from the distance.

“That wasn't thunder.” Molla commented.

“No it wasn't.” Quinn added, “That's battle cannon fire. Someone's attacking the fourteenth.”

“Let's move.” Wolf said, “Just follow the gunfire and be alert for enemy forces.”

## 2.

The platoon moved as quickly as it could through the jungle. The Catachans making use of their expertise with jungle terrain while Wolf just followed the trail of trampled undergrowth left behind by the ogryns as they smashed their way through the undergrowth. The sounds of gunfire grew louder as they got closer to the road that the armoured column had been travelling along when the platoon had been ordered to investigate the nearby ruins. The sound of the Leman Russes' battle cannons was briefly drowned out as the squadron of circling vulture gunships raced in at treetop height and joined in the battle, launching their loads of unguided rockets towards the enemy position.

At the front of the platoon, Molla and Quinn's squads suddenly burst out of the trees and found themselves at the top of a steep incline.

"Whoa!" Molla exclaimed as the rest of the platoon came to a halt, "Mind that step."

"Ogryns halt!" Khor bellowed when he saw the drop and his squad slid to a halt, running into one another as well as tree trunks as they struggled to react in time.

"What's going on?" Wolf asked as she made her way forwards, "Why aren't we- Oh." and she looked down the slope. Then she turned her attention to the source of the gunfire.

The road had dropped to a lower level since the platoon had left it and now it was visible running along the bottom of the slope where it was next to a ravine. Across this ravine was a single ancient bridge that the first few Catachan armoured vehicles had reached and had halted there until the capability of the bridge to support the weight of armoured vehicles could be determined. From across this ravine came flashes of weapons fire. Much of this appeared to be stubber fire which could be coming from either native cultist or Kordonian troops, but there were also the obvious signs of las weapon discharges as well as the unmistakable tail flares of heavy bolter rounds that could only come from the treasonous former Imperial Guardsmen. Meanwhile the tanks of the XIV armoured regiment had turned their turrets to face across the ravine and were firing high explosive rounds across towards the enemy.

"What's that?" Vance said, raising his hand to his microbead and then he turned his head to look along the top of the ravine, "Oh feth." he said.

"What's wrong?" Wolf asked.

"Look there." Vance replied, pointing, "I think Rull's found our campers."

Further along the top of the slope was a group of men in Kordonian uniforms and unaware that they were being observed they were working to set up three las cannons in a small clearing. The heavy weapons were designed specifically for taking out heavily armoured vehicles and from the position they were in they had a clear line of fire to the vulnerable topsides of the Leman Russes below.

"Corporal Mayer!" Wolf snapped, "Set up your mortars, I want a smoke screen along this slope before those las cannons are ready to fire. Everyone else, we have a target so let's take it out."

Corporal Mayer's squad was well trained and experienced in the both the setting up and use of their mortars but the Kordonian traitors had a head start in getting their las cannons ready for use and would have been firing on the Catachan tanks before Mayer's squad was ready. However, unknown to them the traitor heavy weapon squad was in the sights of Rull.

"Get that battery pack in place!" the squad leader snapped as one of his men hefted one of the heavy power cells towards a las cannon. All of a sudden the man collapsed, the power cell tumbling from his grip and bouncing down the incline ahead of their position, "You fool!" the squad leader yelled, "Go get another and-" and then he noticed the blood that had sprayed across a nearby bush, "Sniper!" he shouted before a second silenced shot put a hole right between his eyes. The remaining four men panicked, seeking what cover they could. Primarily this was undergrowth, but one of them instead decided to use the bulk of his own las cannon. The weapon proved ineffective as a hiding place however as Rull aimed lower and fired between the legs of its tripod, severing the traitor's spine before putting a second shot through the back of his head when he fell sideways.

It was at this point that the first mortar round was fired by Mayer's squad, arcing through the air to burst open about halfway down the incline. Two more rounds followed in rapid succession and a thick white cloud of smoke began to form between the Kordonians and the Catachan force on the road.

"Well that ought to give the colonel's tanks some cover." Vance commented as he ran through the jungle towards the Kordonian position.

"And hopefully it'll warn them that something's wrong." Wolf added before Vance raised his las pistol and fired.

Ahead a man screamed as he fell and Wolf saw that he had been wearing a Kordonian uniform. Since he was not one of the heavy weapons squad it obviously meant that there was a larger enemy force present.

"Contact!" Wolf snapped, using her microbead to broadcast the warning to the entire platoon, "We're facing more than just one squad."

Then a las bolt flew close by Wolf's head and she flinched as the sudden flash blurred her vision. Instinctively she threw herself to the ground and was relieved to find out that the rest of her command squad did likewise.

"Lieutenant, can you see my fingers?" Torrent asked, holding up a hand in front of Wolf's face while the rest of the squad returned fire at the Kordonians.

"Yes, yes I'm fine." Wolf replied before she looked for a target.

Ahead of the platoon Wolf saw brief movements through the undergrowth and there were more flashes of las fire. However, each flash gave away the position of another traitor.

"Sergeant Molla!" Wolf shouted when she saw first squad coming to a halt close by, "Get that heavy bolter set up. I want suppressive fire all along there."

Molla nodded.

"You heard the lieutenant." he told his troops, "Get that bolter ready. Everyone else give them cover." and while the heavy bolter team worked to get their weapon ready for use the rest of the squad began to fire on the Kordonian position.

This was met by another barrage of fire from las weapons that forced most of the Catachans into prone positions. There was a yell from behind the command squad and Wolf looked around to see one of Grey's men fall.

"Go and check on him." she told Torrent and the woman began to crawl towards second squad's position.

"There's one hell of a lot of las guns out there." Vance commented as he fired his las pistol again, hoping to at least be able to pin down some of the enemy even if he didn't actually hit any of them.

"I know." Wolf replied and she activated her microbead, "Sergeant Quinn, can you get your squad around the side of this lot?" she asked.

"Negative lieutenant." he replied, "There's too much fire. I'd say those guys aren't even trying to pick out targets, they're just firing randomly into the jungle."

Wolf frowned.

"Great." she muttered, "Being dumb is the smart thing to do." then she grinned, "And it just so happens that we've got the dumbest of all on our side." Noticing Vance smile at this she frowned again. "Don't even think about saying it." she said, pointing a finger accusingly at him before she continued, "All they're firing is las weapons," she said, "so let's just use someone that just gets angry if you shoot them with one of those." and then she activated her microbead, "Sergeant Khor, you are to charge the enemy position and engage them." "Ogryns!" a deep voice boomed out from somewhere behind Wolf, "Charge!"

Then came both a crashing sound as the massive abhumans tore through the jungle to reach the enemy position but also a roaring as they expressed their delight at being called into action. Wolf ducked as one of the ogryns leapt over her as she lay prone and then flinched as the roaring of the ogryns' war cry was joined by the roaring of their ripper guns. Like the ogryns themselves the weapons they carried were crude and bulky. But the drum fed high calibre shotguns fired at a tremendous rate, so fast in fact that they were fitted with burst limiters to prevent the simple minded ogryns from simply expending all of their ammunition with a single pull of the trigger. Seven of these weapons firing together put out a tremendous amount of firepower that ripped through the undergrowth being used by the Kordonians as cover. The Kordonians now focused their efforts on the ogryns, targeting them with their las guns but just as Wolf had predicted the relatively weak weapons had little effect on the tough ogryn hides other than to annoy them just as they got within arms reach of the first rank of traitors and suddenly switched to swinging their ripper guns like clubs.

Then came a loud rhythmic pounding as Molla's squad finally got their heavy bolter set up and the explosive tipped rocket assisted projectiles began to tear through undergrowth, trees and traitors alike. With the ogryns already engaging the enemy in hand to hand combat and covering fire from the heavy bolter, Wolf saw an opportunity.

"All squads advance." she ordered over her microbead.

Wolf fired her las pistol as she got up, copying the Kordonians by just firing the weapon randomly towards a location where she suspected someone could be hiding. All around her the Catachans did the same thing, breaking from cover and firing their weapons as they moved. Only those armed with heavier weapons held their fire, unwilling to risk accidentally hitting their own comrades but they too advanced and drew their traditional Catachan fighting blades ready for when the enemy got within arms reach.

A sudden screeching sound followed by screams of agony told Wolf that Quinn's squad had uncovered a group of traitors and was using their flamers to burn them out just as Wolf and her command squad caught up with the ogryns. One of the abhumans had been set upon by a large number of Kordonian troops and he staggered back from the wounds they had inflicted on him. Vance dodged the ogryn as it fell, noting the knife sticking out of the side of his neck. An injury like that would have decapitated a normal human he thought himself, whereas the ogryn may yet survive it if Torrent could get the bleeding under control.

"We need to get to those las cannons." Wolf said, placing a hand on Vance's shoulder and he nodded.

"That way," he replied, "Assuming we can get past this lot."

Wolf looked around and saw what Vance meant. The force of traitors they had discovered was much larger than just a single heavy weapon squad. In fact it looked as if it could be significantly larger than Second Platoon. Fortunately her troops were mainly Catachans and those that were not were ogryns. Wolf rated all of them more highly than the Kordonians in close quarters jungle warfare.

Wolf turned to the member of her command squad that carried a bulky grenade launcher instead of a standard issue las gun.

"Walker, we need cover." she told him and the man nodded, plucking a smoke grenade from his webbing and manually loading it into the weapon's chamber. There was a sudden 'Pop!' as the launcher discharged and the grenade bounced off a tree before bursting open, "Okay now!" Wolf snapped and she and her squad leapt up and began to run towards the incline, protected from view by the expanding cloud of smoke between them and the Kordonians. However, despite protecting Wolf's squad from being seen the cloud did let the enemy know that something was happening and the Kordonian commander ordered some of his men to advance through the cloud to investigate. The first man through the cloud gasped as he came face to face with Abbot and the squad's vox operator unceremoniously head butted the man before shooting him in the chest.

The sound of a compact motor made Vance turn as a man with a chainsword came rushing out of the cloud towards him.

"Keep going!" he shouted at Wolf as he rolled aside and slashed at the man with his blade, "Abbot and I'll hold them back."

Wolf nodded in reply and she and Walker continued to head towards the las cannons, leaving Abbot and Vance to keep the Kordonians away from them. The edge of the clearing was only a short distance away and Wolf and Walker slowed down as they approached it, Walker slinging his grenade launcher and drawing his knife instead as they both crept forwards.

The first Kordonian gunner they saw was slumped over a las cannon and the blood dripping down to the ground told Wolf that he was already dead. Then she saw two more bodies just inside the tree line, both with visible bullet wounds.

"Rull." Wolf muttered, "By the Emperor he's taken them all out already." then she looked at Walker, "Come on, we need to disable those guns before anyone else can get to them." she told him and then she began to stride towards the las cannons. Emerging into the clearing Wolf saw that the Kordonians had come close to getting the las cannons firing before Rull had picked off the crews one by one. Under normal circumstances Wolf would have considered trying to put the guns out of action by removing components that could easily be replaced by an armourer so that they could be put to use by the Catachans. But the weight of las cannons made them unpopular with Catachans, who preferred to use the more flexible and lighter missile launchers for the anti-armour role. Therefore she decided that the easiest way to disable the las cannons was simply to shoot them.

Using her las pistol, Wolf placed a single shot into the port where the closest las cannon's power cell was connected, fusing the internal wiring and ensuring that any power cell plugged in would instantly be shorted out. Then she heard a second las shot from behind her and for a moment she assumed that Walker had just disabled another of the las cannons.

Then she remembered that he didn't have a las gun.

Spinning around Wolf was just in time to see the fist swinging at her face and she fell backwards as she was struck, letting go of her las pistol. Dazed she looked upwards to see a man in a Kordonian uniform glaring back down at her. Evidently some of them had been able to bypass Vance and Abbot, or at least that was what she hoped had happened. The alternative was that they were both as dead as Walker.

"Blood for the Blood God." the man hissed and he aimed his las gun down at Wolf's face.

A booming sound made Wolf flinch and she was promptly sprayed with blood as the traitor's head exploded from a shotgun hit at close range. Wolf looked towards the treeline, expecting to see Quinn's squad rushing to her aide, but all she saw were more Kordonians.

"Die sinners! Drown in your own worthless blood!" someone cried out in a Catachan accent and turning her head, Wolf saw a man in priest's robes climbing up from the incline. In his hands he held a shotgun that he fired again, sending another Kordonian to the ground.

Then came the sound of more las gun discharges. Not from the Kordonians but rather from the Catachans who had been scaling the incline and a familiar face soon appeared staring down at Wolf instead of the Kordonian.

"Lying down on the job lieutenant?" he asked while more Catachan guardsmen ran past him, firing their weapons into the jungle, "You may want to get up, that leash isn't far behind."

"Captain Fear." Wolf replied, smiling. Fear was the commanding officer of Fourth Company's First Platoon and second only to Major Trent in overall command of the company itself. The man he referred to as the 'leash' was the company's commissar, a political officer present to ensure total loyalty and adherence to the



Imperial creed. If he suspected cowardice or treason he was fully authorised to summarily execute the individual involved. Commissars were almost universally hated amongst the Imperial Guard, but especially so in the independently minded Catachan regiments where they were hated not only for their role, but also for being outsiders.

“Err, a little hand here?” Wolf asked and Fear smiled as he reached down to pull her to her feet.

“Perhaps you should watch where you tread.” he told her, “There's a bit of a drop just over there.”

Wolf looked down the incline and now saw squad after squad of Catachans scaling it.

“Throne. How many are coming?” she asked.

“When those smoke shells went off Colonel Vorris realised that something was wrong and told the Major to bring the entire company up here.” Fear explained, “Now what are we facing?”

“I'm not certain sir. A platoon at least, but possibly more than that. My troops were outnumbered.”

“Then pick up your weapon and let's go give them a hand shall we?”

The arrival of the rest of Fourth Company ought to have been enough to put the Kordonian force to flight. But their leader stubbornly refused to order a withdrawal, instead yelling at his men to keep fighting.

“The Blood God cares not where the blood comes from!” he shouted, telling them that their own deaths were just as good as those of the Catachans to the dark deity they worshipped. However, the next blood to be spilled was his own as his shouts gave away his position to Quinn's squad and two rapid shotgun blasts from Quinn himself sent the traitor officer tumbling backwards.

“Don't let any of this lot escape.” Quinn ordered as his men charged towards the rest of the enemy command squad, “No flamers or melta either.” he added, knowing that the use of either weapon could destroy valuable intelligence.

Obediently Quinn's squad pushed forwards, overrunning the enemy command squad's position. Without their officer the remaining traitors were slower to react and uncoordinated, something that cost them dearly as the experienced Catachan troops assaulted them. They used their shotguns at range, firing them rapidly to keep the Kordonians pinned down until they were close enough to use their knives.

Just as the last of the command squad fell at Quinn's feet another Kordonian burst out of the jungle, rushing towards Quinn who reacted by swinging his blade so that it struck the man's throat with almost enough force to decapitate him.

“Brace yourselves lads.” he warned, expecting the dead Kordonian to be just the first of a unit coming to avenge the loss of their leader. But the next Kordonian to emerge stumbled and fell with a smoking hole in his back where he had been shot by a las gun and it was then that Quinn realised that these Kordonians were not charging, they were fleeing. It was pure bad luck for them to have tried to escape along a route blocked by the Catachan veterans. Behind the Kordonians came the rest of Fourth Company, hot on their trail and quite happy to shoot them in the back.

“Purge the heretics!” the man in priest's robes shouted as he appeared, blasting another Kordonian in the back with his shotgun.

“Preacher Black.” Quinn said, “Where did you spring from.”

“Colonel Vorris sent us to do the Emperor's work.” Black answered.

“And is there much more work to be done?” Quinn asked.

“It seems not. I am happy to say that many of the Emperor's enemies have died here.”

“Yeah, well that guy didn't seem too worried about that.” Quinn replied as he walked over to the dead officer and crouched down beside him before starting to rummage through his pockets.

### 3.

Wolf stood in the clearing at the top of the incline with the other two platoon commanders of Fourth Company as well as Major Trent and his command squad. Also standing with them was Preacher Black and a slender bald man in colourful clothing. This was Aloysius Veneel, a sanctioned psyker attached to Fourth Company. Like Wolf he was not a native of Catachan and was viewed with suspicion both for the powers he had as well as for being an outsider. Missing though was Commissar Layne. After getting almost to the top of the incline he had mysteriously lost his footing and slid down almost as far as the road. Now he was down there receiving treatment for the minor injuries he had suffered. The smoke screen laid down by the mortars had cleared now and from this position armoured vehicles could be seen crossing the ancient bridge one at a time while tech priests in red robes monitored the structure closely.

"Cornellius suggested waiting until we could bring in a modular bridge and lay it across." Major Trent said, "But Colonel Vorris didn't want to wait. So as soon as the sentinels had cleared the other side he ordered his tanks across."

"Will Sergeant Gant be back with us soon?" the tallest of the gathered Catachans asked. Lieutenant Lore was the commanding officer of Fourth Company's third and final platoon and the sergeant he spoke of commanded the squad of lightweight scout walkers attached to the company for reconnaissance duties. "I think she's still involved in the hunt for survivors." Trent answered, "This was a serious force that ambushed us here today."

"What are our losses like?" Wolf asked.

"Minimal." Trent answered, "It appears that the enemy were pinning their hopes on these las cannons to knock out our tanks. They weren't expecting your platoon to appear." and Wolf smiled.

"Don't get cocky." Fear commented.

"Lieutenant I think you need to see this." Vance's voice said as he stepped into the clearing with Quinn. Then when he saw the other officers present he nodded towards Trent, "Major." he added.

"What is it?" Wolf asked, looking at the dataslate Quinn held. It was the standard issue type to the Imperial Guard, but it did not have the typical green colour scheme of most Catachan equipment.

"I found this on the Kordonian officer after I blew the bastard's gut out."

"You paint such a wonderful picture sergeant." Wolf commented and Quinn grinned.

"He painted the jungle better." he replied.

"Bright red, all over the bushes. I saw it." Vance added.

"Give it here." Trent's company sergeant major, Stubbs, said and he took the device from Quinn, "Sir this is filled with Kordonian maps." he added before passing the dataslate on to Trent.

Trent scanned through the various data pages, changing from one to the next without paying too much attention to the detail of any. He did however, manage to take in the importance of what he was holding.

"This could hold the locations of their entire network of hideouts." he said, looking up from the dataslate.

Then he looked around and yelled, "Vox!" and his command squad's vox operator dashed forwards, holding out the handset, "This is Catachan One Nine Mark Four calling Catachan One Nine. Over."

There was a brief pause as the vox operator attached to the regiment's commanding officer, Colonel Shryke, fetched him.

"Catachan One Nine Mark Four this is Catachan One Nine. Go ahead, over." the colonel's voice responded.

"Colonel we've engaged an enemy force that tried to ambush Colonel Vorris' column. During that engagement my second platoon was able to retrieve a dataslate that appears to contain maps made by the Kordonians. Over."

"Maps? That's excellent. Did you manage to take any of them alive for interrogation? Over." the colonel asked. But when Trent looked at Wolf she just shrugged. Then he looked at Quinn and Vance and both men shook their heads.

"No sir. It appears that we were forced to kill all of the enemy troops. Over." Trent told the colonel.

"Understood major." Shryke replied, "Look, I've got the second, fifth and eighth companies manoeuvring to try and encircle a large enemy formation right now. But let me know when you've made camp and I'll send a courier to pick it up. Over."

"Understood colonel. Over and out." Trent said before giving the handset back to the vox operator beside him. Then he looked around at his platoon commanders, "Okay, you all heard that. Now I think that Colonel Vorris won't want to keep his tanks going in the dark so as soon as we've got across that bridge we'll probably break to make camp."

"Will it be just us?" Wolf asked, meaning just the fourth company. When first deployed to Lyannus the entire XIX Regiment had camped together. But now that the Catachans were moving deeper into the jungle the various companies seemed to be getting further apart from one another.

"Just us." Trent told her, "Most of our support staff are too far behind for it to be anything decent anyway."  
"Looks like we're sleeping under the stars tonight then." Lore added.

Major Trent was correct in his assumption that Colonel Vorris would call a halt to their advance once they were safely across the bridge over the ravine. The first order of duty was to check the positions from which the traitors had launched their attack across the ravine just in case there was any further material of value for its intelligence but nothing but burned bodies was found. Following this the Catachans made camp. The site selected was a cluster of ruins that the road on the other side of the bridge ran right through. There were still numerous structures amongst the ruins that were vaguely intact, possessing upright wall and roofs with only a few holes in them and so the Catachans took shelter in them.

Most of second platoon gathered together in one large structure whose original purpose had been lost to history. Only Khor's ogryns whose smell was considered unpleasant in such a confined area and Rull who had apparently decided to carry out his own sweep of the area were not present while the rest set out beds on the floor.

Having been the one to find the dataslate, Quinn had been entrusted with looking after it until the courier arrived from Colonel Shryke. But he preferred to hand it over to Wolf instead.

"Maybe you can find something useful on it." he said to her, "I've got work to do checking our perimeter. The last thing I want is some cultist springing out of the shadows to kill me."

Wolf's eyes widened slightly.

"Well now I've got that to worry about I'll probably be awake all night anyway." she said, "So I may as well take a look at it."

The dataslate's contents were exactly as they had been described, one map after another. Significantly there were markings placed on many of these. Some of these markings were just notes regarding details that may have been out of date or missing such as collapsed bridges or roads that had become overgrown. But special attention seemed to have been paid to the locations of the ruined settlements that littered the jungle in this region. Initially Wolf thought nothing of this, both the Kordonian traitors and their cultist allies favoured using the ruins for shelter just as the Catachans were doing now. But some of the ruins had been further marked, ringed and several arrows placed next to each pointing off in different directions. If the maps were to be believed then the ruins thus marked had little in common. They were noted as being in various states of disrepair and of differing sizes. But for some reason they were all considered worthy of note to the officer Quinn had killed. The drawback was that each of the marked ruins appeared on a different data page, so it was impossible to see if there was a pattern. Wolf turned to Vance who was asleep beside her and reached out to shake him.

"Vance." she hissed, hoping to wake only him and none of the other Catachans. This was a tall order however, being a light sleeper was a natural Catachan survival trait. However, her first attempt failed and so she shook him again, "Vance." she repeated, slightly louder, "Wake up."

Vance groaned.

"Not now Gloria." he muttered without opening his eyes.

"Does your wife know you're calling outsider women by her name?" Torrent asked from close by and Wolf saw the medic now sat up in her own bed and looking right at them both.

"What?" Vance exclaimed as he sat up in alarm. Then he frowned, "What's happening?" he asked.

"I need to go and find Cornelius." Wolf replied, "I need his help."

"Then go. I'm tired." Vance replied.

"It's dark outside." Wolf pointed out, "Regulations say an officer should be escorted."

"Only cowardly outsider ones." Torrent said, "Real Catachan officers aren't afraid of the dark, the dark is afraid of them."

"In that case you can escort me." Wolf said and Torrent's face fell.

"I agree." Vance muttered, "Torrent, I order you to escort the lieutenant to find Cornelius the bastard."

Despite it being night time, the tropical climate of this part of Lyannus meant that the air was still warm and humid so there was no chill to worry either of them. Cornelius B5T-RD-3X, better known to the Catachans as Cornelius the bastard due only to the similarity of his designation to the word when written down was the Adeptus Mechanicus tech priest assigned to fourth company to keep its equipment operating, primarily the four sentinel walkers attached to the company but he could be called upon to fix anything that was damaged or malfunctioned. Given that the cybernetically enhanced engineer required no sleep Wolf decided that he would most likely be found tending to the sentinels of fourth company or the tanks of the XIV armoured regiment and she decided to start with the sentinels.

There was indeed a figure crouched by one of the bipedal walkers when Torrent and Wolf approached, but was clearly not the tech priest they sought.

"Hey Cogboy!" Torrent called out when she saw the figure in overalls, "Where's your boss got to?"

The man Torrent had just addressed as 'Cogboy' was Nathin PL673, the assistant to Cornelius. Unlike the

engineer himself, Nathin was a native of Catachan so was not regarded as an outsider.

"Oh hi there." he replied as he got to his feet and turned around, "He's over with the Leman Russes. The tech priests of the fourteenth are worried that the machine spirits of several of the tanks may have been unbalanced by the ambush and Colonel Vorriss wants them all in fighting order when we move out tomorrow. He left me to check over our sentinels."

"Thanks." Wolf replied and then she headed for the parked rows of Leman Russes and other armoured vehicles. There were numerous techpriests and cyborg servitors moving amongst these machines. Unsurprisingly the XIV Armoured Regiment had many techpriests on its books to ensure that the vehicles they used remained operational. Unfortunately the hooded robes and implants that replaced human facial features made it very difficult for anyone other than another tech priest to pick out a specific individual amongst them so instead Wolf just walked up to the first tech priest she saw.

"Excuse me." she said, "We're looking for Cornelius."

The tech priest looked back at Wolf while the tentacle-like mechadrites that protruded from beneath his robe continued to probe the Leman Russ tank he was inspecting.

"Error." he replied, "Statement irrelevant."

Wolf frowned but Torrent just sighed.

"Can you direct us to Cornelius?" she asked.

"Error." the tech priest repeated, "Please state correct identification."

"Correct identification? What does that mean?" Torrent responded and she looked at Wolf.

"It must be all those letters and numbers after his name." Wolf suggested. Then she added, "The ones I can never remember." then she smiled, "Please direct us to the engineer assigned to the nineteenth regiment's fourth company." she added.

"Proceed sixty two metres at a bearing of thirty one degrees east." the tech priest replied.

"I don't suppose you could just point could you?" Wolf asked and silently the tech priest extended one of his mechadrites while still looking at Wolf.

"Thank you." she replied before setting off in the direction indicated.

Sure enough after a relatively short distance they came across another tech priest and Wolf walked up to him.

"Engineer Cornelius?" Wolf asked.

"Yes Lieutenant Wolf. What do you require?" Cornelius asked in reply, though he remained focused on the Leman Russ side sponson he was using one of his mechadrites to clear of debris that limited its ability to turn.

"I need you to take a look at this." Wolf said, producing the captured dataslate, "It contains several maps that have been annotated by the owner. I need to know if there is a pattern to the notes."

Cornelius did not take the dataslate from Wolf. Instead he extended one of his mechadrites and plugged it directly into a port on the side of the device.

"Verifying device parameters." he said, "No corruption of machine spirit or malicious scrap code detected. Commencing data retrieval." then he waited while he copied the entire contents of the dataslate's memory before disconnecting from it and adding, "Please indicate required information."

"These sets of ruins have been marked in a similar way." Wolf told him, holding up the dataslate and switching from one of the marked maps to the next.

"Processing." Cornelius responded. Unlike a normal human the tech priest was able to build up a composite of all the maps in his mind, merging them into one much larger image that covered an area wider than was possible to fit on the screen of the dataslate and still keep the level of detail present on the smaller maps, "There are eight sets of ruins that have been picked out as if significant." he added.

"Yeah, I kind of saw that. I can count." Wolf commented.

"The sites are organised to form a circle positioned equally around the circumference." Cornelius continued, "They may also form the points of a star."

"An eight pointed star?" Wolf asked.

"Oh great." Torrent commented, folding her arms, "I know where you're going with this and I get the feeling you'll be dragging the rest of us along with you."

"Never mind that." Wolf said, "We need to go and tell Major Trent what we've found."

"We've found?" Torrent asked, "Quinn found the dataslate and he figured out the pattern." she added, pointing to Cornelius. Wolf just ignored her however.

## 4.

"Major Trent!" Wolf called out as she ran towards the structure where the fourth company's command section was camped. The major himself was stood outside drinking from a canteen with Stubbs, "I'm glad I'm not waking you up."

"Lieutenant." Trent responded.

"Sir I've just spoken with Adept Cornellius and he has identified a pattern to the ruins that the Kordonians have highlighted in the maps on the dataslate. They may form an eight-pointed star."

"An eight pointed star?" Trent repeated. The eight pointed star was a well known symbol of traitor organisations. Its connection to the Dark Powers of Chaos was less well known but the symbol itself was something that was widely recognised.

"The bastard's certain about that?" Stubbs asked.

"The bastard is always certain." Trent replied. Then he looked at Wolf again, "There'll be a courier here from Colonel Shryke tomorrow morning." he told her, "When we send the dataslate back with them, we'll include that piece of information. But I reckon that the colonel will want those ruins checking out."

"Magister, this is the location."

The Magister lowered his hood to reveal his heavily tattooed face and looked at the man who had just addressed him. He was a native of Lyannus, one of those who had spent his life skulking in the jungle with his tribe until the Kordonians had arrived and made contact with them, recognising fellow worshippers of the galaxy's true gods, not the false corpse god of Terra. Looking around The Magister inspected his surroundings. All around him was nothing but jungle, with no signs of any of the ruins that littered this area. If the ancients tribes of Lyannus had ever considered trying what he planned to do here then they had been stopped before they could complete their task. The Magister however, intended to complete it. It would be the key to seizing this world.

"Are the others in position?" The Magister asked.

"They are Magister." another of his companions said. Unlike the man who had guided them to this spot he was a Kordonian officer and the command squad he kept close by had proven invaluable in getting the ritual prepared. Only their vox link could allow them to properly co-ordinate their actions with the other teams positioned at the ruins surrounding their location.

"Then we must prepare ourselves. The corpse god's servants will be getting nearer. I do not want them to reach us before the ritual can be completed."

Wolf woke to the sound of laughter and as she sat up she saw a female Catachan that she did not recognise sat on top of Quinn.

"Give it to me Ibram." she said.

"I've told you I don't have it." Quinn protested.

"Yes you do Ibram." the woman replied, "I want it now."

"Who's that?" Wolf asked, leaning closer to Torrent who was the nearest Catachan to Wolf.

"Oh, that's the courier from regimental HQ." she answered and Wolf sighed. Then she picked up the dataslate and walked over to the courier.

"I think this is what you're looking for." she said.

"What's that?" the courier asked.

"It's what you were sent here to collect Bess." Quinn said, "So get off me."

"Not until I get what I want." she replied and Wolf frowned.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"Lieutenant, meet Bess." Quinn said, looking up from his position on the floor, "My little sister."

"So Quinn's sister is the courier?" Wolf said, looking at Vance, who nodded.

"Plus she regards Quinn's chocolate ration as her own." he said.

"This is about chocolate?" Wolf exclaimed.

"Pretty much, yes." Vance said.

"So is this the outsider that cost you a lieutenant's pay?" Bess asked, looking around at Wolf while still sat on top of Quinn.

"Pay and increased chocolate ration." Grey commented with a smile.

"Not helping." Quinn said, glaring at Grey before Bess got to her feet.

"Wow, you really are short aren't you?" she said to Wolf. Then she looked back at her brother as he was getting to his feet as well and added, "Is she the same size as Short Arse?"

"Thereabouts." Quinn replied. 'Short Arse' was a nickname for Lieutenant Selena, the fourth company's

quartermaster who was unusually short for a Catachan. It was a name she did not appreciate and was rarely used in her presence.

"Then I suppose I ought to thank you." Bess said and Wolf was confused.

"Thank me?" she asked.

"Ibram didn't want to be voted in as lieutenant. He told me so himself." Bess told her. Catachan regiments normally selected their commanding officers by popular vote and it was widely known that had Second Platoon held such a vote to replace their previous lieutenant after his death rather than Wolf being transferred to them it would have been Quinn that won. Bess then briefly wrapped her arms around Wolf and hugged her.

"Okay, that's friendlier than anyone else has been while I've been here." Wolf said.

"So is it true you once ate an entire meal while wearing a straight jacket? Just stuffed your face right in and went for it?" Bess asked and Wolf groaned.

"So you heard about that? I was picking food out of my hair for hours. Or at least I was when this lot finally let me out." she said.

"Well like I say, my brother didn't want to be a lieutenant so that makes you okay with me. For now at least." Bess replied before turning back towards Quinn, "You on the other hand, you owe me chocolate for getting me drafted into this job."

"Okay. But only to avoid having you jump up and down on me again." Quinn responded and he walked over to where several backpacks were clustered together and pulled a bar of issue chocolate from it and tossed it to his sister.

"Cheers." Bess said as she began to unwrap the chocolate, "So what about this dataslate then?"

"Here it is." Wolf said, holding out the dataslate again, "I asked our tech priest about it and."

"Yeah, your CO told me. The marked areas form an eight pointed star." Bess interrupted and she took the dataslate and stuffed it in the bag she carried over her shoulder. Then she walked back over to Quinn and kissed him on the cheek, leaving behind a mark of chocolate.

"Well I better be going now." she said, "The colonel wants this pretty urgently." and then she left the ruin. Second Platoon was sheltering in.

"She was nice." Wolf said, looking at Quinn and smiling. Then she noticed that all of her squad leaders were smiling back at her and her face fell, "What?" she asked, "What did I miss?"

"Nothing lieutenant." Mayer replied.

"We're just glad you like her." Quinn added.

"Really glad." Vance added.

"We thought you would though." Molla said.

"Which is why we swapped all the backpacks around while you were still asleep." Grey said, "We knew there was the chance she'd turn up to collect the dataslate so that was your chocolate ration Quinn just gave her."

"Mine? But I was saving that." Wolf protested.

"That's what makes it such a grand gesture on your part." Vance said.

With no time available to clear an area big enough for Fourth Company to assemble for parade, Major Trent just gathered together the three platoon command squads along with his own in the ruin that he had spent the night in. Aloysius, Black and Commissar Layne were also present, the commissar sat with his foot raised and bandaged following his fall the previous day.

"I've already spoken with Colonel Vorris." Trent explained, "He's been briefed on what we know about the maps found on the dataslate and that they are well off the road. With that in mind he's decided to hold position here. Colonel Shryke doesn't want to waste time on having him check out the maps before having us move in to investigate the ruins though."

"Won't that leave Colonel Vorris' tanks without infantry support?" Fear asked.

"Colonel Shryke has ordered Sixth Company to move up and take our place." Trent replied, "Their chimeras ought to get them here in about two hours."

"The co-ordinates of even the closest ruins are some way off." Lore commented, "I estimate it'll take until nightfall to get to them."

"The Navy's sending in several flights to pick us up." Trent replied, "They'll fly us out and provide cover from the air. We'll depart as soon as they get here whether Sixth Company has made it here or not. Colonel Vorris will just have to rely on Seventh Company's sentinels along with our own squadron for close protection if there's any trouble."

"So Sergeant Gant's not coming with us?" Wolf asked.

"No, there aren't any specialised lift aircraft available." Trent said, "Where are they?" he added, looking round at Stubbs.

"Deployed with the Fourteenth Armoured's own infantry support company." Stubbs answered.

"Ah yes, the one's we're filling in for here." Trent commented, "Anyway, make sure your squads know what's

going on. Wolf, that'll mean getting your ogryns ready to board aircraft."

"Yes sir." Wolf replied, realising that what he meant was finding some way of convincing them to go aboard. Ogryns' bulk made them wary of entering confined spaces such as chimera or valkyrie transports. Fortunately however, they were unswervingly loyal to their commanding officers and followed any order they were given, so all she really needed to do was make sure that she was present to order them aboard the valkyrie.

"Since there are eight sites to be checked out I'm splitting Third Platoon in half and I'll take command of one half of it." Trent continued. Lore's Third Platoon was the largest of the three in Fourth Company, mainly thanks to the large conscript squad consisting of new recruits, so splitting it in half made each half about the same size of the other two platoons, "Then each team will take two sites. Mister Aloysius will accompany second platoon."

"As will I in that case." Black added, glaring at the psyker.

"Unfortunately Commissar Layne's injury precludes him from joining us." Trent said and he glanced at the commissar.

"Yes, I need to speak with you about that." Layne replied, struggling to stand and supporting himself with a crutch that had clearly been improvised from a tree branch by one of the Catachans, "I definitely felt someone grab my ankle just before I fell. Or rather was deliberately assaulted."

"Not possible commissar." Stubbs replied, shaking his head, "I was right behind you and I saw no one grab your ankle."

"Then you obviously weren't looking." Layne said, scowling.

"If you've quite finished hurling random accusations around commissar, I'd like to make sure my troops are properly briefed." Trent said before there was the sound of engines from outside, "Ah," Trent added, tilting his head back as a shadow passed overhead that was visible through one of the holes in the roof, "it would appear that the navy has arrived earlier than expected."

Rushing from the structure, Fourth Company's command personnel headed for their platoons.

"Everyone grab your gear." Wolf shouted, "We're deploying."

"Deploying?" Molla repeated, "Deploying where?"

"I don;t know exactly." Wolf replied.

"The major didn't get around to that bit." Vance added, "Look, just get your gear and head over for those valkyries. Hopefully those navy boys will know where they're taking us."

## 5.

It took six valkyries to transport second platoon, with one squad in each and Aloysius and Black joining Wolf's command squad. The valkyries flew in a triangular pattern with Wolf's squad riding in one in the second row. As they neared the first set of ruins to be inspected the valkyries broke formation and at the same moment the door gunners opened the side hatches and moved their heavy bolters into position. Five of the valkyries began to circle the ruins while the sixth, the one carrying Quinn's veterans descended, opening its rear ramp so that when it touched down in a nearby clearing the passengers were able to run right out of the transport. The with the veteran squad on the ground their transport rose back into the air.

"Spread out." Quinn ordered, "I want to know if anyone else is around."

The squad began to spread out just as Quinn had instructed, the Catachans alert for any signs of an ambush. Their approach may have been rapid but it was hardly stealthy and anyone on the ground would have had plenty of opportunity to conceal themselves. While they began their search another of the valkyries came lower, vanishing from view as it dropped below treetop level for just a few seconds before ascending again and rejoining the others as they continued to circle.

"Okay, that'll be Rull joining us." Quinn commented, "Or at least I hope it is." then he continued to creep towards the ruins ahead.

"Sergeant Quinn, report." Wolf's voice said in the microbead receiver in his ear.

"We're down and deployed. So far it looks like no one's home. I'd say that Rull's just touched down as well." Quinn replied.

"He has." Wolf said, "He said there are signs that someone was here, but what he found suggests we've missed them by a few hours. Hold position and wait until the rest of us are down. Then we'll surround the ruins and move in."

"Understood lieutenant." Quinn replied and then he signalled to his men to stop, each of them crouching down in cover as they obeyed.

Then the remaining valkyries began to descend one at a time, the pilots of each one seeking out a clear area large enough to allow their aircraft to get low enough for their passengers to disembark without the need for drop lines or grav chutes.

"Units to the south move in." Wolf ordered, using her microbead to broadcast the order to the entire platoon, "To the north hold position just in case we do happen to disturb anyone."

From the south Wolf, Quinn and Grey led their squads towards the ruins while to the north the rest waited to see if they made anyone retreat. Advancing from all sides may have allowed them to cover the ruins faster, but Wolf did not want to risk her troops accidentally firing at one another so she opted for the safer option.

"Blood." Grey broadcast using his microbead when he caught sight of a dark stain on a bush.

"Which way is it leading?" Wolf asked.

"No where." Grey answered, "There's just one patch. I'd say that it was on someone's clothing when they came past. But the damage to the undergrowth here suggests that it was someone heading away from the ruins."

"Well let's not assume that means there's no one about." Wolf said, "Keep going and keep your eyes open." Grey looked around at his squad and smirked.

"Now where would we be without that sort of professional advice?" he commented before continuing to advance towards the ruins.

In Wolf's squad Vance took the lead, as he generally did, while Wolf remained further back and watched carefully where he stood. In turn Veneel walked along just behind Wolf until he felt a sudden psychic jolt and he dropped to his knees.

"The witch is possessed!" Black yelled, reaching for his blade.

"No." Veneel gasped as he got back to his feet, "Just a momentary shock, that's all."

"What caused it?" Wolf asked.

"I'm not sure. But something happened here recently that has established a psychic disturbance." Veneel explained.

"Lieutenant, if we're heading into something to do with the warp then-" Vance began before Wolf interrupted him.

"Yes I know. Splitting our force weakens us." she said, "The risk of us shooting one another accidentally isn't as bad as the risk of fighting rogue psykers with only half our force." and she activated her microbead, setting it to broadcast to the entire platoon, "All squads advance." she ordered, "Be alert for signs of psychic activity." "Suffer not the witch to live." Black hissed and he strode onwards.

The ruins ahead were heavily overgrown and Wolf did not even notice as her command section entered them. Only when she steadied herself against what she had taken to be a tree trunk covered in moss did she



realise that it was a stone column and she halted, looking around her carefully.

"What's the matter?" Torrent asked, "I thought you were used to life in towns and cities."

"Which I guess makes me the professional here." Wolf replied and she smirked.

"This way." Veneel said softly, pointing through the ruins. Hearing him, Vance turned to look in that direction and nodded, raising his las pistol as he advanced. After a short distance he halted and crouched down.

Keeping low Wolf crept forwards.

"What is it sergeant?" she asked quietly.

"Don't you hear that?" Vance replied.

"Hear what?"

"So that's a 'no' then. Listen, there's a buzzing sound. Sounds like insects." Vance explained.

"I take it you don't just think it's some sort of hive." Wolf said and Vance shook his head. Wolf reached for her microbead, "Sergeant Quinn, I need you to bring your squad to my location. We may need your flamers." then she looked at Vance again, "Those ought to clear them out right?"

Vance smiled and nodded.

"If necessary, yes. A blast of flame does wonders for getting rid of swarms of insects." he answered.

"They all have the taint?" The Magister asked as he looked at the row of natives being held by Kordonian troopers. The natives were both male and female and had a variety of ages, though none were younger than teenagers. Before that age range it was not possible to identify most psykers without more advanced equipment than was available to the natives.

"They do Magister." the Kordonian officer replied, "Their villages gave them up willingly for us to use to complete the ritual."

The Magister grinned.

"The Blood God has no need for any of you in his armies." he called out to the natives, "Your taint is a rejection of the strength he prizes. However, your blood itself still has its uses." and then almost in unison the Kordonians plunged their knives into the captive psykers, filling the chamber with the sound of their screams.

The two veterans armed with flamers advanced close behind Quinn, Vance and Wolf as they approached the source of the buzzing sound. Further behind them Veneel staggered and reached out to steady himself against Black.

"The Emperor protects." the psyker hissed.

"Not the likes of you." Black commented before there was a high pitched scream from ahead and both men rushed forwards with the rest of the command and veteran squads.

"Oh very professional." Torrent commented when she saw Vance pulling Wolf back to her feet.

"It wasn't my fault." Wolf responded, "I slipped on this." and she looked down at the pool of blood on the stone beneath her feet.

"Well there's plenty more of it about." Quinn said as he looked ahead, towards the source of the buzzing sound. There he saw a carefully carved block of stone that was covered in the remains of a human body that had been cut into numerous pieces and it was around this that a cloud of flies was gathering. Positioned centrally was a human skull, presumably the one that had belonged to whoever had been cut up.

"What happened here?" Wolf asked.

"A ritual sacrifice." Veneel said, "Something that has left a residual disturbance in the warp that I can still detect."

"Sorcery." Black hissed.

The information from the dataslate was displayed on a large screen in Colonel Shryke's command centre as the XIX Regiment's most senior representative of the Adeptus Mechanicus, Magos Serett, examined it closely.

"There are eight points highlighted, spaced equally from one another." the tech priest announced.

"Yes, that much we already know." Colonel Shryke replied, "But can you tell us why the enemy is so interested in these locations?"

"No colonel. However, plotting a circle that crosses all eight points gives us a locus of points that is centred on this location." and using one of his implants the tech priest projected a spot of light onto the display.

"And what is there?" Regimental Commissar Garratt asked.

"Our orbital auspexes have indicated that there is another ruined structure at that precise location." Serett responded, "Most of it appears to be subterranean however and we cannot determine how much remains intact from space."

"Then we need to send someone to investigate in person." Garratt said, looking at Shryke.

"Fourth Company is already in the area." the colonel replied, "I think I need to speak with Major Trent immediately."

Still circling overhead the valkyries provided air cover for the Catachans, though the density of the jungle limited visibility and all they could do was wait for a call for help or until they saw any signs of enemy activity for themselves. However, what happened to disrupt this was not what any of the navy pilots had expected. The first signs of trouble came when the entire control panel went dead in one of the aircraft. Every display went blank and every gauge dropped to zero. There were not even any alarms to warn either of the two flight crew in the cockpit.

"Him on Earth!" the pilot exclaimed as all of a sudden he found himself unable to keep control of his aircraft. The noise from outside the cockpit told him that the valkyrie's engines were still operational, but the varying pitch and loudness told him that they were out of control and sure enough almost right away the valkyrie suddenly lurched in mid air before starting to spin.

"What's going on?" one of the gunners in the separate passenger compartment behind the cockpit asked, proving that the intercom at least was still functional.

"The machine spirit's failed." the pilot answered, "I've no control over anything."

"Look!" Grey snapped, pointing skywards as the valkyrie began to plummet towards the ground in a spin.

"Did anyone see any weapons fire?" Wolf asked.

"Nothing." Vance replied.

"It must be a fault." Quinn added just before the valkyrie disappeared from view and there was a crashing sound as it dropped through the trees, followed by a flash and the sound of an explosion.

Wolf reached for her microbead.

"Sergeant Molla, can you-" she began before giving out a sudden yelp and pulling the device from her ear.

"Abbot, give me the vox." Vance said, holding out his hand for the handset and when the guardsman passed it to him he activated it briefly, "Someone's jamming us." he said as the only sound that came from the vox was a high pitched squeal.

"You don't say." Wolf commented, rubbing the side of her head.

"I can feel it in my head." Veneel said as he too lifted his hands to his head, "This is no mundane vox interference."

"Could it be strong enough to disrupt the machine spirit of a valkyrie?" Quinn asked, looking around but only blank expressions faced him.

"Well perhaps we ought to try and figure out a way of warning the navy boys." Torrent added, "Look." and she pointed to where the other valkyries were moving round to investigate the crash.

"Too late." Vance added as the nose of the first of these aircraft suddenly dropped and the valkyrie ploughed into the ground, tumbling as it crashed through the trees and leaving a trail of burning debris in its wake.

With no idea of how the two aircraft had been disabled the remaining four pilots opted to break off their approach. But for one of these it was already too late and even as its pilot tried to avoid it the aircraft entered the region of disruption. This valkyrie began to roll and tumble in mid air and then there was a flash from the cockpit as the crew realised that their aircraft was doomed and decided to eject. The two flight crew shot from the cockpit on plumes of flame as their ejector seats triggered while from the rear of the valkyrie two small dark shapes appeared as the gunners leapt from the rear ramp before the valkyrie could join the first two in crashing to the ground.

Meanwhile the three surviving aircraft now pulled back, flying away from the invisible force that had brought down the others.

"Well there goes our air cover." Vance said.

"Sergeant Quinn." Wolf said out loud, "Take your squad and locate those crewmen. If they're still alive then they'll need our help. Everyone else keep searching this place, I want to know what this sacrifice was all about."

## 6.

"What do you mean you can't raise the major?" Shryke demanded as he entered the communications tent with Magos Serett and Commissar Garratt. In here were rows of advanced vox equipment that was supposed to be able to communicate with units all around the planet or with ships still several million kilometres in space. But according to the equipment's operators Major Trent's command squad could not be reached.

"I'm sorry sir, but we can't reach anyone from Fourth Company." one of the technical specialists replied.

"Allow me to try." Serett suggested and without waiting to be answered the tech priest stepped up to the closest vox unit and extended one of his mechandrites, plugging into the equipment to manipulate it by thought alone, "Accessing communication and data nodes." he said and the displays on the vox unit he had connected himself to began flickering as Serett made changes faster than they could keep up with.

"Well? What's happened to Fourth Company?" Garratt asked, growing impatient, "Can you raise them or not?"

"Negative commissar." Serett answered, "All conventional communications to Fourth Company's units in the field are blocked. I can however, raise their support elements and some of the navy's valkyrie transports that were ordered to deposit them."

"Some?" Shryke asked.

"Correct colonel. It appears that a zone of extreme electromagnetic interference has been established that encompasses the entire search area. Centred on the same ruins that you want Fourth Company to investigate. I am unable to establish communication with any unit either inside it, or on the far side other than by using satellite relays. The navy units that I have established communication with have indicated that the disruption is powerful enough to corrupt the machine spirits of any aircraft that enters the zone."

"So much for flying our people to the central ruin." Garratt said.

"Right now we can't even get them to go there on foot." Shryke replied, "We can't tell them to go anywhere."

"Perhaps a courier?" Garratt suggested, "We could fly one out as close as possible to Major Trent's force with orders." but Shryke shook his head.

"We can't be certain how far out that disruption extends, the navy would have to drop the courier in the jungle some distance from the ruins. Then they could wind up wandering around for hours actually trying to make contact with Major Trent." he responded.

"Colonel, there may be another method of transmitting a signal to Major Trent." Serett commented and the colonel and commissar both turned towards him.

"You think that the vox can be adjusted to-" Garratt began before the tech priest interrupted.

"No commissar" he said, "Adjusting vox communications protocols in search of a setting that could penetrate the jamming would be a matter of random chance without even any certainty that it would be successful. Besides, even if such alterations were possible Major Trent's forces would have to make the same adjustments and we have no way of instructing them on how to do so. We must look for a way of communicating without using technological means."

This surprised both Colonel Shryke and Commissar Garratt. Before being assigned to the XIX Regiment, Magos Serett had held high rank within the Adeptus Mechanicus and for him to make any suggestion that did not involve the application of the technical knowledge he held was highly unusual.

"What do you suggest then magos?" Garratt asked.

"I believe that Fourth Company has a sanctioned psyker attached to it." Serett replied and Colonel Shryke grinned.

"Get Kaitlin." he told a nearby trooper.

"Who's there?" a voice called out through the jungle.

"Quinn. Catachan Nineteenth." Quinn responded as he led his squad forwards.

"Oh thank the Emperor." came the reply and it was then that Quinn saw the naval airman dangling from the tree, his limbs caught up in the lines of his parachute.

"Are you injured?" Quinn asked as his men stood beneath the airman.

"Just my pride." he answered.

"Don't you have a knife?" Quinn then asked.

"Sure I do." the airman said, "Its by your foot."

Quinn looked down and saw the compact knife from an navy emergency survival kit poking out from the grass at his feet. Compared to the traditional Catachan blade that was designed a multi purpose tool that could be used both for hacking through the dense jungle of the deathworld they originated from and also fighting off some of the myriad of predators that lived there the emergency knife was tiny, looking more like

something out of a mess kit.

Swiftly, Quinn climbed the tree until he drew level with the airman and then keeping a grip on the tree with one hand he drew his own Catachan bald with the other.

"Get ready." he said.

"Ready for what?" the airman asked.

"I wasn't talking to you." Quinn replied and then he swung his blade, aiming for where the parachute cords were tangled up in the tree.

"Whoa! Wait-" the airman began but he was cut off as Quinn effortlessly sliced through the cords and he suddenly plummeted downwards, crying out in alarm. Fortunately Quinn's squad was ready at the base of the tree and they caught hold of him, slowing him down before he could hit the ground at full speed.

"I don't suppose you noticed where the other three ended up did you?" Quinn asked as he climbed back down the tree.

"Sorry no. I was concentrating more on where I was about to land." the airman replied.

"Oh well." Quinn said, "I doubt they'll be too hard to find. You weren't."

Kaitlin Shayal's milky white eyes were in stark contrast to her dark skin and although she was clearly blind she had no trouble in keeping them directed towards Colonel Shryke as she entered his command post. The soul binding ritual that had robbed her of her conventional sight had replaced it with a psychic sense far more perceptive than mere human vision. Being touched by the mind of the God Emperor himself had not only strengthened her defences against daemonic intrusion it had enhanced her power to the point where she was instinctively aware of everything around her. But it was not this ability that had caused the colonel to summon her. Astropaths like Shayal were essential to maintaining communication between the distant worlds and starships of the Imperium by sending messages telepathically, thus bypassing the limits on the range and speed of purely technological methods of signalling. For someone able to communicate across a galaxy Shryke was hoping that establishing communication across few hundred kilometres would be trivial. But as it happened he was wrong.

"I need you to communicate with Fourth Company's psyker." he told Shayal as she sat down in front of him,

"I need to speak with Major Trent."

"How would you have me achieve this?" Shayal asked.

"How do you think?" Garratt responded before Shryke could answer, "Use the powers given to you by Him on Earth."

"Aloysius Veneel may have been sanctioned as fit for field deployment but he is not a psychic conduit."

Shayal explained but leaving the two senior officers none the wiser. Fortunately Shayal picked up on their confusion and attempted to simplify this, "I send messages into the warp to be retrieved by other astropaths who are searching for such things. Even if I were to be able to send a message to Aloysius, he could not respond and he is too far away for me to simply pluck information from his mind."

"Perhaps just sending a message will be enough." Shryke said.

"You mean just relay to him that he is to take his troops to investigate the ruins at the centre of the vox disruption?" Garratt asked and Shryke nodded.

"Precisely. The major's an intelligent man. Providing Kaitlin can impress on Veneel that we're interested in that location he ought to be able to figure out what he needs to do."

"If not, then I'm sure Commissar Layne will do so." Garratt added, unaware of his subordinate's 'accident'.

"Do it." Shryke said, looking back at Shayal, "Tell Major Trent that we want him to investigate the ruins at the centre of the eight assigned to his company."

Shayal smile briefly.

"Well?" Garratt asked, "What are you waiting for?"

"Why nothing commissar." she replied, "It's done."

Aside from the blood soaked carved stone block, none of the ruins showed any signs of having been used by humans in a long time. Most of the Catachans preferred to keep their distance from the block, concerned that its proximity could attract the attention something unnatural. Wolf herself would have preferred to remain further back from it as well, but as the platoon's commanding officer she felt that her place was at the front while Black and Veneel studied it closer, trying to determine what sort of corrupt practice had taken place here. Torrent was also standing close by to examine the human remains for any sign of abnormality or mutation that could give a clue to why the victim had been sacrificed. This was something that the platoon medic was not happy about but given Wolf's decision to observe Black and Veneel's investigation closely Torrent had found it impossible to ask to be excused, fearing looking weak compared to the non-Catachan officer.

Khor's orgyns formed a perimeter around the block. The big abhumans were just as wary of it as the Catachans, but their desire to demonstrate their bravery and loyalty to Wolf overrode this for at least the time

being.

All of a sudden Veneel staggered, steadied himself on a nearby wall and gasped.

"Stand to!" Wolf yelled, fearing that the psyker had something unnatural approaching to attack the platoon and the Catachans and ogyrns all took cover and readied their weapons.

"No!" Veneel gasped, "A message."

"A message? What message?" Wolf asked.

"Shryke. Trent. The centre. Trent. Shryke. The centre." Veneel said and Wolf turned to Vance.

"I don't like the sound of that." she said.

"Neither do I." Vance agreed, "It sounds like an order meant for the major."

"The colonel probably used his astropath to bypass the jamming." Molla agreed, "Too bad he didn't know that Veneel's with us rather than Major Trent's force."

"But what does he mean by the centre?" Torrent asked.

"The centre of the ruins perhaps?" Grey replied, "They're in a circular pattern after all. Maybe the colonel's found something there."

"Like the source of the jamming?" Mayer suggested.

"Could be." Wolf replied as she pulled out her dataslate and then groaned, "No map." she added.

"Of course not." Vance said, "It needs satellite data to establish its position."

"Looks like we're doing this the Catachan way then." Molla said, "I can get us to the centre point." and Torrent smiled.

"Try not to get left behind." she said to Wolf.

"Well we need to wait for Quinn to get back first." Wolf replied.

"Missing me lieutenant?" Quinn's voice called out and Wolf looked around to see the veteran squad emerging from the jungle. Accompanying the Catachans were the four naval airmen who had bailed out of the disabled valkyrie before it crashed. The flight crew both had officer's markings on their uniforms, while the door gunners were as expected both enlisted men. One of the officers was supported by two of Quinn's troops, a simple splint strapped to his leg. From his uniform wolf guessed that he was the pilot.

"I broke it smashing through the trees." he said when he saw wolf staring at his leg, "Fortunately your man was there to set it."

Wolf smiled and looked at Quinn.

"Not me. Rull." Quinn said, "He'd already found the lieutenant when we got there."

"Where is he now?" Wolf asked.

"Heading for the other two wrecks. I know the odds of there being any survivors are negligible, but we to know for sure." Quinn answered.

"Lieutenant," Vance said, leaning in close to her, "carrying an injured man is going to slow us down badly." then he noticed Torrent smirk, glancing at Wolf again and he glared at her angrily.

Wolf nodded in agreement.

"Give them a vox set." she replied.

"A vox? But the jamming-" Vance began.

"I know, they can't signal for an evac from here. But if they can get away from the disruption then maybe those other valkyries can come back and pick them up. Plus they can signal Colonel Shryke and tell him that we're proceeding to the target."

"I bet he'll be overwhelmed about that." Grey muttered.

"I take it you know how to operate a guard vox set." Wolf asked the injured pilot and he nodded.

"Yeah, we use something similar in the navy." he replied as Abbot removed the bulky vox set from his back and gave it to one of the door gunners.

"Just keep heading that way." Molla said, pointing into the jungle, "Keep the sun to your left and you should get out of the affected area."

"Thanks." the pilot said while the two Catachans supporting him stepped back and allowed the second officer and gunner to take their places, "When you get back the first round of drinks is on me."

## 7.

The Magister immersed his blood soaked hands in water to rinse them clean and then shook them as he withdrew them. It seemed a waste of blood to just wash it away and shake what was left from his hands, but the ritual he was undertaking had very specific requirements that had already been met. There would need to be another round of sacrifices for the next stage of the ritual, but that would require fresh blood and offering it up stale would risk the wrath of the warp's inhabitants.

"Magister!" a voice called out and moments later a young native rushed up and knelt in front of him, his head bowed in submission.

"Speak your piece." The Magister said.

"Our scouts have returned, they report explosions in the jungle on several sides." the man replied without lifting his head.

"Artillery?" The Magister asked.

"No lord. They say that the enemy's aircraft are falling from the skies."

The Magister smiled.

"So the ritual is working." he said, "We are now isolated from the outside world." then he paused as he considered the ramifications of what he was being told, "You say all sides?" he asked and the native nodded, though he still kept his eyes averted from The Magister's face, "What sort of aircraft were they?" he then asked.

"The ones your people call 'valkyries' my lord." the native told him, "Some turned and fled, but at least half crashed into-"

"Send search parties." The Magister interrupted, "With enough strength each to fight an Imperial Guard force that could have been carried by those aircraft."

"But my lord, how could the people aboard survive?"

"I'm not worried about a handful of down navy pilots." The Magister hissed, "Valkyries are troop transports. That means there could be enemy troops already in the area. We cannot have the ritual disturbed. Now go and tell the others that I want all of those aircraft investigated. Warn them that the enemy could be close by and tell them that there will be a reward for every Imperial skull brought to me. Tell them blood for the Blood God."

"Yes my lord." the native responded and still without making eye contact with The Magister he got to his feet and retreated back the way he had come.

The Magister watched the native as he left, wondering how the Imperium had discovered what he was doing in time to deploy a force to try and stop him. The he put those thoughts aside, confident that it was already too late as the skies outside began to darken.

Given his expertise at jungle navigation and his claim to be able to find his way to the centre of the ring of ruins, Wolf allowed Molla's squad to lead the way through the jungle. All of sudden she felt a shiver run down her spine as dark clouds began forming and the sun was blocked out. Then there was the distant rumble of thunder without any preceding flash of lightning and rain began to fall.

"Oh great." Wolf said as she felt the first large drops of water falling through the trees and she looked down, "This ground is all going to turn to mud isn't it?"

"Possibly." Vance replied, "Don't worry though, I doubt it'll get so deep you sink under entirely." and Wolf frowned briefly at this thinly veiled comment about her height compared to everyone else in the platoon.

Then she noticed that Molla had halted his squad and she raised her hand for the rest of the platoon to do likewise before she and Vance went to join Molla.

"Sergeant why have you stopped?" Wolf asked and Molla looked up and pointed at the sky.

"That." he said.

"What? It's just a bit of rain." Wolf replied.

"Yes, but it's blocking out the sun and that's pretty important to navigation. It's too easy to get turned around in the jungle if you can't see it." Molla explained, "I hope those navy fly boys managed to get somewhere they could use that vox in time."

"So are you saying that we have to just sit here and wait for the sun to come out again?" Wolf asked.

"We may not have much to waste Molla." Vance added.

"I know." Molla replied, "Hopefully this is just a bit of a flash shower and it'll be over in a few minutes."

"And if it isn't?" Wolf said and Molla thought for a moment.

"Then we'll need to form a line." he said.

"A line?" Wolf repeated.

"Yeah, I get it." Vance said, "The platoon forms up in a line that points the way we've been going. Then Molla

here uses that as his reference point for navigation.”

“That’ll work?” Wolf said,

“Sure.” Molla answered, “It’ll slow us down mind you because we’ll have to move the platoon in groups. One group will stay in formation while the other advances and sets up in a parallel line to them so we always have our reference line.”

Wolf sighed.

“So we lose time either way.” she said before a shrill scream cut through the jungle.

“What the feth?” Vance exclaimed.

“That wasn’t one of us.” Molla added as he, Vance and Wolf all reached for their magnoculars and began to search the jungle in front of them for the source of the sound.

At first all seemed peaceful, but then there was a distant flash of light that the Catachans recognised instantly.

“Las fire.” Vance said.

“But none of our people could be out here could they?” Wolf replied.

“No chance.” Molla said, “The other platoons are way too far away to have made it here by now.”

“And we know that no more navy boys survived the other crashes.” Vance added, “That means only one thing.”

“Yeah.” Wolf interrupted, “Kordonians. Tell everyone to stand to.”

To the natives of Lyannus the jungle was their home. It provided them with everything they needed to survive; food, water and the materials for creating shelters and clothing and this meant that they made effective guides for the Kordonian troops who found it to be an alien environment from the one they grew up in. But on Catachan the jungle was not a place of life, it was a place of death. Every animal and many of the plants on the planet were deadly to the human settlers and the Catachans were expert jungle fighters precisely because every day of their lives on their home planet was a battle for survival. So although the native guides had been able to help the Kordonian troops in making their way towards the area where Second Platoon's valkyries had been seen crashing they could neither help them in concealing their advance or in detecting the sniper that had just put a bullet through their officer's stomach.

Rull had aimed low deliberately. He was a good enough shot that he could have shot the enemy officer through the heart or brain and killed him instantly. But in addition to taking out the enemy commander Rull wanted to warn the rest of the platoon of the force approaching them and for that it was essential that the officer was able to cry out and shooting him in the stomach guaranteed that he did just that.

The Kordonians and their native allies returned fire of course, shooting las and slug weapons at where they thought Rull had concealed himself, right where the Catachan sniper wanted them to think he was while he slipped away and waited for the rest of Second Platoon to react.

Wolf watched for the wave from Mayer that told her his mortars were set up and ready to fire and she gave a single wave in response. With this signal Mayer turned back to his squad and uttered a single word.

“Fire!” he yelled and in rapid succession there were three loud 'booms' as the mortars were fired, sending their explosive payload into the air in an arc that brought them back down where Molla and Vance had guessed the enemy force was to be found.

The sound of the mortar rounds heading towards them could be heard by the Kordonians even over the sound of the rain and they scattered as they realised that they were under fire. Without accurate targeting information the placement of the mortar rounds was largely guesswork and to increase the chance of at least one hitting something they had been aimed individually, one directly at where the Catachans expected their enemy to be, one to the left and one to the right. The detonation of all three bombs in rapid succession caught only a handful of the enemy in their blasts, killing or wounding barely half a dozen. But the sound of the blasts left them disorientated and without their officer to rally them and issue orders they delayed while each squad leader tried to decide what he was going to do on his own.

The air was then filled with the rhythmic pounding of a powerful automatic weapon as Molla's squad opened fire with their heavy bolter, sweeping it from side to side as they sought to flush out the Kordonians.

However, the sustained burst of bolter fire left a trail in the air that led right back to the Catachan position and one of the Kordonian sergeants was able to regain enough control of his men to direct their fire towards the bolter crew.

“Short bursts!” he ordered as he fired his pistol, “Take out that gun.”

The bright flashes of las fire lit up the jungle and Molla saw the man working to keep the heavy bolter fed with ammunition slump forwards.

“Second squad advance.” Wolf yelled, waving at Grey. Without bothering to acknowledge the order directly, Grey beckoned his squad forwards, heading for the source of the las fire. Meanwhile Quinn took his squad in search of a vulnerable flank, leaving Molla's squad and the command section to hold their position.

The heavy bolter suddenly fell silent, not because its gunner had been killed but simply because its belt of

ammunition had been exhausted and without a second crewman to connect a replacement the gunner was forced to stop firing while he reloaded.

"Stevens! Go give Young a hand." Molla ordered and then when he looked back towards the enemy position he saw that they were taking advantage of the sudden gap in the heavy bolter fire to launch a counter attack. The Kordonian squad that had engaged the heavy bolter team now turned its attention to Grey's troops as they made their way forwards and one of the squad was hit before they could take cover. Meanwhile someone seemed to have imposed some order on the other Kordonian troops and their native allies and now they were making their way forwards, heading straight for where Molla and Wolf were positioned.

"Throne there's a lot of them!" Vance exclaimed as he defiantly fired his las pistol into the enemy force and then ducked to avoid the returned fire.

"Time to thin out their numbers then." Wolf said and she looked behind her at where Khor's ogryn squad waited patiently, "Sergeant Khor, take your men forwards and engage the enemy." she ordered and Khor grinned.

"Ogryns advance!" he yelled and the six massive abhumans marched forwards, holding their ripper guns aimed ahead of them. The ogryns marched between the members of Molla's squad and it was then that the enemy came into view of them, "Ogryns fire!" Khor ordered and the ripper guns roared into life, tearing into the enemy.

The ogryns continued to advance, firing on the move and the Kordonians parted to allow them through, too intimidated by their appearance and the weight of fire coming from their weapons to want to risk charging at them. The ogryns on the other hand were eager to get within arms reach of the enemy and as soon as Khor saw an opportunity to do just that he ceased fire and gave another shout.

"Ogryns charge!"

In unison the ogryns roared as they suddenly broke into a run, smashing through the first line of enemy troops they encountered and crushing them underfoot. Then they began to swing their ripper guns as clubs, swiping at anything smaller than they were.

Wolf watched this from her position and saw a group of natives emerging from the jungle to reinforce the Kordonian regular troops. Their weaponry was not as good as the traitors', consisting of primitive slug throwers and tools adapted into melee weapons, but Wolf could see that their numbers could be enough to overwhelm the small number of ogryns.

"Forwards." she said, scrabbling to her feet, "We need to help Khor before he's overrun."

"For the Emperor!" Black bellowed and he pulled his blade free and broke into a run, "Let the might of Him on Earth flow through us today!" he yelled as he ran.

Black's yell alerted the Kordonian troops to his approach and one turned to face him, swinging his las gun around as he did so. But despite the muddy ground the priest still moved quickly through the jungle and he was already within arm's reach before the traitor could take aim Black lunged at him, plunging his blade into the man's chest. Then as a second traitor turned towards Black the priest shot him in the head with his las pistol.

"Fear me! For I bring the wrath of the Emperor in my hands!" he bellowed as the two men fell to the ground beside one another.

Behind Black came the rest of Molla's and Wolf's squads, though Wolf herself lagged behind with Veneel. This force, though small, crashed into their opponents and engaged with rifle butts and blades. Though they remained outnumbered by the main mass of traitors the Catachans were enough to prevent them from surrounding the ogryns who were still bashing their way through their opponents, one now using the body of a Kordonian as a club in place of the ripper gun he had dropped. Wolf looked for somewhere that she would be of use. Lacking the size and body strength of the Catachans under her command she was aware that she was not the same match for the Kordonians that her troops were and she attempted to find somewhere that she could join in the fighting without becoming a liability. Ideally she wanted to find an enemy that was already engaged against someone else that would keep them distracted while she slipped in close and took them by surprise. But in focusing on the battle in front of her Wolf failed to watch where she was putting her feet and all of a sudden she found herself falling forwards as she tripped over a tree root. Squealing as she fell, Wolf landed face down in the mud, striking her head against the trunk of the same tree she had tripped over and everything went black for her.

One of the Kordonians noticed this and took aim at Wolf while she lay helpless. But before he could pull the trigger of his las gun a tiny red dot appeared on his forehead and then a bullet blew the top off his skull and he too fell into the mud.

Apart from this melee, Grey continued to lead his own squad forwards. Under fire from the enemy, they dropped to the ground and began to crawl forwards through the mud, pausing only to take shots with their lasguns whenever a target presented itself. Grey crawled forwards until he was within just a few metres of the enemy position. From the las fire flying overhead in both directions he knew that the Kordonians were aware of his squad's approach but not his exact position. A situation which suited him just fine. Reaching to



his waist he plucked a fragmentation grenade from his belt and pulled out the pin. Releasing his grip so that the safety lever flew off he counted to himself.

“One. Two. Three!” and then he hurled the grenade towards the Kordonians and lowered his head.

Some of the Kordonians noticed the grenade come flying out of the undergrowth towards them, but even these could not react in time before the explosive it contained detonated and red hot fragments of metal tore through undergrowth and flesh alike.

Taking advantage of the momentary confusion in the enemy ranks one of Grey's men raised himself up to his knees and took aim with the bulky drum-fed weapon he carried. This was a grenade launcher and before the Kordonian troops could recover he fired three more explosive projectiles into their ranks in rapid succession, dropping back to the ground just before they detonated as the smoke cleared and the smell of burned flesh filled the air Grey saw that the incoming enemy fire had ceased, though he could still hear groans coming from their position.

“Finish them!” he snapped, pulling himself up out of the mud and drawing his blade.

## 8.

Quinn held up his hand for his men to stop and they all paused. Peering through the undergrowth Quinn saw more enemy troops advancing. Unlike most of the first wave the overwhelming majority of these were locals and they possessed only their usual, primitive weapons. A pair of Kordonians were with them, apparently acting as leaders. The problem was that there were so many that if they reached the fighting then they would undoubtedly swamp Second Platoon.

"Franks. Warner." Quinn said and the two members of his squad armed with flamers stepped forwards, "Light them up."

"Yes sergeant." Franks replied as both nodded and then they cautiously moved closer to the enemy while Quinn brought his shotgun up to his shoulder and waited.

The two veterans armed with flamers split up and pressed themselves up against large trees to keep out of sight, listening to the sound made by the native troops as they moved through the undergrowth. Normally Quinn would have used his microbead to alert them when the enemy came within range, but with all such communications jammed he instead had to trust in their own skills. Fortunately, like all the members of Quinn's veteran squad Franks and Warner were both well experienced in jungle operations and as they heard the enemy coming closer they suddenly stepped out from their hiding places and fired their weapons. The two flamers produced a screeching sound as the liquid promethium they held was projected forwards and ignited. Keeping the flow of fuel going and moving their weapons back and forth Franks and Warner attempted to cover as many of the enemy troops as they could with the burning liquid. The promethium fuel used in the flamers was thickened to make it stick to whatever it hit and when this was a person it meant they continued to burn even after the jet of fire had moved away from them. The screeching of the flamers was joined by the screams of men now on fire and then by the sharp 'crack' of stubber fire as those native still unharmed took cover and returned fire. Unsurprisingly the first few shots were poorly aimed, the shooters' more interesting in getting off the shots than in taking their time to place them accurately and this gave the two Catachans the chance to cease fire and retreat back into cover.

"Now!" Quinn snapped and he fired his shotgun.

The rest of his squad did likewise, only the trooper armed with a meltagun holding his fire. Theoretically the shotguns wielded by the Catachans were no better than the weapons with which the native troops were armed but there was a vast difference in the quality of the men using them. Most of the natives had rarely used their weapons for anything other than hunting whereas the Catachans were trained to use theirs as weapons of war and they did so in conjunction with the rest of their squad. Unlike the natives, who even under the instruction of Kordonians tended to act individually. This inevitably led to gaps in their fire that Quinn's squad exploited, moving into them and letting loose with rapid volleys of fire before taking cover and moving into the next gap that appeared.

"Stand firm!" one of the Kordonian leaders shouted to his men, "Blood for the Blood God!" But it was then that the Catachans' melta gunner came within range and he took careful aim at the shouting leader.

The beam from his weapon turned the rain around it to steam and was too bright to look at directly but the Kordonian leader did not have the chance to look away before the beam struck him and he was briefly turned into a column of flame and was incinerated. Seeing the Catachans deploy such firepower broke the native will to stay in the fight. The remaining Kordonian tried to rally them, but his words meant little when compared to a melta gun and all he could do was watch them flee into the jungle.

"Problem with your men?" a voice from behind the Kordonian said and when he turned back around he saw Quinn pointing his shotgun straight at him while the other Catachans began circling around him.

"The Blood God does not care where the blood flows from." the Kordonian said, "He demands only that it flows." and then he began to raise his las pistol. Seeing this movement Quinn did not hesitate and he fired two blasts in rapid succession from his shotgun that blew the Kordonian off his feet, killing him before he hit the ground.

One of Molla's men staggered backwards with a knife wound to his chest. Knowing that he could do nothing to help the man, Veneel instead shoved him aside and swung his staff at the Kordonian who had inflicted the wound. There was a brief flash as the psychically charged weapon discharged into the man who promptly fell backwards with a large burn mark where the staff had struck him. Veneel followed this up with a shot from his las pistol that narrowly missed another Kordonian before Molla pounced on the man and dragged him to his knees before slitting his throat.

Veneel took advantage of the momentary gap in the fighting around him to assess the overall situation. The Catachans were clearly holding their own against the superior numbers of their foes, though as he watched he saw one of Mayer's mortar squad who had moved up to support the rest of the platoon when the two

sides became too entangled to risk using the heavy weapons take a hit and fall. In addition to this Veneel saw two more Catachan bodies and knew it was possible that more had fallen. Despite these losses it looked likely that the Catachans would wipe out their opponents, especially with Black and the ogryns hacking their way through them eagerly. The problem was that the longer the fighting continued the more casualties the Catachans would take and those losses could prove critical later on given that there could be no reinforcements. However, Veneel had a weapon at his disposal that he had yet to deploy and he decided that now was the time to unleash it.

Taking a deep breath he gripped his staff tightly, focusing his thoughts through the complex structure designed specifically to amplify and channel his powers. The psychic attack he was about to launch was guided by his thoughts rather than his eyes and he reached out psychically, searching for the differences in the minds of the Catachans, the ogryns and the enemy troops. Such differences were readily apparent, with there being one over riding thought running through the heads of the Kordonians.

*Blood for the Blood God!*

It was then that Veneel struck.

His eyes glowed brightly and he extended one arm towards a cluster of Kordonian troops and at that moment lightning leapt from the tips of his fingers, jumping towards the closest Kordonian before leaping from man to man, targeting only the Kordonians while leaving the Catachans unharmed thanks to Veneel being able to tell their thoughts apart.

"Sorcery!" one of the Kordonians shouted when he saw an entire squad consumed by lightning and then he screamed as the energy arced towards him as well.

The followers of Khorne, the Blood God and Lord of Skulls looked down on the use of psychic powers, seeing them as a manifestation of the mind rather than a demonstration of the physical strength they revered. Fuelled by hatred for such power, many of the Kordonians turned their attention to Veneel while ignoring the Catachans and the Imperial troops were quick to take advantage of this. The Catachans struck at turned backs and tackled those trying to run past them to reach the psyker while he continued to unleash the psychic lightning storm.

Seeing the losses that they were suffering took the fight out of even worshippers of Khorne and the few survivors, mainly native troops rather than the Kordonians who had suffered the brunt of Veneel's attack began to flee. But rather than being able to just vanish into the jungle they found their escape route blocked as Quinn and his veterans arrived to surround them. Some of the enemy troops tried to fight their way through the Catachans and were cut down mercilessly. A few dropped their weapons and tried to surrender, but the Catachans were in no mood to taken prisoners and they too were killed. The remainder attempted to stand their ground but there were so few of them left that they stood no chance.

Vance was breathing heavily as he plucked his blade from between the shoulders of a Kordonian trooper and he looked around. Though only a handful of the Catachans had been killed in the battle more had been wounded and they were gathering together for Torrent to inspect their injuries.

"Hang on." he said as he continued to look around, noting each of the faces of the surviving Catachans, "Where's Lieutenant Wolf?"

"Maybe she's finally out of our hair." Grey replied, "I always said she wasn't up to being a combat officer."

"She's got to be somewhere." Molla said, ignoring Grey for the time being.

"Everyone take a look around." Vance ordered, "I want eyes on the lieutenant ASAP."

"Officer hurt." Khor said.

"Maybe." Quinn replied.

"Officer hurt." Khor said again and this time the abhuman pointed to where Wolf still lay in the mud.

"Torrent quick." Vance exclaimed as he rushed over to Wolf, "Check her out."

"There are injured men right here you know." Torrent replied.

"Move your ass guardswoman!" Quinn yelled, "The platoon sergeant just gave you an order, now follow it."

"Yes sir!" Torrent snapped, suddenly standing at attention and saluting. Then as Quinn glared at her she strode towards Wolf and crouched down beside her, "Well she's alive." she said, "Looks like the useless little outsider tripped and banged her head on this tree trunk. No need to waste any more time on her." and she stood back up and began to return to the other injured men, "Looks like you won't be being promoted just yet." she hissed as she passed by Quinn.

"Be grateful." he replied, scowling at her, "Because that attitude of yours won't fly with me."

"Perhaps someone ought to help the lieutenant to her feet." Molla suggested.

"Lift the officer." Khor said and before anyone could intervene he walked towards Wolf, reached down and lifted her up off the ground.

Wolf's eyes suddenly opened and she squealed as she found herself apparently flying through the air. Then Khor set her down roughly and she staggered, supporting herself by leaning on the ogryn BONEHead.

"Wh- What happened?" she asked, still trying to determine what was going on.

"We won." Mayer said.

"Yes, a great victory that will go down in Imperial history." Grey added and he grinned, "We did just fine while you were asleep."

"I wasn't asleep." Wolf replied, "I- I- what happened to me?"

"Looks like you tripped on something lieutenant." Quinn told her.

"But you're back to normal now I suppose. Though I guess it doesn't hurt to be certain." Grey said and then he held up a hand in an insulting gesture, "How many fingers?"

"Cut it out." Quinn responded, frowning and Grey lowered his hand, grinning at his men.

"So what's our situation?" Wolf asked, rubbing her head where she had hit it against the tree.

"We lost five men and another six are injured." Vance replied.

"Basically first and second squads are both down to five healthy troops." Molla added.

"I've just four left." Mayer added, "Gives me enough men to keep two mortars running."

"I'm on nine." Quinn said, "I've not lost anyone, but one of my men took a shotgun hit to his arm."

Wolf turned to where Torrent was seeing to the wounded.

"How serious are their injuries?" she asked.

"Not too bad." Torrent answered, "They can all walk, but there are a few broken arms and ribs that I need to set. It'll take me a couple of hours to get them ready to fight again."

Wolf sighed.

"We'll group the injured together as a reserve squad under the command of Quinn's injured man." she said, "But we can't afford to lose them entirely. In the mean time I want all of these enemy bodies searching. If you find anything heretical then give it to Preacher Black for destruction, but anything that looks of military value should be brought to me."

"Looking for anything in particular lieutenant?" Molla asked.

"I'm hoping that at least one of them may have a map that doesn't need to link to a satellite to work." Wolf answered. Then she frowned briefly, "Where's Rull?" she asked, noticing the sniper's absence.

"My guess would be hunting." Quinn replied.

"Hunting? We've just engaged the enemy and he's off looking for his next meal?" Wolf said.

"Not that sort of hunting." Quinn told her, "Some of the enemy troops managed to get away and Rull's off making sure that they don't make it far enough to tell anyone about us."

## 9.

"Show me." The Magister said. He had been summoned to the upper floor of an overgrown tower. What purpose it had served when first built had been lost to history after the Imperial crusade forces had cleansed the area of its inhabitants but now it made an effective lookout post, positioned as it was at the top of a hill that rose above the height of most of the trees in the jungle that surrounded the ruins for miles all around.

"Over there sir." the Kordonian soldier replied, passing The Magister a set of magnoculars and pointed out across the treetops, "There was definitely las fire from that direction. The flashes were easily visible in this weather."

"How far?" The Magister asked as he peered through the magnocular.

"About eight to ten thousand metres." the lookout replied.

"Well there's nothing there now." The Magister said, lowering the magnoculars.

"My lord." a voice said from behind him and The Magister turned to see a native now kneeling in front of him.

"Ah, is it time already?" The Magister said and the native nodded. Then The Magister glanced outside of the tower and up at the sky, "These clouds make it so difficult to tell." he said before turning back towards the lookout, "It is too late for the servants of the false Emperor to stop us now." he said, "But that does not mean that we should lower our guard. If you see anything else then send word to me immediately. I shall be in the temple completing the ritual. Mark my words, by the time this day is out we will have all the power we need to drive the Imperium from this world."

Unfortunately if the enemy troops had possessed any usable maps before the battle then they had been either lost or destroyed in the fighting and this left Second Platoon having to continue navigating without any to guide them. The only items of any use found on any of the enemy bodies were the charge packs from the Kordonian las weapons which were compatible with the Catachan weapons and so were divided up amongst the platoon. However, when Rull reported back in he had found something useful and Molla and Wolf took what was left of their squads to investigate.

"So they all ran this way?" Wolf said as she looked at the damaged undergrowth, "Not exactly difficult to follow is it?"

The Kordonians and their native guides had given no thought to hiding their movement through the jungle, believing themselves to be in friendly territory and they had left a trail behind them that was clearly visible. Even the rain that was continuing to fall could not wash away the footprints of almost a hundred men.

"That's what Rull said." Molla replied as he looked along the trail and then back towards where the rest of the platoon waited, "Plus from my reckoning they came from the about the same place we're trying to get to."

"Kind of confirms that there's something going on out here doesn't it?" Wolf commented.

"Question is, are the forces we've encountered so far the bulk of what's defending the target or just the tip of the iceberg?" Vance said as he looked along the trail.

"That doesn't matter." Wolf said, "Either way we need to keep going. At least Rull's gone on ahead so he ought to be able to warn us if there are any more surprises waiting for us."

As well as providing the Catachans with a easy trail to follow, the damage to the jungle left by the defeated enemy force meant that there was no need for them to have to hack their way through any dense undergrowth and this meant that Second Platoon was able to advance rapidly towards their target. Wolf expected that the group of injured troops bringing up the rear of the platoon would have slowed them down, but in keeping with their reputation for toughness the Catachans refused to let their injuries get the better of them and instead it was Veneel and Wolf who found themselves struggling to keep up. Wolf was relieved when Molla called a halt to their advance, but was less pleased when she found out why.

The body was of a Kordonian guardsman and a knife had been driven into his chest, entering between his ribs from behind and then twisted to push the bones apart and deflate his lung. This would have not only increased the speed at which he bled out but also prevented him from crying out. But rather than being laid out on the ground or concealed beneath any of the bushes all around him the dead man had been propped up using a branch about five centimetres thick and almost two metres long that had been pushed down the back of his tunic, then down one leg of his trousers and forced into the ground. Narrow vines had been used to tie his helmet to the top of the branch so that his head remained raised and also bound his weapon to his hands. A thick smearing of mud across the back of the man's uniform concealed the blood from the wound that had killed him. To a casual observer he would have appeared to be still alive and standing guard.

"I almost put a shot into him." Molla said, "But then I noticed he wasn't blinking."

"So what happened to him?" Wolf asked.

"Someone stabbed him." Molla replied and Wolf frowned at him.

"Rull." Vance said, "My guess is that he took this guy out and propped him up to make his friends think he was still alive."

"But if he was here alone then that means we must be close to our target." Wolf said and she began to look around.

"I suggest we hold position here and send First Squad on ahead." Vance told her, "Molla can find out what we're facing and report back. Then we can figure out how to proceed."

"Sounds good to me." Molla replied, "Though I'll bet that Rull's already taken a good around."

"Try and find him." Wolf said, "If this is it the source of the jamming then I want to know as much as possible about what's going on here and how we put a stop to it." then she looked at Vance, "We'll have Mayer set up his mortars just in case. If we can solve this from a distance with a few mortar rounds rather than having to go in closer with our reduced strength then so much the better."

The Magister watched as the blood was poured out onto the floor of the underground chamber. The only light came from the flames being used to burn the carcasses of the sacrificial offerings. In life all of these had possessed the abominable powers of psykers and their suffering had been used to prime their precious blood for use in the ritual before their heads had been cut from their corpses. Around the edges of the chamber natives chanted their devotion to Khorne but their words mattered little, all they needed to do was draw the attention of the Blood God and his servants in the immaterium. On the other hand the blood and the flayed skulls of the psykers would be used to curry Khorne's favour and open the way.

The ritual was time consuming and complicated, not to mention risky. If anything went wrong then Khorne could open a portal to the immaterium only to have it send forth an army of daemonic warriors to slaughter The Magister and his followers. Khorne cared not where the blood flowed from, only that it flowed and The Magister's blood was as good as any. On the other hand, if the ritual went as planned then The Magister's forces would be boosted by warriors far beyond the capability of those he already controlled.

This was not The Magister's first attempt at bringing the forces of chaos to Lyannus. He had previously attempted to turn the XIV Kordonian regiment's leader, Colonel Johann Mallet into a conduit that would act as a beacon for their allies but that plan had failed when the colonel had been killed by the Catachans before the summoning could be completed. Now The Magister had to attempt this far more complicated ritual instead to open a portal for his allies directly.

Fortunately his native followers still remembered this place, hidden deep within the jungle and located at the centre of a network of altar stones that had been used in ages past for offerings meant to curry favour with the inhabitants of the warp that their ancestors had worshipped. Of course the native tribes had never achieved the level of knowledge about the warp that The Magister had but they had known enough to be able to create a viable warp gate. All that they lacked was the ability to activate it.

Eight native cultists were involved in pouring out the blood, eight being the favoured number of the Blood God and The Magister watched them all carefully to make sure that they were doing it properly.

"Not so quickly!" he shouted at one of the cultists. The blood needed to be poured out not only in the correct pattern but the various elements had to be formed in the correct order. If any of the cultists got too far ahead or lagged too far behind then the portal would not bring The Magister the forces that he was hoping for.

The cultist that had attracted The Magister's attention slowed down, looking around at the others to see how far they had got with their own work. It was then that another group of cultists appeared at one of the entrances to the chamber, each one holding a small bundle in front of them.

"Wait there." The Magister called out, "Do not enter the summoning area until I have checked those." and he circled around the trails of blood being poured out onto the floor to stand with the new arrivals. Walking up to the closest he unfolded the cloth the woman held to reveal the human skull that lay within. This was one of the skulls taken from the sacrificed psykers. Now cleaned and polished the skull had been extracted from its original owner while he had still been alive, his skin and flesh being peeled back to expose the bone beneath. Only when the spinal column had been severed to allow the skull to be removed had the screaming ceased. After that it had been sent to be emptied out and a band of iron wrapped around it, covering the now empty eye sockets and held in place with eight iron spikes driven through at equal intervals. The Magister reached out to touch the iron band around the skull with his fingertips and he grinned when as soon as he did so he heard the sound of screaming inside his head once more.

"Very good." he said softly and then he began to open up each of the other bundles in turn, checking that the suffering of each psyker had been properly imprinted on their skull. Of course if any of the skulls proved to be unsuitable then there were still more psykers left in the cells that could be sacrificed. However, all eight of the iron bound skulls proved to be charged by the pain of their owners and The Magister stepped aside to allow the skull bearers to enter, "Now take your places." he commanded and each skull bearer advanced, walking into the area now being marked out in blood. Taking care not to damage any part of the markings the skull bearers made their way to specific places that had been prepared for them, consisting of a ring of blood that they had to stand within while the ritual took place.

As soon as the eighth skull bearer took his place there was a tremor and a rare smile appeared on The Magister's face.

"They have found us." he said to himself, "They are coming."

## 10.

"Rull's taken out two more sentries." Molla told wolf when his squad returned to the rest of the platoon, "But he reckons that there are least another six of them."

Wolf, Black, Vance, Veneel and all of the squad leaders were clustered around a small patch of mud where Molla had etched a crude map into the ground and he prodded at it with a stick

"That makes three he's taken out though." Vance commented, "That at least gives us some room to advance in."

"But can we keep the ogryns quiet enough to slip between the remaining sentries?" Wolf asked.

"The sentries are the least of our worries." Molla replied, "It looks like they're guarding another set of ruins. Like the one where we found the altar only bigger."

"So what?" Wolf said, "That's pretty much what I was expecting."

"Yeah, well were you expecting the guard tower overlooking the area?" Molla then asked, "Rull's seen movement in a tower. Right now he can't tell if it's just one man or more. If there is more than one then when Rull takes out the one he can see then the others will raise the alarm. Now we could take out the entire tower with a grenade or missile but-"

"But the detonation would give us away." Wolf interrupted and she smiled, "See, I do know how to command a combat platoon." and from behind her Torrent just snorted.

"There's smoke as well." Molla went on, "I can't make out anywhere where that seems to have a fire burning in it, so that means that it's likely to be underground." and Wolf groaned.

"Not underground again." she said, "Why can't we fight someone who likes to stay out here in the open air?" then she looked directly at Molla, "Okay, so tell me more about this tower." she said.

"It's pretty much the same as the rest of this place." Molla replied, "Built of stone, about five or six storeys tall and overgrown. At least on the outside."

"So it could be housing a large number of enemy troops inside it then?" Wolf said and Molla nodded.

"Could be a platoon in all. But the watch area couldn't have more than five or six." he said.

"Then that gives us a chance." Wolf said, "Tell me about the sentries Rull took out. How big are they?"

"How big?" Molla replied, "What's that got to-"

"Oh no." Vance said, wincing, "Don't tell me you're thinking what I think you're thinking." and Wolf grinned at him.

A short time later Mayer, Quinn and Vance stood in front of the rest of the platoon dressed in the uniforms of the slain Kordonian sentries and holding their las guns. Wolf had selected these three men to infiltrate the watchtower not only because of their experience, but also because they happened to be the same size as the three dead Kordonians.

"My, don't we all look adorable in our fancy schmancy uniforms today?" Grey said, smirking, "Anyone got a camera?"

"Feth you." Quinn replied.

"To become like the sinner invites damnation." Black added, scowling as he stared at them.

"How else do you suggest they infiltrate the tower then?" Veneel asked.

"The views of a witch are unimportant." Black hissed. Meanwhile

"You've got your own clothes in those packs though, right?" Wolf asked.

"Yeah, don't worry about that." Mayer answered, "The last thing we want is to get mistaken for the enemy when the rest of you launch your attack."

"Okay, then go." Wolf said.

Molla accompanied the three disguised Catachans as far as the edge of the ruins, making sure that he kept out of sight of the watchtower. From there the other three made their way into the ruins individually, still doing their best to keep out of sight. Where they had to move across the open they lowered their heads so that their helmets covered their faces until they made it back into cover. Quinn led the way and was the first to reach the base of the tower. Here he quickly located an entrance and waited for the other two to catch up. "Ready?" he said softly, reaching out for the door handle. Though the door was possibly as old as the tower itself the rope used for the handle looked new, suggesting that the Kordonians and their native allies upgraded the ruins to suit their needs.

Vance just nodded and Mayer took a step back and raised his las gun.

"Be careful Bomber." Vance warned him, "Once you use that thing you'll give our presence away and we'll have them all down around our necks."

"I know." Mayer replied and then he too nodded at Quinn.

Quinn gave the door a shove and it opened without resistance.



"Clear." Mayer said quietly and he went inside, Quinn and Vance following him.

Inside the tower was in darkness, but a limited amount of light shone in not only through the door behind the Catachans but also from the floor above that was accessed by a set of stone stairs on the far side of the room. Without speaking the Catachans darted towards these stairs and then slowly proceeded up to the floor above. They repeated this, moving from floor to floor and checking each one. It appeared that the lower levels of the watchtower had been pressed into service as storage areas, with each one filled with standard Departamento Munitorum containers that according to their labels mainly contained survival equipment such as tents, portable heaters and stoves. But the Catachans had neither the time nor the inclination to open every single one of these to confirm their contents so they instead just made sure that no one was hiding amongst the containers before proceeding up to the next level.

As they approached the stairs leading up to the fourth floor they heard footsteps from above and quickly ducked behind some of the stacks of containers themselves while they waited for whoever was coming down the stairs to appear. The man that descended the stairs was a native soldier with a bolt action rifle slung over his shoulder and he walked directly towards the stairs leading down to the floor below. However, Quinn was unwilling to be caught between two groups of enemy troops, even if one of them was alone and so as the man walked past his hiding place he struck.

Silently Quinn emerged from behind the man and clamped one hand over his nose and mouth while grabbing hold of the man's throat with the other. Seeing this both Mayer and Vance emerged to help Quinn, taking hold of the native's arms and legs and lifting him off the floor so that in his panicked flailing he would not knock over any of the containers all around them and alert whoever was still in the tower.

Feeling the man's windpipe beneath his hand Quinn pressed down and to the side and there was a soft 'crunch' as it was knocked out of alignment. But Quinn and the others still kept their grips even as the man's thrashing became more desperate. With his throat ruined it was only a matter of minutes before he would lose consciousness and then die for lack of oxygen, but until then his struggles could still make enough noise to give the Catachans away if he was not restrained. When he finally went limp they carried him behind some of the containers where he would be out of sight and set him down gently before they headed up the stairs. Unlike the previous floors, the fourth was not used for storage. Instead a pair of foldaway bunks and some simple plastic chairs and a table had been set up here. In addition there was a bucket located to one side of the room that was giving off a rancid smell that suggested it was there for the occupants of the room to be able to relieve themselves without having to continuously walk all the way down the tower and back each time.

From the floor above came the sound of voices and Mayer and Vance paused while Quinn crept closer to the stairs leading up and then stopped while he listened, doing his best to pick out the different voices. Then he held up four fingers to indicate the number of people he estimated to be above them. This matched the number of beds on this floor and suggested that the native they had already killed was not one of the regular watchmen.

One option for the Catachans was to simply use their las guns to fire up through the floor. But this risked giving them away even if they were able to kill all four enemy troops before any of them could shout out a warning to anyone outside. So instead they did what Catachans often did at close quarters, they reached for their knives. The Kordonian issue knives were much smaller and lighter than the traditional Catachan manufactured ones that they were used to, but they were no less deadly in the hands of someone who had been brought up from the day they were born to use such a weapon. Different worlds in the Imperium had wildly varying traditions regarding naming ceremonies for newborn children and on Catachan it was here that parents would present their child with a blade that they would hopefully retain for the rest of their life.

Trying to lure some of the Kordonians down the stairs so that they could be dealt with separately rather than engaging all four of them together was not an option, the Catachan accent of spoken gothic was easy to tell apart from that of the Kordonians or the natives and so the only viable alternative was for the three Catachans to attack all four watchmen at the same time.

With their rifles slung to make them appear harmless, all three Catachans ascended the stairs together with their knives concealed between their arms and bodies. As expected there were four men here, all of them regular Kordonian troops. There were enough las guns in the room for all four of them, but in an example of poor military discipline these were all propped up against a wall and out of immediate reach.

"What's going on?" one of the Kordonians asked from across the room. This man still retained the sergeant's markings that he had earned before turning traitor and Quinn calmly walked over towards him while Mayer and Vance positioned themselves closer to two of the others, "Well? Come on trooper, spit it out." he said, frowning and at that moment Quinn produced his knife and thrust it upwards. The blade entered the traitor's body just below his body armour and went up into his chest cavity. The traitor's eyes widened as he looked at Quinn in disbelief, still unsure as to why he had just been stabbed. On the other hand the other three Kordonians just looked on in confusion as they wondered what was going on. From where each of them was stood they had not seen their leader stabbed and so all they knew was that he had suddenly stopped talking.

On the other hand Mayer and Vance knew exactly what had happened and they used this as their queue to attack, each one lunging at the closest enemy trooper. Mayer drove his knife into his opponent sideways through the hole in his armour for his arm while Vance instead plunged his downwards through the neck. In each case they twisted their knives to open out the wounds before withdrawing them and simply letting the Kordonians drop to the floor as they bled to death.

The final Kordonian tried to focus on his personal survival rather than the more strategic choice of shouting out a warning in the hope that someone outside would hear him and reinforcements would be sent to deal with the Catachan infiltrators. He dived across the room, aiming to reach his las gun before any of the Catachans could get to him. But Quinn was already plucking his knife from the dead sergeant and he spun around and grabbed hold of the Kordonian by the ankle.

"Oh no you don't!" he exclaimed, pulling the man back towards him. Not expecting to come under attack in their watchtower, none of the Kordonians had been wearing helmets and so Quinn was able to grab hold of the man by his hair, gripping him tightly before he slammed his face into the floor with a loud 'Thunk!' The man was dazed but not yet dead and Quinn finished him off by stabbing him just below his ear, sending the knife into his brain.

"Clear." Quinn said as he extracted the knife and wiped it off on the uniform of the dead Kordonian.

"Clear." Vance added.

"Clear here as well." Mayer finished.

"Right then," Vance said, "let's get back into some proper clothes."

Keeping watch on the tower from the jungle Molla smiled when he saw Vance appear briefly at a window dressed once again in his Catachan uniform. Quietly and alert for any enemy patrols that may be about Molla then retreated to take word of this back to the rest of the platoon.

"They've taken the tower." he announced.

"Excellent." Wolf replied.

"And since Rull says he's taken out all of the sentries that leaves the way open for us." Grey added, looking at Wolf. With all of the other sergeants gone, Grey had effectively been second in command of the platoon and given his continued hostility towards her command Wolf had had the nagging feeling that he may try and exploit this to take control. But these fears had been unfounded, or least they had been given the current situation and Grey had made no effort to try and organise any sort of mutiny, "We ought to get moving lieutenant." he continued, "The longer we delay the more likely Vance and the others will be discovered." Wolf nodded.

"I agree. Sergeants Grey and Molla get back to your squads, we're going to attack now." she said and behind her Black smiled.

"We will deliver the Emperor's justice to the heretics." he announced as he drew his las pistol, "And we may take comfort in delivering their souls up to their cursed gods for eternal damnation."

As the platoon began to move out Molla approached Grey.

"So what was that about?" he asked quietly.

"What was what about?" Grey responded innocently.

"You offering honest and sensible advice to the lieutenant? You've never accepted her being in command."

"Why should I? She's an outsider and she's no place commanding Catachans in battle. But her plan was good and you know I'd never sabotage a mission just to get rid of her." Grey said.

"Just be sure you don't." Molla warned him, "The rest of us aren't overjoyed about having her as our CO, but that's just the way things are and none of it's her fault so we've got her back. Remember that."

The platoon advanced towards the ruins and they had just come into view through the jungle when Veneel placed his hand on Wolf's shoulder, squeezing it tightly.

"Ow! Hey!" she exclaimed, "What are you doing?"

"Release her witch." Black hissed.

"Something is wrong." Veneel told her, "Something is very wrong. The veil is parting."

"What do you mean 'the veil'?" Wolf asked, confused.

"The barriers between warp space and the real universe. Something here is deliberately weakening it. It is possible that this weakening is also the source of the interference to our communications." Veneel said.

"But why would anyone do that?" Wolf asked.

"Don't you get it?" Torrent asked in reply, "Somebody's trying to summon something from the warp and this is where it's going to appear. You've led us right into the middle of it."

"Whatever foul sorcery is at work it is our Emperor given duty to put a stop to it." Black said, "With fire we shall purify."

"Preacher Black is correct." Veneel said, prompting a scowl from the Ministorum priest, "If a summoning ritual is completed then we will likely be facing a force that we cannot possibly hope to defeat on our own. Our only hope is to find out where it's taking place and put a stop to it."

Wolf thought back to the ruins where she and the rest of Second Platoon had discovered the Kordonian treason. Their colonel had been acting as some sort of figurehead for chaos worshippers that had established a temple in an underground ruin and now it appeared that despite his death his cult was still going strong. Then another thought occurred to her. If the Veneel was able to sense the weakening of the barriers between realspace and the warp then maybe he could determine the source of the disturbance.

"Mister Veneel can you lead us to where this ritual is being carried out?" she asked and the psyker nodded.

"I can." he answered, "But I should warn you that if I try and use my powers in such proximity to a disturbance as strong as this then I will open myself up for attack from the warp even before the ritual is completed."

"Okay I get it." Wolf replied with a nod, "You just stay back and try to keep out of the way." then she turned to Black, "Preacher Black, I must ask you to watch over Mister Veneel and if he shows any signs of-"

"If the witch is possessed I will end him. Have no fear of that lieutenant. I am not afraid to do my duty." Black said before she could finish.

"Okay great." Wolf said, "But do wait until anything actually happens. We need him alive for now."

"For now, yes." Black said.

"Right then let's go. Sergeant Molla, lead the way to the watchtower and we'll join up with Platoon Sergeant

Vance's team.”

In the small groups that now made up the reorganised platoon the Catachans advanced into the ruins. Like the three who had gone on ahead to take out the watchtower they did their best to stay out of sight, but they were ready to fight if they saw any enemy activity. This was no longer infiltration, this was an assault. Reaching the watchtower without incident Second Platoon found Mayer waiting for them just inside the door, still armed with the Kordonian las gun.

“Corporal, report.” Wolf said as soon as she was inside.

“Sergeant Quinn and Platoon Sergeant Vance are still on the top floor plotting enemy movements.” he replied and Wolf looked back at Veneel.

“Would getting up high help you figure out where the disruption is coming from?” she asked the psyker.

“It may.” he answered.

“Then let's give it a try.” Wolf said.

“I'll be right behind you.” Black commented, “I'm not letting this witch out of my sight.”

Mayer led Wolf, Veneel and Black up the stairs to the top floor, passing by the bodies of the Kordonians that had been unceremoniously dumped along with the native's on the third floor. Upon reaching the fifth they found both Quinn and Vance looking out of the tower's windows. Though both men now wore their Catachan uniforms once more they had retained their Kordonian flak helmets so that if anyone caught sight of them from the ground they would be more likely to think that they were the watchmen assigned to the tower.

“Ah lieutenant, we spotted you approaching.” Vance said.

“Corporal Mayer said you were watching for enemy activity.” Wolf replied, “What have you seen?”

“Not much.” Quinn answered, “The enemy seem to be keeping their heads down even around here.”

“We didn't see anyone coming here.” Wolf commented, “I've left the platoon outside.”

“There have been some signs of movement from over here.” Vance said, “Over near where that smoke is coming from.”

Wolf looked at Veneel and he nodded before walking up to Vance.

“Show me.” he said and Vance pointed to where a thin column of smoke could be seen rising up from one of the ruined structures.

“Well?” Wolf asked and Veneel nodded.

“It's there.” he said.

“What's there?” Vance asked, looking out of the window again.

“Oh, someone's trying to open up a warp portal. That's all.” Wolf told him and as his face fell she added, “Now come on, we've got some sort of ritual to put a stop to.”

“Closer.” The Magister hissed, “They are getting closer.”

In front of him the eight skull bearers now stood in the midst of the completed design laid out in blood on the floor. The chanting from the cultists continued and the air seemed to be taking on an odd quality with tiny pulses of light suddenly appearing and then vanishing just as quickly as the barrier between realspace and the warp decayed.

For a brief moment The Magister considered what would happen if anything had been done incorrectly. The portal was suppose to be opened in a specific manner and if it was done incorrectly then there was no telling what would be waiting to come through from the other side. Then he shook his head. He had overseen the ritual at every stage and everything had been done in accordance with the ancient knowledge that had been entrusted to him. In the greater scheme of things the regiment's exposure as worshippers of chaos and the loss of Colonel Mallet would be inconsequential. This world would fall to the galaxy's true gods and the power of the corpse Emperor would be further diminished.

“Magister!” someone shouted and The Magister turned to see a Kordonian trooper come rushing into the ritual chamber.

“Stay back you fool!” The Magister yelled just in time to prevent the soldier from damaging the markings poured out in blood on the floor. The Magister would not let his plans be destroyed by someone who couldn't be bothered watching where he put his feet at this stage, “Now stay there.” The Magister added as he began to circle around the ritual markings towards the soldier. Obediently the trooper stayed put, but as The Magister approached he called out across the chamber.

“Lord, the Emperor's soldiers are here.” he exclaimed.

“Impossible.” The Magister replied, “Our watchmen and sentries would have warned us of their approach.”

“My lord, the enemy appear to have already taken our watchtower and are now heading this way.” the soldier said and The Magister scowled.

“Stop them.” he hissed, “Do whatever it takes, but make sure that they do not reach this place alive.”

“Yes lord.” the soldier responded before he turned and ran from the chamber. Meanwhile The Magister looked back towards the ritual, still scowling.

He would not have the ritual interrupted now. Not after all his work and the bargains he had made, some of

which would not necessarily expire upon his death.

The first indication that the enemy was aware of Second Platoon's presence was when a Kordonian trooper appeared and fired his las gun on full auto, cutting down one of the injured Catachans in the group bringing up the rear of the platoon. More las gunfire came from the same direction and the Catachans turned to face this threat.

"No!" Wolf snapped, "We can't slow down for this. Sergeant Molla, detach your heavy bolter team and leave them here with our reserves. The rest of us have to keep moving."

"Stevens! Young! You heard the lieutenant." Molla barked, "Get that bolter up and running."

The two guardsmen acted quickly to set up the belt fed weapon on its tripod and began firing, the roar of the heavy calibre weapon almost drowned out by the sound of the mass reactive ammunition exploding and blasting apart the ruins that the Kordonians were trying to use for cover. With the heavy bolter and the injured Catachans now protecting their rear, the rest of the Second platoon continued to advance.

"In there." Veneel said suddenly, pointing to an opening in the ground between two ruined structures and right at that moment a pair of natives appeared in the opening with what looked to be cut down hunting rifles.

The Catachans were already within a few metres of the opening, with Quinn's squad the closest. Without needing to be ordered to the shotgun-armed veterans opened fire, blasting at the natives until they fell to the ground.

"Torch it!" Quinn snapped and the two veterans armed with flamers stepped forwards to use their weapons.

The twin jets of fire vanished into the hole and there were screams from within as the enemy troops waiting to ambush the Catachans were burned alive. When he reached the opening Quinn took a quick look inside and saw that it led to a small chamber that had a single passageway leading off at the far side and from the looks of the slope, it went deeper underground.

Normally to clear a space like this Imperial Guard doctrine called for a fragmentation grenade to be thrown in. But on this occasion doing so risked bringing down the ceiling and blocking the Catachans' access to the passageway. Therefore without an alternative entrance to rely on Quinn opted to lead his men into the room without having it cleared by grenade first.

As it happened none of the enemy troops waiting had survived anyway. Those not burned to death by the flamers had had the air sucked from their lungs by the sudden change in pressure when the fire drew the oxygen out of the air.

"Clear!" Quinn shouted over his shoulder, "We've got a tunnel in here."

"Let Veneel take a look at it." Wolf replied and she brought her command section into the room with Quinn's veterans.

"This is it." Veneel said, "The disturbance is definitely coming from in here."

"Then in we go." Wolf said, "Sergeant Quinn lead the way. The rest of us will be behind you."

"Tunnel small." Khor said when he looked through the opening. Worse than trying to get ogryns into cramped transport vehicles was attempting to get them to go underground for anything other than the briefest of times. However, there were ways to convince them of the need and Black stepped forwards to address them.

"The enemies of the Emperor lurk beneath this cursed land and it is our sworn duty to destroy them." he told the ogryns, . Then he pressed his hands to his chest in an imitation of the two-headed Imperial eagle, "The Emperor protects." he said, "And he sees all."

"The Emperor watches?" Khor asked. Then after a momentary pause he added, "Ogryns in."

The troops that defended the underground structure had set up an improvised barrier at the end of the passageway where it opened out into another chamber, this one somewhat larger than the one leading to the outside world. Down here in the poorly ventilated chamber using a flamer was a risky proposition, since the flames would consume the same oxygen that the Catachans needed to breathe and so again it came down to shotguns at first. However, the Kordonian troops had set up a belt fed heavy stubber on their side of the barricade and as soon as the first two veterans appeared its crew opened fire, cutting both men down in their stride.

"Stubber!" Quinn yelled as he fired his shotgun towards the enemy heavy weapon team defiantly. But the containers used to build the barricade were able to resist the shotgun blasts easily. On the other hand a larger ripper gun was a different story all together and the moire powerful automatic weapons began to rip apart the barrier.

"Ogryns attack!" Khor bellowed and his squad pushed past Quinn's and charged right for the enemy position. Seeing the massive abhumans lumber into view and break into a run the crew of the heavy stubber turned their weapon towards them and directed a sustained burst at one. The powerful rounds were enough to overcome even an ogryn's natural toughness and the abhuman cried out briefly before he fell forwards, his body tumbling right into the barrier with a 'crash'. Ignoring their fallen comrade the remaining ogryns reached the barrier and just smashed the containers aside to get at the soldiers beyond. The heavy stubber ceased

fire as one of the containers fell on top of its crew. As they struggled to try and get out from underneath the container they suddenly realised that one of the ogryns was standing right over them and he roared as he brought down the butt of his ripper gun in revenge for the death of his squad mate. With the defending troops occupied in battling the ogryns the rest of the platoon charged forwards as well, shooting at any of the defenders who was able to break away from the ogryns for long enough to make them a target.

## 12.

The Magister turned his head as he heard the shooting from the chamber outside. The ritual he was overseeing was on the verge of being completed, but with the enemy right outside its completion had suddenly become uncertain. The bulk of the forces he had under his command had been sent to search for Imperial troops in the areas of the crashed valkyries and now he had only a small number left to protect this chamber. From the noise outside it seemed that these had been insufficient for the task and Imperial troops would likely enter the chamber soon. However, when he turned back towards the cultists still holding the sanctified skulls within the ritual markings he smiled when he saw their eyes begin to bleed.

"It begins," he hissed, "There are almost here."

"Imperial guard!" Wolf yelled as she appeared in the doorway to the chamber, "Drop your weapons."

"We have no weapons slave of the false emperor." The Magister called out as the Catachans continued to pour into the chamber, "We have no need of any."

Wolf took a quick look around the chamber and saw the chanting cultists at the far side of the room

"Tell those freaks to drop those skulls." she said but The Magister just smiled at her.

"You're too late little girl." he said and the eight skull bearers promptly exploded.

"No!" Veneel yelled, clutching at his head and Torrent caught him as he stumbled.

Wolf watched in horror as the blood released when the cultists' bodies were unexpectedly destroyed remained hanging in the air and then began to drift towards the centre of the chamber.

"Open fire!" Wolf yelled right before she put a shot into The Magister's chest and the Catachans began shooting at the remaining cultists. But the death of those responsible for carrying out the ritual did not stop the floating blood from binding together for form a ball in the centre of the chamber that began to steadily expand.

"The Blood God cares not where the blood comes from." The Magister gasped as he stared at the growing sphere of blood and the final thing he saw before death finally claimed him was a giant figure stepping out of the sphere.

The figure stood over two metres tall and was dressed in black armour that covered its entire body. The eyepieces of the horned helmet glowed red as it looked around the chamber and when it saw the Catachans it raised the weapon it was carrying in both hands and opened fire.

There was the distinctive sound of bolt fire as the figure fired short bursts at the Catachans and one of Quinn's veterans was blown apart as two of them detonated inside him.

"Traitor marine!" Wolf yelled, "Target all fire at him!"

The traitor marine did not even flinch as the las gun shots and shotgun blasts bounced off his powered armour but when the members of the platoon armed with grenade launchers joined in, firing grenades designed for knocking out light vehicles rather than fragmentation rounds, he staggered back. Finally the veteran armed with a melta gun took a shot and the bright beam sliced right through the marine. But as the bolter fell from his grip and he dropped to his knees another two marines emerged from the sphere, firing.

"Fall back!" Wolf yelled as the melta gun armed Catachan died under a hail of explosive rounds.

"We must fight the traitors!" Black yelled.

"And we will, but outside." Wolf replied.

"She's right." Vance added, "We can't fight chaos marines at close quarters. We need to put some distance between us."

Falling back into the outer chamber the platoon found he ogryns waiting for them.

"Sergeant Khor, we're falling back to the surface." Wolf called out, "Tell your men to-" but before she could finish one of the black armoured figures appeared in the door behind the Catachans. As he fired his bolter a nearby ogryn swung his ripper gun and knocked the weapon aside, sending the burst of mass reactive rounds into the wall rather than another of the Catachans. The ogryn roared as he then slammed his ripper gun into the marine's helmet and he staggered backwards. Even with the benefit of his powered armour the marine was not as strong as the massive abhuman, but he was heavily protected and as the ogryn delivered more blows the marine did nothing more than stagger back under their force.

"Ogryns back!" Khor shouted, focusing on the ogryn attacking the chaos marine but it was too late. As the ogryn landing a blow powerful enough to knock the marine onto his back he was suddenly left framed in the doorway just as another marine stepped from the sphere and raised a glowing energy weapon. The blast of plasma lit up both the inner and outer chambers as it burned straight through the ogryn, leaving a smoking hole through his chest. But the ogryn's sacrifice had opened up a gap between Second Platoon and the growing number of chaos marines emerging from the sphere of blood and the Catachans used this to escape back into the passageway leading up to the surface.

The rain had ceased when they came rushing out of the entrance to the underground structure and Wolf

turned to Grey.

"Sergeant, I want that entrance collapsed." she said, "Maybe we can seal those marines in there."

"You really think that'll work?" Molla asked.

"You got a better idea?" Grey replied and then he turned to his missile launcher team, "Set up that launcher." he ordered, "I want a krak round firing down there in sixty seconds or less."

Hurriedly one of the team knelt down and lifted his long tube shaped weapon onto his shoulder while his loader took an anti-armour missile from its carrier and carefully slid it into the back of the launcher.

"Clear behind!" the loader shouted and then he slapped the gunner on his back.

There was a sudden 'Whoosh!' and a flash of light as the missile shot from the launcher and its motor ignited, taking it through the entrance to the structure. Then came the sound of an explosion as the warhead detonated and the ground gave way, collapsing the entrance and the chamber inside exactly as Wolf had called for.

"Well done." she said, "That's just what I wanted.

"I wouldn't speak so soon lieutenant." Torrent commented and she pointed to the now filled in hole in the ground. As Wolf turned to look for herself she saw the ground shake as something beneath it pounded at it get out. Then all of a sudden a large black armoured fist broke through the ground, miniature lightning bolts arcing over the surface of it. Though she had seen only a few during her time in the Imperial Guard, Wolf knew a power fist when she saw one. Power fists amplified the strength of the user to such a point that a normal human could rip open the armour of a tank and a marine wielding such a weapon was a genuine force to be reckoned with. Power fists were also uncommon weapons and the fact that this marine had one marked him out as a champion amongst his kind, making him even more dangerous. To obtain his status the champion would have to have the blood of thousands on his hands already. Compared to that a small force of Imperial Guard was nothing.

The champion dragged himself up from the hole he had just made and turned towards the Catachans.

"Get another missile loaded!" Grey snapped, knowing that a krak missile was the best hope they had for taking out the marine and as the missile launcher team hurried to try and reload the rest of the platoon opened fire on the marine. As earlier the las gun shots and shotgun blasts did nothing to the marine, his armour deflecting everything that the Catachans could throw at him. The heavy bolter of Molla's squad would have had a better chance of penetrating the marine's armour but this was set up to face in the opposite direction and the crew needing time to turn it around.

The energy field that surrounded a power fist meant that it was impossible to hold another weapon in that hand, so the marine could not wield a bolter as well. Instead he was armed with a bolt pistol and just as the missile launcher team was completing their preparations to fire the marine shot at them first. Alternating between the gunner and loader, the marine put two mass reactive rounds into each of them and both men simply exploded as the rounds detonated inside their chests.

All of a sudden the marine's head jerked backwards and as it came forwards again Wolf saw that one of his eye pieces had been shot out.

"Rull." Wolf said, "Thank the Emperor."

"Now if he can just deal with all of them as well." Vance said and he pointed to where more chaos marines were climbing out of the hole made by their leader. These marines fired off short bursts of bolter fire that was intended just to keep the Catachans' heads down while they got clear of the hole and spread out. Clearly they were unaware of just how few guardsmen they were facing and did not want to risk being wiped out by a single lucky hit from a heavy weapon.

Even spread out the marines were able to co-ordinate their movements, with one providing cover fire while the others took up better positions and a sudden thought struck Wolf. Taking out her dataslate she activated the map function and smiled when she saw that it was now active. The completion of the ritual that had opened the warp portal had brought an end to the disruption jamming communications. Wolf scabbled across the ground towards the closest Catachan carrying a vox set and snatched the handset from it.

"What are you playing at?" Quinn asked but Wolf ignored him.

"Catachan One Nine Actual this is Catachan One Nine Mark Four Mark Two, do you read ? Over." Wolf transmitted. Instead of the burst of static that the other Catachans expected there was a response in the familiar accent of their own home world.

"Catachan One Nine Mark Four Mark Two hold for the colonel." it said.

"Hold?" Vance exclaimed, "What do they think we're calling for? Customer service?"

Then moments later Colonel Shryke's voice was heard.

"Catachan One Nine Mark Four Mark Two this is Catachan One Nine Actual. What is your situation? Over."

"Colonel the enemy has been able to open a warp portal that is now being used by forces of the traitor legions to gain access to this world. I request urgent fire support. Over." Wolf said and then she ducked as a bolter round struck a wall close to her and showered her with bits of stone.

"Catachan One Nine Mark Four Mark Two, be advised that the closest support units are forty five minutes



out. Can you hold until then? Over.”

Wolf looked back towards the hole and then at Vance who just shook his head.

“Negative colonel. Our position is untenable and we need immediate support. Over.” she responded and then there was a pause before the colonel's voice was heard again.

“Your situation is acknowledged lieutenant. Are you able to withdraw? Over.” he asked.

“Affirmative.” Wolf replied, “We can pull back into the jungle. Over.”

“Then you are ordered to fall back to your original insertion point. You will be evacuated from there Over.”

Shryke told her and Wolf sighed.

“Understood colonel, we are falling back. Ave Imperator. Over and out.” and then she replaced the handset and looked around at her troops.

Normally she would trust them to be able to outpace any opponent in the jungle, but on this occasion they were facing power armoured marines who could move quickly through almost any terrain and did not need to stop to eat, drink or rest for days on end and it would take only a small number of them to catch up with the Catachans to wipe them out. Splitting up the platoon was one option, forcing the enemy to divide their own numbers to follow them all. But the only real protection against the chaos marines that guardsmen had was their numbers and in small groups they would be vulnerable to even lone marines finding them. Wolf saw only one option remaining open to her platoon.

“We need to scatter.” she said, “We all head off in a different direction and make for our insertion point.”

“What good does that do us?” Torrent asked, “We all get to die alone?”

“No, maybe we all get to live.” Wolf snapped back at her, “Look, so far we outnumber those marines but they can still outfight us. But if we all go in separate ways then maybe they'll decide that it's too much trouble to hunt us all down individually and let us go. I doubt they came all the way here just to take out a single platoon of guardsmen.”

“What about the ogryns?” Molla asked, “They'll never make it back individually.”

“Sergeant Khor,” Wolf said, looking at the BONEHead, “can you guide your men back to our insertion point?” and Khor grinned and tapped the cybernetic implants set into his skull.

“Khor remember.” he said.

“Good. Then go. Head back to the insertion point and wait for us there.” Wolf ordered and Khor saluted.

“Ogryns follow.” he commanded before getting to his feet and leading the remaining abhumans into the jungle.

As they disappeared from view Black looked at Wolf.

“What about you lieutenant?” he asked, “How will you find your way back through the jungle?”

Wolf held up her dataslate.

“The map on this is working again.” she replied, “I'll be just fine. Sergeant Molla's taught me enough to get by on my own for a few hours.”

Black then looked at Veneel, the psyker looked drained following his exposure to the closing stages of the ritual and the warp portal it opened.

“And I shall escort the witch.” he said, “He should not be allowed to roam unescorted when the servants of chaos are abroad.”

“You should go now.” Vance then told Wolf, “Go now and we'll cover you.”

Wolf nodded and took a deep breath. Then she leapt to her feet and began to run. She squealed as she heard the sound of bolt rounds whizzing close by, but none came close enough to harm her and she carried on running into the jungle. Some distance ahead she could hear the crashing of the ogryns as they smashed their way through the undergrowth. Wolf paused, remembering how Khor and his squad had saved her from being devoured by alien kroot mercenaries and she felt bad about abandoning them now. If the traitor marines did decide to come after anyone then the ogryns would be easiest to find. Then she looked back the way she had come. Wolf could still hear the sounds of fighting, with las guns and bolters exchanging fire. Finally Wolf looked at her dataslate again and compared her current position with where the navy had dropped off Second Platoon. Selecting a route that she thought would be easiest for her to follow, Wolf set off on her own.