



CATACHAN ONE-NINE MARK FOUR MARK TWO

3.3: THE EMPEROR'S WRATH

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With more Necrons awakening and their retreat cut off the only means of escape left open to the Catachan XIX Regiment is to stage a daring raid into the heart of enemy territory with a weapon of terrible destructive power.

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The lighter was designed to be able to deliver an entire company of Imperial Guard from an orbiting starship to the surface of a planet, often under fire from the inhabitants of that world who may not be pleased to see a fleet belonging to His Divine Imperial Majesty the God Emperor of Mankind above them. But lighters were equally adept at lifting troops from the surface of a planet and back to the starships waiting for them in orbit and that was what was being done now.

A freak warp storm had cast the requisitioned merchant vessel chartered to move the XIX Catachan Regiment off course and deposited in what was believed to be unexplored space. The subsequent discovery of a mysterious beacon that suggested that this region of space had in fact visited before by human explorers had then lured the regiment to this world, its assigned cadre of tech priests from the Adeptus Mechanicus hoping to discover a lost treasure trove of ancient technology. But all they had uncovered was a trap laid by something even older than the wrecked starship they had sought. The Necrons, ancient alien intelligences that now inhabited machine bodies slept beneath the surface of the planet and the arrival of the Catachans had woken them up from their millennia of slumber.

The Necrons had launched an immediate attack on the Catachan camp, attempting to overwhelm it with sheer weight of numbers by sending wave after wave of their warriors at it. The force had been carried in resurrection arks that had retrieved the body of each fallen warrior from the battlefield and repaired them only to send them back into action against the Catachans once more and it was this strategy that the Necron overlord directing the attack had hoped would wear down the Catachans until they collapsed. But a single platoon of Catachans had been able to locate the overlord and destroy him, causing the attack to fail for lack of direction and this had bought enough time for the Catachans to organise an evacuation.

Colonel Shryke, commanding officer of the XIX Regiment was in his command post along with several other senior officers and advisers as the first lighter began its drop from the orbiting merchantman.

"Atmospheric insertion confirmed. We're through the exosphere and approaching the thermosphere. Altitude six hundred thousand metres and dropping. ETA to surface eight minutes." the shuttle pilot signalled.

"Commissar Chen." Shryke said, looking towards one of the black clad political officers present in the command post, "Have your company ready to leave on the first ship."

"You're evacuating the convicts first?" the other commissar present asked in response. This was Lord Commissar Garratt, the senior regimental commissar whose duty was to ensure that Colonel Shryke himself acted as was expected of an officer in the Imperial Guard. His task was made more difficult by the natural tendency of Catachans to be suspicious of anyone not native to their own home world, especially when such 'outsiders' as they were known were attempting to give orders to them. For commissars to meet with unexpected and sometimes fatal accidents while serving with Catachan units was a common occurrence. "This is a death world commissar." Shryke replied, "Combined with the losses that Ninth Company has already suffered I doubt they could form an adequate rear guard. Nor will they pose much of a threat to Trader Willan's armymen should they decide to cause trouble aboard ship before we can get more of our troops aboard. So basically yes, I am proposing to evacuate our penal legion company first. Then I'll send up the support units and finally our combat troops." then he smiled and added, "Though if you're uneasy about staying down here longer than you have to I don't mind if you accompany Commissar Chen on the first ship out."

Garratt scowled. It was clear that Shryke was insulting him, suggesting that he was a coward. This was a significant insult to any commissar whose primary duty was to summarily execute officers accused of cowardice. Bringing charges against the colonel for this would be a waste of time Garratt knew, surrounded by other Catachan officers there was not one who would not back the colonel and it was unlikely that any of the gathered tech priests would be willing to get involved in a matter that did not concern them. So instead Garratt let the comment pass and continued to listen to the reports from the shuttle pilot.

"Exiting mesosphere, now entering stratosphere. Altitude fifty four thousand metres, firing breaking thrusters. Hang on there appears to be turbulence. Strange, there shouldn't be any here. Picking up ionisation on the hull, looks like the beginnings of an electrical storm, intensity increasing."

"What's going on up there?" Shryke asked, turning towards Engineer Lazas KBL-814 who had taken over as the regiment's senior tech priest following the loss of Magos Serett UVR-997.

"The craft is being subjected to highly anomalous atmospheric disturbances colonel." the tech priest replied in his bizarre augmented voice.

"But why?" Shryke asked. But before the tech priest could offer a theory there was another signal from the lighter.

"Controls are becoming heavy. I'm going to have to abort. Adjusting aerofoils, angling thruster for emergency ascension. Firing in three, two -" and then the voice signal was swamped by a dull 'Crump' sound, followed by

screams, "Lightning strike! Lightning strike! We're going down. Mayday! Mayday! May-"

Outside the command post the Catachans were hard at work packing up their camp when a sudden flash in the sky above attracted the attention of most and they looked upwards in time to see a ball of fire streaking across the sky as it crashed down somewhere in the jungle.

Meanwhile inside the command post Shryke looked at Enginseer Lazas.

"It would appear that the Necrons have unleashed a new weapon against us colonel." he said, "One that will keep us trapped on this world until they can destroy us all."

"So how do we get back to the ship?" a woman in the uniform of an adept of the Adeptus Munitorum asked. Her accent made it obvious that she was not a native Catachan but like the regiment's tech priests she was tolerated because her interference was limited to issues of supply, "It's taken this long just to figure out where we are. Surely there must be some way of getting us off this planet."

"The solution is simple in theory Adept Clay." Lazas replied, "We must locate the central Necron tomb on this world and destroy it. Though I suspect that in practice this is something that will not prove as simple to carry out."

Lieutenant Emilia Wolf, commanding officer of the Second Platoon of XIX Catachan Regiment's Fourth Company screamed as the curtain to the shower cubicle was suddenly pulled back by someone from the outside.

"Major Trent wants to see you right away." the woman holding on to the curtain told Wolf. Guardswoman Harriet Torrent was Second Platoon's medic and unlike Wolf was a native of Catachan. Wolf on the other hand had been a supply officer in her own Lyerian XXXII Regiment until she had become separated from them and forced to transfer to the XIX Catachan Regiment instead. Suddenly finding herself in command of a combat unit made up of troops naturally intolerant of outsiders she had faced significant hostility from most and this was still the case with Torrent.

"Well right now he'd be seeing far more of me than necessary." Wolf replied.

"Here." Torrent said, tossing Wolf a towel, "Now come on."

"Give me a minute to rinse off and get dressed and I'll be right with you." Wolf told her and Torrent sighed.

"Colour Sergeant Stubbs said the major wanted you right away. No excuses." Torrent said, "He said I could use force if I had to."

Wolf stared at Torrent. Like most Catachans she towered over Wolf, who was barely one and a half metres tall. But the idea that she would physically drag her to the company command post seemed unlikely.

"I'll be with you in a minute." Wolf repeated and Torrent turned towards the exit from the shower tent.

"Toola!" she yelled and a massive muscular figure almost three metres tall squeezed into the tent.

Ogryns were a breed of abhuman descended from humans whose ancestors had been cut off for thousands of years on planets with harsh environments where physical strength had been key to survival while intellect had been of much lesser importance. Now the physically powerful but intellectually limited ogryns found a niche in the Imperial Guard as shock troopers and even Catachan regiments respected their strength. A seven strong squad of the abhumans was attached to Second Platoon and this included the female Toola.

"Toola in." she said and saluted at Wolf. Knowing that the figure would hold the salute indefinitely otherwise, Wolf returned it..

"Major Trent wants Lieutenant Wolf in his tent now." Torrent said, "Understand? Lieutenant Wolf," and she pointed at Wolf, "to Major Trent now." and Toola smiled.

"No!" Wolf exclaimed as she hurriedly wrapped the towel around herself, "Toola no."

"Major want lieutenant. Toola carry." Toola replied as she reached down and picked up Wolf like a child would pick up a doll. Then carrying Wolf over her shoulder, Toola turned and lumbered out of the shower tent before looking around.

"Put me down!" Wolf yelled, but her cry only served to attract attention to her and there were jeers from the nearby Catachans who recognised her immediately by her size and accent.

"The major's tent is this way." Torrent told Toola as she slipped out of the shower tent past the ogryn while holding onto Wolf's belt that carried her las pistol and combat knife. Imperial Guard regulations demanded that both officers and enlisted men be ready for action at all times and Torrent did not intend to put Wolf in breach of these.

"Toola follow." Toola said before she started following Torrent while Wolf continued to scream at her to put her down.

Leading the way, Torrent went straight to the tent that served as Major Trent's company command post and peered inside.

"Sergeant Stubbs?" she said to the man sat behind a desk sorting through papers in preparation for being evacuated from the planet.

"Torrent." Stubbs replied, "Did you pass my message to Lieutenant Wolf?"

"She's right here." Torrent said, smiling as she stepped aside so that Toola could carry Wolf into the tent, "Oh and here's her sidearm and knife." she added, walking over to Stubbs's desk and putting down Wolf's belt.

Major Trent looked up from the map on his desk in surprise as an ogryn suddenly burst into his office. Upon seeing him Toola immediately snapped to attention and saluted, forgetting that the arm she used to salute with was also the one she was using to hold onto Wolf and Wolf squealed as she fell to the floor. Trent got to his feet and returned Toola's salute.

"Dismissed trooper. Thank you." he said and Toola grinned before turning on the spot and marching out of his office. Trent then peered over his desk at where Wolf was sat on the floor trying to wipe the shampoo out of her eyes that had run into them from her hair while being carried, "I'd offer you a towel lieutenant." Trent said, "But it seems you already have one." then he walked round his desk to help Wolf to her feet.

"Torrent said you wanted to see me sir." Wolf said, blowing hair away from her mouth.

"Yes lieutenant." Trent replied, "If you'd like to take a seat we can wait for the others."

"Others sir?"

"Yes, Captain Fear and Enginseer Cornelius will be joining us as well." Trent said and Wolf frowned in the knowledge that there would have been plenty of time for her to get properly dressed without being late to the meeting and that having her brought in with a towel was another prank being played on her by one of the Catachans supposedly subordinate to her.

Captain Fear arrived soon after, glancing briefly at Wolf as he sat down next to her. The captain commanded Fourth Company's First Platoon and was the de-facto second in command of the company.

"Dressing down lieutenant?" he said.

"Let's just call it a wardrobe malfunction okay?" Wolf replied.

"Your statement is illogical Lieutenant Wolf." Enginseer Cornelius said as he then entered Major Trent's office just in time to overhear her remark, "Lacking internal mechanisms or electronic components a wardrobe cannot malfunction. It can only be physically broken. Any damage that cannot be repaired by your self should be reported to the Adeptus Munitorum rather than the Adeptus Mechanicus."

"Ah, Enginseer Cornelius." Trent said, "Right on time as usual."

"Of course. To arrive late is disruptive. To arrive early is to waste time waiting beforehand. Prompt arrival maximises efficiency." Cornelius answered.

"Then in the name of efficiency I suggest we get on with the meeting." Fear said.

"Yes let's." Trent agreed, "Enginseer Cornelius has the details of your assignment."

"Assignment?" Wolf said, "But I thought we were leaving before more Necrons woke up."

"Unfortunately that will not be possible Lieutenant Wolf." Cornelius replied and one of the tentacle-like mechandrites plugged into his spine appeared from beneath his robes and tiny projector built into the tip activated, creating an image of the lighter despatched from the orbiting starship that had also recorded what was now being shown to the three officers, "As you can see the Necrons appear to have activated a highly destructive anti-aircraft weapon system." he explained as the footage recorded by the orbiting starship showed the lighter explode in mid air.

"What was that?" Wolf exclaimed.

"Something with more firepower than we can muster." Fear commented, "I take it that the launch site for the weapon wasn't identified?" he added, looking at Cornelius.

"Negative." the tech priest answered, "In any case the merchantman's defensive weapons are inadequate for heavy orbital bombardment.

"Just clearing jungle huh?" Trent commented, referring to how the area where the Catachans' camp had been established had first been cleared of vegetation by a brief bombardment from space.

"Quite." Cornelius replied before he returned to his briefing, "Given that it is imperative that we escape this world and return to our intended course we are faced with first finding a way to disable this and any other weapons that the Necrons may now be preparing to use against us. It has been determined that the most effective way on ensuring that this objective is achieved is to eliminate the Necron threat entirely."

"Is that all?" Fear commented, "What do you want us to do after lunch?"

"Captain, it is unlikely that you will be able to achieve this goal by the scheduled lunch break for your platoon. It is already oh-eight forty-three and-"

"It was a joke." Trent said, interrupting the enginseer.

"Noted." Cornelius replied.

"Then perhaps you'd like to explain how just two platoons are supposed to take out every Necron on this planet?" Trent said.

"Two platoons?" Wolf exclaimed, "Those things almost overran the entire regiment? How can two platoons stop them all?"

"Perhaps if you let Enginseer Cornelius explain, you'd find out." Fear told her.

"Sorry." she replied.

"As you are aware, the attack on our position was defeated when Second Platoon was able to locate and terminate the Necron field commander." Cornelius began, "Thus denying their warriors the command and control that they required to operate. In essence that is what we will do to trigger their destruction on a planet wide basis. The detonation of a device with a suitable yield within their central control facility will cause a

cascade failure of command and control throughout their entire network. Such actions have been proven effective by kill teams of the Deathwatch and other Adeptus Astartes units.”

“Adeptus Astartes?” Trent said, “Space marines?” and he laughed, “Just in case you haven't noticed my men are not genetically enhanced killing machines.”

“Some of us even less so than others.” Fear added, smiling momentarily in Wolf's direction and she frowned in return.

“But your troops are amongst those considered the finest in the galaxy. Especially in the terrain you are expected to function in.” Cornellius said and both Trent and Fear looked at Wolf.

“Yes somebody say it.” she said with a sigh, “I'm just an outsider in a towel. What use am I?”

“Your platoon is the only to have previously been to the first location we must travel to in order to locate the enemy headquarters Lieutenant Wolf.” Cornellius told her.

“It is?” Wolf asked in reply.

“You mean that buried starship?” Fear added.

“Correct Captain Fear.” Cornellius said, “It is logical to assume that the crew of the starship came here because they either had proof of or suspected the presence of the Necrons and sought to investigate this. Then when they awoke the Necrons their ship was disabled and the survivors forced to remain here, developing into the tribal groups we have had some contact with. But if the crew had located the central Necron tomb on this planet then its location should still be within the cogitator system of their ship which Lieutenant Wolf will be able to confirm is relatively intact.”

“That's true.” Wolf said, “We even recovered a shuttle to escape in.” then she looked at Cornellius, “Will we be taking the shuttle back again?” she asked.

“Negative Lieutenant Wolf. No air travel is authorised until the Necron weapon is conformed destroyed.”

“Oh great.” Wolf responded, “So we're walking again.”

“That is correct.” Cornellius replied.

“And I suppose you're joining us as well. Right?” Fear added.

“Correct Captain Fear. I will be needed to access the starship's records.”

“I have one question for you engineeer.” Trent said, leaning forwards across the map on his desk, “You mentioned taking a 'device' into the enemy base. What exactly are you talking about?”

“In order to generate sufficient destructive power in a device small enough to be portable, only a fusion device will be adequate.”

“Oh feth.” Wolf said, “We're taking a nuclear bomb with us?”

“Given the explosive power that is likely to be needed, combined with the difficulty of moving large quantities of explosives through the terrain of this planet a fusion device is the only viable option.” Cornellius explained.

“I wasn't aware that the regiment had any in its armoury.” Trent commented.

“It does not.” Cornellius said, “And given the strength of the enemy's anti-air defences it is not possible to bring in the components for one from our orbiting ship. The regiment's tech priests are currently producing one from available components.”

“How long will that take?” Fear asked.

“Three point nine to five point one hours with ninety percent certainty.” Cornellius replied.

“So we leave late this morning or early this afternoon.” Fear said, “It shouldn't be a problem to have my platoon ready to leave by then.”

“Same here.” Wolf agreed, “But how will we transport this bomb? I'm no expert in nuclear weapons but I was under the impression that they are rather heavy.”

“Correct Lieutenant Wolf. A Sentinel power loader will be the most practical way of moving the device over a long distance. However, a combat pilot should be used to operate the vehicle.” Cornellius said.

“Sergeant Gant?” Fear commented. Sergeant Ursulla Gant was normally in command of the four strong squadron of Sentinel walkers attached to Fourth Company. But in the same mission that had taken Second Platoon to the crashed starship all four machines in her squadron had been destroyed and she had been the only pilot to survive.

That would be the most obvious choice Captain Fear.” Cornellius said, “Though the assignment of additional personnel is the decision of Major Trent as company commander.”

“Okay you've got Gant.” Trent said.

“I and my assistant will also accompany the force Major Trent.” Cornellius said, “To ensure that the fusion device is properly handled and used.”

“And if something should happen to you?” Fear said.

“Then I shall issue the means and instructions to trigger the device to suitable command staff.” Cornellius replied, “But under normal circumstances the decision to use it must remain with the Adeptus Mechanicus.”

“Fine by me.” Wolf muttered.

“Is that all?” Trent asked, looking at Cornellius.

“It is.” the tech priest replied, “Further information will only become available when I have accessed the starship's data library. If further resources are needed then we shall signal for them.”

“And what about you two?” Trent added, turning towards his two officers, both of who remained silent, “Then I suggest you go and get your platoons ready to leave. Oh and Lieutenant Wolf?”
“Yes sir?” Wolf asked.
“That includes putting some damned clothes on.”
“Yes sir.” she replied, embarrassed.

2.

Wolf was first out of Trent's office and she headed straight for the way out of his tent, watched from behind his desk by Stubbs. She pulled back the tent flap and was about to step outside when she paused and looked down. Like all of the tents issued to the XIX Catachan Regiment, the one that served as Major Trent's command post featured a ground sheet that consisted of a heavy gauge fabric resistant to punctures and tears. Then on top of this rigid floor plates made from a mix of metal or plastic depending on the strength required were placed to provide a solid floor. However, outside the tent the camp was bare earth.

Like Catachan, this planet was considered a death world where the ecosystem was naturally hostile to human life and although it was by no means as dangerous as Catachan itself which was regarded as the most deadly world in the Imperium of Man there were still many species of plant and animal that posed a threat. Looking down at the ground outside the tent, Wolf considered how many such life forms may be crawling around in the dirt beneath the regiment's feet.

"Problem Lieutenant Wolf?" Fear asked as he and Cornelliuss walked up behind her.

"Oh, err, yes captain." she replied, "I was just wondering about what would happen if I went walking back to my tent barefoot. What sort of creatures are there in the ground that could inject venom into my feet or burrow into them to lay their eggs?"

"Very good lieutenant." Fear said, "You're learning."

"Sergeant Molla's been teaching me field craft." Wolf said, "But how to get across dangerous ground while wearing only a towel hasn't come up yet."

"The solution is simple Lieutenant Wolf." Cornelliuss said, "By tearing the fabric of the towel into two pieces you can wrap one around each foot to create a protective layer."

"Okay, maybe I should have made it clear that I don't intend walking back to my tent naked either." Wolf responded and then she sighed, "How do I do this?" she added.

"Another important thing to remember lieutenant," Fear told her, "is that you're not alone." and he pointed towards Stubbs's desk.

"What?" Wolf asked and then Stubbs placed a pair of combat boots and socks on his desk and smiled.

"A spare pair of the major's." he said, "The boots are obviously too big for you, but if you stuff the socks in the end they should get you across the camp."

"Thanks colour sergeant." Wolf said, collecting the boots from his desk and pushing the socks inside, "I'll bring them right back."

The members of Second Platoon were all gathered together outside Wolf's tent.

"You know what disappoints me Torrent?" Sergeant Molla, leader of the platoon's First Squad said as he looked up from threading a fishing line through a hook.

"That I let the outsider have a towel?" Torrent responded.

"Busted." Quinn, the platoon's veteran squad sergeant said to Molla with a grin and Molla frowned in return.

"Vance, here she comes." another of the unit leaders told the platoon's senior suddenly when he caught sight of Wolf heading across the camp with a towel wrapped around her, her equipment belt draped over her shoulder and oversized combat boots on her feet.

"Cheers Bomber." Vance replied and he looked around, "Okay everyone, fall in for inspection." then looking specifically at the leader of the ogryn squad he added, "That includes your lot Khor. Officer approaching."

"Ogryns! Salute!" the cybernetically enhanced ogryn bellowed at his troops. The process of upgrading the limited intellectual capacity of those few ogryns that showed more intelligence than their peers was known as Biochemical Ogryn Neural Enhancement and those who were subjected to it became known as Boneheads. They were the only way that even the simplest of orders could be carried out with any certainty as they acted as intermediaries between normal human officers and the abhuman ogryns.

Reacting to his command, the entire ogryn squad formed a rough line that was straightened out with a helping shove or two from Khor so that they all faced Wolf as they snapped to attention, stood rigidly still and saluted.

Meanwhile the five Catachan squads that made up Second Platoon, a command section, two infantry squads, a veteran squad and a mortar squad also formed up in ranks and stood at attention, carefully positioning themselves so that they blocked the entrance to Wolf's tent.

Wolf sighed when she saw the platoon lined up at attention and all saluting.

"Platoon ready for inspection and briefing." Vance said clearly, still holding his salute.

"At ease platoon sergeant." Wolf replied as she returned the salute while still holding onto her towel with her other hand.

"Thank you lieutenant." Vance said and the platoon relaxed but did not move out of Wolf's way.

"I'll brief you all fully in a few minutes." Wolf said, "But right now I think it's obvious that I need to get dressed."

"First Squad one pace left." Molla ordered and in unison his squad stepped to the left and opened up a narrow path to Wolf's tent.

"Thank you sergeant." Wolf said as she stepped towards the gap, "I'll just be-" and then she came to a halt and stopped speaking as she noticed the fishing hook in Molla's hand and her eyes widened, "A fishing hook?" she exclaimed.

"Practising my skills lieutenant. Thought some fresh fish might make a change from our ration packs." Molla replied.

"There are no edible fish within fifty kilometres of here sergeant." Wolf pointed out, "You were going to use that to pull off my towel weren't you?"

"Busted again Tari." Sergeant Grey, leader of Second Squad muttered and Molla frowned again.

"You've become predictable." Quinn added.

"Just a misunderstanding lieutenant." Molla said.

"I'm sure." Wolf replied, "Now the platoon is dismissed for half an hour. Then I'll brief you. Now go."

"Okay you heard the lieutenant." Vance said out loud, "Everyone go check your gear. I'm sure we'll be needing it soon."

The platoon then began to disperse, heading back to their tents. However, the leaders of each squad remained outside Wolf's tent.

"What?" she asked, "I dismissed you all."

"Just waiting to see if we can be of any assistance lieutenant." Grey said and Wolf eyed him suspiciously. Of all the squad leaders in her platoon, Grey remained most hostile to her presence and when he offered help she did not trust his motives.

"Very well. Wait here while I get dressed." Wolf said and she headed for the entrance to her tent, making sure to stay out of reach of any of the gathered Catachans. Reaching her tent safely she started to relax but when she pulled open the flap and looked inside she groaned.

"Problem lieutenant?" Quinn asked.

"Of course there is. Look." Wolf answered, stepping aside and holding open the tent so that the Catachans could see that while she had been gone someone had removed the lightweight lockers that contained her belongings and replaced them with neatly stacked and folded towels like the one she had wrapped around her, "All my clothes are gone." she added.

"Not quite all of them lieutenant." the mortar squad's leader replied.

"Oh really Corporal Mayer. And exactly what-" Wolf began as she looked into the tent again to see what he was talking about. However, she stopped and scowled when she did. Not long after joining the XIX Catachan Regiment, Wolf had been tricked by Fourth Company's supply officer into requisitioning a straight jacket that Wolf had never been able to return and since all guardsmen were financially responsible for equipment issued to them and could be billed for anything lost or damaged due to their own negligence Wolf had been left with no other choice but to keep the jacket with her other belongings. Normally it was kept stuffed at the bottom of her trunk, but obviously whoever had removed her belongings had gone to the trouble of leaving it behind and now it was neatly laid out on her bed.

"Problem lieutenant?" Grey asked with mock innocence and Wolf sighed as she turned around.

"Okay guys, a joke's a joke but I need my uniform." she said.

"Your stuff's in our tent." Molla replied as he stepped up to her and pointed to the nearby sergeants' tent, "Safe and sound."

"Thank you sergeant." Wolf replied and she began to walk away, watched by the squad leaders.

"Borrowing combat boots so she didn't have to walk back barefoot." Molla commented, "She's learning."

"Assuming that it was her idea." Grey pointed out, "Could have been Captain Fear, Major Trent or Stubbs that warned her not to walk about without something on her feet."

"Oh and by the way." Wolf suddenly called out, stopping about half way between her tent and the sergeants',

"If my underwear is stuffed under Molla's bed I'm burning it all."

"Your underwear or our tent?" Molla asked in response.

"Yes." Wolf said before she turned back around and continued on her way.

"Well that wasn't very nice." Molla said, "And just as I was wondering what to do with this." and he smiled as he held up the reel of fishing line that was steadily unravelling as Wolf walked away, having fixed the hook to her towel when he stood beside her.

The sergeants gathered together and looked towards their tent.

"Okay do it." Grey said.

"No not yet." Molla replied, "I'll wait until the very last minute." and they waited as Wolf continued to walk towards their tent. Then just as she reached out and opened the tent flap Molla tugged on the line and Wolf screamed.

3.

Wolf was still frowning at Molla when Second Platoon gathered again.

"Where's Rull?" she asked, looking at the assembled guardsmen, "I didn't see him earlier either."

Guardsman Rull was Second Platoon's sniper. Once part of a six man squad he had been the only remaining member by the time Wolf was placed in command. Always a loner, Rull had no time for many of the mundane aspects of Imperial Guard life and tended to be absent from parades and briefings. However, thanks to his exceptional level of skill in regards to field craft and marksmanship none of the other Catachans bothered about this.

"He's out reinforcing the perimeter with traps." Vance replied, "He and a bunch of others are out there making sure that any Necrons who come creeping through the jungle won't get within a kilometre of us without triggering off something that goes 'boom.'"

"Very well. I'll just have to fill him in later." Wolf said, "Now bring the platoon to attention Sergeant Vance."

"Platoon attention!" Vance barked and the members of the platoon all stopped what they were doing and looked towards Wolf.

"Thank you." she said, "As you are probably aware, this morning I was summoned to see Major Trent." she said and she glared briefly at Torrent when she noticed the medic smirk, "While there Enginseer Cornelliuss informed me that the enemy has now deployed an anti-aircraft weapon of sufficient power to prevent our lighters from coming down from our orbiting starship to take us off this world. Therefore, this weapon must be taken out of action before we can leave. Furthermore, it has been determined that the only way of achieving this is to take out the enemy headquarters and along with First Platoon we have been tasked with accomplishing this."

"At least we'll have a proper officer in charge then." someone said from within the ranks and Wolf looked towards the source of the comment but was unable to determine who had spoken it. She guessed that it was one of the platoon's newer members however, since most of the longer serving members of the platoon recognised her ability to command even if they did not accept her as one of their own.

"We have been chosen to take part in this mission because it requires us to escort Enginseer Cornelliuss to the derelict starship that first drew us to this planet so that he can attempt to use its data library to locate the enemy stronghold. After that we will escort him there so that a suitable explosive device may be used to destroy it."

"A demo charge?" Grey asked, "What if the target's too big?" and Wolf took a deep breath.

"The device will not be a standard demolition charge." she replied, "The regiment's tech priests are currently assembling a suitable fusion device that will be carried by a Sentinel power loader piloted by Sergeant Gant." however, much of what she said after 'fusion device' was drowned out by gasps and muttered alarmed comments as the platoon suddenly learned that they were about to take part in the use of a nuclear weapon. The Imperium had many such powerful weapons in its arsenals but they tended to be kept in the hands of the Imperial Navy or the space marines of the Adeptus Astartes. Only a handful of Imperial Guard heavy artillery units were ever issued anything so destructive.

"Settle down!" Vance yelled, "So what if we're going to be carrying a nuke around? It's just another weapon we can use to kill the enemy and if you ask me I'm proud to know that we're trusted with it." then he looked at Wolf and nodded.

"Anyway," Wolf said, "make sure that you're packed for a long march and overnight camp. Last time it took us more than a day to get to the starship and we had the benefit of a fortified camp site that isn't likely to be available to us this time around. According to Enginseer Cornelliuss the nuclear device we're transporting will be ready within the next couple of hours and we need to be ready to go as soon as it is. Muster will be in front of Major Trent's command post. Dismissed." and the platoon began to disperse once more, leaving just Vance looking at Wolf, "Is there a problem sergeant?" she asked.

"Kind of." Vance replied, "I don't suppose whether anyone mentioned how we're supposed to use a fusion bomb without getting vaporised along with the target when it goes off did they?"

"It never came up." Wolf said, "But I'm sure the Adeptus Mechanicus will have thought of that."

"Oh great. We're trusting our lives to a bunch of cogboys who rate us as more easily replaceable than those automated sentry guns on the perimeter." Vance pointed out.

First Platoon was a similar size to Wolf's second Platoon, consisting of two regular infantry squads, two veteran squads and a six man team of combat engineers in addition to Captain Fear's command section. This meant that the firepower of the force would roughly evenly split between each platoon. Enginseer Cornelliuss was present at the muster point with a unit of four half man half machine servitors, two of which had been modified to carry heavy bolters in place of the servo arms they were normally fitted with to assist a

tech priest with repair work. Also with him was his assistant Nathin PL673. Unlike the engineeer whose body was heavily augmented with cybernetic upgrades Nathin was fully human. Not only that but he was also a native Catachan and so was readily accepted by the members of the regiment. One of many Catachans who saw their parents killed while they were still young he had been taken in and trained by the Adeptus Mechanicus when he showed a natural technical aptitude. Now as a lay member of the Adeptus Mechanicus his role was to undertake those tasks deemed too mundane for a tech priest but requiring more thought than a servitor was capable of. The small Adeptus Mechanicus contingent was gathered around a Sentinel power loader. This lightweight bipedal walker was fitted with a large grasping arm where the weapon on the more common scout and armoured variants would be located and this arm currently held a long narrow container that Wolf could see was covered in purity seals to indicate that the contents were undisturbed and she guessed that this was the fusion bomb that the force had to deliver to the heart of the Necron tomb. As soon as Fear saw Wolf and her command section approaching he separated himself from his own and walked over to them.

"Second Platoon reporting sir." Wolf said despite not all of her troops being present yet.

"Very good lieutenant." Fear replied, "Now I want you to take the point for the first stage of this mission. Your men are familiar with the route and we'll make better time if they can guide us."

"We shall be guided by the divine light of Him on Earth." a Catachan voice called out at that moment and looking around both Fear and Wolf saw a man in priest's robes walking towards them, a traditional Catachan blade hanging from his belt and a shotgun and bandolier of ammunition slung across his back.

"Preacher Black." Fear replied, "I didn't know you would be joining us."

Preacher Black was a priest of the Adeptus Ministrorum attached to Fourth Company. He held regular services for the troops but Catachans were not known for attending such things and so his regular congregation generally consisted of just Wolf, Khor's ogryn squad and company's commissar, Layne. Though there was a sanctioned psyker attached to the company as well he tended to avoid the sermons to avoid Black turning them all into rants against witchcraft.

"This world is possessed by heresy." Black responded, "The xenos and the traitor lurk everywhere in the shadows and your men shall need all the spiritual guidance they can get."

"Thank you preacher." Fear replied and he turned to Wolf, "I suppose another pair of eyes to search the jungle never hurts." he added.

"Of course not." Wolf said.

"And perhaps it would be best for him to join your platoon so that he's on hand should it encounter any of the heresy that awaits us." Fear said smiling and Wolf suppressed the urge to sigh. As a native Catachan, Black did possess good jungle survival skills and she had witnessed his abilities in combat before. But that did not change the fact that his presence could be something of a distraction at times.

"If you say so captain." she said and she looked around just as the remainder of her platoon approached, Rull was still missing but she knew better than to ask when he would arrive, "And it looks like we're ready to go."

"Yes it does." Fear agreed and he turned back towards his own troops, "Okay men, it's time to hit the green so grab your gear and fall in. Second Platoon is on point, Engineeer Cornelius you're with me."

"Captain Fear." Cornelius replied and the tech priest began to walk towards Fear and Wolf. As he neared them he held out one of his hands and both officers saw that there were a pair of keys hanging from chains in it, "Before we leave I should-"

"Wait!" a voice that lacked the distinctive Catachan accent called out and Fear winced as he recognised it as belonging to Commissar Layne.

"Commissar." he said, turning towards the approaching political officer, "Come to see us off?"

"No captain, I shall be accompanying you on this mission." Layne replied and he turned to Cornelius and held out his hand, "I believe that those are firing keys to arm the device with?" he said, "I think it best that I take one of those. Control of a weapon of mass destruction is best left out of the hands of the common soldiery I think."

"As you wish Commissar Layne." Cornelius replied, handing over one key and returning the other to beneath his robes.

"Well since the commissar has a key to the weapon, perhaps he should remain close to it." Wolf suggested and Fear glared at her.

"Very sensible." Layne said as he looked around, "I take it that that's it over there." and he pointed towards the Sentinel.

"That's right commissar." Wolf said, smiling.

"Nice try Wolf. But watch how a Catachan handles this." Fear whispered to her, "Actually commissar," he then said out loud, "given that Engineeer Cornelius will be accompanying the weapon it makes more sense for you to be elsewhere in our formation. It would be awful for anything to take out both people able to operate the device in one go."

"Yes, you're right of course." Layne replied, "So I take it that means I'll be joining your squad captain."

"No sir. Given their familiarity with the path we need to take, Second Platoon will be taking point. So you'll be joining Lieutenant Wolf instead." and Wolf's face fell.

"Very good." Layne replied, "Well lieutenant, I'm sure that we'll be able to whip your men into shape and have us at our destination in no time at all."

"Of course commissar." Wolf replied and then she looked round at her platoon only to find her entire command section glaring at her, "What do you expect me to do?" she said softly as she joined them.

"Well since you're such great buddies from Bother Black's services perhaps you could take him behind a tree and show him a good time in exchange for staying behind." Torrent hissed.

"It might work." Vance agreed as Wolf scowled at them both.

"What might work sergeant?" Layne asked as he strode over to join second platoon's command section.

"Oh just saying how your presence will inspire us commissar." Vance replied.

The force moved out with Second Platoon in the lead. Wolf knew that Molla and Quinn were best qualified to navigate their way through the jungle so she had placed them in the front as she generally did while her own command section came next. There was a tense air among the members of her squad, even more than when she was having to deal with new recruits that had yet to get used her being in command. This was entirely down to the presence of Commissar Layne she knew, Black's presence with them may have been annoying at times but he was at least a real Catachan and as such he understood what was needed in terms of behaviour in the jungle where danger could lurk behind every tree or rock. Layne on the other hand knew the text of every Imperial Guard operations manual by heart and insisted on quoting it whenever he saw any trooper doing anything that did not fit with the official doctrine. That the Catachans were doing what they had been born to did not matter to him in the slightest.

"You there!" he called out, giving away the platoon's position to anyone within earshot, "Maintain equal spacing."

"Err commissar." Wolf said, "First Squad is just avoiding that patch of vegetation. The one with the bright flowers. They have a tendency to spit an irritating fluid if you get too close to them." and beside her Vance smiled briefly, impressed that she had remembered the flowers from word passed around by units that had learned about them the hard way."

"Then they should select a route that does not go so near them." Layne replied and he hurried forwards a few paces, "I said space yourselves equally!"

All of a sudden wolf noticed a tiny red dot appear on Layne's back, right between his shoulder blades and she instantly recognised the tell tale sign of a sniper's laser sight.

"Oh no." she muttered to herself, "Rull."

But before Rull could fire the bullet that would end Layne's life the dot suddenly plummeted towards the ground to the fallen branch that Layne was resting his foot on and only then did Rull fire. The bullet he chose was a low velocity round that produced no sound as it left Rull's silenced rifle and when it struck the branch it fragmented, ripping it apart and leaving the commissar with nothing supporting his foot.

Layne let out a cry as he toppled forwards, landing face down in the dirt and as he lifted his head he found himself staring at a cluster of brightly coloured flowers.

"Commissar!" Wolf called out as Layne shrieked when the flowers propelled their spray towards him and struck him directly in his face, "Torrent, quick." Wolf said, waving Torrent forwards as she hurried to drag Layne away from the flowers as he clutched his face.

"Platoon halt." Vance ordered, though Layne's cry had already brought the lead units to a stop as they turned to take a look at what had happened to the hated commissar.

"Let me see." Torrent said as she gently prised Layne's hands away from his face. Then she winced.

"That doesn't look good." Wolf commented when she saw that the commissar's face was covered in tiny black specs where the spray had struck him and that the skin around these had already turned red and started to swell.

"It'll be fine." Torrent said.

"My eyes. They sting." Layne said, "Am I blind?"

"Can you see me now?" Torrent asked.

"Yes but-

"Then your eyesight won't be harmed. Providing you get this seen to quickly." Torrent interrupted, "The moisture in your eyes will delay any damage but eventually the spray will get into the nerve."

"Then do something." Layne snapped.

"Can't." Torrent said.

"What do you mean? I order you to-

"Commissar," Wolf interrupted, "perhaps you should let Private Torrent explain the situation fully."

"Of course. But hurry private." Layne said.

"The spray needs to be neutralised." Torrent said, "It's easy but it needs a counteragent to be applied as a wash and I don't have any with me."

"Well why not?" Layne demanded.

"Because avoiding the flowers is easy if you know what you're doing." Torrent said and Layne snarled.

"Commissar," Wolf said before he could take out his anger on Torrent, "it seems apparent that you cannot carry on with us. Look, we're only a few hundred metres from the camp and we've left a clear trail behind us. Perhaps you should go back."

"Go back?" Layne exclaimed. Then he sighed, "Yes, I suppose I must." and he reached for the key hung around his neck, removing it and handing it to Wolf, "Here you go lieutenant, I suppose there is no choice but to hand this over to you."

"Thank you sir." Wolf replied, accepting the key and helping Layne to his feet. Then she and her platoon waited as they watched him walking back towards the XIX Regiment's camp. Wolf then looked at Torrent, "Isn't leaving camp without any of that chemical a bad idea?" she asked, "What if there's an accident and someone else gets sprayed? Someone we can't send back to camp?"

"Oh don't worry lieutenant." Torrent replied, "The reason I didn't bring any of the counter agent is that it's urine. So if you fall face first into a patch of those things I'll happily supply as much as you need myself and I'm sure that there will be no shortage of volunteers at camp to help the leash."

Wolf then noticed Fear moving towards them.

"Captain." she called out, "Is there a problem?"

"No, no problem." he replied, "Not now you've managed to get rid of that leash."

"Oh yes, I suppose you should have this." Wolf said, holding out the key to the fusion bomb. But Fear just smiled and reached under his shirt and produced the second key Cornelius had offered to them before the arrival of Commissar Layne.

"No need lieutenant." he said, "I got this from the cog boy as soon as Layne wasn't looking."

4.

In a chamber located deep beneath the surface of the planet the leader of the Necrons, whose name had long since been forgotten by even his own followers during their long years in stasis and was now known only by his title of phaeron strode between rows of crypteks who continued to work at bringing the tomb's systems back on line fully. Only when this was completed could the full array of Necron forces be brought to bear on the humans that had dared to invade the planet. Many had already been killed by the warriors who had been awoken first but there were many more who had been able to stubbornly resist the Necrons in spite of the clear technical superiority they possessed.

"Report." the phaeron said.

"Primitives have made no further attempts to evacuate since their transport vessel was destroyed my phaeron." a cryptek told him, "Their space vessel remains in orbit and beyond the range of our current weapons. A Tomb Blade assault is possible but not advised given the scale of the target."

"And what of our status?" the phaeron asked.

"Stage four revival systems have failed my phaeron." another cryptek replied without turning away from the interface panel that it was stationed at, "Heavy armoured units remain in stasis but are undamaged."

This presented a problem to the phaeron. The armoured units the cryptek was describing were the powerful Monoliths and Night Scythes. Monoliths were massive hovering pyramids that could be teleported to any point on the planet in an instant and that were equipped to allow units of Necrons to follow them simply by stepping through the eternity gate mounted on the front of the vehicles while the Night Scythes were advanced aircraft that possessed similar teleportation capabilities for rapidly deploying troops. Had either been available then the phaeron could simply have Monoliths teleported directly into the midst of the Catachan camp or had the Night Scythes overfly it and had an army follow them, bypassing the humans' perimeter defences entirely before they could react.

But although these vehicles were among the most powerful vehicles available to the phaeron's forces they were by no means the only ones.

"Status of Tomb Blade and Destroyer units." the phaeron said.

"Tomb Blades now returning to base my phaeron. Destroyer mission profiles eighty four percent complete. Seven units already returning to base. Twenty four others reanimated and prepared for deployment."

"Launch all ready Destroyers." the phaeron ordered, "Target primary enemy stronghold. Launch Tomb Blades to support when they become available. Interface with our guest to determine optimum targeting strategy." At this point one of the crypteks stopped working and turned towards the phaeron.

"My phaeron." it said, bowing in deference to the dynastic leader.

"Speak cryptek." the phaeron responded.

"Why deal with the primitive? Our technology is vastly superior. They will fall before us inevitably." the cryptek said.

"Overlord Phennett was given a supposedly superior force and still failed to destroy the invaders." the phaeron said, referring to the failed attempt to overwhelm the Catachan camp with a massive number of Necron warriors continuously being repaired in the field when damaged so that they could be sent straight back into battle, "Though primitive the invaders do have a degree of cunning and this must be taken into account. Our guest can point out their vulnerabilities to use and allow us to minimise our own losses. Now carry out my orders."

"Yes my phaeron." the cryptek replied before returning to the interface.

The battery of Hydra self propelled anti-aircraft guns were the first to spot the approaching Necron craft on their tracking radars. Tomb Blades looking like compact versions of the jet bikes that once been employed by the Imperium's forces before the secrets of their construction had been lost and were still used by the alien Eldar. But these were far more than just lightweight single pilot flyers. They had been designed to act as space fighters, using sheer numbers to overwhelm a starship's defences and making high speed attack runs at point blank range using their underslung gauss blasters but they operated just as well as ground attack craft, zooming down out of the sky to engage targets with pinpoint accuracy.

However, the presence of the Hydras meant that the Catachans were not entirely defenceless.

"Incoming!" one of the Hydra crew yelled as he turned the turret of his vehicle to face the fast approaching Tomb Blades and without waiting for an order he squeezed the trigger bars of the quad linked auto-cannons mounted on it.

The roar of cannon fire grew louder as the other two vehicles in the battery joined in, sending streams of shells into the sky that created streaks of light in the wake of the tracer rounds mixed in with the others. Joining this was the sound of a klaxon even though the entire camp had heard the Hydras firing and knew

exactly what it meant.

The camp was under attack.

Catachans rushed to take up their positions on the perimeter, a ring of trenches and bunkers that offered the best protection from the Necrons that was possible under the circumstances while the Hydras, now joined by numerous infantry portable weapons continued to direct fire skywards.

The Hydras were the most effective of these weapons by far, their built in tracking systems enabling them to accurately predict where the Tomb Blades would be by the time their shells reached them. But the Necrons had been warned about the Hydras' capabilities and though several of the agile vehicles exploded under the hail of fire there were still many more remaining and they suddenly split apart, dividing into smaller groups. The Hydras turned to try following these, but as the Tomb Blades continued to divide themselves into smaller groups the Hydras were unable to target them all at the same time.

The sun was starting to set when Molla signalled for the lead elements of the force to come to a halt and in turn the rest followed.

"Seen something?" Quinn asked quietly when he moved forwards to see what had attracted Molla's attention.

"Maybe." he replied, "Look." and he pointed through the trees ahead of them. But he was not pointing at anything in the jungle itself, instead his arm was angled upwards to point at a patch of sky visible through the vegetation and Quinn saw that instead of the usual dark blue he had come to expect on this world there was a dull orange glow visible.

"That's not just an indication of the weather is it?" Quinn said as he looked in the opposite direction, seeking out another patch of visible sky and he saw that is was the typical colour.

"No." Molla agreed, "In fact I've got an uneasy feeling about what it could be." and then he pressed his microbead headset to activate the compact communicator, "Lieutenant are you there?" he signalled.

"Right here." Wolf responded, "You haven't managed to lose me in the jungle yet."

"I think we've got trouble up ahead and I could do with you bringing your map up here." Molla told her.

"I'll be right with you." Wolf replied and then the channel went silent.

Molla and Quinn waited while Wolf made her way from her command section past Quinn's veterans and to First Squad's position.

"What's wrong?" she asked as she crouched between the two sergeants.

"Something's burning." Molla told her, pointing ahead and Wolf sniffed the air and then frowned.

"We can't smell smoke you dolt." Quinn said after groaning and shaking his head and Wolf frowned.

Technically Quinn's comment counted as insubordination, as did a lot of Catachan behaviour, but she knew that even bringing attention to that fact was not a good idea. Besides, Quinn was one of the Catachans she most counted as an ally in the platoon.

"Can you see that glow in the sky?" Molla asked, pointing ahead of them again and Wolf peered through the jungle.

"Oh right." she said.

"Give us a look at that map lieutenant." Quinn said, holding out his hand and Wolf handed him the dataslate she carried. This device stored a collection of maps generated from images taken by the orbiting starship.

Wolf, like the other officers of the regiment had modified her copy as she had discovered more details that had not shown up on the original images. This included the location of a fortified native settlement that Second Platoon had spent a night in when they had first been sent to find the derelict starship, "That's it."

Quinn said, holding up the map, "The settlement's that way and so are the flames. That's too much of a coincidence for it to be anything else."

"But why would it be on fire?" Wolf asked.

"I'm guessing the Necrons had a hand in it." Molla replied and a puzzled look appeared on Wolf's face.

"But didn't they worship those things or something?" she said. When her platoon had encountered the native human population that was descended from the crew of the crashed starship they had treated the tech priests accompanying them as if they were messengers from their gods that had later turned out to be the Necrons. But since Second Platoon had escaped from the starship nothing more had been heard from them and none of the natives had approached the XIX Regiment's camp.

Quinn smiled.

"I'm sure that Emperor botherer would have something to say about how Him on Earth is the only true god and anything else is-" he began.

"Yeah, yeah, I get it." Wolf interrupted, "But Captain Fear needs to know about this."

"Fifty coin says he'll order us to investigate." Molla said and Quinn nodded in agreement.

"How do you know?" Wolf replied.

"Because we have to go past that settlement even if we don't stop there on the way and there's no way that the captain would want to risk whatever could do that getting around our flank." Quinn answered.

"So do I go tell him or do we bring him here?" Wolf asked.

"Neither." Quinn replied, "He's right behind us." and Wolf looked around suddenly and jumped when she saw Captain Fear standing behind them.

"Captain, I didn't hear you." she said.

"Because you weren't meant to." Fear responded, "Now how about you tell me what's holding us up?"

"It's the settlement where we stayed sir." Wolf told him, "Sergeant Quinn believes it's on fire."

Fear sighed.

"Damn." he muttered, "Then we better go check it out." he said, "I'll go tell my men. You lead the way."

"Yes sir." Wolf said as Fear returned to his command section.

"Looks like you owe us fifty coin apiece lieutenant." Quinn commented with a grin.

"I'll settle for a lap dance." Molla added and Wolf scowled.

"He has a better chance of getting the cash." she replied, glancing at Quinn.

Two of the Hydras burned while the crew of the third tried desperately to hold back the Necron Tomb Blades. Most of the alien aircraft had been shot down as well, but there were still enough left that each time the Hydra crew tried to bring their auto-cannons to bear on any particular target it could cease its attack and take evasive action while its fellow Tomb Blades took over. The one saving grace for the Catachans was that they had enough man portable auto-cannons and heavy bolters to provide some cover for the final Hydra and any Tomb Blade pilot that attempted to make a direct run at the armoured anti-aircraft gun would rapidly be targeted by so many such weapons that even the Tomb Blade's speed and altitude offered little protection. But the Tomb Blades were merely the first wave and from inside the jungle came a shrieking sound that seemed to come from many places at once.

The first of the Necron Destroyers to burst out of the jungle mounted a long barrelled weapon that was mounted directly to the shoulder of the torso that was in turn joined at the waist to an anti-gravity platform that extended out behind it. Some of the more alert Catachans closest to the Necron opened fire, but the tough construction of the Destroyer enabled it to ignore the small arms fire while it targeted one of the handful of remaining Tarantula automated sentry guns deployed to protect the Catachan perimeter. Most of these had been destroyed by Overlord Phennett's warriors, but some had either survived intact or been brought back into action thanks to the effort of the Adeptus Mechanicus. The sentry guns mounted either heavy bolters or las cannons in twin mounts and this one was already turning towards the destroyer as it fired. The beam from the Destroyer's weapon was the same pale green that the Catachans had come to expect of their alien foes but this was brighter than any they had seen before. Another characteristic of the Necron gauss weapons was their ability to penetrate even the thickest armour and this weapon proved to be even more effective at this than most as the beam cut right through the bunker where the tarantula had been set up. The beam ripped through the main body of the sentry gun where its targeting auspex and the motors for aligning its weapons were located. This meant that the two drums of explosive tipped bolter shells did not explode but the damage was still catastrophic enough to reduce the weapon to nothing but scrap metal mounting a pair of now useless heavy bolters.

From elsewhere on the perimeter a Catachan missile launcher team launched an armour-piercing krak missile at the Destroyer and the missile struck the alien war machine where its torso met the anti-gravity platform, breaking the machine in two. This prompted cheers from the Catachans as the burning remains of the Destroyer ploughed into the ground and bounced along it. But the celebration was short lived as not only did more Destroyers, most armed with shorter multi-barrelled weapons but a few mounting the longer version carried by the first, emerged from the jungle but the fragments of the crashed Destroyer began to reassemble themselves as its self repair mechanism kicked in.

5.

The natives encountered by Second Platoon shortly after the XIX Regiment had made planet fall lived in a heavily fortified settlement that offered them protection from the hostile animals that lived in the jungle. By Catachan standards it was crude and flimsy, unlikely to last long on a dangerous world. But conditions on this planet were tame compared to Catachan itself and the fortress had lasted for many years.

But it had failed to protect its inhabitants from the death that had come for them today.

When the Necron Destroyers had first emerged from the jungle the leaders of the native tribe had rushed from their fortress to greet them, convinced that their gods were here to bless them. But the Destroyers' hatred of all life meant that the devotion of the tribe was of no concern to them and they slaughtered the tribal leaders. The gauss beams had stripped the flesh from their bones in moments and what little was left lay scattered around.

"This happened recently." Molla told Wolf as they both peered out of the jungle at the fortress that had smoke billowing out from behind its walls. First Squad had halted at the edge of the clearing in which the fortress was constructed and Wolf had brought her command section forwards to join them.

"How can you tell?" she asked.

"Because nothing's eaten what's left of those xenos worshippers." Vance responded before Molla could.

"Sinners all." Black hissed, "Death is too merciful a release for such corruption of spirit."

Molla then looked around as Captain Fear and his own command section approached.

"Captain." he said.

"Sergeant." Fear replied and then he looked at the fortress for himself.

"So this is it then is it?" he asked.

"This is it." Wolf replied, nodding, "Of course the last time we were here it wasn't on fire."

"Technically the fortress isn't on fire." Molla pointed out, "It's what's inside that's burning. Probably those tents they lived in."

Wolf noticed Molla's use of the past tense. The tents that they *lived* in. He had already come to the conclusion that the inhabitants of the settlement were all dead. However, given that they had demonstrated themselves to be hostile towards the forces of the Imperium she had little sympathy for any of them.

"I'll take my two veteran squads in to investigate." Fear told Wolf, "Second Platoon can stay here and provide support as needed."

"But sir, my men know the-" Wolf began.

"Your platoon got us here lieutenant." Fear interrupted, "Now it's First Platoon's turn."

"Of course sir." Wolf said, "I'm-" but Fear held up his hand for her to stop before she completed her apology.

It was the duty of an Imperial Guard officer to volunteer to lead an attack and he would have been disappointed had Wolf simply accepted being told to take a back seat.

Fear then activated his microbead headset.

"Tyrol, Kean, bring your squads up." he broadcast, "We're going in to take a look around. First and Second Squads will remain out here under Lieutenant Wolf's command."

"Please confirm that captain." a voice replied, the signal being broadcast to all of the nearby Catachan forces, including those of Second Platoon. Wolf could not put a name to the voice but she did recognise it as one of First Platoon's sergeants. Obviously he was not happy about being left under her command and she saw Torrent smirk.

"I repeat, Lieutenant Wolf has authority." Fear said, "Obviously my signal broke up because I'd hate to think that my orders aren't being taken seriously."

The warning clearly worked as there were no further complaints and the two veteran squads from First Platoon moved forwards. While Fear was giving orders to his men, Wolf turned her attention to her own platoon.

"Sergeant Molla I want your squad's heavy bolter set up here to cover the gateway." she said. Then she activated her microbead, "Sergeant Grey do you read me?"

"Right here lieutenant." Grey responded.

"Sergeant I want you to get your squad's missile launcher ready to engage enemy armour." she told him.

"There are tanks around? Where?" Grey asked.

"No contact yet, armour or infantry. But I want us ready just in case. Also could you make sure that the squads from First Platoon are prepared to give covering fire?"

"On it lieutenant."

"Good. Corporal Mayer?"

"Yes lieutenant?"

"Corporal set up your mortars and target the settlement. Captain Fear is taking two squads in so I want you

ready to lay down smoke rounds. If he has to withdraw then he'll need the cover."

"Yes lieutenant. We'll be ready in three minutes." Mayer answered.

Wolf watched as the two squads from First Platoon hurried towards the fortress together. The ground between the treeline and the fortress walls was littered with large wooden spikes that had been driven into the ground at an angle, pointing outwards from the fortress. These were intended to be a defence against the larger predators that inhabited the jungle. Should one attempt to charge the fortress walls then it would be impaled on the spikes by the force of its own charge. But the spikes were useless against human sized attackers and the veterans of First Platoon were able to easily dodge them.

Fear and his command section followed the veterans close behind and all three units hurried as far as the wall of the fortress. In single file they moved along the wall towards the gate that stood wide open, las guns and shotguns held at the ready just in case anything rushed out of the fortress. But that was not the direction that the attack came from.

There was the sound of a powerful engine from inside the fortress and from about the wall Fear and his men were moving along a Necron destroyer appeared, rising up and looking down at the Catachans.

"Necron!" Wolf yelled, firing her las pistol at the alien machine. Despite how rapidly she fired her aim was true but the stopping power of her las pistol was insufficient to cause the Destroyer any harm and it ignored her. Instead the Necron aimed its arm mounted weapon downwards and unleashed a barrage of fire at one of First Platoon's veteran squads. There were brief screams as two of the Catachans had their flesh burned away by the energy beams but these were drowned out when Molla acted.

"Open fire!" he yelled at the heavy bolter team close by him and there was a sudden roar as the belt fed weapon fired.

The stream of rocket assisted projectiles struck the Necron Destroyer dead on and the mass reactive explosives they contained detonated just as they were supposed. Despite its toughness, the Destroyer could not ignore this sort of onslaught and it rocked as one round after another tore pieces from its body.

"Run!" Fear yelled as pieces of the Destroyer started to land around them and his men broke into a run, heading for the gateway as fast as they could.

More of Second Platoon joined in the attack and the overwhelming level of fire directed at the Destroyer tore it apart, blowing off first its weapon arm and then its head at which point the machine exploded entirely and its remains plummeted towards the ground.

"Quick." Wolf said, "Before it can repair itself. Quinn, Khor, bring your squads with me. We have to make sure that thing stays down."

"Ogryns forwards." Khor called out as in front of his squad both Wolf and Quinn led their troops into the clearing.

"So how exactly do we stop this thing from repairing itself?" Torrent asked as she looked at a small patch of debris and noticed what looked like electrical cables knitting themselves back together.

"Just smash anything you find." Vance replied.

"Ogryns! Smash." Khor bellowed, making Wolf flinch at the noise and the ogryns began to not only stamp on any piece of metal they came across and grind it into the ground but also to tear up the defensive stakes by combining their already formidable strength to rip them out of the ground.

Meanwhile, Fear and his men had reached the gateway that led into the fortress. The gates themselves hung off their hinges and the way was open for them to enter the structure. As expected the inside was a scene of devastation with the partial remains of many bodies strewn about. Many had obviously been struck by the disintegrating beams of Necron weapons but there were others that looked as if they had been physically torn apart or even carried into the air and then dropped to be impaled on what lay below. The tents in which the natives had lived had fared no better than their inhabitants either and it was the smoke from these that could be seen over the walls.

"Spread out." Fear ordered, "Look for survivors but be aware that they are likely to be hostile. Subdue them for questioning if you can but don't take any chances, they are heretics one and all."

Fear's men started to spread out, with the two squads of veterans taking up flanking positions around Fear's own command section. But as they started to advance there was another roaring of an engine as a second Destroyer burst through a column of smoke and opened fire as it raced headlong towards the same squad that had already lost two of its men outside the fortress walls. The Catachans returned fire, but the cover offered by the wreckage of the tents and the smoke limited their lines of fire and only a handful of them could target the alien machine at any one time. Three more of the squad were cut down by the Destroyer's gauss cannon before the machine slammed into the remainder of the squad and began hacking at the Catachans who in response cast aside their las guns and drew their own heavy blades.

Fear was about to lead his command section in a counter charge to support the embattled veterans when all of a sudden another Destroyer glided around a burning tent and fired a blast that turned his vox operator into a torch as his flesh was burned away. Fear whirled around and fired his las pistol at the Destroyer as it charged towards him, but although the machine flinched slightly when the energy blasts struck its face one

after another its momentum as enough to keep it moving and it charged straight into Fear's command section, swatting aside their medic.

The other veteran squad was about to hurry to their officer's aide when another Destroyer glided between two burning tents and they opened fire on it with their shotguns.

Outside the walls wolf looked around as she heard the commotion from inside the fortress and she looked at Vance.

"Trouble." he said.

"Okay forget this thing." Wolf replied, glancing down at the wreckage of the first Destroyer, "We go in and help." then she activated her microbead, "Sergeant Molla, we're going inside the fortress to support Captain Fear. Keep us covered from out here and make sure this thing doesn't get back up again."

"Understood lieutenant. No-one's going to be taking you by surprise." Molla reassured her.

Khor's ogryns were the first to reach the gateway, smashing what remained of the gates out of their way and roaring as they raced inside the fortress. Each ogryn was armed with a ripper gun, a heavy gauge rapid firing automatic shotgun that was fed from a drum. These gave individual ogryns tremendous firepower, though few of them had the intelligence to make the most of this. This was especially true when the two potential targets they could make out were engaged in hand to hand combat with the ogryns' allies. But ripper guns were constructed with ogryns specifically in mind and in addition to their ranged firepower they were sufficiently ruggedly made that they could be used as clubs and that was how the ogryns used them now.

"Ogryns charge!" Khor yelled, lifting his ripper gun above his head and firing a brief burst into the air. Then he roared and charged towards the Destroyer engaged with Captain Fear.

When Wolf's command section and Quinn's veterans reached the gate just as Khor's ogryns were starting to land blows on their chosen target, they heard the sound of gunfire coming from the only squad not engaged in close combat.

"Go help them." Wolf told Quinn, "See how well these Necron machines deal with your melta gun." and Quinn smiled at her before waving for his squad to follow him.

"And what about us?" Vance asked.

"Khor's helping Captain Fear. We should go help them." Wolf replied, pointing to the other veteran squad that had already lost another of its number to the Necron Destroyer's attacks.

"Death to the xenos!" Black yelled and he drew his blade before breaking into a run.

Holding their weapons at the ready, Quinn's veteran squad hurried through the settlement inside the fortress. This was not their first time here but on their previous visit their way had not been obscured by smoke and flames and so they took care to check any potential hiding places to make sure that they were not being led into an ambush.

"Down." Quinn hissed when he caught sight of the Destroyer that darted from one firing position to another as it fired short bursts from its gauss cannon. Two Catachans already lay dead but the rest appeared to at least be holding their own against the alien, "Jackson, bring that melta up and see if this thing can take the heat." Quinn ordered and the trooper equipped with the squad's meltagun, an extremely powerful if short ranged energy weapon, moved forwards to where he could get a better line of sight towards the alien. Then he raised the bulky weapon and took aim before squeezing the trigger. There was roar that grew in intensity as the weapon was fired, a brilliant white light leaping out towards the Necron. Caught unaware by the surprise attack the Destroyer had no opportunity to try and avoid the blast and the beam struck the centre of its torso, causing it to explode and the anti-gravity platform that had kept it aloft wobbled before dropping out of the air and crashing to the ground to become just another piece of burning debris.

Meanwhile Khor's ogryns were proving their worth against the Destroyer attacking Captain Fear's command section. Having already lost two of his troops, Fear had been concerned that his section was doomed to join them right up until the moment that the first of the massive abhumans crashed into the Destroyer, swinging his ripper gun like a club and forcing the alien to retreat. But the ogryns were not content to allow their opponent to escape and they followed it, raining blows down upon it at every opportunity.

"Get back here!" Khor snapped and he reached out and grabbed the destroyer by its more human looking arm before pulling the machine back towards him. The Destroyer responded by swinging its gauss cannon around to take aim at Khor. But before the weapon's muzzle could align with Khor another of the ogryns grabbed hold of the cannon and lifted it upwards where it could do no harm, "Smash it." Khor shouted and the remaining ogryns began to do just that, striking the Destroyer as hard as they could while it was held immobile.

Seeing his chance Fear leapt forwards and slipped between two of the ogryns with his blade drawn. The Destroyer briefly turned its head towards him as he lashed out with his blade, slicing through a cluster of power and control lines that ran down its neck. The Destroyer shuddered and its anti-gravity platform suddenly began to spin out of control. This knocked Khor and the other ogryn holding it out of its way but the Destroyer was unable to regain control of itself as it continued to spin away from them.

"Shoot it!" Fear shouted and the remains of his squad along with all of Khor's ogryns opened fire from close range. Such a heavy volume of fire was too much for even the Destroyer's hardened construction and self

repair systems to withstand and its shattered body crashed into a nearby burning tent and flipped end over end before coming to a halt among the burning ruin.

This left only one Destroyer remaining inside the fortress and it was still battling the remains of the veteran squad and Wolf's command section. Aware that it was the last of its unit left operational the Destroyer lashed out its arm, lifting Wolf off the ground as she was hurled backwards through the air allowing the Destroyer to briefly pull back from the fight just enough that it was able to run a quick scan of the surrounding area and it saw that every Catachan and ogryn in the fortress was now moving towards it. Against those sorts of odds the Destroyer knew that it could not win in hand to hand combat.

On the other hand it could still inflict significant damage from a distance.

Being surrounded by the Imperial Guard forces meant that there was nowhere to go inside the fortress that would get it away from its enemies but there was one direction that was open and so with a roar of anti-gravity engines the Destroyer rose up above the burning settlement and aimed a beam of energy towards Khor's squad, prompting a roar of pain from one of the abhumans as the muscle on one arm was burned away before the beam moved towards the ogryn's chest and disintegrated its major organs.

This sent the Catachans scurrying for cover before the Destroyer could fire again and moments later there came another flash from overhead. But this was not accompanied by the usual beam of green light from a gauss weapon, instead there was a 'Whoosh!' as a krak missile flew over the fortress walls and struck the anti-gravity platform that was keeping the Destroyer aloft and blasted it to pieces. Without power to keep it airborne any longer the Destroyer came crashing back down to the ground where in the absence of any more of their kind the wreckage of all four downed Destroyers inside the walls and out faded away until the only evidence of their having been there was the destruction and death that they had left behind them.

"Lieutenant." Grey's voice said over Second Platoon's communication network, "Are you there?"

"Right here sergeant." she gasped in response, still lying on the ground where she had landed. At the end of the XIX Regiment's last deployment she had suffered several broken ribs when she had been struck by a chaos space marine in terminator armour and although the breaks were now healed her ribs still felt sore at times and she had felt the pain of the Destroyer's blow more than she would have prior to this earlier injury.

"Lieutenant what's your status?"

"Asleep on the job." Torrent commented as wolf's command section gathered around her and the medic knelt down to examine her.

"I'll be fine." Wolf told her, "I just need a hand getting up."

"Allow me." Captain Fear said as he walked over to her and offered her his hand, "I don't think my men would have survived if you hadn't come racing in here to help."

Wolf nodded, still breathing heavily as she tried to catch her breath. Then she activated her microbead again.

"Good shooting Sergeant Grey." she signalled, "Pass on my congratulations to Guardsmen Dean and Michaels."

"Will do lieutenant." Grey replied. Then Wolf looked around at the burning settlement before looking at Vance.

"How many did we lose?" she asked.

"Just one of Khor's lot." he replied, then looking at Fear he added, "I think First Platoon came off far worse though."

"We did." Fear said in agreement, nodding as he did so, "Ten dead, including my own vox operator and platoon medic."

"And the Necrons probably know we're in the area by now." Wolf added.

"Lieutenant, captain." Vance said to the two officers, "Perhaps it would be an idea for us to camp here tonight. After extinguishing these fires of course."

"Yes, the walls may offer us some protection." Fear replied, "Our weapons are better than the natives' were so we should be able to make better use of this place as a defensive position."

6.

Debris from the ruined settlement was used to barricade the fortress gate, moved into position using Sergeant Gant's Sentinel and Khor's ogyrns while Cornelius deployed his gun servitors to the battlements to stand watch while the Catachans slept. But before they could rest the leaders of the small force gathered around one of the camp fires that had been lit.

"So what did the colonel have to say?" Fear asked when Wolf joined them, having just returned from the battlements where she had gone to check in with the main camp at the landing site.

"They're under heavy Necron attack." she announced, "It sounds like more of the things that did all of this." and she indicated the still smouldering ruins around them.

"They are called Destroyers lieutenant." Cornelius said, "What little we know about the forces of the Necrons indicates that they are used for missions that demand a high body count ratio."

"Hence their rapid firing weapons." Quinn commented.

"Precisely sergeant." Cornelius replied.

"Well the colonel said that the perimeter is still holding but he asked for an ETA on getting to the ship. I told him we'd be there tomorrow afternoon." Wolf said.

"Is that accurate?" Fear asked.

"Sounds good to me." Molla replied.

"It took us about half a day to get there when the natives were guiding us." Grey added.

"We need to discuss how we're going to gain entry into the ship as well." Wolf said.

"Well we can't go in the same way we did before." Gant replied, "That got blown up."

"Plus if we did dig it out again then all those Necron insect things are probably still under there." Vance added.

"There are two other possible entry points." Cornelius pointed out.

"The shuttle bay and the upper hatch Rull found." Wolf commented.

"Assuming both are still open the hangar will let us get more in at a time." Molla said.

"Neither's going to be much good for getting my Sentinel inside though." Gant pointed out, "Both are top entry with long drops."

"There was loading equipment in the hangar." Cornelius responded, "If any of it remains functional then it may be of use for bringing down the Sentinel."

"Why bother?" Vance asked, "We'll only be in there long enough to figure out where the Necrons are hiding their headquarters after all."

"That's a good point." Grey agreed, "We could also do with a force to make sure that the Necrons don't bury us alive in that wreck."

"Given second Platoon's experience inside the starship, I would suggest that First Platoon's squads along with my gun servitors form the group left on the surface." Cornelius said, "With the exception of Captain Fear's own command section and his engineers. I will leave PL-six-seven-three to monitor the servitors." and it took Wolf a moment to realise that the tech priest was referring to his assistant who she always thought of by the name of Nathin that he went by among the Catachans.

"Some experience." Grey said, "Only Quinn did any real exploring."

"And we were being led around by that traitor Serett." Quinn added.

"It's still more experience than my men have got." Fear pointed out. Then he looked around, "That's settled then. My command section and engineers will join Second Platoon in entering the ship and locating the data library while the rest of my men remain on the surface under Sergeant Gant's command. Now everyone get some rest because I get the feeling tomorrow could be a long day."

In the thousands of years since the exploration vessel had landed on this otherwise unknown world it had become buried and the jungle had grown over it, meaning that from a distance it had the appearance of a long hill. Only when someone knew what they were looking for could they pick out the areas that were the prow and the control tower towards the rear of the ship.

"Looks just like it did the last time we were here." Wolf commented as she looked at the buried starship through her magnoculars from high ground.

"You were expecting something different lieutenant?" Fear asked from beside her as he too studied the buried vessel.

"I don't know." Wolf replied, shrugging as she lowered her magnoculars, "I thought maybe the Necrons would have acted to secure the ship but I don't see any from here."

"Rull agrees with you lieutenant." Molla said as he walked up to the two officers.

"He's called in?" Wolf asked.

"Yeah, he's already reached the ship and has confirmed that both the hangar and the upper hatch are still open while the tunnel the natives led us to is still buried. He also says that he hasn't seen any sign of enemy activity between here and there." Molla told her.

"Then we should hurry." Fear said, "After last night the Necrons will know we're around and I doubt it will take them long to figure out where we've got to. They could have a force on the way here right now."

Wolf nodded in agreement.

"Lead the way Sergeant." she then told Molla.

The phaeron's personal guard stepped aside to allow the Necron Lord that had just returned from the surface to approach their master.

"Speak." the phaeron commanded as the lord drew closer.

"My phaeron," the lord said, dropping to one knee and bowing its head towards the floor of the throne room, "I have returned with my phalanx from the primitive settlement and regret to report that the invaders are no longer there." it spoke.

And in which direction did they head?" the phaeron asked.

"It is not certain my phaeron. They leave little evidence of their passage through the jungle."

"Little evidence is not no evidence." the phaeron pointed out, "Now where are they likely to be travelling to?"

"To the ship of the previous primitives to invade our world my phaeron."

"Indeed, it is the only thing that interests them We know that it is why they came to this world in the first place."

"Then I shall take my phalanx and-"

"Your phalanx is not needed." the phaeron interrupted, "Your troops can join the attack on the invaders main base. In the mean time I shall leave dealing with this second group to the starship's defenders."

"Looks like Rull couldn't wait for the rest of us." Mayer commented when he saw the single rope secured by the gaping hole in the ground that led down to the buried starship's hangar. The rope was secured to a nearby rock and Wolf guessed that it had only been left there by Rull as an indication to the rest of the Catachans that he had headed into the ship ahead of them, otherwise he would have found a way to take it down with him and not leave any evidence behind.

Standing beside the hole Wolf took a chemical light from her webbing and activated it before tossing it into the darkness. The tiny stick of light spun as it fell until it hit the deck of the hangar many metres below, so far that the sound of it bouncing did not reach the surface and it took some time for the Catachans to be certain that it had reached the deck.

"Sergeant Quinn." she said, looking towards her platoon's veteran squad, "I want your squad to go in first and confirm that the way is clear. Then First and Second Squads will follow before my command section and Corporal Mayer's squad." then she looked at Captain Fear, "Assuming that's alright with you sir." she added.

"Of course. Carry on lieutenant." he replied, smiling.

Moving a squad at a time the Catachans descended into the darkness of the starship's hangar. The chemical light dropped in by Wolf provided a limited amount of illumination as they landed on the deck and hurried to find cover among the numerous shuttles present within the chamber after so long. Only one of these was missing, the one used by Second Platoon to evacuate the ship after the Necrons had begun to awaken and tried to kill them.

There were no signs left of any of the Necrons now though, any of them not damaged so badly that they simply vanished as their remains were taken to be repaired had either chosen not to remain or had been ordered elsewhere.

When it came time for wolf's command section to enter the ship Wolf paused by the edge of the hole and looked over.

"What's the matter lieutenant? Scared of heights?" Torrent asked.

"You can't even see the bottom from this high up." Vance added and then he jumped backwards into the hole, rapidly disappearing from view.

"I'll be just fine." Wolf said, "I've taken the Imperial Guard climbing course after all." and then she cautiously leant backwards over the hole and stared down into it again.

"Hurry up lieutenant." Fear said as he stood waiting to take his turn. The hole in the ground leading down into the ship was large enough for all of the Imperial Guard troops going into it to have gone at the same time, but to avoid having so many of them exposed at once only a handful of lines were being used.

"I just need to make sure everything's in order." Wolf replied and she looked towards Gant, "Sergeant Gant." she called out, "Are your preparations complete?"

"They will be soon." Gant responded without taking her eyes off the troops of First Platoon who were busy digging into the ground around the hole to establish a cluster of dugouts to provide them with cover just in case the Necrons attacked.

"In that case-" Wolf began but before she could finish Fear stepped towards her and pushed her into the

hole.

Wolf screamed as she dropped before remembering the rope she was connected to and she tightened her grip on it.

"Are you okay down there lieutenant?" Fear called out from above.

"Oh now you ask." she responded before Torrent suddenly appeared beside her, having jumped into the hole on the line beside Wolf's.

"She's fine." she shouted and she smiled at Wolf, "See you at the bottom lieutenant." she added before continuing to slide down the rope.

"Oh I hate doing this." Wolf muttered to herself and then she slackened her grip while keeping her hands around the rope so that she began to head downwards again. But unnoticed by Wolf, her leg had become tangled in the rope and when she began to descend again it tightened, "Whoa!" she exclaimed as she came to another sudden halt and the rope slipped through her fingers because of the jolt.

"Lieutenant are you okay?" Vance called out when he saw her fall backwards and then dangle upside down from the rope, swinging back and forth.

"What's happening down there?" Fear demanded using his microbead.

"Lieutenant Wolf is caught in her line sir." Vance responded, "Someone's going to have to free her manually."

"I'm on it." Mayer said, hurrying to the rope that Torrent had just used and wrapping it around himself.

"Perhaps a second pair of hands would prove useful." Black added, hurrying to the rope on the other side of Wolf's.

"Okay on three." Mayer said when he saw that Black was ready and the priest nodded, "One. Two. Three!" and both men jumped into the hole.

Sliding down their respective ropes, both Catachans came to a halt either side of Wolf as she hung upside down.

"Have faith lieutenant." Black said, smiling at her.

"You think faith in the Emperor will get me down from here?" she asked.

"In the Emperor and in Catachan steel lieutenant." Black said and keeping one hand gripping his rope he drew his blade in the other, "If you wouldn't mind corporal." he added, looking at Mayer.

"Got it." Mayer replied and he reached out with his free hand to grab Wolf's rope above where she dangled, "Lieutenant you need to grab hold of me tightly." he said, pulling them both closer together and Wolf wrapped her arms around his waist. Then in turn Mayer let go of the rope and wrapped his free arm around her legs.

Meanwhile Grey, Molla, Quinn and Vance all stared up at them from the floor below and Molla smiled.

"That's it Bomber!" he yelled, "You're in there!"

"That's not funny." Wolf replied.

"What's the matter lieutenant?" Torrent called out as she too stared upwards, "Don't you want to show Corporal Mayer how grateful you are for saving your life?"

Then Molla looked at her.

"So does that mean if I saved your life-" he began.

"No chance." she replied.

"Oh well, just checking." Molla said.

"Can we hurry this up?" Wolf asked, "All the blood is rushing to my head."

"Are you ready?" Black asked and Mayer nodded.

"Err, I think-" Wolf started to say but before she could confirm being ready Black swung his blade and sliced through the rope supporting her just above where she was caught in it.

Wolf felt the rope give way and squealed, tightening her grip on Mayer.

"It's okay lieutenant." he told her, "You're free now."

"Free? I'm hanging upside down from your waist." she said, "This isn't covered in the Uplifting Primer."

"Neither's this." Mayer replied and he let go of her legs.

Wolf screamed again as she was unable to hold onto Mayer's waist and suddenly plummeted downwards.

Fortunately for Wolf, the other squad leaders of her platoon had been ready for this and before she could hit the hangar deck and injure herself Molla grabbed hold of her and cushioned her fall.

"Thanks for dropping in lieutenant." he said, smiling at her while Mayer and Black finished their descents in a more controlled manner.

"Thank you." Wolf said.

"I guess we can add rappelling to the list of things outsiders are no good at." Grey commented.

"I can do it when I'm not pushed over the edge." Wolf said. Then she looked directly at Molla, "Would you mind putting me down now sergeant?" she asked.

"As you wish." he replied and he let go of her, causing her to cry out again as she dropped to the floor.

"Come on now." Vance said, helping Wolf back to her feet, "We need to get Captain Fear's people and the ogryns down here before we can get this job finished off so let's get a move on."

There were no more complications as the remaining Catachans and Enginseer Cornelliuss descended into the hangar and to follow this the six remaining ogryns of Khor's squad were lowered down, with a full squad

of the Catachans left on the surface having to support the last of them. But with the boarding party now entirely within the hangar they were ready to proceed with their search for the ship's data library.

7.

The boarding party split up into individual squads to carry out the search for the data library while the two command sections and Khor's ogryns remained in the hangar and waited for word from the search parties. Enginseer Cornelliis also remained in the hangar and took the opportunity to inspect the array of shuttles that were stored within the chamber. The last time he had had the opportunity to do this he had been distracted by the need to quickly locate and bring on line a shuttle that Second Platoon could use to escape from the Necrons that were on the point of killing them all. Now though he had more opportunity to examine the products of long lost technology and the Catachans got the impression that he would have happily, assuming that the tech priest was capable of feeling happiness, ignored the reason for their coming back to the buried starship.

While the command sections waited to hear the results of the search Captain Fear's microbead headset suddenly came to life.

"...not alone down here...something move...shadows...man down...assistance...urgent.."

Fear's eyes widened."

"Say again." he responded, "You're signal's breaking up."

"It's the structure of the ship." Vance commented, "It plays hell with our microbeads."

"...not solid...can't see...under...urgent..."

"That's my engineers." Fear said, looking at Wolf, "It must be if they're only on First Platoon's network."

"I'll take my section to investigate." Wolf replied, "And the ogryns." and Fear nodded.

"Go." he said.

"Vance, Khor, we're moving." Wolf said and the BONEHead, who along with his squad were sat on the floor eating got to his feet.

"Ogryns up." he ordered and the other abhumans also got to their feet and picked up their ripper guns.

Outside the hangar the walls of the starship's corridors had been marked with chalk by the Catachans as they moved through them searching for the data library. This told them and other search teams which areas had already been covered as well as pointing the way back to the hangar if they needed to withdraw in a hurry. Now though Wolf's command section was able to use the marks left by First Platoon's engineers to follow the path they took through the ship.

When Wolf saw the light cast by the engineers' flash lights ahead she brought her team to a halt and activated her microbead.

"This is Lieutenant Wolf, I'm on your six about twenty metres. What's going on?" she signalled.

"Lieutenant they're all around us." a panicked sounding engineer responded, "They come out of the walls. Out of the fething walls!"

"Calm down trooper." Wolf said, "How many targets?"

"I don't know. Maybe just one. We never see more than one at once."

"One?" Vance commented, "What's going on?"

"Perhaps we should get closer." Wolf said, "Everyone keep an eye out for anything unusual." and she began to creep forwards.

"We're creeping around the corridors of a twenty thousand year old starship that's buried under the jungle."

Torrent muttered as she followed Wolf, "What could possibly be unusual about that?"

"Have no fear guardswoman." Black said, "The Emperor's will shall prevail."

Moving forwards, Wolf led her team into a chamber filled with what looked like canisters meant for holding pressurised gases and crouched between two clusters of these in the centre of the room they saw four of First Platoon's engineers while the bodies of the other two lay nearby.

One of these was between Wolf's command section and the surviving engineers and as they crept forwards Torrent crouched down beside the body to inspect it.

"No prizes for guessing how he died." she said softly as she looked around and when Wolf glanced down at the body she saw that it had been impaled on something that had punched right through the dead man's chest from behind.

"What's going on?" Wolf said when one of the surviving engineers looked in her direction.

"They're everywhere." the engineer replied, "They just keep coming at us when we're not – there!" and the engineer fired off a burst from his las gun, a risky thing to do in a chamber that was filled with potentially explosive cylinders.

Wolf turned and saw the las blasts strike the wall at the far end of the room but she did not see what the engineer had been shooting at. Then another of the engineers fired a single shot from his own las gun that struck one of the cylinders stored in the room and a jet of vapour erupted from the hole the blast punched through it.

"Throne!" Wolf exclaimed, "Will you cease fire?" then she looked around again, hoping that she would finally see what it was that had terrified the normally unshakable Catachans so much.

At first she saw nothing, just the gas cylinders and the cloud of vapour from the damaged cylinder. But then all of a sudden she thought she caught something moving in the beam of her flash light and she pointed her light straight at it. What she saw was a single floating green light that at times seemed to be surrounded by a mechanical form but at others just floated free.

"What the feth is that?" she said out loud.

"Some fiend conjured up with heresy no doubt." Black responded, snarling and he fired his las pistol straight towards the apparition. But the shot passed clean through his target, striking the wall on the far side. What it did do however, was attract the attention of whatever Necron creation it was that lay ahead of them and it turned towards Wolf's unit.

"Open fire!" she ordered rapidly, ignoring the presence of more gas cylinders in their line of fire and the Catachans did just as she said, sending several rapidly fired volleys of las fire towards the charging machine. But every last shot seemed to pass through the insubstantial target. Only at the last moment did the machine become fully visible and solid looking, right before it tried to plunge a massive curved talon through Vance. Fortunately the platoon sergeant was experienced enough to realise that he was about to be struck at before the strike could cleave him in two and he rolled aside while Black fired his las pistol again from point blank range. This time both shots fired by the priest struck their target in its head but the machine proved too tough and instead of collapsing in a heap it turned towards him.

With the machine right in front of her, Wolf finally got a good look at what the Catachans were facing. This particular Necron had a serpent-like construction with a long trailing tail extending down from its body that mounted three pairs of talons, the largest being near the head and the smallest being furthest away. But rather than slithering along on this tail it appeared that the Necron floated in the air while its tail just dragged behind it.

"Emperor have mercy!" Black cried out as the Necron machine lifted one of its talons again. However, as the talon came down there was a roar of defiance and Khor stepped forwards and swung his ripper gun by its butt in an upwards arc that intercepted the talon and knocked it aside. The alien then pulled back as it turned its attention to this latest threat and once again became incorporeal.

"Fall back!" Wolf ordered, "Fall back!" and she waved for the remaining engineers to follow her. But at that moment the Necron lunged forwards again and became solid just long enough to wrap its tail around the neck of the guardsman in her squad who carried the grenade launcher and there was a sickening 'Snap!' as the Necron lifted him into the air with enough force that his neck broke. Then by becoming incorporeal once more the Necron let the dead guardsman drop back to the floor as it darted away.

This gave the Catachans the opportunity to fall back to the doorway they had entered the room through, coming to a halt in the passageway outside.

"So what now fearless leader?" Torrent asked and Wolf grinned.

"Sergeant Khor, do you think your squad could get this door shut?" she asked and she slapped a hand against what little of the door into the room was showing around the frame.

"Ogryns pull." Khor answered and the abhumans stepped forwards and took hold of the door at each side of the frame and pulled as hard as they could. At first nothing happened, but then there was a groaning sound that became a grinding as after tens of thousands of years standing open the doors began to slid shut.

"Okay stop there." Wolf said when the gap between the doors was down to about ten centimetres and as she looked at Vance she took a fragmentation grenade from her webbing and smiled as she asked, "What do you think this going off in there will do to that thing?"

"One way to find out." he replied.

"Okay." Wolf said as she pulled the pin from the grenade and held it up for Khor to see, "Sergeant Khor, as soon as I throw this in there I need this door closing fully. Understood?"

"Yes sir!" Khor replied, snapping to attention and saluting. Wolf frowned briefly at being referred to as 'sir' but let it pass and returned the salute, knowing it was the only way that Khor would stand at ease and carry out her order.

"Fire in the hole!" Wolf called out and she tossed the grenade through the gap left between the doors before leaping out of the way.

"Ogryns push!" Khor bellowed and the six abhumans all pushed the doors as hard as they could, causing them to slam shut moments before the timer on the grenade ran out.

There was a dull rumbling as the grenade detonated and the cloud of shrapnel it produced ripped apart all of the nearby gas cylinders and began a chain reaction that blasted apart every cylinder in the room.

"Okay let's see what we got." Wolf said and she drew her las pistol as she turned towards Khor.

"No lieutenant, wait." Vance warned her, placing a hand on her shoulder.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Gas." Vance replied, "That explosion could have produced a lot of carbon monoxide even without the effects of whatever was in all those cylinders. I think we should wait until we can get respirators before going in

there.”

“Good thinking sergeant.” Wolf said, nodding.

“Yeah, cause that’s not an officer’s job is it?” Torrent muttered.

Wolf turned around, scowling and considering calling the medic out for her comment but before she could Vance suddenly pushed her towards the side of the wide corridor that they were now standing in.

“Lookout!” he yelled as he dived in the opposite direction himself and as Wolf turned once again she saw not one, but two of the immaterial serpent-like Necron machines pass straight through the door that Khor’s ogryns had just pushed closed.

One of the ogryns roared as it spun, swinging his ripper gun by its barrel only for it to pass right through the alien apparition in front of it. But this left the ogryn off balance and the Necron responded by taking physical form fully and lashing out with its long whip like tail. The ogryn howled as this slashed across his face and he fell backwards, bleeding as he knocked over two of the other abhumans.

Instinctively Wolf fired and her shot struck the Necron machine in its head, causing it to flinch. But then it swung out of its larger bladed arms and knocked her off her feet.

“Get back from it!” Vance yelled and the Catachans began to retreat, keeping their weapons raised and pointed towards the two Necrons that had both become insubstantial once more. One of these then glided forwards, tilting its head down to look at Wolf while she lay on her back and staring back up at the thing. It paused, hovering over her while the Catachans fired their weapons at the second machine as it moved menacingly towards them and drove them further back down the corridor. The machine hovering over Wolf then raised one of its arms as if to strike and she gasped as it came down towards her. She barely had time to notice that as the Necron became solid a tiny red dot appeared on its head and drifted over the glowing green eye.

The supersonic armour-piercing bullet that Rull fired was not affected by the silencer fitted to his rifle and the shot echoed in the confines of the corridor before shattering the Necron’s single large eye. The impact threw the machine’s head backwards and the whole thing flipped over in mid air before it came crashing down and Wolf screamed as she rolled out of the way before it could crush her. Looking around as she lay next to the wrecked Necron she saw that there were sparks coming from within its head and the damage appeared to have repaired itself.

“Oh no you don’t!” she snapped, lashing out with her foot and using it to jam the Necron’s head against the wall before she pressed the muzzle of her las pistol against the eye socket and fired shot after shot into it, hoping that this would allow the relatively weak sidearm to have some effect by bypassing the Necron’s armoured external construction. She continued firing until all of a sudden the Necron started to fade once more. But this time rather than becoming ghostlike in appearance and rising up above Wolf it vanished entirely just as other disabled Necrons had done.

The destruction of its comrade apparently had a significant effect on the second Necron as it continued to chase the Catachans down the corridor and it came to a sudden halt, twisting in the air so that it could look back towards Wolf before it unexpectedly dived through the corridor wall and vanished.

“Where do you think it went?” Torrent asked as she took advantage of the respite to eject the spent power cell from her las pistol and replace it with a fresh one.

“Nowhere good I’ll bet.” Wolf replied as she got to her feet and held out her hand towards the trooper than carried her command section’s vox set, “Turner, give me that.” she said and he hurried forwards, unhooking the handset and passing it to her, “Now let’s see if this thing can get a signal through the structure of this ship as far as the other search teams.” she said before turning the handset to transmit mode, “This is Lieutenant Wolf to all units. Confirmed enemy contact. One target has escaped. Be warned, enemy appears to be using some form of defensive phase field technology, avoid engagement where possible and report its position.”

“There could be more of those things you know.” Vance pointed out as Wolf gave the handset back to Turner.

“I know.” she replied, “But at least people will be watching out for them now.” then she looked down the corridor in the direction that the shot that had taken out the Necron about to kill her had come from. With only the Catachans’ flash lights to illuminate it the corridor was gloomy and filled with shadowy places for someone with Rull’s skill to hide and Wolf could not find him anywhere, “Rull?” she called out.

“Too late.” Vance told her, “He took off as soon as that Necron thing did. My guess is he’s hunting it.”

8.

Quinn's veteran squad moved in two groups of five, one advancing while the other covered it. In the confines of the starship their short ranged weaponry would not be a disadvantage if they ran into trouble and they organised themselves for the most effective fields of fire. Where they encountered open doorways or those that could be easily opened into various compartments they left one group at the doorway on guard while the other investigated what lay beyond, taking this in turns. On the other hand doors that were closed and could not be simply slid open were marked and ignored for the time being.

It was when Quinn led half his squad into a darkened room that he found it to be filled with storage units mounted on tracks. This obviously enabled the quantity of items stored to be massively increased since there would only ever be one gap between adjacent units to allow access to them while all of the others would remain pressed together and inaccessible.

"Now what do we have here?" Quinn said as he pointed both his shotgun and flash light into the gap currently open. The units either side of the gap featured racks at floor level running the entire length on the units that were obviously meant to store something long and thin in a vertical position. Above these were shelves obviously designed to take multiple small objects, most likely not much bigger than a human fist, "Does this look like an armoury to you guys?" he added, looking round at his men, "Rifles at the bottom, ammo at the top?"

"Think anything's been left here sergeant?" one of them asked and Quinn smiled.

"You mean like a plasma gun or something else the cogboys have forgotten how to make properly?" he responded, "Well I suppose there's only one way to find out isn't there?"

A wheel mounted at the end of each storage unit moved the unit when turned back and forth and by turning each one in turn the Catachans were able to inspect the units one pair at a time. Most were identical to the first one they saw, the weapons and ammunition having been removed long ago. But one of the units was different from the others and rather than racks meant for whatever rifles had been available to the crew it featured nothing but shelves and on these sat numerous storage cases.

"Okay let's get these open." Quinn said as he reached out and dragged one of the cases off the nearest shelf and set it down on the floor. Then he released the simple clasps that held it shut and lifted it open, "Huh." he said, "Now isn't that nice?" and he took out one of the half dozen pistols that the case held to examine it. The weapon was a basic slug thrower, fed from a magazine located in the grip and from the look of the bare minimum of controls limited to semi-automatic fire only. Such weapons were common throughout the Imperium in the hands of both government agents and private citizens.

"There are more of them in this one." one of his men said as he opened another case without bothering to remove it from the shelf first.

"This one too." another veteran commented upon opening a third case.

"Anyone found any ammo for them?" Quinn asked but his question was answered only with silence, "Okay we grab as many as we can." he said, "Guns and mags only. Forget the cases they're too big and heavy. With any luck the cogboys will be able to knock up some ammo for these and we'll all get a bit of extra firepower. Plus any we don't need for the platoon we can probably swap with someone for some extra goodies."

Molla held up his fist for his men to halt when he noticed the beams of flash lights from around the corner of a junction up ahead.

"Lights out." he said softly and First Squad turned out their own lights and took aim towards the junction just in case whatever came around the corner was hostile. But as the first figure appeared Molla recognised the outline of a human being carrying a standard issue Imperial Guard las gun, "Bomber!" Molla called out into the darkness and Mayer turned towards him, the beam of his flash light illuminating First squad.

"Sergeant Molla." Mayer replied as Molla and then the rest of his squad turned their flash lights back on.

"Found anything interesting Bomber?" Molla asked as he walked towards the junction and Mayer shook his head.

"I'd say that when the crew decided to get off this ship they took everything of interest with them." he replied. "Can't say I blame them." Molla commented, "Though from what we've seen of the natives it didn't do them much good." then he looked down the passageway that Mayer's heavy weapon squad had come down. The passageway looked the same as most of the ones that First Squad had encountered and it had been marked with chalk in the same way as Molla had done. Meanwhile Mayer looked down the passageway where First Squad had been waiting.

"Well I suppose that means we've covered these two directions and that just leaves one left." he said, turning in the other direction.

"It's probably best if we head that way together." Molla said, "Then if we hit another junction we can split up. First Squad will lead, you bring up the rear."

"Got it." Mayer replied, nodding and as Molla waved his squad onwards Mayer and his men waited for them to pass before following, making sure to watch for any signs of the mysterious Necron machine known to be on the prowl somewhere in the darkness.

Molla brought the search team to a halt as they rounded a corner and he saw a large doorway set into the wall beside him. As with many of the larger doorways in the ship there was writing above it that Molla guessed described the contents of the chamber on the other side. The problem was that although the language that had been spoken by the starship's original crew had developed into the common Imperial language of Gothic, there was more than fifteen thousand years of changes between the time when the label had been applied and the Catachans coming aboard to hunt for the data library. In addition to this Catachans generally had poor literacy skills as a consequence of their upbringing where there were few texts to begin with and although most Catachan guardsmen could manage the simple and modern language used in modern Imperial texts attempting to decipher something written in such an archaic dialect was something different entirely.

"Hey Bomber." Molla called out, "Get up here and take a look at this." and he kept his flash light pointed at the writing above the door as Mayer hurried forwards to join him, "What do you make of that?" he asked when the mortar squad's leader arrived beside him and Mayer looked up at the writing for himself.

"First?" he said, "Or maybe 'Primary'. I think that first word is one of them."

"I was thinking 'Main'." Molla replied, "But all of those make this place sound important and that door does look pretty impressive. Think you can get it open?"

"I can give it a go." Mayer said, grinning and then he and Molla walked up to the door to examine it more closely.

As expected there was a control panel set beside the door but in the absence of any power they did not even bother trying this. Instead the two Catachans focused on finding any access panels located close to the door that could be covering the motors used to operate the door.

"Here's one." Mayer said, shining his flash light at a spot close to the floor and crouching down beside it.

"Got a tool?" Molla asked, joining Mayer and shining his own light over his shoulder.

"Yeah, right here." Mayer answered and he set down his light and took a compact multi-tool from his pocket. Unfolding one of the screwdriver tools this included he then scraped the surface of each of the screws holding the panel in place before starting to undo them one at a time. Having been in place for so long, it was tough to get the screws moving at first and Mayer cursed as the screwdriver slipped several times before he was able to get the screws turning. As the last screw came away Mayer removed the panel and Molla shone his light inside the hole.

"A-ha." Mayer said, "The motor."

"Are you sure?" Molla asked.

"Well I'm no cogboy but I don't see what else it could be." Mayer replied, "So all we need is to make sure that it can't jam the door in place."

"Sounds like cogboy stuff to me." Molla said.

"No, not cogboy. Catachan." Mayer said and he plucked a krak grenade from his webbing, "Stand back."

"Everyone get back!" Molla called out, "Fire in the hole."

A krak grenade was a more compact version of the warheads used in Imperial anti-tank missiles, containing a shaped charge designed to punch through armour. Second Platoon had been issued a number of them on their last deployment and those that had not been used had been kept by them. The grenades could be thrown but they functioned best when used as Mayer was about to use his now – by placing it directly against a target so that the blast was directed towards it and then getting well clear.

As soon as he had removed the pin and seen the lever fly off Mayer turned and ran, following Molla back around the corner where their two squads were waiting, all sat against the near wall with their hands clamped over their ears and their mouths open to protect against the pressure that could be generated even by a directed blast. Mayer joined the others against the wall, taking the same precautions against the blast just before the grenade detonated. The 'Boom!' echoed down the corridor and the vibration was felt by the Catachans through the wall. Cautiously Mayer uncovered his ears and peered back around the corner. As expected the door remained just as it had been when the Catachans first found it but now there was smoke coming out of the open access panel beside the door.

"Let's go take a look shall we?" Mayer said to Molla and then he scrambled around the corner, hurrying to the access panel where he had set the grenade and looking inside he smiled as he saw that the motor had been completely destroyed and the mechanism holding the door in place no longer existed, "It's done." he added, looking back over his shoulder.

"Okay men let's get this door open." Molla called out, "Everyone grab hold."

The large door split down the middle and the destruction of the motor meant that only one half was no longer held in place. This meant that there was not enough room for all sixteen Catachans to take hold of the

moveable half by one of the irregularities in its surface. Instead a number of them could only stand back and wait while the others, the biggest and strongest out of their number, pulled at the door. Like the door that the ogryns had pulled shut, this had not moved in thousands of years and it was now wedged in place. But the combined strength of the Catachans was enough to overcome this and there was a grinding sound as the door slowly began to move.

“Someone get in that gap.” Molla ordered and two of the currently unoccupied guardsmen hurried forwards to try pushing against the now exposed end of the door.

“Wait!” Mayer called out when the gap had expanded to about the width of his head and then he pushed his way to the gap and shone his flash light into the room beyond.

“What have we got Bomber?” Molla asked as he joined the corporal in peering through the gap in the door. Then he grinned as the beam from his flash light shone over desks that mounted keyboards and angled panels that looked like flat display screens. Then at the far end of the room he saw blocks of electronic equipment mounted in racks and connected together by bundles of cable.

“I'd say all this was cogitator equipment.” Mayer replied, “The sort of stuff you'd have in a cog boy's data library.”

9.

"Lieutenant! Captain!" Mayer shouted across the hangar as he ran through the doorway, "We've found it." "The library?" Fear asked in response and Mayer nodded.

"Corporal, is it intact?" Cornelius said as he emerged from behind one of the shuttles that he had been inspecting.

"I don't know. We haven't been able to get the door open wide enough to get inside but everything looks in one piece." Mayer told him and Cornelius turned his head towards Fear.

"Captain, I must investigate this discovery immediately." the tech priest said.

"Okay I'll escort you there." Fear replied before looking at Wolf, "Lieutenant, gather up the rest of your men and join us there."

"What about maintaining a presence here sir?" Wolf asked.

"I think my men above can hold the hangar lieutenant." Fear said, "But if that Necron ghost-

"Wraith." Cornelius interrupted, "The designation applied by the Imperium to the machines described by Lieutenant Wolf is 'Wraith.'"

"If the Wraith is still loose on this ship then it could well try and stop us gaining access to its data library and we'll need all the firepower we can muster." Fear continued.

"Correct captain. Battlefield records indicate that massed firepower is the best way to counter a Wraith's phasing capabilities." Cornelius said in agreement.

"Thank you." Fear replied.

"I take it that the route is marked?" Vance said to Mayer.

"Yes lieutenant." he replied, "You can follow First Squad's markings or my own. We joined up at a junction a couple of levels up."

When Wolf and the rest of Second Platoon arrived at the room believed to be the data library the search teams had been looking for, the door that Mayer and Molla's men had moved was still stuck only partially open. On the other hand the opposite half was fully open and in the gap between the doors First Squad's heavy bolter had been set up in a defensive position that allowed it to be turned in either direction down the corridor.

"Lieutenant. Over here." Molla called out, waving the rest of the platoon towards the doorway.

"Sergeant Grey." Wolf said, "Deploy your squad here with First Squad. Anything that doesn't identify itself is to be fired on. Understood?"

"Yes lieutenant." Grey replied.

"I thought you couldn't get the door open." Vance commented as he stepped past Molla.

"It was the cogboy." Molla replied, "He just plugged one of those tentacle things of his into the other motor and it opened up right away. Now he's in there poking around the machines."

"So this is the place then?" Quinn asked, shining his flash light around and bringing it to a halt as the light shone on Engineer Cornelius. The tech priest had extended all of his mechadrites and was using them to probe the banks of data storage units while Khor's ogryns formed a defensive perimeter around him.

"What's with the security detail?" Wolf said, walking over to Fear.

"The cog boy was concerned about that Wraith suddenly bursting through the walls." he answered.

"I hadn't considered that." Wolf said, "I'm just not used to enemies that aren't stopped by walls."

"Well hopefully Cornelius won't keep us here long enough for it to find us." Fear responded and they both turned towards the tech priest.

It was difficult to tell how much progress Cornelius was making in accessing the vast data storage system. Wolf had some experience in using various cogitators from her time as a administration officer with the Lyrerian XXXII Regiment but those had not been the compact and streamlined devices that were present in the ancient vessel's data library, instead being the products of a society that viewed technology from a standpoint of superstition. Fortunately though, the technology of the Imperium was based entirely on what fragments of knowledge had been preserved since the Dark Age of Technology when the crashed vessel had been constructed and launched. Thinking about this suddenly made Wolf consider whether Cornelius would genuinely limit his search of the data archives to finding out whether the crew of this ship had discovered anything that could lead them to the Necron headquarters or take advantage of the opportunity to conduct a more general search of the library for any information relating to lost Standard Template Construction records that could be used to recreate lost technology. Taking back even one previously unknown STC record would improve Cornelius's standing within the Adeptus Mechanicus immensely.

As she pondered this thought Wolf looked around at what the troops of Second Platoon were doing. As she had ordered Grey and Second Squad had joined Molla and First Squad at the doorway to cover the corridor

outside the data library while Quinn's veterans and Mayer's mortar squad were both inside the room taking advantage of the break to have something to eat. Wolf was just turning back towards Cornellius when Vance tapped her on the shoulder.

"I think something's moving over there." he said softly, looking along the row of data storage units and when Wolf turned her head in the same direction she noticed the limited light in the room reflecting off something moving and she drew her las pistol.

"Slowly." she said as she began to creep forwards with Vance and Torrent and Turner started to follow them. "Problem lieutenant?" Fear asked when he saw this.

"Maybe." she replied and Fear drew his sidearm as well but kept what was left of his command section in place for the time being.

The four members of Second Platoon's command section spread out as they advanced, all aiming their weapons and flash lights ahead of them. There was a trolley of ancient tools positioned not far from the racks of data storage units and a buzzing from this attracted the attention of Wolf's unit.

"It's behind there." she whispered.

"Thanks for telling me. I'd never have guessed." Torrent responded sarcastically.

Wolf frowned just as she saw movement again and from behind the trolley a machine that looked like a metallic insect crawled into view. Second Platoon had encountered Necron machines such as this before, only on that last occasion there had been swarms of thousands of them that had torn men and machines apart.

"Scarab!" Wolf screamed as she aimed her las pistol. But the slight delay between calling out and aligning her weapon with the Scarab was enough for it to be able to leap into the air and take flight.

"Don't let it get away." Vance called out as he tried to track the Scarab.

"Move!" Quinn snapped when he saw the glow from the Scarab's eyes and his veteran squad dropped the ration bars and canteens they had in their hands and reached for their weapons.

"Keep watching the corridor." Fear ordered, calling out to the two squads positioned at the doorway as his own section also began trying to find the Scarab.

A buzzing sound attracted Wolf's attention and she turned towards it only to see the Scarab swooping down towards her and she flinched, crying out as she ducked. The Scarab flew over the top of her head, barely missing her and instead one of its wings sliced into Vance's arm as he tried to aim his las pistol at the tiny machine.

"Torrent, see to him." Wolf ordered, spinning around in an attempt to see where the Scarab had gone. Then there was the booming of a shotgun as Quinn fired, followed by several more rounds from the members of his squad.

"No!" Cornellius yelled, disengaging himself from the data storage units, "Any weapons fire could damage the archive."

"Then what do you suggest we do?" Fear demanded, "We can't just let that thing go."

"Unfortunately you may have to do just that captain." Cornellius responded, "Our priority is for me to obtain the required information from this data library, not to destroy one Necron Scarab."

The Scarab then swooped over the heads of Mayer's mortar squad and they attempted to swat the machine by swinging their las guns as the ogyrns often did with their ripper guns. The desperate swings failed to connect with the Scarab, however and it promptly veered towards the doorway and flew over First and Second Squads on its way out into the corridor.

"Quick! Shoot it!" Grey snapped, firing his las pistol down the corridor and several of his men fired their las guns in an attempt to prevent the Scarab from escaping. But the machine's small size, combined with its agility and the darkness of the corridor prevented any of them from scoring a hit and the Scarab vanished from view, "Feth! It's gone." Grey exclaimed.

"They're going to be coming." Molla commented.

"Lieutenant," Quinn said, turning towards Wolf, "perhaps I should position my squad out in the corridor. One fire team at each end to give us a bit of extra warning."

"Do it." Wolf replied, nodding. Then in turn she looked at Cornellius, "How long?" she asked.

"That question cannot be answered with any certainty lieutenant." the tech priest answered, "However, I can say that the sooner I am able to get back to examining the cogitator system the sooner I shall have the information we seek."

"Then get to it." Fear told him, "We'll cover you." and without saying anything further Cornellius returned to the data storage units and plugged himself back in to them.

Meanwhile Wolf went over to where Torrent was treating Vance's injured arm.

"How is he?" she asked.

"I'll live." Vance said before Torrent could reply.

"He will." she added as she continued to wrap a compression bandage around the wound, "It's a clean wound with no fragments so I've sealed it and this should keep the seal in place until Doc Altman can take a look at it."

"Good because I need my platoon sergeant." Wolf said.

"Yeah, we all need our platoon sergeant." Torrent muttered, "We all need someone who knows what they're doing."

The Scarab flew rapidly through the empty corridors of the ancient starship until it encountered a robotic humanoid figure standing alone in the darkness while clutching a staff in one hand, the glow of its eyes visible from the far end of the passageway in which it stood. The Necron Lord held out its free arm and the Scarab swooped down to land on it before the Lord established a mental link between them. Though by Necron terms a Scarab was an incredibly crude machine with a bare minimum of intelligence it still remembered every detail of what it had seen in the ship's data library and images of the Catachans and the tech priest they were protecting. It was Cornellius that interested the Lord more than any of the Imperial Guard troops and it studied every detail of the cybernetically enhanced human before breaking the link with the Scarab, at which point the smaller machine took off.

The Lord then began to march forwards along the corridor, the end of its staff striking the floor beneath it with each stride it took. Then the darkness behind it was broken as pairs of glowing lights appeared and rank after rank of Necron warriors marched after their Lord.

Quinn and four of his squad were deployed at a junction with their flash lights extinguished. Even if the Necrons were able to see in the dark Quinn knew that this would at least prevent his team from being detected from around a corner because of the light they were casting out. Given what they knew about Necrons, Quinn doubted that one could sneak up on them in the dark either, expecting the glow of their eyes to give them away.

But it was not the glow of alien eyes that revealed the approaching Necrons to the veteran guardsmen, it was the sound they made. The Necrons did not speak to one another of course, the Lord issued instructions to its warrior phalanx by other means, but the rhythmic pounding of hundreds of pairs of feet as they marched in unison towards the data library echoed along the corridors of the starship well in advance of their arrival.

"Look sharp." Quinn whispered, "Here they come." and his men raised their weapons. Beside Quinn there was a sudden hissing as the veteran armed with a flamer ignited the small flame used to set light to the promethium from the tank mounted underneath the weapon and Quinn hoped that both the hissing and the slight glow given off by the tiny blue flame would not be enough to give them away.

The Necron Lord marched around the corner ahead of the warriors under its command, not breaking step when it saw the Catachans positioned ahead of it. To begin with Quinn remained silent and his men did nothing, there was only one Necron ahead of them after all. But as soon as the first rows of Necron Warriors marched into view behind the Lord he acted.

"Light them up!" he yelled and there was a screeching sound as the flamer discharged a jet of flame towards the Necrons, joined almost immediately by the booming of shotguns that all served to light up the darkness.

The burning promethium was aimed directly at the Necron Lord marching at the head of the Necron phalanx but just as the flames were about to strike their target the Lord suddenly became insubstantial and the flames passed straight through it to where they instead enveloped the first few ranks of Warriors marching behind. The warriors staggered as the flames washed over them but only one fell, those behind it stepped around their still burning comrade until it faded away and the flames vanished too.

"Fall back!" Quinn shouted over the noise of shotguns and the Catachans began to retreat, never taking their eyes off the Necrons. This was until the Necron Lord raised its staff and pointed it down the corridor towards the Catachans and a bolt of bright white light lit up the corridor as it burned a hole right through the trooper armed with the flamer.

"Fellow's down." Quinn said, activating his microbead to warn the rest of the platoon, "Large enemy force closing on our position."

"Then get out of there sergeant." Wolf responded, "Get everyone back here now."

"Already on it lieutenant." Quinn said before he looked at his remaining men and added, "Okay you heard the officer. Run like Him on Earth ordered you to." and the Catachans ceased their careful retreat and instead turned and ran back towards the data library.

At the same time as Quinn's group fell back, the other half of his squad retreated as well and the two groups reached the open doorway to the data library at almost the same time.

"Large Necron infantry force heading this way from down there." Quinn warned Grey and Molla.

"There are more coming from that way." one of the veterans from the other half of Quinn's squad then added.

"We can't hold this door from both directions at once." Molla commented.

"No but we might be able to limit them to coming from just one way." Grey added and he looked towards the two man heavy weapon team that carried Second Squad's missile launcher, "Dean, Michaels. I want a double tap." he told them, "Put a krak round into the ceiling up there and follow it up with a frag into the hole."

"Yes sergeant." Dean replied as he lifted the tubular weapon over his shoulder and kneeling down to take

aim. Meanwhile Michaels unpacked an armour piercing krak round and slid it into the back of the launcher. "Clear behind!" he yelled, making sure that no-one was stood directly behind the missile launcher before slapping Dean on the back as he jumped clear himself.

There was a loud 'Whoosh!' as the missile shot out of the launcher and flew down the corridor. Dean had angled his weapon upwards and the missile slammed into the ceiling of the corridor near the corner, triggering the warhead on impact and punching a hole in it. Michaels then hurried to unpack a second missile, this one an anti-personnel fragmentation missile and loaded it into the launcher before slapping Dean again. The second missile was aimed in the same place as the first and it struck the ceiling at the edge of the hole already punched in it. Unlike the concentrated directional blast of the krak warhead the fragmentation warhead hurled shrapnel in all directions, including back towards the Catachans who took cover behind the door. Against the ceiling the effect was dramatic. The explosion took place at a point that enabled the blast to get into the gap between this level and the one above, travelling along it and ripping apart not only the ceiling of the corridor but also the floor of the upper level and the debris from all of this fell into the corridor. Smaller pieces of wreckage turned the level floor into a mass of twisted metal while larger pieces swung down to create a tangle of wreckage that made the corridor in that direction all but impassable. "What's going on?" Wolf demanded as she and Fear hurried towards the door.

"Just reinforcing our position." Grey responded, "Now they can only come at us from one direction."

Then before Wolf or Fear could reply there was a pounding noise from the other direction as the Necron phalanx approached.

10.

"Stand to!" Molla yelled, aiming his las pistol down the corridor. Then as soon as the Necron Lord appeared the Catachans defending the doorway opened fire.

The need to keep an escape route open prevented the Catachans from using their missile and grenade launchers to block this second approach but they still had plenty of weapons at their disposal, most significantly First Squad's heavy bolter and the belt fed weapon roared as it fired a barrage of explosive tipped rounds towards the Necrons. The Necron Lord leading the phalanx was the focal point of this sustained stream of fire but the phase shifter that had protected it from the flamer made the machine insubstantial enough that most of the rounds that would have struck it pass through harmlessly instead. The rounds were far more effective on the Warriors behind the Lord, however and the explosive tipped rounds blew off limbs and heads and shattered torsos wherever they struck. Caught in the confines of the corridor the Necrons had nowhere to take cover and the heavy bolter continued to rip through them.

Seeing the damage being done to its troops, the Necron Lord aimed its staff towards the doorway. But this required it to become solid once more and the moment that its phase shifter deactivated it was struck by not only several rounds from the heavy bolter but also numerous las gun and shotgun blasts. The Necron Lord was significantly tougher than the Warriors that operated under its command but the sheer weight of fire meant that inevitably some of the shot found vulnerable points at joints as well as the Lord's neck and eyes. Staggering backwards, the Lord dropped its staff and collapsed before the lights in its eyes went out. But the Catachans' joy at seeing the enemy commander fall was short lived as rather than fading away to nothing as the Warriors laying siege to the XIX Regiment's camp had done when their leader was destroyed these warriors just stepped over the remains of their Lord and continued to advance towards the Catachan positions.

"Back!" Grey yelled as he saw the Necrons raise their weapons and just as he had expected green lightning erupted from them. Most of the Catachans made it through the doorway before they could be shot but the loader for the heavy bolter was too slow in getting to his feet and he screamed as one of the gauss gun shots struck the base of his spine, dissolving his flesh and bones as he just stared ahead in horror at what was happening to him.

Meanwhile out in the corridor the Necron Lord was getting back to its feet, most of the damage inflicted on it already repaired and it raised its staff above its head as it began to lead its force towards the door.

"They're coming." Molla called out.

"Form a semi circle around the door." Wolf ordered, "Maybe we can hold them in the gap." then looking at Khor she added, "That includes your squad sergeant." she added and Khor growled as he grinned.

"Ogryns ready." he replied.

While the troops of Second Platoon along with First Platoon's remaining engineers formed up to concentrate their fire on the doorway Fear and the two remaining members of his command section gathered around Cornellius.

"Enginseer," Fear said, "now would be a really good time to find that information you're looking for."

"Stating a fact I am already aware of will not assist me in locating the information any faster captain."

Cornellius replied right before there was the roar of gunfire as the first Necrons appeared at the doorway and Second Platoon opened fire.

"Death to the xenos!" Black bellowed as he fired his shotgun towards the Necrons, "Bring them the release of death by the Emperor's command!"

To begin with only the Necron Warriors attempted to force their way into the data library and the firepower of the Catachans was sufficient to hold them back. But the Necrons were still able to get off a few shots before collapsing and Wolf saw two more of Second Platoon fall.

"Hurry up!" Wolf yelled, looking over her shoulder towards Fear and Cornellius.

"I am searching as fast as I can lieutenant." Cornellius replied, still remaining focused on the data storage units, "However, I am encountering an unexpected complication."

"Complication?" Fear asked, "What sort of complication?"

"The records appear incomplete captain." Cornellius replied, "I have a location for the signal that led this ship to this world but nothing more."

"But all we need is that location." Fear said.

"We need surface co-ordinates that have a known point of reference." Cornellius told him, "And the orbital scans do not take into account fifteen thousand years of orbital and continental drift. Added to which the records include no mention of the weapon that was used to bring this ship down, meaning that I cannot determine its launch site."

"Wait!" Wolf exclaimed as she heard this and she abandoned her place on the firing line to rush over to

Cornellius and Fear, "How did this ship manage to survive a crash landing and remain the right way up?" she asked.

"An interesting point." Cornellius said, "The structural condition of this ship is not consistent with having been shot down while in orbit." then he paused for a brief moment, "But the flight recorder indicates that a controlled atmospheric entry was performed at some point before recording stopped."

"What are you saying?" Fear asked, looking back and forth between Wolf and Cornellius.

"The ship didn't crash. The crew deliberately landed it." Wolf said.

"Correct." Cornellius added, "And the reason that there is no data relating to the position of the signal that brought them to his world is because they landed right on top of it."

Fear looked down at the floor.

"It's been down there the whole time?" he said.

"Most likely so captain." Cornellius answered.

"That's probably how the Necrons got aboard in the first place and why the crew chose to leave rather than hold up in here." Wolf said, "The ship landed, the crew dug down into their base and the Necrons stormed the ship. The only way for the crew to survive was for them to evacuate and take with them whatever they could carry."

"Then we need to get down the bottom of the ship and find out where the Necrons got in." Fear said and Wolf looked back towards the door just as another Catachan was hit by an alien energy blast.

"I don't think that's going to be as simple as it sounds." she said.

"There has to be another way out of here." Fear said and looking at what was left of his command section he added, "Spread out and find it." but before they could carry out his order Cornellius interjected.

"That is the only door to this chamber captain." he said, "To leave we must fight our way through the Necrons."

"There are hundreds of them." Fear pointed out, "And less than fifty of us."

"What about that?" Wolf asked and she shone her flash light upwards to where a metal grill was set into the wall.

"You mean the ventilation system lieutenant?" Cornellius asked, "It is not functional."

"But we could use it to escape couldn't we?" Wolf responded, "Back home as children we used to play in some of the larger vents."

"There will be pumping fans and isolation grates that will block our path lieutenant." Cornellius told her, "Plus there is no guarantee that the system has not been sealed between here and the dorsal hangar."

"Why the dorsal hangar?" Wolf said, "Don't we need to go to the bottom of the ship?"

"Because we'll need First Platoon and the fusion bomb." Fear pointed out.

"Oh, right." Wolf said, "Well even if it doesn't get us all the way there it only needs to get us past those Necrons. Besides engineeer, if you're leading the way, won't you be able to cut through anything that blocks our path?"

"Most likely yes." Cornellius replied, "Captain, lieutenant, I suggest you organise a retreat while I gain access to the ventilation system for us."

Joined by Fear, Wolf hurried back to her troops to let them know what was happening and she arrived just in time to see another Catachan being pulled out of the firing line by Torrent as she tried to provide some relief from the agony he was in after having most of his arm shot away. However, it was not the painkillers she was still reaching for that put an end to his screaming, instead it was his death from blood loss.

"We're moving out." Wolf announced, "Engineeer Cornellius has the information we need and we're getting out of here."

"I think they may have something to say about that lieutenant." Molla commented as he reloaded his las pistol and started shooting towards the doorway again.

"Don't worry." Fear said, "Lieutenant Wolf came up with a plan and Engineeer Cornellius ought to have an alternative route ready for us any minute now."

"Oh great. We're relying on an outsider and the bastard to get us out of here." Grey responded.

"I have removed the cover to the ventilation system." Cornellius's augmented voice then called out and Wolf looked around to see him climbing into the vent.

"Sergeant Khor." she said, "Cover us while we fall back."

"Ogryns firing." Khor responded, firing another burst from his ripper gun as if to emphasise his compliance.

"Good. Everyone else fall back." Wolf ordered and the Catachans began to retreat.

"Ogryns back." Khor ordered and the six abhumans began to back up as well, still shooting towards the doorway where the incredible hitting power of their ripper guns continued to take a toll on the Necrons attempting to force their way into the room.

"You first lieutenant." Fear said when their command sections reached the now open vent, "I'll bring up the rear with the ogryns and make sure the Necrons don't follow us."

"Yes sir." Wolf replied and she immediately climbed into the vent, followed by her command section.

The interior of the ventilation system was nowhere near as spacious as even the smallest of side passages

and Wolf found herself having to stoop to walk along it. It was even more cramped for the much larger Catachans who would have had to bend right over to be able to walk and were instead forced to crawl along on their hands and knees.

"You didn't dispute that order to escape ahead of the others." Vance commented as they made their way along behind Cornellius.

"What and stay in that room with an army of Necrons trying to get in?" Wolf asked, "Not likely. Why, do you have a problem with that?"

"No, just noting how your survival instincts are coming along." Vance replied.

Meanwhile the only squads remaining in the data library now were Fear's command section and Khor's ogryns.

"Sergeant, follow me into the vent." Fear told Khor and the ogryn looked at the vent and frowned.

"Place small." he said.

"Do as I command sergeant." Fear ordered, "The Emperor needs you to follow me."

"For the Emperor!" Khor snapped, suddenly saluting and Fear returned the salute before retreating into the vent.

"Ogryns follow." Khor ordered and he too crawled inside the vent. If the vent was cramped for the Catachans it was even more so for the ogryns and the bulky abhumans barely fit inside. Fear heard a lot of muttering from the ogryns in the crude dialect they often spoke among themselves but Khor said nothing about any of his squad being left behind. Fear then looked forwards to where the corporal in charge of his engineers was directly in front of him in the vent.

"I think we're ready for your surprise now corporal." he said.

"Yes sir." the corporal replied and from his webbing he plucked a vox operated detonator and flicked the single red switch on the side of the device.

Back in the data library the Necrons had come swarming into the room when the ogryns ceased fire and begun to spread out. Having seen where the ogryns had gone a number of the aliens headed directly for the entrance to the ventilation system, the Necron Lord leading them. But left in place just beside the ventilation shaft was a bulky metal tube fitted with a vox receiver and just as the Necron Lord leant closer to examine this the corporal who had set the demolition charge triggered it from within the vent.

Just as Cornellius had warned the way through the vent was not completely unobstructed. To allow the system to be used to either isolate areas of the starship or channel gases to specific sections there were numerous rows of rotating metal plates located at key junctions. Aligned one way these would allow air, though not a person to pass freely whereas by turning the plates through ninety degrees they blocked the vent entirely. But no matter which way the plates were aligned it was not possible for the Catachans to get past them before Cornellius had used a combination of a cutting torch built into one of his mechandriles and also the powerful sevro-arm mounted on the backpack of his power armour to remove them. This needed to be done completely, even leaving a small piece in place could make the way too narrow for the ogryns bringing up the rear to get past.

But although moving through the ship's vents was slow going, it meant that the Catachans encountered no further Necron forces on their way back to the hangar.

"Lieutenant." Cornellius said as he came to a halt in front of a vent that to Wolf looked no different to any of the others they had crawled past, "This leads to the corridor outside the dorsal hangar we used to enter the ship."

"Not the hangar itself?" Wolf asked.

"No lieutenant. Given the need to be able to de-pressurise that section of the ship it uses a dedicated atmospheric processing system." the tech priest explained, "This is the closest standard vent."

"Okay, then get us out of here." Wolf replied.

"Yes lieutenant." Cornellius said and while he was cutting through the vent Wolf looked behind her.

"Okay we're there." she said, "Pass the word."

Being the first into the vent also meant being the first out of it as well and although this did not bother Cornellius who had long since had the parts of his brain relating to fear responses removed and replaced by machinery that the Adeptus Mechanicus considered far more efficient, Wolf did wonder what could be waiting for them as they emerged and Wolf paused as Cornellius exited the vent ahead of her. The sound of his armoured feet landing on the floor outside echoed and she waited to see if she heard either a shouted warning or the sound of gunfire. But when she heard neither she hurried out of the vent after him.

"You see lieutenant?" Cornellius said when she landed behind him, "That is the entrance to the hangar."

"Great." she replied as she hurried past him and activated her microbead, "Sergeant Gant can you read me?" she asked, hoping that she was close enough that the signal would reach the Catachans left on the surface.

"Right here lieutenant." Gant responded, "I've got to say, we were starting to worry about you. Did you find what we're looking for?"

"Yes we did sergeant." Wolf told her, "In fact the Necron headquarters is right below this ship. There must be

a way to reach it somewhere in here. I need you to bring down First Platoon and the bomb.”

“The bomb's somewhat heavy to move by hand and I don't think we'll be able to get the Sentinel down there lieutenant.” Gant said.

“Don't worry, I'm sure the ogryns will be able to manage. The entrance can't be too far away.” Wolf replied.

“Understood lieutenant. We're on our way down.”

Unlike in their search for the data library, Wolf and Fear kept their force unified as best they could while they searched for a way down to the Necron headquarters they knew must exist. The combined Catachan force formed two columns, advancing with one along each side of the corridors they navigated in their hunt for a way down to the lowest levels of the ship. This formation allowed them to cover passages to both left and right for signs of Necron activity while keeping their command sections and the ogyrns who now carried the fusion bomb safe between them. Only Rull did not stay with them, the sniper instead moving around their position as he continued to watch for the Wraith that was still at large somewhere on the ship. Just as in the jungle he was able to move significantly faster on his own than the rest of the force could manage together and this allowed him to scout out the route that the others needed to follow, leaving chalk marks behind to guide them.

"Are you sure he knows what we're looking for?" Wolf asked.

"Of course lieutenant." Cornelliuss replied, "I briefed Guardsman Rull fully. We need to locate a ventral hangar that will allow us to access the complex that lies below this vessel."

"And you're certain that this access will be from a hangar?" Wolf added.

"It is the most logical access point lieutenant. A hangar provides a large work area, can be isolated from and climate controlled separately from the rest of the ship and also features large exterior doors." Cornelliuss explained.

"Wherever the xenos lurk the light of the Emperor will reach." Black commented. Then he glanced over his shoulder at the container four of Khor's squad were carrying between them, "And we shall visit his fury upon them."

"Captain Fear, Lieutenant Wolf." Molla's voice said suddenly over the Catachan's communication network, "I think we've found it."

"Can you see the way down?" Wolf replied.

"No, but there's a large set of doors here and they look like they've been hit by some serious firepower that doesn't leave any shrapnel."

"Like those rifles the Necrons carry." Fear commented before activating his own microbead, "Sergeant is there any sign of enemy activity?"

"None sir. But Rull's left markings to indicate the presence of five enemy soldiers." Molla replied.

"Proceed with caution sergeant." Wolf told him, "We're right behind you."

"All units stand by." Fear added, "There may only be five of the enemy but we've seen how tough they can be. If this is the hangar we'll try and spread out so we can all hit them together. Do not fire unless fired upon or if ordered to."

Molla led his squad along with one of the infantry squads from First Platoon up to the hole in the door that he suspected led to the hangar and the two squad leaders peered through the hole to assess what lay beyond it, extinguishing their flash lights to avoid being seen from the other side. Sure enough even without their flash lights there was enough ambient light from within that they could see that the chamber was massive and like the dorsal hangar bay was filled with shuttles of various types. But the matter of the ambient light troubled Molla. He could understand that some would leak into the hangar from the Catachans moving up behind him but there were shadows being cast by the shuttles that suggested there was another, stronger light source already inside and he knew that Rull would not make so simple a mistake as to leave a lamp pack active.

"I'll take my squad this way, you head that way." he whispered to the sergeant from First Platoon and the other man nodded in response. The two infantry squads then entered the hangar, cautiously climbing through the hole in the door and then hurrying to either side. Molla's squad took cover beneath an ancient shuttle that looked to be designed as a short ranged cargo hauler and looked deeper into the room where Molla saw the reason for the light inside hangar.

Between the rows of shuttles that extended as far as the eye could see there was a launch door set into the floor of the hangar that was obviously open and from the other side of this a column of light was shining up into the starship. But more ominously there were five vaguely humanoid figures standing in a ring around the door. Each of these looked bulkier than the standard Necron Warriors that the Catachans had encountered in the thousands and the weapons they carried looked heavier as well.

"Five targets confirmed." Molla signalled, "Looks like they're standing guard around the entrance to their headquarters that we're after."

"Understood sergeant. Stand by." Wolf replied.

The rest of the force followed the first two squads into the hangar, all deactivating their own flash lights and using the faint glow cast out from the launch door to light their way as they spread out and took cover

amongst the shuttles. Meanwhile the five Necrons remained motionless, either unaware of the presence of the Catachans or simply not caring about them.

"Deploy heavy weapons." Fear signalled to his platoon. On the other hand Wolf had no need to do this. First Squad's heavy bolter had been left in the data library following the death of one of its crew while the three mortars of Mayer's squad had not even been brought with them into the ship given their obvious impracticality. This left only the missile launcher carried by Second Squad and Grey was already overseeing this being set up.

But when Wolf looked around towards where the troops of First Platoon were deploying she saw the Wraith suddenly burst through the wall behind them and take solid form just long enough to decapitate the two crewmen of one of their heavy weapons. At the same time as if responded to some unheard signal from the Wraith the five Necrons surrounding the launch door turned towards the Catachans and began to form into a single group.

"Open fire!" Wolf yelled and the dim glow from beyond the launch door was joined by the bright flashes of las gun fire.

While the Catachans armed with las guns and other longer ranged weaponry fired on the steadily advancing Necron squad, Wolf's command section and other units armed with shorter ranged las pistols and shotguns tried to locate the Wraith.

"It's there!" Gant yelled when she spotted the glow from its eye beneath a nearby shuttle. But in the time it took the Catachans to turn their weapons towards the alien machine it had already become insubstantial and was darting away.

"Ogryns!" Khor yelled, raising his ripper gun, "Charge!"

"No!" Cornelliuss yelled as the ogryns dropped the case containing the fusion bomb, "You must protect the device."

"Ogryns halt." Khor responded and the abhumans frowned as they picked the case up once more and waited.

Meanwhile there was a flurry of shotgun fire from one of First Platoon's veteran squads as the wraith suddenly swooped towards them. The Necron became solid just long enough to be able to swipe at two more of them while the gunfire bounced harmlessly off its armoured body before fading once more as it circled around for another pass. A barrage of fire met its next charge, forcing it to remain insubstantial while the Catachans dived out of the way to avoid it but they ceased fire when Cornelliuss suddenly leapt into the Wraith's path and stood there brandishing his power axe.

The Wraith lashed out with one of its bladed arms as it passed the tech priest but Cornelliuss was ready and he parried the blow expertly with his axe. The energy field around the weapon's blade proved sufficient to overcome the protection given to the Wraith by the strange living metal that it was made from and the arm and its built in blade were cleaved straight off the wraith's body. At the same time Cornelliuss extended his servo-arm and grabbed hold of the Necron while it was still solid and tightened its grip around its body.

"Death to the xenos!" Black yelled out as he leapt to his feet and fired his las pistol repeatedly at the Wraith. The shots had no effect on the Necron, being absorbed by its tough outer casing but the attack prompted the Wraith to lash out at the Catachan rather than becoming insubstantial once more to escape Cornelliuss's grip and in this moment's delay the tech priest brought his axe down on its neck and severed its head.

The now headless body of the Wraith convulsed as its self repair systems started trying to repair the damage. But Cornelliuss could see what was happening and he made use of his servo arm to hurl the body as far from the severed head as he could. Putting this much distance between the two parts obviously convinced the Wraith's self repair systems that they were too far apart to be rejoined and before the headless body even landed it had faded into nothing along the head.

Then came the sharp crackling of gauss weapons being discharged as a storm of green lightning erupted from the weapons held by the advancing guards. More powerful than the standard gauss gun blasts, these tore through the shuttle being used for cover by one of Fear's infantry squads as well as the squad themselves.

"Fire in the hole!" Grey yelled and there was a 'Whoosh!' as a missile erupted from Second Squad's launcher and hurtled towards the still advancing Necrons. Grey had ordered the use of a fragmentation warhead in the hope of taking out all five of the Necrons at the same time and when it exploded in the midst of them they were all hurled outwards away from the centre of the blast.

For a few moments there was silence in the hangar as the Catachans waited to see what would happen, hoping that the Necrons had all been destroyed in the explosion. But rather than fade away the five guards remained present and one of them reached out for the weapon that had been blown from its grasp and raised its head. Which promptly jerked backwards as a bullet punched through one of its eyes. Sparks burst from the socket as the Necron's self repair system tried to repair the damage but the bullet had passed right through the Necron's head and damaged too many other systems to make repairs possible and the Necron suddenly slumped face down on the deck once and faded away.

But the other four Necrons were already getting back to their feet, none of them having suffered critical

damage from the missile blast.

"Kraak grenades!" Wolf shouted and the Catachans armed with grenade launchers in both First and Second Platoons opened fire, sending a volley of anti-armour grenades towards the Necrons. However, although each hit made a Necron stagger backwards it was not enough to put any of them down. In return the Necrons fired again, this time splitting their fire between several squads, moving their weapons in a sweeping pattern as they tried to kill as many Catachans as they could. But although they were able to hit a handful of them, including the grenadier of Grey's squad the majority of the Catachans remained unharmed and the greatest effect of the barrage was to force the Catachans to cease fire as they took cover.

This gave the Necrons the chance to cover more of the space between them and the Catachans unscathed but in doing this they brought themselves within range of the shorter ranged weapons that they carried.

"Melta!" Quinn yelled and there was a beam of intense white light from his squad's meltagun that burned through one of the advancing Necrons, inflicting so much damage that it faded away before it could even land on the deck.

Then came the roar of flamers as two jets of fire erupted from the Catachan lines. The heat of these seemed to bring the Necrons to a halt but their bodies were too resilient to be damaged by the flames and when they returned fire they specifically targeted the flamer armed troops.

Seeing that the Necrons were looking away from him, Cornellius charged forwards and swung his power axe at the nearest Necron. The alien was too slow to react and the tech priest decapitated it in one go. Then without looking he lashed out with his servo-arm and smashed open the torso of a second. But the final Necron was able to swing its weapon around and take aim at Cornellius. In response the tech priest wrapped one of his mechandrines around the muzzle of the weapon and tried to push it away but the Necron fired before he could manage this. Thanks to the mechadrite the weapon was pointed at Cornellius's leg rather than his chest but the blast still disintegrated it below the knee in spite of the power armour he wore and the Necron stood over him as it prepared to fire again.

"Charge!" Wolf yelled and there were yells of defiance as the Catachans broke from cover and rushed forwards, firing their weapons at the final remaining Necron. The small arms fire did little against the highly resilient machine but it was enough to prevent the Necron from finishing off the helpless Cornellius. Though Wolf had been the one to order the charge she was easily outpaced by the Catachans around her and Quinn swung the butt of his shotgun into the Necron's face while two of his men tried to rip its weapon from its grasp.

Then Nathin dived towards the Necron. In one hand he held a las pistol that he fired to no significant effect but in the other was a compact plasma cutting torch that he now wielded as if it was a knife, stabbing the Necron under its jaw.

"Die!" Nathin hissed, "You are an affront to the Ommissiah."

The Necron shuddered as the cutting torch bored its way through its head until the back of its metallic skull exploded and the Necron simply faded away, along with its weapon much to the disappointment of the Catachans who had been hoping for an exotic souvenir.

"Enginseer, are you alright?" Wolf asked, looking down at the crippled tech priest.

"Severe damage to lower right limb lieutenant." he replied, "Mobility compromised eighty four percent."

"We can't take him with us." Fear said to wolf, "He'll slow us down."

"Correct captain." Cornellius said, "Fortunately PL Six Seven Three is fully briefed on the use of the device."

"We can't just abandon him here though." Wolf said.

"I'll take him back." Gant said, "Just give me a couple of men to help watch my back."

Fear turned to the two survivors of one of his veteran squads and nodded to them.

"Go with her. Get the enginseer to safety." he ordered. Then he turned to Wolf, "And I suppose we better go see where that door leads."

The phaeron looked at the status reports from the troops positioned aboard the human starship to prevent anyone from gaining access to the main tomb. The primary force of Warriors had been bypassed while their commander as well as the units of Wraiths and Immortals had been wiped out entirely, their bodies returned to the tomb for repair.

"Serett." the phaeron said, "Now you must demonstrate to me that you can succeed where my own warriors have failed."

"Yes my phaeron." the former tech priest replied from behind the Necron.

12.

Below the launch door in the floor of the hangar a ramp had been constructed that allowed the Catachans to descend into the cavern that was located beneath the starship. The starship crew had obviously excavated deep into the ground until they reached this and the tunnel created emerged near the top of the sloped cavern side.

"Throne." Wolf said when she looked at the strange alien city that lay before them. Massive towers reached up as far as the cavern roof and lightning could be seen arcing between these at irregular intervals.

Meanwhile strange lights could be seen emanating from within many of the alien buildings, some constant while others pulsed off and on, "Where do we even start?" and she and Fear looked at Nathin.

"I don't know." he said.

"You're supposed to know what to do with that bomb cogboy." Vance commented.

"And I can tell you exactly how destructive it is." Nathin replied, "But I don't know what we need to blow up to take out the Necrons."

"Well how about you tell us how much damage the weapon will do?" Wolf suggested.

"It'll have a radius of destruction of about eight thousand metres." Nathin answered, "And will inflict severe structural damage for a further five thousand metres after that. Plus there are EMP effects that will disrupt electronics without the proper runes and blessings."

"The Necrons are a blasphemy. Their machines are unblest." Black said with contempt.

"Maybe so but we need to do more than just knock out a few cogitators. We need to reduce this place to rubble." Fear said.

"Bring down the roof and bury them." Grey suggested.

"Maybe." Molla replied, "But we don't know if there are any lower levels to this place that could survive a collapse."

"There." Wolf said, pointing out across the city at a pyramid that dominated the central area and was surrounded by several of the towers that reached all the way up to the cavern roof, "That looks important."

"Well it's big." Fear admitted.

"And located centrally." Nathin added.

"Then that's our target." Fear said.

"Sergeant Quinn, have your squad take point." Wolf ordered and Quinn nodded before leading his squad down the slope.

"A pity we left the mortars on the surface." Mayer commented as the rest of the force started to follow Quinn's veterans, "This place is big enough for them to be of use."

"Well unfortunately Bomber, we don't have time for you to go back and get them." Molla responded.

The slope led all the way down to the alien city and the Catachans proceeded to make their way through the eerily deserted streets. Though the city was large enough to house millions of people there had been no signs of any habitation since the Catachans had emerged from the tunnel.

"I don't like this." Wolf commented, "It's too quiet for a strong hold."

"You'd rather we were up to our necks in Necrons lieutenant?" Torrent asked in response.

"No, but I just can't help getting the feeling that they're waiting for use to get right where they want us." Wolf answered.

"Our faith in the Emperor protects us." Black said.

"Personally I'd rather rely on my las pistol." Molla commented. Then he looked at Wolf and added, "And Rull of course. I'm sure he'll let us know if we're walking into a trap."

The pyramid that was the Catachans' target was at the centre of an area of open ground in the middle of the city with the towers set several hundred metres back and spaced evenly all around it. It appeared to be as lifeless as the rest of the city but just in case the Catachans darted towards it squad by squad while the others kept watch. Up close it was possible to see that the lowest visible level of the pyramid had openings all around it that looked to run deep inside though what they led to could not be seen from the outside due to a lack of illumination.

"So I guess we just need to put that thing inside and set the timer." Wolf said, looking towards the case that held the fusion bomb.

"That easy huh?" Fear responded, "Okay, let's do this."

"Anyone hear that?" Vance asked, looking around as he heard a regular pounding unlike anything that the Catachans had heard while in the city until now.

"Rull sound off." Grey said, activating his microbead. Then he looked towards the two command sections,

"Trouble." he said, "Rull says there's a large force of Necrons approaching unlike anything we've seen before. He also says that they're being led by someone we know."

Coming closer now, the sound of the marching Necrons became louder and in the distance Wolf saw them marching around one of the towers.

"Stand to." Wolf said but the Catachan troops were already kneeling down and taking aim.

These Necrons were humanoid like the Warriors the Catachans had already faced, though their size was closer to that of the guards in the ventral hangar. But unlike those other types of Necrons, these did not appear to be carrying any form of rifle. Instead in one hand they carried a bladed weapon with a long handle and a glowing green shield in the other that made them look like the images of ancient warriors from Holt Terra in the centuries before mankind had even learned to build machines that could fly through the air, let alone fly through space and travel to other star systems. Even more bizarre however, was the figure that marched at the head of this force. Though many of his bionics had been replaced by Necron technology what remained of Magos Serett was still recognisable to the Catachans.

"Traitor!" Black bellowed, "Damnation awaits you."

The Catachans fired their las guns while the Necrons were still a significant distance away and the marching machines reacted by holding their shields up in front of them, demonstrating that they were far more than just some primitive warriors clad in suits of iron.

"Can we just set the bomb and get out of here?" Wolf asked, looking at Nathin.

"Yes but Magos Serett will know how to disarm it." he replied, "But we could trigger it as soon as its armed."

"Killing us as well." Fear commented.

"I'm afraid so." Nathin said.

"Our names will be remembered for our sacrifice in the Emperor's name." Black said, smiling.

"Or maybe we can find a way out without getting ourselves vaporised or letting Serett disarm the bomb." Wolf responded.

"You have an idea lieutenant?" Fear asked.

"We put the bomb inside one of these passageways." Wolf said, looking towards the pyramid, "Then we use the demolition charge your engineers have to collapse the ceiling and bury it."

"That could work." Nathin said, "If we leave the device in its case then it will be protected against the impact."

"Whatever you're planning on doing, you might want to hurry." Molla called out, "These things are getting closer."

"Then let's do it." Fear said, "Lieutenant, hold the line while I arm the device."

"Khor, take the bomb inside the pyramid." Wolf ordered the BONEHead, "Captain Fear will show you where."

While the ogryns carried the bomb inside one of the passageways under the direction of Nathin and Captain Fear, Wolf joined the Catachans still firing on the Necrons. So far though, there was no indication that any of the aliens had fallen, their shields offering an incredible level of protection.

"Surrender your lives." Serett called out, his voice amplified by the implants that the Necrons had upgraded with their own devices.

"Concentrate your fire on Serett." Wolf ordered, "Maybe if we can take him out the Necrons will retreat."

The next volley of las gun fire was directed towards the treasonous tech priest but it was stopped short by an energy field surrounding him and in response to being targeted Serett directed his troops to surround him, providing him with a shield of living metal.

"How much longer?" Wolf called out right before Fear and Nathin came hurrying out of the passageway with Khor's ogryns following them.

"Done. The weapon is armed with a five hour timer." Fear replied and Nathin held up a dataslate that showed the count down standing at just under five hours, "More than enough time to get clear."

"And Serett won't be able to diffuse it?" Wolf asked.

"Not unless he can find it under the rubble." Fear replied and he waved his engineers closer.

The engineers immediately rushed to place their last demolition charge just within the passageway that Fear had just set the fusion bomb inside and then their leader nodded at Fear.

"Okay that's it. We're out of here." Fear said.

"Fall back." Wolf called out and the Catachans got up and started to run, still firing their weapons towards the Necrons but not worrying about aiming at a specific target.

There was a loud 'Boom!' as the demolition charge and Wolf glanced over her shoulder to see a plume of smoke now billowing out of the passageway where the bomb lay. But close by Nathin came to a sudden halt, looking down at his dataslate.

"Uh-oh." he said.

"What do you mean 'uh-oh'?" Fear demanded and Nathin held up the dataslate. The timer on the display was now simply flashing the same value rather than counting down.

"It's stopped." Nathin said and the rest of the force came to a halt.

"Oh great." Fear said as he took out his magnoculars and looked back towards the pyramid.

"I see a gap in the rubble." he said, "Maybe we can dig it out and get in to see what's wrong with it. Maybe it's something that can be fixed."

"But what about them?" Molla asked, looking back towards the Necrons.

"I doubt it." Nathin replied.

"I'll go." Wolf said as she looked at the pyramid through her own magnoculars, "I think I can get into that hole. You just draw those Necrons away from me and listen for my signal."

"Are you sure about this lieutenant?" Fear asked.

"No. But who else can do it?" Wolf answered.

"May the Emperor be with you." Black said and he made the sign of the aquila on his chest.

"Remember to listen for my signal." Wolf said and she suddenly broke into a run, heading back towards the pyramid.

"Okay everyone, you heard the lieutenant. Let's make sure those Necrons follow us." Fear said as he aimed his las pistol towards the advancing Necrons, "I don't care if they're in range or not. Open fire!"

Wolf heard the barrage of fire from behind her and risked a glance towards the Necrons. She smiled when she saw that they were heading away from her, instead focusing on the rest of the force and she continued to head for the rubble. Upon reaching the pyramid she scaled the mound of rubble until she reached the narrow gap and she peered inside, shining her flash light into the darkness. It appeared that the opening went some distance back and Wolf crawled into it. Despite her small size it was still a tight squeeze and she winced as she repeatedly struck herself against lumps of rubble.

It was not too long before she reached the end of the opening, however and she emerged into a cramped space where the fusion bomb and its case had been pinned beneath a beam that now hung down diagonally from the ceiling and pierced the case. Wolf could see right away that there was no way that she could open the hinged case lid so instead she drew her las pistol and reached over the case to press the muzzle of her weapon against one of the hinges before pulling the trigger. The shot blew the hinge apart and Wolf then repeated this with the other. With the hinges destroyed Wolf released the latches on the front of the case that secured the lid, effectively separating it from the body of the case entirely. This enabled her to drag the lid upwards, sliding it along the metal beam until she could get at the bomb inside the case.

It was then that she saw what had happened to cause the timer to stop running. The key that Captain Fear had inserted into the bomb to arm it had been hit by the falling beam and dragged out of its slot, being mangled and pressed against the inside of the case in the process. Fortunately wolf still retained her own arming key and she took this from inside her shirt before pushing it into the slot meant for it and the bomb promptly lit up and began to hum.

"Okay the bomb should be armed again." she signalled with her microbead, hoping that the rubble would allow the transmission to reach the Catachans.

"Copy that lieutenant. Timer is running." Fear responded, his voice distorted by static but still understandable. Smiling, Wolf turned around and began to crawl back through the narrow gap in the rubble. But just as she was nearing the outside of the pyramid something reached into the gap and suddenly dragged her out by one of her wrists, causing her to repeatedly hit herself against the rubble again.

Wolf screamed as she was suddenly lifted into the air and then gasped as she looked down into the face of Magos Serett.

"Did you think I would not notice you fleeing in a different direction Lieutenant Emilia Wolf?" the former tech priest said, his bionic eyes glowing the same shade of green that Wolf had come to associate with Necron energy.

Wolf did not answer the question though. Instead she reached for her las pistol with her free hand and aimed it at Serett's face.

"Not good enough Lieutenant Emilia Wolf." he said without displaying any hint of emotion as he knocked the weapon from her hand with one of his mechandrites. "Did you really think that you could deliver the wrath of your false Emperor with such a puny weapon? I have seen the true face of the Ommissiah and he has blessed me. Soon I shall lead his brethren from this place and we will swarm across the galaxy. Your Imperium will not stop us."

Then Wolf saw a tiny glowing red dot appear on Serett's forehead that was in contrast to the green light being emitted by his bionic implants and she smiled.

"It's not the wrath of Him on Earth you need to worry about right now." she said, "It's the wrath of Rull." and there was a sharp 'Crack!' as an armour piercing round punched its way through Serett's head and Wolf found herself falling to the ground along with the former tech priest.

Picking herself up she scooped up her las pistol and inserted it back into its holster before activating her microbead.

"Thanks Rull." she transmitted, "Now let's get the feth out of here before that bomb goes off."

Wolf caught up with what was left of the Catachan force in the dorsal hangar as they were climbing back up to the surface and as soon as they were clear of the ship the force began to hurry back towards the XIX Regiment's camp, not bothering with stopping at the native settlement on their return journey. After they had been travelling for a short time Nathin's dataslate suddenly let out a shrill shrieking.

"Thirty seconds!" he called out, "Take cover."

The Catachans spread out, crouching down behind the largest trees they could find and looking away from the direction they had come from before there was a flash that was visible even in daylight that was followed by a blast of wind heading back the way they had come. When they finally emerged from cover and looked back towards the ancient starship and the Necron citadel that lay beneath it all they could see was a massive mushroom shaped cloud that dominated the skyline.

"Such treasure." Cornelius said, "So much lost."

"Second Company is requesting reinforcements." one of the vox operators in the regimental headquarters called out.

"There are none available." Colonel Shryke responded.

"Tell all commanders to hold with what they have." Commissar Garratt hissed, "And remind them that the Necrons will be the least of their worries if they try to abandon their posts."

"My men know what is required of them commissar." Shryke said, "Perhaps you ought to-" but then he stopped as all of a sudden the sound of firing ceased, "What's happening?" he demanded.

"Second Company is now reporting that the enemy forces facing them have ceased their engagement. They've just collapsed sir."

"Fifth Company reporting the same." another vox operator added, "And First and Third. Sir, the Necron attack has ceased."

Shryke smiled and looked at Garratt.

"Looks like Captain Fear's team has accomplished their mission commissar." he said.

When the team led by Captain Fear and Lieutenant Wolf made it back to the XIX Regiment's camp they were met at the main gate by Company Colour Sergeant Stubbs.

"The major wants you both in his tent right away." he said over the sound of a lighter taking off.

"So we can leave now." Fear commented as he and Wolf followed Stubbs through the camp that was being dismantled around them.

"Yes sir. The Necrons are gone it looks like. We'll be off this planet within a day and heading back to where we were supposed to be." Stubbs replied. Then he held the flap of the company command tent open for the two officers to enter ahead of him.

Proceeding into Major Trent's office they found not only Major Trent but also Fourth Company's medical officer Doctor Altman and Colonel Shryke present as well as Commissars Layne and Garratt and Wolf snapped to attention and saluted.

"At ease lieutenant." Shryke said and Wolf relaxed, "Congratulations on your success."

"It was a team effort sir." she replied.

"Captain Fear voxed ahead and gave us a full report on your actions lieutenant." Garratt told her, "You were solely responsible for the bomb detonating correctly."

"I had no choice but to-"

"Shut up and accept the praise you're being offered lieutenant." Trent interrupted.

"Praise indeed Lieutenant Wolf." Layne said and he smiled, something that Wolf found disconcerting. As a rule commissars did not smile at anyone, "Such actions deserve recognition. There has been talk of the Honorifica Imperialis." and Wolf's jaw dropped. The Honorifica Imperialis were awards for gallantry that were rarely given out.

"I don't know what to say." she said eventually.

"There's no need to say anything lieutenant." Garratt said, "Because you're not getting a medal."

"I'm not? Then why-" Wolf began.

"Haven't you learned yet?" Trent said, interrupting her again, "Catachan regiments don't give out medals. We have our own system of awards. Now take a seat."

"Of course sir." Wolf replied as she sat down, "But I-" but before she could continue a wooden bit was forced into her mouth.

"Hold her still." Altman said as he approached and while he unrolled a pouch of sharp needle-like tools Fear and Stubbs held Wolf down. Then Altman took hold of her right arm and held it out, "Don't squirm." he told her, dipping one of the needles into a pot of ink, "This will hurt quite a bit." and then he began to tattoo a skull onto her arm.