



CATACHAN ONE NINE MARK FOUR MARK TWO
**THE TRAITOR, THE ASSASSIN
AND THE WOLF**
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7.3: THE TRAITOR, THE ASSASSIN AND THE WOLF

The survivors of the VII Catachan division are relatively secure within the walls of the ancient fortress taken from the Orks but the alien warboss remains at large. A small force is despatched to try and track down the warboss by tracking his use of the Emperor's Tarot. However, he has been warned of the danger posed to him and he believes that he is prepared to face The Assassin, The Traitor and The Wolf.

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1 .

"You know Grey if those jungles weren't full of alien killers then this would be a nice place to call home." Captain Emilia Wolf, commanding officer of the Second Platoon, Fourth Company of the Catachan XIX Regiment said to the sergeant of one of Second Platoon's squads as he was looking out over the walls of the fortress that the Catachan VII Division, of which the XIX Regiment was part, now sheltered in. Wolf was obviously not a Catachan herself. She stood barely one and a half metres tall whereas the vast majority of native Catachans stood significantly taller than that. Added to this her speech stood out from her Catachan troops.

"It's those killers that make this place more like home to us." Grey replied and Wolf sighed as she leant on the wall beside him. Even among deathworlds Catachan was known as one of the most dangerous planets in the galaxy where the majority of the human inhabitants did not live to reach adulthood. The entire ecosystem, both flora and fauna was hostile and from the moment they could walk Catachans had to learn how to survive against this.

"Reminding me again that I'm not one of you?" she said, "You're never going to let that drop are you?"

"Of course not. No matter how well you adapt to our ways there'll always be something you learnt rather than lived from birth." Grey said and Wolf smiled.

"Did you just admit that I can do my job?" she asked.

"I admit that you haven't got us all killed yet captain. A lot of outsider officers would come in and start throwing their weight around-" he began

"Weight?" Wolf interrupted, mocking offence and Grey smiled.

"What little weight there is to you." he said before he continued with his point, "They'd start giving orders regardless of how little they knew about fighting on a deathworld and either they'd get us all killed or they'd meet with an accident. On the other hand you've had the intelligence to rely on us, asking us what we think and then making a decision. That's why I voted for you as company commander when we thought Major Trent was dead. You know how to lead but I'd still rather not be out in the field with you if I can help it. One day you'll have to make a life or death decision and not have enough time to put it to a committee. On that day I don't want my wife being told I died because an outsider made a mistake that our children are old enough to know better than to make."

Before Wolf could respond to this there was a dull rumbling from the jungle outside the fortress walls and her eyes widened.

"How about this for a life or death decision? Duck." she said and she and Grey along the other Catachan troops present dropped behind the wall around the battlements before the first Ork shell landed just outside. Moments later there was collective roar from the jungle that Wolf had become all too familiar with.

"Waaargh!"

Peering over the battlements Wolf saw a hoard of green skinned Orks come charging out of the jungle as they let out their traditional war cry waving an assortment of small arms and close combat weapons above their heads as they ran. Almost immediately the weapons deployed along the fortress walls opened fire, spraying the charging Orks with energy blasts and projectiles that killed hundreds of the aliens. But for every Ork killed there were at least five that made it to the walls where they leant tall ladders against it or launched grappling hooks up towards the battlements.

One of these hooks came flying over the wall close to Wolf and Grey before the chain trailing behind it was pulled taught as Orks began to scale it.

"Stand to. Fix bayonets." Grey ordered and the soldiers of his squad all drew their traditional long Catachan fighting knives. These were heavy bladed weapons that were equally well suited to hacking through undergrowth to disembowelling an opponent and the soldiers fitted them under the barrels of their lasguns. Meanwhile Wolf drew her las pistol and pointed it to where the hook had come over the wall. She knew that she was not strong enough to pry the hook loose and that it was tough enough to resist a direct hit from her sidearm, however the chain was obviously weaker and she fired a single well aimed shot at it. This cut through one side of one of the links close to the hook and moments later there was a sudden 'snap' as the link broke and, no longer supported by the hook, the chain went flying back over the wall and sent the Orks using it to climb towards the battlement plummeting back towards the ground. Although most of the grappling hooks could be dealt with before the Orks managed to reach the ladders were a different matter and before long the first of the aliens appeared, leaping over the battlement and swinging its axe at the nearest Catachan. The blow struck the soldier in his shoulder and he staggered back before collapsing. Another Catachan then lunged at the Ork, thrusting his blade into the alien's back. The Ork bellowed in pain but did not fall. Instead it spun around, ripping the Catachan's blade from its back in the process and lashed out at the soldier. Luckily the Catachan moved quickly enough to avoid this and Grey put a shot from his las pistol

into back of the Ork's head, killing it instantly.

"Ogryns charge!" a voice bellowed and then there were more roars from within the fortress this time as a group of three metre tall abhumans charged along the battlements to where the Orks were coming over the walls. Although each ogryn was armed with a large automatic shotgun known as a ripper gun none of them fired these at the Orks, even their limited intellect enough to realise that they stood a good chance of hitting their own side if they did and instead they rushed right up to the Orks and began to swing the solidly built ripper guns like clubs.

The massive strength of the ogryns was more than a match for the Orks and each blow from one of them produced a 'crunch' of shattered bone. Given that the Orks could only reinforce their numbers slowly using the ladders and grappling hooks they had deployed against the walls the intervention of Second Platoon's ogryn squad proved decisive, rapidly wiping out the aliens that had been able to make it onto the battlements in this section of the line while the Catachans were able to focus on the ladders and hooks themselves. The chains connected to the grappling hooks were severed with lasgun blasts while by leaning over the side of the battlements the Catachans were able to shoot down at the Orks still scaling the ladders before the ogryns were brought up to reach over and simply push them away from the wall entirely.

"Everyone back to the wall." Wolf ordered, "Standby for another wave."

However, as she peered over the battlements, something she had to stand on the tips of her toes to manage, she saw that the Ork hoard below was now in full retreat. The aliens' efforts to break into the fortress either through the gates or over the walls had failed quickly and now they were fleeing back into the jungle. Of course the Catachans were not about to let them escape easily only to regroup for yet another attempt and they continued to fire down into the hoard with every weapon at their disposal.

"By my count that makes five assaults today now." Grey said as he holstered his pistol while Wolf stepped back from the outer wall.

"Does it still feel like home to you?" she asked, smiling at Grey.

The ancient city inside the fortress walls was large enough that every Catachan unit in the VII Division could have had a building to themselves but even though the greenskins had theoretically been driven from it there were still a few of the aliens scattered around in hiding, particularly of the smaller Gretchin variety that were far less dangerous than their larger cousins the Orks but they could still pose a threat to a lone human. Therefore, General Fortnam, the Catachan VII Division's commanding officer, had ordered the remnants of each of his four regiments to billet in just a single building and each of these was fortified by a wall of rubble around it created by demolishing the neighbouring structures to provide material and also create an area of open ground that the Orks would be forced to cross. If the enemy were able to get inside the fortress in significant numbers it was hoped that these fortified areas would be able to provide the basis of the continuing defence against them.

When Wolf, Grey and the ogryns returned to the large building where the XIX Regiment was currently based they found this wall of rubble now defended by the Tenth Company, the regiment's heavy weapons company. An additional squad of men was located at the gap that had been left in the barrier as an access point. Their purpose was to ensure that the limited supplies of the XIX Regiment were not removed by members of other regiments who were also facing similar shortages and might be tempted to acquire what they needed without going through the proper channels. With Wolf's appearance and accent so distinctive she was recognised even by troops she did not personally know and they stepped aside to let her and her troops pass. However, just as Grey walked past the leader of the sentries the other Catachan muttered to him.

"Easy life serving the outsider?" he said just loud enough that Grey heard him but Wolf did not.

Grey glanced at the other sergeant for a moment, tempted to punch him but instead he decided on letting the man think his words had had no effect on him but remembering to think of a way of getting back at him later on.

The original purpose of the building the XIX regiment was now quartered in had been lost to time. Following centuries of use by the original human builders the planet had been conquered by the Orks and during their occupation everything had been either looted or defaced. The crude glyphs of the Ork language were daubed on most walls and punishment details were busy scrubbing these clean when Wolf entered the building ahead of Gray.

"Captain, finished your inspection?" a voice said and she turned to see Company Colour Sergeant Stubbs standing in front of her. Stubbs was Fourth Company's senior NCO and assistant to Major Trent, the company's official commanding officer. However, with Trent badly injured and Wolf next in the chain of command he was effectively her assistant now.

"Yes colour sergeant. I was just in time to see Sergeant Grey's squad and Sergeant Khor's ogryns help fend off the latest assault." she replied as Stubbs began to walk alongside her and at the mention of his name the leader of the ogryn squad, Khor, grinned.

"It went the same as the others I take it?" Stubbs asked.

"You mean a mad charge with limited artillery support that fades away when the Orks fail to get over the walls in any decent numbers? Yes." Grey responded before Wolf could answer.

"What about here?" Wolf added.

"I'm sure you'll be glad to know that Doctor Altman has sent word that Major Trent is awake." Stubbs answered.

"Thank the Emperor." Wolf said.

"Not enjoying being in command of the company?" Stubbs said.

"Oh command is just fine colour sergeant but that doesn't mean I want Major Trent gone. Now at least I can hand-" Wolf began.

"He's not returning to duty any time soon captain." Stubbs interrupted, "The doctor wants to keep him under close observation for a while yet."

"I'll pay him a visit anyway, just to say 'hello' if nothing else." Wolf told him. Then she looked at Grey and added, "Sergeant see that Khor and his squad get back to their quarters then take your men back to yours. I'll brief the company when I've checked in with Major Trent and Colonel Shryke."

The infirmary occupied an entire level of the building that combined the medical resources of the entire XIX Regiment and Wolf and Stubbs quickly located the area set aside for Fourth Company where they found the company's medical officer Doctor Altman standing beside the bed occupied by Major Trent, who smiled when he saw Wolf and Stubbs.

"Come to visit the invalid?" he said.

"You're hardly an invalid major." Altman said.

"If this were Catachan my body would already be being consumed by scavengers." Trent told him.

"How are you feeling major?" Wolf asked.

"One hell of a headache which I'm assured means I'm still alive at least. Fortunately I have Doc Altman here to look after me. Your Sergeant Molla's daughter has been looking in on me as well. So how's my company?"

"We've taken loses major." Wolf answered and Trent waved a hand around him.

"I'd say everyone has. I've been told that Lökk's dead and no-one seems too sure about Colonel Mann from the Twelfth right now."

"Major Stanner has been filling in for him." Stubbs said.

"Yes I heard. Stanner's a good man. He'll probably win the vote to take the regiment permanently if Mann doesn't recover. Now what about the Orks?" Trent said and Wolf sighed.

"Unsurprisingly they keep trying to get in. They've sent five assaults against us today. They've all been driven back easily though. It's like they aren't really trying." Wolf said.

"Holding the walls has been easier than rooting out the survivors of the greenskins that were here when we arrived." Stubbs added.

"Yes, I've heard the gunfire." Trent said, "So is there any word on reinforcement or resupply?"

"I've not heard anything sir but I'm heading up to see Colonel Shryke now. He may have more news." Wolf said and Trent nodded.

"I won't hold you up any longer then captain. There is just one thing though." he said.

"Yes sir?" Wolf asked.

"By all accounts you're handling yourself well as company commander. It looks like I was right to make you my second in command. Keep up the good work and don't take any 'outsider' comments from anyone."

"Thank you major. Actually I've already had to deal with some of that when we were still gathering survivors. I managed to handle it though." Wolf replied.

"She promoted Mayer to give him the authority to execute some malcontents from the Fourteenth Armoured if they didn't follow her orders." Stubbs explained and Trent let out a laugh before wincing in pain.

2.

Colonel Shryke, the commanding officer of the Catachan XIX Regiment had set up his headquarters on the top floor of the building and when they exited the stairwell Wolf and Stubbs found themselves surrounded by the regiment's remaining administration and support staff who were still doing their best to determine what resources they had available.

"Emilia." a voice that obviously was not Catachan called out and Wolf smiled as woman with a similar appearance to her waved from across the room. Wolf was not the only outsider in the regiment she had originally served as an administration officer in to have transferred to the Catachan XIX Regiment. However, while Wolf's transfer had been involuntary when she was separated from her previous regiment and could not be returned to it, her sister Elisa had later requested to be transferred to it when the Lyrerian XXXII had been almost totally wiped out and the survivors moved to other regiments instead. Like Wolf, Elisa was viewed as an outsider by the Catachans but her role did not place her in a position where she was expected to give orders in combat and she was often used by Colonel Shryke to deal with the other non-Catachan officials that the regiment was expected to deal with.

"Elisa." Wolf responded, "Is the colonel around? I'd like to speak with him."

"Yes, he's right in there." Elisa replied, "He already has company though. General Fortnam and Captain Aetus are with him."

To hear that the VII Division's commanding officer had come to speak with Colonel Shryke was not very surprising, the two men would be in regular contact during a campaign. However, the presence of Captain Aetus was more significant. Aetus was not a Catachan, in fact he barely qualified as human since he had undergone the extensive process of genetic modification that turned him into one of the Adeptus Astartes. Aetus commanded a team of space marines that were considered an elite force even among the Astartes. Known as the Deathwatch they drew their members from the best troops from other chapters of the Astartes and operated under the direct control of the Inquisition's Ordos Xenos. Unlike other chapters who had a general licence to act against any threat to the Imperium the Deathwatch existed solely to hunt aliens and their presence here on the planet Rema Anta was for the purpose of killing the Ork warboss, the leader of all the Orks on the planet. Unfortunately the Orks had somehow anticipated this and used a decoy and instead of triggering chaos as rival Orks fought one another to take over the position of warboss the Catachans had been led into a trap. Inquisitor Tobias, under whose authority Captain Aetus and his men had been deployed had fled back to the orbiting fleet but the marines were now stranded on the surface with the Catachans of the VII Division.

"I suppose we better wait then." Stubbs commented and Wolf nodded just as Shryke appeared from the room now serving as his office.

"Lieutenant-" he began, looking at Elisa but then he stopped when he saw Wolf and after a brief pause he continued, "Ah Captain Wolf, I was about to ask your sister to send for you. Please come in." and then he disappeared back into his office.

"Uh-oh. I don't like this. Summoned to meet with a general." Wolf said to Stubbs before the pair of them headed into the colonel's office.

Both Wolf and Stubbs immediately stood at attention and saluted when they saw General Fortnam leaning on the table on which a large map of the fortress and the surrounding area had been laid out, then relaxed when he returned their salute without speaking. This gave Wolf the chance to take a quick look around the room at the others present in the meeting. Unsurprisingly Shryke was accompanied by both Regimental Commissar Garratt and also a small woman with dark skin, most of which was covered by the green robe she wore. The woman's milky-white eyes gave a hint to her blindness that was a consequence of the soul binding ritual she had undergone to not only enhance her psychic powers but also to protect her from attack by the creatures dwelling within the warp whenever she used her powers as an astropath to send messages over vast, even interstellar distances. Another robed and hooded figure was present as well but this man wore the red robes of the Adeptus Mechanicus instead of an astropath's green robes. Lazas KBL-814 headed the XIX Regiment's contingent of tech priests, responsible for maintaining all of the vehicles and other machinery the Catachans used and in keeping with the practices of the Adeptus Mechanicus large parts of his own body had been replaced by cybernetics along with the addition of numerous long mechandrite tentacles that Wolf could see emerging from beneath his robe. However, even the inhuman appearance of the senior tech priest could not prevent the massive figure in black powered armour from standing out most in the room. Not as large as an ogryn, Captain Aetus still stood more than two metres tall even with his helmet lying on the table and it was obvious to Wolf that he would have had to stoop to squeeze through the doorway that was made for ordinary humans much shorter than he was. Even some of the Catachans were having to watch their step when passing through doorways in this building and there had

been numerous loud curses yelled since the XIX Regiment had taken up residence there.

"Colonel I just came to brief you on the latest Ork assault." Wolf said.

"Yes, another half hearted attack that stood little chance of either inflicted permanent damage to the walls or getting a significant infantry force inside them. The pattern is consistent." Fortnam said.

"You don't think that the Orks are serious in their attacks then general?" Wolf asked. Had this been anything other than a Catachan regiment she would not have dared question a general but she knew that Catachan officers were typically more willing to justify their thinking to their subordinates given the way in which they were selected by vote for their positions.

"They are testing our defences captain, looking for weaknesses. They may also be trying to distract us from watching for Gretchin attempting to infiltrate the fortress by way of the same tunnels you and Captain Aetus' troops used when you sabotaged the Ork defences and allowed us to take it in the first place." Fortnam explained.

"Fortunately our program to locate the termini of the tunnels has been effective and the existing points of vulnerability have been destroyed using explosives." Enginseer Lazas added, his modified voice sounding as strange as his appearance.

"Won't they be able to dig new exits from the tunnels?" Wolf asked.

"A valid concern Captain Wolf, which is why we have deployed auspex units within the walls that are configured to detect the sound of digging. By triangulating the readings we will be able to detect the location of the intrusion attempt and respond." Enginseer Lazas said.

"Of course the aliens could just use explosives to gain entry from the tunnels but we would see and hear any blast strong enough for that and respond immediately." Commissar Garratt added.

"Perhaps we should return to the reason why Captain Wolf has been summoned before us." Aetus said.

Although as a captain he was technically outranked by both Colonel Shryke and General Fortnam it was a very brave Imperial Guard officer who attempted to defy even a lower ranked marine officer. Fewer still would attempt to issue an order to one.

"Of course, the alien leader." General Fortnam said.

"Who unfortunately remains elusive." Colonel Shryke added.

"Captain Aetus intends to take his kill team into the jungle and seek out the Ork warboss. It may be that his force will need additional support and he has specifically requested you fort his." Fortnam said.

"Your record to date in co-operating with Astartes units has been impressive." Aetus said, "In particular my sergeant, Onund, was keen for you to join us."

"Impressing the space marines is quite a feat Captain Wolf." Commissar Garratt said and Wolf smiled.

"I think some of it has to do with my name commissar." she said, "Sergeant Onund is from the Space Wolves chapter and he seems to think my name symbolises something."

"Regardless of why captain, the Astartes have requested your unit to accompany them." Fortnam said and Wolf nodded.

"I can have Fourth Company ready to go by nightfall general." she said and he frowned.

"Captain Wolf is currently filling in for Major Trent as Fourth Company's commanding officer while he is in the infirmary." Shryke told him.

"My platoon sergeant, Vance, is running Second Platoon for now." Wolf added.

"Second Platoon is being placed on detached duty. You will return to your regular posting and another officer will fill in for you as company commander. I assume that there are other officers left in Fourth Company?" Fortnam said.

"All of our commissioned officers survived sir." Stubbs said.

"Good, then Captain Wolf can take command of Second Platoon and accompany Captain Aetus." Shryke replied.

"Our best lead so far about the location of the Ork chieftain is the interference being sensed by our psykers through the Emperor's Tarot." General Fortnam said.

"The alien presence is clear with every reading." Astropath Shayal said.

"Yes and hopefully this will help lead us to the alien chieftain. Colonel Shryke's astropath will accompany you and advise you of readings taken through the tarot." General Fortnam said.

"Your company also has a sanctioned psyker attached to it." Aetus said and Wolf nodded.

"Yes captain. Adept Veneel." she replied.

"Then he should accompany us also. You said that you could have a company ready by nightfall so I see no reason why your platoon should not also be ready by then. Meet my team by the eastern gatehouse at eighteen hundred hours." Aetus told her.

"Find the warboss and kill him Captain Wolf." General Fortnam said, staring at Wolf, "Once he is dead the remaining Orks will fall upon themselves and our forces in orbit will be able to commence the next phase of the invasion."

A man who was tall even for a Catachan was sat on a bed holding a field dressing to a wound on his head when Wolf and Stubbs returned to the area that Fourth Company were quartered in.

"Lore, has there been another Ork attack? I didn't hear anything." Wolf said as she approached Third Platoon's commanding officer.

"Ha! He wishes." another man said.

"Thanks Reilly." Lore said, frowning at First Platoon's commander.

"Then what happened?" Wolf asked.

"I forgot to duck and hit my head on the door frame." Lore answered and Wolf fought to suppress a laugh.

"Well I just hope it hasn't affected your mind because I'm leaving Fourth Company in your hands Lore." Wolf said.

"Where are you going captain? Not been promoted again have you?" Reilly said.

"I heard a rumour that Colonel Mann is dead. Maybe the Twelfth have voted for her as their new leader." Lore joked.

"No I've been ordered to take Second Platoon out personally. By General Fortnam himself." Wolf said.

"What about Vance?" Reilly said then when he noticed Second Platoon's senior NCO nearby he called out to him, "Hey Vance come here."

"Yes lieutenant?" Vance said as he walked over and then he smiled when he saw Wolf, "Hello captain. Come to make sure I'm looking after your platoon properly?" he added.

"She's taking back command. Did you know about that?" Reilly told him.

"No, this is the first I'm hearing about it. Is Major Trent up and about again?" Vance responded.

"No, we're being deployed at the request of Captain Aetus and his marines. They specifically requested that I take command. I'm sorry about this but-" Wolf explained.

"Hey, there's no need to apologise captain." Vance said, "We all knew that this was just temporary. Even if you got the post of company commander permanently Quinn is far more likely to get voted in as the new lieutenant than I am." Sergeant Quinn commanded Second Platoon's veteran squad and although he had frequently said that he had no wish to lead the platoon it was generally held that he would win a vote to succeed Wolf.

"Thanks Vance." Wolf said, smiling in appreciation of his words, "We're to rendezvous with the Deathwatch at the eastern gatehouse." then she checked the time and added, "We've got four hours. Let's see if we can be ready in half that."

"Sounds good to me." Vance replied, nodding.

"Good. The you go and gather the troops. Colour Sergeant Stubbs could you bring Lieutenant Lore up to date on the state of Fourth Company? I need to go and brief Adept Veneel." Wolf said and Vance winced.

"The witch?" he said and Wolf smiled.

"Oh it gets better." Stubbs commented before she could respond, "Astropath Shayal, the colonel's personal witch is going along as well."

3.

In a cave far enough away from the fortress occupied by the Catachans that it could not be seen a massive Ork that was almost the same size as an ogryn looked out over the jungle. The cave was just part of a number of such spaces located throughout the mountain that served as the warboss' headquarters, all of them connected by a network of tunnels. The warboss had decorated this cave with reminders of his victories, partially for sentimental reasons but also to serve as reminders to all those who came here to visit him about how he had risen to his position and a not so subtle warning not to challenge him. As with the vast majority of Orks this creature wore clothing in keeping with the ideals of his clan. However, while for many this meant a single bright colour dominating their appearance this particular Ork wore combat fatigues that resembled a crude impression of human camouflage combat fatigues. Camouflage, stealth and concealment were aspects of warfare that most Orks looked down on or even outright despised. Only the Blood Axe clan embraced them along with other theories of warfare other than simply charging headlong at an enemy, shooting, screaming and waving weapons in the air. It was rare for Blood Axes to rise to the level that this creature had managed, warboss of an entire world, but his authority over all the greenskins here was absolute. Every challenger had not only been beaten, they had been seen to be so easily beaten by enough Orks that the rest had fallen into line.

"Boss." a voice said. This was not deep enough to have come from an ork and the warboss instantly knew that a Gretchin messenger had arrived with news.

"Go on. Tell me wot 'appened." the warboss said.

"Da lads failed boss. Dey ran away again. Only da other bosses says dat dey could 'ave got over da wall if ya'd just let 'em use more lads and bigger guns." the Gretchin said and the warboss turned around, looking down at the diminutive creature.

"Tell da other bosses dat dey ain't getting' any more lads, wagons or big guns dan wot I tells 'em dey can 'ave." he said sternly, "Take 'em dis as well." he continued, reaching out to where the severed head of an Ork rested on a rocky ledge alongside some other trophies that the warboss had collected over the years, "Warn 'em dat if dey wants to come and complain to me demselves den dare's a gap on me shelf now wot I can put dare 'eads in." and he tossed the head at the Gretchin, who staggered back as he caught it.

"Yes boss." the Gretchin replied as he checked the severed head's mouth on the off chance that there were any teeth left in that he could remove and spend. Finding that there were none the Gretchin sighed and then headed for a tunnel that led deeper into the mountain that the cave was set into.

The warboss then turned around, walking towards the back of the cave where another Ork sat. Still larger than many of the species, this creature was still significantly smaller than the warboss and sat hunched over, leaning on a copper staff. This Ork also wore clothing with a camouflaged pattern crudely painted on it and small totems hung from numerous places. Some of these were Orkish in origin but there were also some that had obviously been gathered from other species, especially humans. The Blood Axe clan were known for their dealings with humans, sometimes even fighting alongside the armies of the Imperium as mercenaries and this was the reason for much of the distrust of them among other Orks. Humans and in particular the Imperium of Man were a favoured enemy of the Orks who could always be counted on to put up a good fight and provide plenty of useful loot to a victorious Ork army but most greenskins did not see this as any reason to begin trading or allying with them.

That was how peace broke out.

"Give me another readin'." the warboss told the weirdboy and the shaman grinned back at him, slipping his hand into the bag at his feet and producing a small box that was marked with the Imperial aquila. Opening this box revealed a set of cards that the weirdboy began to shuffle before dealing out three of them on the flat surface of a rock.

"Da readin' is da same as before." the weirdboy said, "I sees a traitor. I sees an assassin and-"

"And ya sees a wolf, yeah I 'eard all dat before. I wants to know wot it all means." the warboss interrupted. Ever since the weirdboy had obtained the set of cards known among humans as the Emperor's Tarot he had been able to provide the warboss with insight into the actions of his enemies that had been the main cause of his rise to power. Now though the weirdboy seemed to give nothing but the same warning over and over again.

The weirdboy shuffled the deck again and laid out three more cards.

"A traitor, an assassin and a wolf." he said.

"More cards." the warboss told him, "Now."

Leaving the existing three cards where they lay the weirdboy began to place more on top of the rock.

"Dey is comin' 'ere." the weirdboy said when he had laid out two more cards then after this he placed down one more, "Da blind seer." he said, naming the particular card that had just been drawn, "Dey will find ya

because of someone wot cannot see.”

The warboss grinned.

“I don't care 'ow dey finds me. When dey do I'll be waitin' for 'em.” he said and then he turned around and headed down the tunnel leading out of the cave. The weirdboy picked up the cards as he watched the warboss leave, seemingly shuffling them when he was in fact sorting them so that a particular selection were on the top of the deck before he laid them out on the rock as well, naming them as he went, “Da Pilgrim. Da Emperor. Da Devourer.”

As Wolf had hoped Second Platoon was ready well in advance of when they needed to be and this meant that when they arrived at the eastern gatehouse they were in time to see an Adeptus Mechanicus work team digging in the ground while a single armoured space marine watched over them.

“Little Wolf!” the marine shouted when he saw Wolf and her troops approaching.

“Sergeant Onund, what's going on?” Wolf replied, looking at the cyborg servitors digging while a tech priest looked on.

“Well you don't think that we're just going to walk out through the gates do you little wolf?” Onund of the Space Wolves chapter responded, “We'll use the xenos' own tunnels to sneak out unseen.”

“Makes sense.” Vance commented, “That's how Rull's gone on ahead.”

“Ah your sniper. Yes, I see he isn't here.” Onund said, looking at the Catachans, “But all the tunnels are supposed to have been sealed.”

“Rull's been on the team searching for them.” Vance explained “I think he may have kept one hidden for his own use.”

“That sounds like Rull all right.” Wolf added.

“That is highly irregular. All access points are to be secured.” the tech priest said when he overheard this and he turned to face Wolf.

“Don't worry your gears cogboy.” Vance replied, “Rull will have seen to it that the tunnel was secure. My guess is that anyone other than him trying to use it will run into a very painful booby trap.”

“To maintain the security of this position it is imperative that the location of this access point be identified to the Adeptus Mechanicus for sealing.” the etch priest said.

“We'll be sure to ask Rull where it is when we next see him.” Vance replied.

“If we ever do.” Wolf commented. Then she walked over to the six man heavy weapons squad that carried Second Platoon's mortars. Despite the supply issues currently affecting the VII Division, Second Platoon's mission had been determined to be of sufficient importance that they had been granted as much ammunition as they requested and in the case of the heavy weapon squad's mortars most of this was being carried by Second Platoon's ogyrns, “Sergeant Mayer.” she called out as she approached the squad.

“Yes captain?” Mayer responded, smiling as he looked at her.

“No one should be as happy as you are when we're about go on a combat mission sergeant.” she said when she saw his expression.

“Sorry captain, I'm just still getting used to being called sergeant.” Mayer replied.

“And here was me thinking it was all about you hooking up with Ursula Gant last night bomber.” another Catachan commented as he walked by and Wolf sighed.

“Not everyone is as obsessed about sex as your are Sergeant Molla.” she said.

“Wait, does everyone know?” Mayer said.

“What, that you and Gant slept together?” Molla said, “Bomber did you not hear that screeching sound she made? I'm surprised that the Orks didn't throw a rock over the wall with a note on asking you both to keep the noise down.”

“She was rather loud.” Wolf commented.

“Both times.” Molla added, “Nice one though Bomber. Gant's a good looking woman and now you're both sergeants there are fewer complications. Assuming that wasn't just a one time, or even two time thing.”

“Sergeant Mayer,” Wolf said, hoping to be able to get the conversation back onto the subject she wanted to discuss, “can you double check your ammunition? I don't want the ogyrns accidentally leaving any behind.”

“Yes captain.” Mayer replied.

“Captain.” another voice said from behind Wolf and she turned to see Quinn standing there.

“Yes?” she asked.

“Just wanted to let you know that it looks like our second witch is here.” and he pointed to where a group of Catachan troops Wolf recognised as being among Colonel Shryke's personal guard were walking towards Second Platoon. Between them walked Astropath Shayal. Despite being blind the astropath needed no help in finding her way around the rubble and other debris that littered the streets. Her powers made her aware of everything in close proximity to her regardless of intervening objects.

Veneel, the sanctioned psyker assigned to Fourth Company had arrived at the gatehouse with Second Platoon and when he saw Shayal approaching he went to greet her.

"Adept Veneel." she said, "I sensed that you had left early so Colonel Shryke organised an escort for me. This is all rather exciting isn't it?"

Veneel looked around at the Catachan troops that the two psykers were to accompany and support. Catachans were no different to any other troops in the Imperial Guard in that they viewed psykers with a mix of suspicion and dread. That neither he nor Shayal were Catachans themselves would not make things any easier.

"I'm not sure I would use that word." he said, holding out his arm and Shayal smiled as she took it.

"You may leave us now." she told the Catachan troops escorting her.

"Yes ma'am." their leader replied and they all turned around and hurried away.

"I hope you don't think that the troops that will be accompanying us out there will be any less distrustful about us." Veneel said as he watched the soldiers leave as quickly as they could, "Especially considering that we will be out in the jungle. They are not forgiving of mistakes."

"Do you think the colonel never took me into the jungle with him Aloysius?" Shayal asked, "Trust me, I can find my way through the jungle just as easily as I can walk across a room. Besides they need us."

"I hope that will be enough." Veneel said just as Wolf was approaching with both Quinn and Vance.

"Astropath Shayal." she said, "We have some time before we leave so I'd like to explain how things will work. You and Adept Veneel will accompany my command section during normal operations but if the need arises for us to detach from the platoon then Sergeant Quinn and his squad will act as your protection detail. If you feel at all unwell or are injured in any way at any point you should tell our medicae, Specialist Torrent."

"I am not an invalid Captain Wolf. In fact I'm willing to bet that I have greater awareness about our surroundings that even the best of your men." Shayal said.

"I wouldn't be too sure about that." Quinn commented.

"Ah, you are referring to your sniper. Rull I believe his name is. Where is he exactly?" Shayal responded.

"Don't you know?" Quinn replied sarcastically.

"Anyway Captain Aetus and his marines haven't arrived yet." Wolf said.

"Of course not. We are early. They will be on time. Precision is the hallmark of the Astartes Captain Wolf." Shayal said.

"Yes, so you may as well find somewhere to relax. We'll let you know when we're leaving." Wolf continued and Shayal smiled at her before sitting down on a nearby lump of rubble from a damaged building.

As Wolf walked away Molla walked over to Shayal and crouched down beside her.

"So you're here to make readings from the Emperor's Tarot right?" he said and despite being blind she turned her head towards him.

"I am." she said.

"And you can predict the future with them?" Molla asked.

"It is not quite as simple as that. But the tarot enables the Emperor to impart some insight into possible future events." Shayal explained.

"That's all I needed to know." Molla said, "Now I've got an offer I'd like to discuss with you."

Captain Aetus and the other marines arrived right as the sun was starting to set, exactly on schedule. The armoured figures were not alone though and walking with them was an Ork in camouflaged clothing. Koroth Nightkill was an Ork from the Blood Axe clan who after helping Second Platoon and a different Deathwatch kill team escape from Commorragh, the home of the Drukhari had been recruited by the Inquisition to work training and advising the Imperium's alien hunters.

"Captain Wolf, your troops are prepared?" he asked.

"They are." Wolf replied.

"We have been for two hours." Vance muttered.

"My sniper has already gone outside the perimeter. He's reported a large force of greenskins approaching. It looks like they're getting ready to launch another attack." Wolf said.

"Good. Although General Fortnam hopes that it will be possible to track the Ork warboss through the Emperor's Tarot we cannot rely on it alone. If the Ork attack follows the previously established pattern then they will fall back after suffering moderate losses. At that point we will follow their trail back to their point of origin. The Orks do not typically make use of advanced vox networks as we do and this means that all communication with their command structure has to be done in person with physical messengers. By identifying these we can use them to lead us to their master." Aetus explained.

"We'll be lookin' for grots." Koroth added, using the common Ork slang term for Gretchin, "Dat means dat dey'll be 'arder to spot but not impossible."

Regardless of their clan affiliation the smaller Gretchin possessed a natural aptitude for moving stealthily and keeping out of sight. To the Orks bigger was better and the small stature of Gretchin in a society with no laws other than the commands of a warboss meant that they were easy targets for the anger and frustration of their larger kin. Being able to run and hide meant being able to stay alive another day.

"Captain Aetus," a heavily synthesised voice said as the tech priest overseeing the digging work approached, "access has been made to the tunnel and widened to permit entry by the members of your force."

"Then we shall leave now. My marines shall take the lead." Aetus said before he walked over to the hole dug by the servitors and simply jumped down into it.

"Time to go little wolf." Onund added as he jumped into the hole as well and then one at a time the other marines followed.

"Second Platoon move out." Wolf ordered and all around her the Catachans began to head for the hole. Unlike the marines who had been able to simply jump in, making use of their enhanced physiology and powered armour to absorb the impact of their landing, the Catachans lowered ladders they could climb. The ogryns were too large to use these ladders and ropes were also lowered for them to cling onto as they entered the hole but when they reached the edge they instead came to a halt.

"Sergeant Khor is there a problem?" Wolf asked when she saw this.

"Hole dark." Khor responded, pointing down into the hole. Wolf had half expected something like this. Ogryns were notoriously claustrophobic and even though they had used the Ork tunnel network before they were reluctant to enter it again. Fortunately there was one aspect of their personalities that was stronger than their fear of confined spaces, their absolutely unshakeable loyalty to the Emperor.

"Sergeant Khor the Emperor needs you and your squad to go into these tunnels." she said.

"Ogryns follow. For the Emperor." Khor said loudly upon hearing this and then he and the other abhumans began climbing down the ropes.

The tunnels beneath the city had been dug by Gretchin and even though this particular stretch had been designed to take large objects it was still cramped for the marines and especially the ogryns, with all of them having to stoop to move along it. Even the Catachans and Veneel had to watch themselves just in case they banged their heads on some random protrusion that the tunnel's creators had not seen fit to remove. The tunnel emerged at the base of the fortress walls and when Wolf and her command section emerged they found that the marines had already formed a perimeter around the exit point. In the fading light the jungle ahead appeared as one large black blur but the marines' armour included autosenses that enabled them to see almost as clearly as they could in broad daylight.

Watching the last of Second Platoon leaving the tunnel Wolf raised her hand to the microbead communication headset that she wore and activated the device.

"This is Captain Wolf calling Enginseer Oram delta four-six-eight." she said and the tech priest who had been overseeing the digging down to the tunnel responded immediately.

"This is Enginseer Oram delta four-six-eight. State your message Captain Wolf." he said, his voice sounding just as inhuman as it did in person.

"Enginseer we have cleared the tunnel. You may proceed with securing it." Wolf told him.

"Understood Captain Wolf. Securing tunnel now." the tech priest said and then there was the sound of an explosion followed soon after by a cloud of dust erupting from the tunnel entrance as explosives were used to collapse it so that the Orks could not make use of it to gain entry to the fortress.

With the way back into the fortress now sealed Aetus got to his feet and started to walk towards the waiting jungle.

"Second Platoon move out. Follow the marines and stay alert for enemy contact." Wolf ordered and the Catachans began to advance as well.

4.

The three crude artillery pieces in the jungle clearing were all unique in their appearance, the result of the different ideas the Orks who had constructed them had had at the time of their manufacture. The only common feature they shared was the calibre of ammunition that they fired and even this was only due to modifications carried out to two of the guns after their initial construction. Although it was devoid of trees the clearing was still covered in grass that stood waist high to a typical human or Ork but this did not concern the Gretchin gun crews as they rushed around under the eyes and whips of their Ork overseers despite the fact that the gun crews themselves could barely see over the top of it. The guns had been brought forwards to further test the defences of the fortress and when the Orks bellowed the order they fired in unison before the gun crews began to scurry about to try and reload them as fast as they could, fearing the beating they would get if they were judged to be too slow. The Ork overseers yelled at the Gretchin as they were reloading the guns and they were all too focused on this for one of them to notice when a tiny red dot appeared on his chest and stayed there until one of the artillery guns fired again several seconds later. At that moment a bullet struck the Ork right where the dot had been placed, piercing his heart and killing him instantly. The Ork fell to the ground, disappearing among the grass while the sound of his fall was masked by the sound of the cannon firing. It was only when the crew for the gun he was supposed to be overseeing called out that they were ready to fire again that anyone noticed the overseer was missing. Assuming that the missing Ork had simply gone into the jungle to relieve himself the other overseers continued to give orders for all three guns to fire but once again there was a silenced shot when the next cannon fired that hit another of them, the report of the cannon hiding the sound of the Ork's fall. With only one Ork now remaining Rull was not concerned about giving away his presence in the area and a third shot fired soon after the second hit the final Ork between his eyes.

The Gretchin gun crews knew that they were under attack now and they quickly grabbed whatever they could find to arm themselves with. For most of them this was a tool that could be used as a crude club but some of the more resourceful among them had simple firearms of their own that they produced. The problem for them was that they had no idea where the sniper fire was coming from. Even without the sound of the cannons firing to mask the sound of his shots, Rull's rifle was near silent with subsonic ammunition and he was too well concealed for the Gretchin to see him even as he put a bullet into one of them that was armed with a crude pistol. Another Gretchin rushed to reclaim the gun where it had landed on the hull of one of the artillery pieces but another shot from Rull killed him before he could pick it up.

It was at this point that panic set into the rest of the crew of that particular cannon and the remaining Gretchin manning it screamed as they leapt down into the grass and began to flee in random directions. Then when another bullet hit a Gretchin on one of the other guns this panic spread to both of the others and all three Gretchin crews began to run. Not knowing where the sniper fire was coming from each of them fled in a different direction.

The artillery pieces had been only one part of the attack on the Catachan occupied fortress and in the distance the sounds of other Ork weapons could be heard firing, distracting the fleeing Gretchin who could be certain that they were not coming under fire still. As one of the Gretchin ran, repeatedly looking over his shoulder in expectation of seeing an army of human troops chasing after him, he failed to keep watch ahead of him properly and thus was taken totally by surprise when a figure in black powered armour stepped out from behind a tree and fired a silent stalker bolt round into him. There was a muffled 'pop' as the projectile detonated inside the Gretchin, killing him instantly before the marine lowered his bolter.

"Target eliminated captain." he said.

"Very good. Continue to advance." Aetus responded and the marine raised his bolter again before moving onwards towards the clearing where the artillery guns were located.

The marines were formed into a single line, side by side with about ten metres between each of them. This way they were able to cover a large area of jungle ahead of the force, using their autosenses to search the undergrowth for more targets. Behind the marines came the Catachans of Second Platoon. Only Wolf and the sergeants of each squad other than Khor carried sets of magnoculars that they could use to see in the darkness of the jungle and to use these they had to stop and hold them to their eyes. Instead it was easier for them just to follow the marines at a close distance, ready to respond if they encountered any Ork forces ahead of them.

"Targets located." Aetus announced, the communicator in his power armour broadcasting on the Catachan frequency.

"Advance." Wolf ordered, "Spread out and secure the area. Sergeant Mayer you're up."

The Catachans advanced into the clearing where the artillery guns were located and immediately began to spread out. Knowing that the long grass offered a convenient hiding place for creatures the size of Gretchin

they used their long Catachan blades to hack at it as they moved to establish a perimeter around the edge while Wolf along with her command section and Mayer's heavy weapons squad joined the marines in examining the Ork artillery pieces.

"These don't look Imperial in origin." she said.

"No, definitely something they made themselves." Vance replied. Then he looked at Mayer and added, "So bomber what do you think?"

"Easy." Mayer answered, "These things are self propelled and there are spare fuel cans stuck to all of them as well as ammunition all over. Assuming that there's actually anything inside those cans we just pour it down the barrels of these guns with a shell in the chamber of each then toss in something on fire. A burning rag will do just fine. The fuel will burn and then the rounds loaded will cook off, taking out all three guns."

"Captain Aetus are you sure that this is the right strategy?" Wolf asked, "Won't destroying these guns alert the Orks to our being out here?"

"The greenskins will not care Captain Wolf." Aetus replied, "They will simply think that we are a foraging or raiding party out here to disrupt their attacks." then he looked towards Korothe and added, "Am I not right Ork?"

"Yeah, dat's right. Da lads and da bosses out 'ere won't think twice about it. Dey'll just accept dat ya took out a mob of dare big guns and ask da mekboys to make some more of 'em. Unless any lads or grots actually sees any of ya beakies about den da bosses won't bother trying to send anyone after ya."

The term 'beakies' was Ork slang for marines, derived from the beak shaped helmets of some patterns of powered armour.

"And if they do find out that there are marines out here?" Vance asked and Korothe grinned.

"Dare ain't an Ork alive wot doesn't want to 'ave a beaky 'elmet on 'is pole." Korothe said.

"Captain I think we should make sure that the tracks of the marines are defaced as much as possible to prevent identification. We've seen enough of those Blood Axe Orks on the other side to know that they probably have some units capable of following a trail." Vance suggested.

"Check with Molla." Wolf said, knowing that among the Catachans of Second Platoon only Rull had superior field skills than Molla who had grown up as the son of a guide showing off world tourists who had more money than sense of self preservation around the deep jungle of Catachan, "With any luck just having us march behind them will be enough. Sergeant Mayer you and your men get started on destroying these guns."

"Yes captain." Mayer replied.

Although the ammunition for the artillery guns was heavy the Orks had designed and made it to be moved by Gretchin without the need for lifting machinery and so Mayer's six strong squad had no real trouble in moving shells from where they had been unceremoniously placed on the ground when the guns had been deployed. While the cannons were being loaded Mayer inspected the fuel canisters attached to each of the half tracked vehicles that they were mounted on. Orks used a variety of different fuel sources for their vehicles and as with any Ork technology two outwardly similar machines could operate on entirely different principles. However, by pouring out a small amount of the liquid from some of the fuel canisters and attempting to set light to it Mayer was able to confirm that the fuel for all three could easily be ignited. Knowing this Mayer walked towards the front of one of the vehicles and looked up at the barrel of the cannon in its elevated position.

"Khor send one your ogryns over here to give me a lift." he called out, knowing that he could not reach up high enough to get the fuel into the muzzle of the weapon.

"Ogryn lift." Khor said to the nearest of his abhuman troops, pointing at Mayer and the massive muscular ogryn walked over to where Mayer stood and immediately lifted the Catachan up onto his shoulders, giving him only just enough time to grab hold of the fuel can by his feet. Given a boost by the three metre tall ogryn Mayer was now able to reach the muzzle of the gun and he poured some of the fuel from the can into it while the ogryn continued to hold him.

"How do you plan to ignite it sergeant?" Wolf asked as she watched this and realised that the fuel would combust and cause the gun to explode as soon as it was ignited.

"Just a length of string ought to do. Even if one or two burn through without making it up to the barrel we only really need one to go off and the blast will trigger the others." Mayer explained as he put the plug back in the top of the fuel can, resting it on the ogryn's shoulder beside him as he took a reel of string from his belt and tossed it down the barrel of the cannon, leaving enough sticking out that when he let go it dropped almost as far down as the top of the grass, "Okay now we need to go over to the next one." he said to the ogryn holding him aloft but the abhuman simply remained stood where he was, "Hey." Mayer added, tapping the ogryn on the top of his head and when the abhuman looked up at him and grinned he pointed to the next cannon along, "That one." he said. However, rather than putting Mayer down so that they could both walk over to the next artillery piece the ogryn simply began to walk towards while Mayer was still perched on his shoulders, "Whoa!" he exclaimed, waving his arms as he tried to retain his balance and avoid dropping the fuel can.

"Don't worry bomber," Grey called out while the other Catachans watched this and laughed, "we'll make a rough rider out of you yet!"

Once all three of the cannons were rigged with fuel poured down their barrels the string fuses were lit by Mayer just as Second Platoon were leaving the clearing before he hurried to rejoin his squad. Behind them one of the lengths of string did indeed burn through without the flame getting up to the muzzle of the cannon it hung from but the other lengths of string continued to burn and when the first of the flames reached the cannon muzzle it ignited the residue of the highly flammable fuel that Mayer had poured down it. There was a sudden flash of light as the fuel residue caught fire and a jet of flame shot down the barrel as far as the explosive filled shell in the chamber at the bottom and it exploded.

The blast was enough to rip the entire vehicle on which the cannon was mounted apart and the fireball it produced washed over not only the other two self propelled guns but also the stockpile of shells that had been gathered for them, triggering more explosions from these that set the entire clearing alight.

"We should get a move on." Vance commented as the night sky was lit up by the flames coming from the burning wrecks, ammunition and undergrowth.

"Captain Wolf this is Molla." Molla's voice said suddenly via her microbead.

"Go ahead sergeant." Wolf responded.

"Captain, Rull just checked in. He says that there's a group of Orks about eight hundred metres from here to the north. He says that most of them are larger than usual and a lot of them are wearing camo of some sort. They look like Blood Axes and it looks like it could be something like a forward command post." Molla told her.

"Surely we can't have got lucky enough to have found the warboss already." Wolf responded.

"Sorry captain. Rull says that they're what the Orks call nobbs, none of them look big enough to be a warboss." Molla said.

"Nevertheless," Aetus said, his armour picking up the conversation, "a command post such as this one will undoubtedly be feeding information back to the warboss himself."

"Yes captain, Rull thought of that as well but given the number of Blood Axes about he couldn't risk getting too close or even he wouldn't be able to avoid being seen. He spotted at least two sentry units hidden nearby and that's when he withdrew." Molla said.

"We need intelligence on this command post." Aetus said.

"What about Koroth?" Wolf asked, and she looked at where Koroth stood close by her command section,

"Could you get close to an Ork command post or do you think they'd know that you weren't supposed to be there?" she asked him.

"I can do it. I'll find out wot dey is up to and tell ya where da lads on watch is if I spots 'em." Koroth replied.

"Captain Aetus did you catch that? Koroth thinks that he can find out what's going on there."

"According to the map data there is a gully just over a hundred metres to the south. We will take up a defensive position there while the Ork heads for the command post. Your sniper is to monitor him as best as he can. At the first hint of betrayal he is to execute him." Aetus ordered.

"Yes captain, I'll inform him now." Wolf replied.

While Koroth headed north towards the Ork command post Second Platoon and the space marines of the Deathwatch retreated away from it, falling back as far as a gully deep enough to provide cover from enemy fire and while the Catachans deployed lying on the sloped sides the marines crouched behind them, ready to be able to stand up and fire over Second Platoon if they came under fire. Meanwhile Shayal sat down and took a set of tarot cards from her pouch.

"Going to see if you can find that warboss using them?" Molla commented, looking over his shoulder from nearby.

"It may be possible." she replied.

"And if not you could always try telling a few fortunes." Molla suggested, grinning. Then he looked at Wolf and added, "How about it captain? Find out if you're destined for further promotion?"

"Oh I don't think that-" Wolf began.

"The Emperor's Tarot offers a window into many futures." Shayal said.

"Go for it captain." Torrent, Second Platoon's medicae commented from close by when she sensed that Molla was up to something.

"It's not like we're doing anything else." Vance added who also could not help but think that Molla had planned something.

"Oh very well. What do I do?" Wolf asked, walking over to Shayal and the astropath held out the deck of psychically reactive cards.

"Shuffle them and hand them back. If the Emperor grants me a vision of your future I will pass it on to you." Shayal told her.

Wolf took the cards and quickly shuffled them before returning them to Shayal, at which point the astropath

took the top card from pack and placed it down on the ground beside her.

"A man." she said, "He is known to you. Close to you."

"One of my platoon then?" Wolf said as Shayal dealt out more cards

"Most likely. He is a soldier who makes you an offer. An offer you have already rejected." Shayal said.

"Now that is interesting. Who here do you keep rejecting captain?" Torrent said, looking at Molla and staring at him.

"Oh shut up Torrent." Wolf said, "She hasn't said anything about-

"You are destined to become as one." Shayal said and Wolf's eyes widened.

"No way." she said.

"You will bring him closer to you and you will be stronger for it. You will be join in spirit as in body." Shayal said.

"I need to go and make sure everyone is in position." Wolf said suddenly and she turned around and hurried off along the gully, watched by the nearby Catachans.

"Thanks." Molla said to Shayal, "I think that was just what I needed." and then he took a pair of candy bars from his webbing and handed them to her.

"I'm impressed Tari." Vance said to Molla, "Using an astropath to try and convince a woman that she's destined to sleep with you?"

"I'm nothing if not original." Molla replied and then both men turned back towards the jungle, watching for any signs of approaching greenskins.

"I am surprised at you." Veneel said, sitting down beside Shayal as she picked up the cards and began to shuffle them again, "Performing a fake reading in exchange for something as trivial as candy."

"Aloysius Veneel have you studied reading the Emperor's Tarot?" Shayal asked.

"I have dabbled but my skills are no where near as developed as yours." Veneel answered.

"Then how can you be certain that the future is not exactly what Sergeant Molla wants it to be?" Shayal pointed out.

5.

Koroth made little noise as he picked his way through the jungle towards the command post. On the other hand he could hear Ork voices from up ahead and there was the dull orange glow of a camp fire. As he got closer Koroth started to notice the presence of Orks hidden all around him. Even if the camouflaged pattern of their clothing had not given away their identities as Blood Axes, Koroth would have known this from the fact that they were able to even attempt to conceal themselves, let alone remain still and quiet for so long.

These units of sentries did not react to Koroth as he walked between them, only halting when he was close enough to see into the small clearing where the Ork nobbs were gathered and he stood against a tree so that he would be hidden by its shadow while he could still see them in the illuminated clearing.

The flames that illuminated the clearing actually came from a number of torches stuck into the ground in a circle around the edge while the ground inside this had been cleared of all vegetation. This had allowed the Orks to turn the ground into a map using rocks and sticks to represent different details while the nobbs gathered around were able to use longer sticks to scratch marks in the ground or push these markers around to explain the situation to the others. Koroth then smiled when he saw a Gretchin creep up behind one of the Ork nobbs and attempt to remove his money pouch from his belt, only for the large Ork to roar as he spun around and start lashing the Gretchin with the longer stick he held.

"Get out of it ya thievin' runt!" he bellowed as the squealing creature fled back into the jungle.

"Da gits still ain't comin' out from inside da walls." a nob dressed all in black, showing off that he was from the Goffs clan. The Goffs had a well deserved reputation for toughness even among the Orks and it was only to be expected that they would be at the forefront of the assault on the human held fortress.

"Why would dey need to?" another Ork asked, this one dressed in clothing marked heavily in the red of the Evil Suns, "No matter 'ow many lads we chuck at dem walls dey ain't getting' through. Da gits know dat so dey can wait inside." then he looked at the group of Blood Axe nobbs all gathered on the other side of the map from the Orks of the other clans present, "Wot we needs is wagons. Wagons with guns on 'em dat can crack dem walls wide open."

"Da gits 'ave wagons an' all." one of the Blood Axes pointed out.

"Dey used 'em when dey took da fort in da first place." a second Blood Axe added, reminding the others of how the Catachans had used what little remained of their armoured forces to support their troops as they stormed the fortress, "Dey also got rokkits and zappas dat dey can fire from dem walls. If we try usin' our wagons den dey'll just use 'em pick ours off from da walls. Wot about da grot tunnels?"

"Blocked." the Goff replied, "Me lads got into a few and dey couldn't get more dan a dozen paces before it was all rubble. We'll need more grots to dig 'em out again or bomms to blast us new 'oles."

"We got way more wagons dan da gits got." the Evil Sun said, "Da boss needs to know dat we can crush 'em flat. Dey can't take all our wagons out before we smash da gates open."

"And 'ow d'ya know dat den?" a Blood Axe said, "Da boss 's told ya wot we is doin'. We keep 'ittin' da walls until da gits is forced to bring out dare own wagons against our lads. Den we blast 'em. Once dare wagons is smashed we'll 'it da walls again with every lad we got. Dat'll stop 'em from usin' dare rokkits and zappas while da wagons smash da gates."

"Da boss 'as got da brain of a runt." another Ork nob said. This Ork wore clothing that was crude even by greenskin standards, giving him a far more primitive and savage appearance than any of the others. In addition his skin was covered in tattoos, with depictions of snakes featuring heavily. This Ork was a Snake Bite, the most conservatively minded of all the greenskin clans who favoured the most basic forms of warfare, even sometimes casting aside their firearms to attack solely using simple bladed weapons. Koroth knew that this Ork would not be happy serving under a Blood Axe and having to go along with the warboss' revolutionary ideas of warfare intended to bring victory with the minimum loss of lives and equipment to the Orks. However, whereas if he saw such behaviour among humans Koroth would be inclined to try and use that to split his enemy's ranks he knew that the Snake Bites would still be able to see the bigger picture, recognising that fighting against the warboss would be in the interests of the humans more than any Ork. When it came down to it, the Snake Bites would still take their orders from the Blood Axe warboss just to be able to join in the fighting but they would not be cowed into silence about their opinion of his strategy, "Ya can tell 'im I said dat an' all."

"Don't worry, da boss gets told everythin'." a Blood Axe responded, "Now go back to ya lads and tell da next wave to get ready but not to move until we tells 'em to. If da gits do bring out dare wagons da boss don't want too many lads out in da open to get shot."

Koroth decided that he had heard enough. The nature of the orders just given to the Ork commanders presented the humans waiting for him with an opportunity to either delay or disrupt the next attack on the fortress. If they could take out the command post then the order to attack would never come and either the

other Orks would eventually give into their impatience and attack without proper orders or they would have to wait for the gap in their chain of command to be filled, presumably with more Blood Axes. Stepping out from the shadow of the tree Koroth turned around and started to walk back the way he had come, this time making a more careful mental note of the locations of each of the Blood Axe sentry units he saw along the way.

“How long do you think we've got until they order another wave in?” Wolf asked when Koroth was done explaining what he had overheard at the Ork command post.

“Dunno.” Koroth replied, shrugging.

“We should move as quickly as possible.” Aetus said.

“Well we know where the clearing is so a mortar strike should let us hit their leaders without having to deal with the sentries.” Wolf suggested.

“Dey won't stay put once ya start lobbin' bomms at 'em.” Koroth said, “Da nobbs or da lads. Dey'll likely send a runner to da front lines as soon as da first bommm lands.”

“Ork nobbs are tough. One round might not kill them all even if they're close together.” Vance pointed out.

“Second Platoon's mortars are capable of attacking the command post from here. This position should be sufficiently easy to defend against a counter attack.” Aetus said, “Captain Wolf have your First and Second Squads deploy facing the Ork position and be prepared to defend against them. My men and your ogryns will form a reserve to deal with any greenskins that get too close.”

“That still leaves Quinn's squad.” Wolf commented.

“Yes it does.” Aetus replied, “If a runner is sent towards the Ork forces, whether to order an assault or summon reinforcements, I want your veterans to intercept them. But take them alive for questioning by Koroth. A runner will likely know the location of the Ork warboss.”

“Dat could work. Grots is all cowards.” Koroth said, “Threaten to pull off an arm and dey'll talk.”

“What if he doesn't?” Wolf asked and Koroth smiled.

“Den 'e'll talk when I threatens to pull off da other arm.” he said.

While Koroth was discussing what he had witnessed in the Ork command post Shayal continued to deal out cards from the Emperor's Tarot, searching for a pattern that would indicate that she had managed to get a fix on the alien interference. The effort of attempting to reach through the warp to find another psyker, especially an alien one was physically taxing her though and like most astropaths she had very little in the way of physical stamina. Shayal was on the verge of giving up when all of a sudden she sensed something as she was midway through drawing out another hand of cards. The first card she had drawn was that of The Dishonoured Scion, following which she had drawn The Assassin. Now the third card was in her hand, having just been drawn from the deck but she found herself unable to tell what it was. Instead her hand was frozen in place and she was unable to move. For a moment she thought she had a vision of a cave filled with Orks and their crude machines but then she was back in the jungle and viewing her surrounding using her psychic sense. However, she was not the only one sensing what was around her, now there was another presence with her and unlike her this one was physically as strong as it was mentally.

“Veneel.” she gasped, “Help me. It's here.”

“Captain Wolf!” Veneel yelled and Wolf and those around her turned to look in his direction. They immediately saw Veneel standing beside Shayal while the astropath just shuddered constantly.

“Is she possessed?” Torrent exclaimed when she saw this.

“Captain I think it's the Orks. She's made contact. One of them may be acting through her.” Veneel said.

“She is possessed.” Aetus said and one of his marines raised his bolt gun, ready to shoot Shayal.

Seeing this Veneel leapt towards Shayal and ripped the psycho-reactive card from her hand and she let out a sudden shriek.

“Stand down brother.” Aetus ordered and the marine lowered his weapon. Rushing to where Shayal sat while Veneel picked up the cards that were now scattered around her on the ground.

“What happened?” Wolf asked.

“I found it. The Ork presence in the Emperor's Tarot.” Shayal told her as she struggled to get her breath back.

“Tell us what you saw.” Aetus told her.

“I saw a cavern filled with Orks, an entire army of them.” she replied.

“Are they preparing to attack?” Wolf asked.

“I don't know. I only saw them for a moment before the Ork turned the link back on me. It used my senses to see us.” Shayal said.

“Then they know we're here.” Wolf said, looking at Aetus.

“That is a possibility that we cannot ignore.” the marine captain responded, “Which means we cannot afford the time it would take to attack the Ork camp. At this moment they could be organising a large scale assault against us. Astropath Shayal, are you well enough to move?”

“Yes, I can walk.” Shayal responded, nodding her head even though she was still breathing heavily after her

experience.

"Torrent check her anyway." Wolf ordered and the medicae opened up her medical kit as she walked over to the astropath.

"Good job that Emperor botherer Preacher Black wasn't here. He'd have shot her on the spot for sure."

Vance commented while Wolf took out her dataslate and activated it, calling up the map function. The map had been generated from scans taken from space just before the Catachan VII Division had begun its ill fated landing and so the information it contained was limited. However, it was all she had to refer to in trying to determine where the cavern Shayal had seen in her vision was located.

"Our information about caves is patchy at best." she said as she started zooming in on some of the mountains in the region, "But auspex scans suggest that these mountains may have large hollow areas in them." and she pointed to a location on the map.

"Fourteen kilometres from here. That's quite a trek. A full day at least if the jungle gets thick." Vance commented and Wolf nodded.

"All while trying to avoid the Orks." she said.

"Aw I reckoned 'is 'ead was really gonna explode dat time." one of the two Ork nobs stood staring at the weirdboy said to the other.

"Yeah ya did, now pay up. Give us a tooth." the other responded, holding out a hand to be paid for the wager they had made between them.

The weirdboy had been walking through the cavern where the bulk of the Orks' armoured forces were being maintained and improved by the Orks' mekboys when all of a sudden he had frozen on the spot and begun to shake. Weirdboys drew their power from the collective Ork psychic field and if it built up to too great a level they were prone to having their heads explode, possibly also causing the heads of other nearby greenskins to do the same. Therefore, when he had begun to convulse most of the other Orks close by had fled, seeking cover beneath the metal hulls of vehicles in the hope that they would offer some protection from the expected uncontrolled outburst of psychic energy. Only the two nobs instructed by the warboss to escort the weirdboy around and keep him out of trouble had remained where they were, fearing the consequences of deserting their post more than having their heads explode quickly.

"Take it." the first nob said, leaning towards his comrade. In turn the second Ork grinned, leant back as he formed a fist and then punched the first nob in the face hard enough to knock out a pair of teeth. "Dare ya go." the nob said, rubbing his bleeding jaw as he bent down and picked up both of the teeth. Handing one of them to the other nob he looked at the second and smiled a gap-toothed smile, "Got me one an' all." he added.

"Berks!" the weirdboy snapped before striking both nobs over their heads in rapid succession with his copper staff, "Punchin' one another in da face right in front of me. D'ya wants me 'ead to explode?" and then he snatched the tooth from the nob who had just been punched, "Dat's mine for me trouble." he said sternly as the nob snarled at him, not daring to try and resist just in case it triggered a surge of psychic energy that did overload the weirdboy, "Now get me to da boss. 'E needs to 'ear dis."

The two nobs escorted the weirdboy through the network of dimly lit caverns until they reached the cave where they found the warboss listening to the complaints from a group of mekboys, each of whom wanted more resources for his own personal projects. Most of them wore the red of the Evil Suns, which was only to be expected given that clan's fascination with speed but the Blood Axes and the blue-clad Death Skulls were also represented.

"Weirdo to see ya boss." one of the weirdboy's minders announced as they entered the cave and the warboss turned towards them.

"Another readin'?" he asked, "D'ya know wot da other one means yet?"

"Maybe." the weirdboy said, walking over to where he usually sat to make his predictions based off the Emperor's Tarot.

"So speak. Wot do da cards tell ya?" the warboss demanded.

"Da cards ain't tellin me nought." the weirdboy answered.

"Pah!" the warboss snapped.

"Kill da weirdo boss. It's technology wot will win dis, not some git magic card trick." one of the mekboys said and the warboss grinned as he glared at the weirdboy.

"Now dat's a good point. Wot good is ya if dem cards don't tell me me nought?" he said and the weirdboy smiled back at him.

"Because dis time it ain't da cards boss. Da gits know about da cards and dey is usin' 'em to try and finds ya." he said.

The warboss frowned.

"Ow d'ya know dat den?" he asked.

"Because I saw wot was around one of dare own weirdos. Only it wasn't seein' exactly. I think dat da weirdo

'ad no eyes but dey still knew wot was goin' on around 'em." the weirdboy explained.

"Ow can a git know wot's goin' on without eyes? Dat's daft." one of the meks commented and the others nodded in agreement.

"Da gits got dese special weirdos wot can't see properly." the warboss told them, thinking back to his dealings with the Imperium, "Dey ain't much to look at but dey is good weirdos and dey normally just 'ang around with dare bosses."

"Dis one is in da jungle boss." the weirdboy said, "With a bunch of other gits." then he paused and smiled before he added, "Dare's beakies with 'em an' all."

A hush fell across the cave, something not at all normal when it came to Orks.

"Beakies? 'Ow many?" the warboss said.

"Just a few. Just like wot da lads 'ave reported before. One of 'em 'as a badge of a wolf on 'is armour." the weirdboy said and the warboss' eyes widened, remembering the weirdboy's tarot readings, "Dare was someone else with 'em as well. A nob." the weirdboy added.

"A Blood Axe I bet ya. Lousy git lovers." one of the meks commented and the warboss turned to glare at him angrily for a moment. He was tempted to attack the mekboy for the slur but the problem was that the individual with the humans most likely would be a Blood Axe. It was extremely rare for any member of another clan to associate with wild humans, especially those from the Imperium's forces and so he looked back at the weirdboy again, "Da traitor and da wolf." he said, "Use da cards again. Keep goin' until ya finds me da assassin. Is gonna go and organise some lads to take care of dese gits wot is 'untin' for me."

"Da cards ain't always clear boss. I already told ya dat." the weirdboy said and the warboss let out a low growl.

"Den try usin' 'em to see ya own future. See wot'll 'appen to ya if ya don't find dis assassin." he said before he turned and strode out of the cave, followed by the meks who hurried after him and continued to try making their individual cases for more resources. Meanwhile the weirdboy sat down and took out his tarot deck and began to shuffle them, dealing them out to read his own future while the two minders watched him from the tunnel entrance. After dealing four cards he hesitated and glanced in the direction of the nob's assigned to guard him. The guards obviously had no interest in what the weirdboy was doing though and neither of them was looking in his direction. Satisfied that he was not being closely monitored the weirdboy dealt another card and smiled.

"Well ain't dat interestin'?" he muttered to himself.

6.

It did not take long for Second Platoon to gather their equipment and prepare to move out but before they set off Wolf and Vance approached Captain Aetus.

"Captain Aetus," Wolf said, "my troops are ready to follow your men. Rull has already moved on to survey the ground ahead for the enemy. I know that your men have superior vision at night so it's logical for them to take the lead now but when-

"You are about to suggest that when daylight arrives your men take the forward position." Aetus interrupted and Wolf smiled nervously.

"Captain the jungle is our home." Vance said, "We can move through it quickly and quietly."

"You can also conceal yourselves more easily should we make contact with the enemy. Even if you are seen they will not think your presence as significant as that of Astartes." Aetus replied and then he looked down at Wolf, "Captain Wolf I had already determined that having your troops take up a forward position during daylight would be advantageous. We will march tonight and tomorrow then set up camp at nightfall so that your men can rest themselves if we have not reached our destination by then."

The cavern where the main Ork armoured forces were housed was filled with the roar of multiple powerful engines running at the same time. It was not unusual for some of the vehicles inside to be started up to check that repairs or upgrade work, if not fully working would at least not cause a vehicle to simply burst into flames or blow up but this was different. This time the vehicles were going to be deployed.

The vehicles chosen for the mission were all heavily armoured. Faster vehicles were available that would get the Ork forces to the front lines so that they could hunt down the human marines faster but they could only make use of their speed along a limited number of tracks and the marines had been seen within the jungle itself. This meant that vehicles capable of moving through the undergrowth were needed and that required the more powerful engines of the battlewagons and kill tanks. To try and offset this limitation in speed only vehicles from the Evil Suns clan had been assigned to the force, every Ork knew that red vehicles travelled faster and so selecting vehicles in this colour was the logical choice for a mission where speed was important. Just in case the marines got too close to these the force also included a number of dreadnoughts armed with large power claws that could cut an armoured marine in half easily. In addition to these armoured walking machines almost every vehicle in the force that was capable of carrying troops had been loaded to capacity as every Ork who could secure himself a place in the force did so, eager to test themselves against a marine in a fight.

The Ork vehicles remained in the cavern, their drivers revving the engines and spewing out massive clouds of thick black smoke until a unit of Ork nobbs dressed in the camouflaged clothing of the Blood Axes walked up to one of the battlewagons, the only such vehicle not to be filled with troops and clambered aboard. The largest of these nobbs climbed up into the turret so that he could look out through the commander's cupola. "Let's roll." he said.

"Ya 'eard dat Blood Axe. Let's show 'em wot real speed is." the vehicle commander instructed the driver and both roared with laughter as the driver accelerated as rapidly as his vehicle would allow, racing out of the cavern.

The area immediately outside the cavern was devoid of vegetation, it all having been ripped up or crushed flat by the steady stream of heavy vehicles over the years since the warboss had claimed the mountain as his headquarters. Thus the only obstacles that the convoy of vehicles that followed the lead battlewagon were the pieces of debris that constantly built up around Ork settlements. This soon changed when the inevitable break downs occurred though and a number of the Ork vehicles ground to a halt, the spluttering of their engines followed by the loud crashes of collisions as other Ork drivers found themselves unable to steer away in time. However, despite these losses the vast majority of the armour convoy made it safely into the jungle, smashing and burning their way through the undergrowth as they ignored the existing tracks to head for the front lines in as straight a line as they could.

"We can afford one hour and no more." Aetus said when his squad and Second Platoon came to a halt just as the sun was rising, "That will have to be enough for your troops to rest, eat and perform any necessary ablutions before we move on."

"That should be enough for-" Wolf began before there was a whistle and she instinctively ducked and drew her las pistol at the warning from Molla, "Report sergeant." she said into her microbead.

"Captain we've got a body here." Molla responded.

"Human?" Wolf asked.

"Negative captain. Gretchin. Looks like a single stab wound from behind. A large blade entered between the

ribs and was twisted to spread them apart." Molla said, "Too precise for greenskins."

"Yes it sounds like Rull's handiwork to me." Wolf replied.

"Agreed. This thing was probably out foraging and got too close to him. He killed it and left here to warn us that there may be others about." Molla said.

"We've only got an hour before we move on so there's no time to bury the body properly. Make sure it looks like it was killed by an Ork." Wolf ordered.

"Mess it up in other words. Understood captain." Molla responded and then the channel went dead.

Wolf then switched her microbead to address the entire platoon.

"Okay we have one hour to rest. There could be greenskins in the area though so no campfires and stay alert. Report any movement and nobody is to leave our perimeter alone." she told them before sitting down on a nearby log.

Quinn's squad formed a line as they sat down facing in alternate directions, enabling them to monitor the jungle in both directions while they ate and drank. The veterans had already positioned themselves towards what would become the front of their formation when they set off again and so the jungle that half of them now faced had not been checked and cleared by anyone since Rull passed by.

They were just beginning to eat when Quinn heard a dull rumbling in the distance he looked up.

"What's up sarge?" one of his men asked.

"Could be trouble. Big trouble." Quinn answered and he continued to eat his ration bar as he got up and walked over to a nearby tree, using it for support as he peered around and looked through his magnoculars. Through these he easily spotted the haze in the air some distance away that was produced by the engine exhaust of a crudely built and badly tuned Ork vehicle, "Tank." he added when the irregular shape of the alien armoured vehicle lumbered into view through the cloud of its own making.

Reacting to this all of Quinn's squad picked up their weapons and took aim towards the source of the noise, audible more clearly now as the tank got nearer. Most of the veterans were armed with shotguns that would be ineffective against anything other than the lightest of vehicles with exposed crew members. However, two of the veterans carried flamers that could shoot a jet of burning liquid that would find gaps in armour such as vision slits and hatches that had been left open while another was armed with a meltagun, a powerful energy weapon that could burn through even the thickest of armour. The entire squad also carried Krak grenades that might stand a chance of penetrating a tank's armour if placed correctly but these required the veterans to get close to the tank to be used effectively, as did all of their other ranged weapons while through his magnoculars Quinn could see that the Ork vehicle was armed with multiple ranged weapons that could probably already hit the men of his squad if its crew spotted them.

"Keep down!" Quinn hissed, waving his hand for his men to take cover.

The Ork tank was moving at an angle from where Quinn was viewing it from and as it continued to advance he heard the sound of firing as some of the gunners amused themselves by shooting into the jungle, sometimes at a random local life form but mainly the firing was just random and unaimed.

"Sergeant Quinn," Wolf's voice said through his microbead, "is that firing?"

"Yes captain." he replied while he continued to watch the Ork tank crushing its way through the jungle,

"There's an Ork tank about two hundred metres from my position. It's not seen us yet but if it carries on on its present heading then it should run into Molla and his men soon."

It was then that Quinn noticed another cloud of exhaust smoke some distance beyond the Ork tank and he zoomed in on it with his magnoculars, seeing a second alien vehicle there as well. This second vehicle was lighter than the first, a half track design with a boxy rear section that suggested cargo or troop carrying capability. Zooming in even closer with his magnoculars Quinn spotted several Ork troops leaning out of openings in the side of the battlewagon that confirmed this theory.

"Make that two Ork vehicles." he said into his microbead, "We've got a troop carrier as well." then he looked either side of the two Ork vehicles and in direction he saw more clouds of exhaust fumes, "Captain I have two more contacts. Line abreast."

"So not a convoy heading for the front then?" Wolf asked.

"I doubt. If you want my honest opinion, I think they're hunting us, I don't think we can slip around." Quinn replied.

"All squads stand to." Wolf ordered. Then she turned to Aetus, "Captain we've got anti-armour weapons but using them will draw attention to our position. Do you have any suggestions?"

"I might be able to send 'em away." Kororth suggested before Aetus could reply.

"No." Shayal responded, "I know that the enemy psyker saw you through me. If these Orks are here hunting us then they know about you as well."

"The Orks are unlikely to have vox communications in their vehicles so they will not be able to warn their superiors of our presence if they can be eliminated quickly enough." Aetus said and Vance smiled.

"A smoke grenade through a hatch." he said, "The crew will have to bail out and then we hit them with these before they know what's happening." and he drew a pistol from his webbing. This was not the las pistol he

carried as his primary weapon though, instead it was a bullet firing stub pistol. This was one of a batch that Second Platoon had come across in the wreck of an ancient human spacecraft and taken for themselves and now each member of the platoon other than the ogryns carried one as a back up weapon. Furthermore the weapons had been modified by Fourth Company's tech priest to accept silencers, making them ideal for stealthy operations.

"All units this is Captain Wolf," Wolf broadcast to the platoon, "switch to stub pistols and fit silencers. Sergeant Khor your squad is to withhold all fire. Hand to hand combat only. Sergeant Quinn get your men into the trees. I want smoke grenades in four adjacent vehicles. All other squads form up behind Third Squad and prepare to engage the Orks when they bail out."

"Brothers," Aetus said, looking around at his men, "stalker rounds." and each of the marines promptly cleared his weapon, swapping the conventional bolt ammunition for a self silencing round that would also enable them to strike without alerting any more greenskins to their presence.

7.

From inside the Ork kill tank it was near impossible to hear anything going on outside while the powerful engine roared and rattled in its mounting. Added to this the various vision slits offered only a very narrow field of view to the Orks looking out through them so the commander of the tank had instead opted to keep his cupola open so that he could stand through it. However, even then his hearing was limited by the noise of the vehicle's crude engine while he was forced to wear goggles for protection from the debris that was constantly being hurled up by the passage of his tank through the undergrowth, goggles that he then had to keep wiping clean as this debris stuck to them. The overall result was that the tank commander could see and hear very little and so failed to notice Quinn and one of his men high up in a tree above him as the vehicle drove beneath it.

"Now." Quinn said to the other Catachan and then he stepped off the branch they were standing on. Secured by a line tied around his body while the other Catachan bore his weight above, Quinn slid straight down towards the Ork tank and landed on its hull just beside the commander's cupola. Even the partially blinded and largely deafened Ork could not fail to notice the sudden appearance of the Catachan soldier right beside him and he reached down for his sidearm. Quinn already had his silenced stub pistol in his hand though and before the startled Ork could call out a warning he put a bullet right between its eyes.

The dead Ork slumped forwards while Quinn hurried to cut through the line securing him to the tree now behind the tank before he could be dragged off it with his knife at the same time as he holstered his pistol. Then he plucked a smoke grenade from his webbing and pulled out the pin before hurling it through the open cupola. Quinn vaulted down from the roof of the tank before the grenade went off and rolled across the ground when he landed.

Inside the tank the rattle of the grenade as it fell and bounced off the interior surfaces of the tank went unheard by the crew and the first they knew about it was when it burst open and the interior of the tank was filled with a thick cloud of choking smoke. The Ork crew immediately rushed towards the handful of hatches that would enable them to escape the still running vehicle. There were fewer exit points than there were Ork crew and this resulted in them fighting one another as they each tried to get out of the vehicle.

It was as the Orks emerged from the now out of control kill tank that Mayer and his squad also emerged from their nearby hiding place and fired their stub pistols repeatedly at the aliens. Individually the low velocity bullets fired by the Catachans' pistols had little stopping power against an Ork and needed to hit a vital spot for a one shot kill but their magazines held enough rounds that each of the greenskins could be peppered with multiple hits before collapsing. Meanwhile the kill tank lumbered onwards, now moving in an erratic fashion and steadily losing speed without the driver's foot on the gas pedal until it had slowed down enough that when it hit a tree it came to a sudden halt.

Two more Ork tanks met a similar fate as Catachan veterans dropped down from above and tossed smoke grenades through hatches or vision slits while Molla and Grey were ready with their men to take out the panicking greenskin crews with pistol fire as they bailed out, coughing and spluttering.

The battlewagon filled with Ork troops was a different matter, however. A smoke grenade could still be thrown into the vehicle but it was built with the rapid disembarkation of its occupants in mind and so when it went off and began to fill the inside with smoke the Ork passengers were able to quickly and easily leap out through one of the numerous hatches and be ready to fight as soon as they landed. This had been anticipated though and waiting for the Orks were Wolf's command section, Khor's ogryns and also Aetus and his marines.

The marines reacted most quickly, emerging from their hiding places and fired rapid bursts from their bolt weapons that cut down four of the the aliens almost instantly. Realising that they were under attack and seeing the marines ahead of them triggered an instant reaction in the Orks and the survivors let out their traditional war cry as they charged forwards.

"Waaargh!"

The Orks fired their own weapons as they ran towards the marines but this was ineffective, the few rounds that struck their intended targets simply bouncing off their armour.

"Sergeant Khor, now." Wolf ordered and nearby the ogryn BONEHead got to his feet.

"Ogryns charge!" he yelled and then the entire squad of abhumans got to their feet and charged at the Orks. The ogryns' ripper guns had been emptied of ammunition before the fight to make sure that they did not fire them, creating a sound that some of the greenskins in the area may have been able to identify but the muscular abhumans still held the weapons. Now though they swung them like clubs as they smashed into the Orks, joining the marines who had switched to their combat blades. The Orks were more evenly matched against the marines in close combat but even the strongest of the aliens present, the nob in charge of the infantry unit, was no match in terms of strength for an ogryn and as he turned to face the charging abhuman

he was lifted off his feet by a blow struck by Khor himself as he swung his ripper gun upwards. Koroth also charged at the Ork squad, firing his pistol on the move in the knowledge that if the sound of its discharge was overheard by any other Orks then it would be dismissed as one of the battlewagon's passengers firing his weapon from the vehicle.

While the Ork infantry was being dealt with by troops better suited to hand to hand combat with the physically powerful aliens Wolf and her command section concentrated on the crew of the battlewagon. Given the greater distance from the crew stations to the hatches, these Orks were slower to bail out of the smoke filled vehicle and as they were suffering the effects of the smoke far worse as they came stumbling out coughing and gasping for breath. This made them easy targets for Wolf's command section and they were quickly despatched in the same way as the crews of the three tanks, by which time the last of the infantry were being mopped up as well. However, while the four vehicles and their crews were being dealt with there were more Ork machines closing from behind them. Striding forwards and following the trail of flattened and uprooted vegetation left in the wake of the armoured vehicles came a trio of Ork dreadnoughts.

Each of the bipedal walking machines was fitted with four weapon arms, two of them mounting heavy calibre Ork stubbers while the second pair terminated in large mechanical claws that snapped open and shut as they advanced.

First Squad was directly in the path of these machines and Molla and his men dived for cover as they came under sustained fire. Molla heard one of his men scream briefly as he was hit several times and then he felt the impact of his squad's vox operator as the man's body fell into him. The vox set on the man's back had also been hit and sparks flew from it as the electronics inside failed.

"This is First Squad we are under fire from three Ork dreadnoughts. Green and Masters are both down."

Molla broadcast with his microbead.

The same tactic used against the Ork tanks would not work against these newly arrived vehicles. Each of them possessed only a single narrow vision slit and the pilots were surgically hard wired into their vehicles meaning that they had no need of hatches that could be pried open for a grenade to be thrown inside.

However, their pilots were still living beings and that made them vulnerable to alternative forms of attack.

"Aloysius help me." Shayal said. She and the sanctioned psyker had remained behind the marines and Catachans, staying out of the fighting so far but now she knew that her skills could be of use.

"Take my hand." Veneel replied, helping her to her feet and supporting her as they hurried forwards towards the sound of automatic weapon fire.

"This is far enough." Shayal said as she came to a halt and raised a hand that she pointed towards the closest of the Ork dreadnoughts. Then she reached out with her psychic powers, searching for the presence of the pilot in the warp. With all Orks generating a small part of the gestalt psychic field that weirdboys tapped into it was not difficult for the astropath to find him and when she did she poured her power directly into his brain.

The Ork inside the dreadnought began to convulse and as he did so did the machine he was piloting, its arms flailing and weapons firing randomly all around it. Blood began to pour from the Ork's eyes, nose, mouth and ears until the build up of psychic power inside his skull continued until it reached a critical point and in mimicry of what happened when weirdboys attempted to channel too much power his head simply exploded and the dreadnought immediately toppled over and came crashing to the ground.

Astropaths were not battle trained though and the strain of employing her power in this way, without the benefit of the amplifier systems most often employed when sending messages over interstellar distances proved to be too much for Shayal and she too collapsed. Fortunately Veneel was on hand to catch her before she hit the ground and injured herself but it was obvious that alternative methods of destroying the remaining two dreadnoughts without attracting attention would have to be found.

"Ogryns attack!" Khor shouted at his squad and the abhumans all charged towards the closest of the two remaining dreadnoughts. The machine's pilot saw the massive figures approaching and turned to face them, unleashing a hail of heavy calibre bullets. One of the abhumans in particular was struck repeatedly by this gunfire and he staggered forwards, still under fire until he collapsed in a lifeless heap on the ground.

The gunfire stopped when the first of the ogryns got within arms reach of the dreadnought and the Ork pilot lashed out with one of the machine's clawed arms. Designed to be strong enough to rip open the armour of tanks, the claw was more than enough to deal with an ogryn and the first of the abhumans to reach the dreadnought was promptly impaled through his torso and killed instantly.

Khor swung his ripper gun at the dreadnought but apart from a loud 'clang' that startled the driver encased inside it his attack had no effect and he had to dodge as the dreadnought swung back at him with one of its claws. The other ogryns joined in with the attack, hammering at the hull of the dreadnought while dodging its claws. Although they were unable to inflict meaningful damage to the dreadnought, the ogryns provided enough of a distraction to the pilot that Onund was able to break from the other marines and charge at the machine himself. Equipped with grenades capable of penetrating the dreadnought's armour the Space Wolf could have destroyed it that way, but he was painfully aware of the need to avoid creating an explosion that

would attract the attention of more Orks so instead of a grenade it was a chainsword that he drew from his belt. The weapon started with a roar and Onund struck at the dreadnought. Even with the cutting blade of his chainsword he knew that he could not penetrate the dreadnought's thick armour but there was an obvious weakness in it.

The vision slit.

The slit was left open by necessity, it was the only way for food to be passed inside for the pilot but it was narrow enough to make it a difficult target to hit. However, Onund could see that it was wide enough for his chainsword blade to get through if his aim was good enough. His first strike was angled incorrectly and sparks flew from the dreadnought as its teeth ground against the hull just below the slit and the Ork inside roared in anger as some of these flew inside the vehicle and stung his face. Onund corrected the angle of his weapon for his next attack, before the dreadnought could attack back with its claws and thrust his chainsword through the vision slit.

The Ork pilot gasped in horror as the tip of the blade came through the slit, unable to move his head enough before the chainsword struck him. Ripping through flesh and bone the blade effectively decapitated the dreadnought's pilot, covering the cramped interior of the vehicle in blood and bone fragments as well as spraying it out through the slit.

This left just a single Ork dreadnought that was now spraying bullets at wherever the pilot thought he saw movement, A random round struck one of the Deathwatch marines in the throat where it was able to pierce his armour but he was the only casualty to be inflicted by this shooting. When the Ork pilot saw that he was now the only one left facing the human troops he reconsidered the wisdom of fighting on though and in a rare attack of common sense decided to withdraw and get help.

The dreadnought promptly turned around on the spot and began striding away from the Catachans, following the trail left through the jungle by the Ork tanks.

"Captain are you seeing this? The enemy dreadnought is retreating." Grey transmitted.

"If it reaches other Orks then we could be drowning in greenskins very quickly." Vance said.

"Then we need to hurry. Gather up our bodies and get out of here." Wolf said.

"There is no time. The dreadnought must be destroyed." Aetus responded.

"But if the Orks hear-" Wolf began.

"That is a risk we must take." Aetus interrupted and Wolf sighed as she reached for her microbead again.

"Sergeant Grey, take the shot." she ordered.

Upon hearing this Grey looked at the two Catachans who made up Second Squad's heavy weapon team.

"Prince. Lesser. Take out that dreadnought." he told them and the two men hurried to set up and load their missile launcher.

This weapon was easily capable of taking out the Ork dreadnought, especially now that it was moving away from the Catachans and was presenting the thinner armour at its rear to them. However, the inevitable explosion risked alerting more Orks to the Catachans' presence. Fortunately for them it turned out not to be necessary to use the missile launcher at all.

As the dreadnought continued its withdrawal its pilot blinked, an intense light shining in through his vision slit and straight into his eyes one at a time before it settled down on his forehead. Then before the Ork could consider the implications of such a light shining on him it was followed by a silenced projectile that hit him in his forehead.

The pilot was killed while the dreadnought was mid stride and it unexpectedly toppled forwards, ending up lying face down on the ground while the Catachans watched.

"Emperor bless you Rull." Wolf said.

"We must hurry still. The absence of these vehicles will not go unnoticed by the Orks for very long." Aetus said. Then he looked through the jungle at the trail of crushed vegetation, "At least now we have an easy trail to follow back to their base."

Orks and Gretchin were already picking over the Ork bodies, empty vehicles and toppled dreadnoughts when the battlegon carrying the Blood Axe nob in charge of the hunt for the human force known to be at large arrived and the nobs disembarked.

"Four wagons and three kans." one of them said as they looked around, "Dese gits ain't messin' about."

Meanwhile the largest of the Blood Axe nobs bent over and picked up a pair of empty casings from one of Second Platoon's stub pistols.

"Me lads 'ave been over everythin'." an Evil Sun nob announced as he walked up to the Blood Axes.

"Yeah and it looks like dey still is." a Blood Axe commented, looking at where a cluster of Gretchin were using a rock to strike the head of a dead Ork so as to knock out his teeth.

"Findas keepas. If ya wanted loot an' all den ya should 'ave got 'ere quicker." the Evil Sun said.

"Wot about da gits?" the largest Blood Axe asked and the Evil Sun shrugged.

Wot gits? Dare ain't no gits 'ere. No bodies either. Maybe it wasn't dem. Maybe dare's some tankbustas

about wot got bored.”

The largest Blood Axe snarled and then let out a roar as he reached out and grabbed the Evil Sun by his collar, dragging him closer and holding the empty bullet casings right in front of his face.

“Does dese look like somethin' dat a tankbusta would use? Da grot runner ya sent said dat no-one 'eard nought. Wot sort of tankbusta don't make no noise? Dey can't even fart without yellin' about it.” he yelled. Then he dropped the bullet casings and pointed at the ground where despite it being heavily disturbed there was a large footprint that stood out among the debris, “And wot about dat? Ya ain't got no nob's in 'eavy armour 'ere so dat didn't come from any of ya own lads. Dat's a beaky footprint dat is. Ya can tell by da size and da shape.” turning towards the closest of the disabled Ork tanks the Blood Axe strode towards it, dragging the Evil Sun along with him and kicking a Gretchin who was attempting to remove a section of exhaust pipe from the vehicle out of his way, “And 'ow exactly was dese wagons taken out? Apart from da bits wot ya own lads 'ave nicked from 'em dey is still one piece. Tankbustas would 'ave blown great big 'oles in 'em.” the Blood Axe said before peering in through a hole left where someone had removed one of the tank's secondary weapons and on the floor of the vehicle he saw the Imperial Guard issue smoke grenade, “Da gits smoked our lads out of dare wagons den shot 'em. Now tell ya lads to stop lootin' and get after da gits.” he ordered.

“But we ain't seen wot way dey went.” the Evil Sun protested and the Blood Axe let out a growl as he snarled at him.

“Dare's only one way dey would 'ave gone!” he snapped, pushing the Evil Sun nob to the ground. Angered by this the Evil Sun drew his pistol but as he did this all of the Blood Axes drew their own weapons and pointed them down at him, “Go on den, let's do dis.” the largest Blood Axe added as he aimed his pistol at the Evil Sun's head, “Sluggas, choppas or just our bare 'ands. I don't care which. Da boss might though when 'e finds a bunch of gits 'ammerin' on 'is front door because ya couldn't do 'as ya is told.”

“Like I said, dare wasn't no gits 'ere when we arrived. So where did dey go?” the Evil Sun hissed back at him. “Where else?” the Blood Axe responded and he thrust his arm out, pointing at the trail left in the jungle by the vehicles that had been disabled here by the human troops, “Dey won't follow dat trail exactly, dey is too smart for dat but they'll be movin' dat way to try and get to da boss. Send one of ya bikers to warn 'im. Even if we don't catch up with da gits da boss can 'ave a few mobs waitin' for 'em when dey shows up.”

8.

Some of the battlewagons deployed as part of the force hunting the human troops had various types of Ork motorbike mounted on them for use as courier vehicles, delivering messages quicker than even the fastest of Gretchin runners. One of these, a half track design that despite its role still mounted a pair belt fed weapons that were loaded while the rider pulled on a set of goggles before climbing onto the bike.

"Is I loaded?" he asked, looking around at the Gretchin who had been loading the bike's guns and the Gretchin gave him a thumbs up sign. Grinning the Ork depressed the twin triggers mounted on his handle bars and laughed as his weapons both fired a stream of bullets into the jungle ahead of the bike. Then he ceased fire, started the bike and sped off down the trail that had been cleared by the battlewagon that had transported the bike to begin with.

Belching thick smoke from its exhaust and kicking up a cloud of debris from the ground, the bike sped along the trail that led all the way back to the warboss in his mountain headquarters. Every so often the Ork rider let off a quick burst of fire from the bike's guns and laughed at the sound of their firing, not caring that the noise from these weapons was carrying a long way into the jungle.

"Do you hear that?" Wolf said to Aetus and the marine captain looked down at her.

"My hearing is far more sensitive than yours." he replied, "That is the sound of an Ork warbike. Given that they are normally deployed in units of at least three it is likely that this is a messenger. Probably carrying word of us to the warboss. We should endeavour to stop him."

"The is Wolf, does anyone have eyes on that bike?" Wolf broadcast.

"I see smoke from behind us captain." Molla responded, "Looks like he's coming up the trail we're shadowing."

"Can you take him out?" Wolf asked.

"I'm already on it." Molla answered.

While Molla spoke he was taking a length of rope from one of his men. First Squad was just a few metres away from the trail that the warbike was rapidly approaching along and with the rope in his hand Molla ran out across this, trailing the rope behind him. Upon reaching the far side of the trail he looped the rope around a tree and tied it tightly. As soon as this was done he whistled and the rope was pulled taught from the other side of the trail, lifting up off the ground before being secured around another tree. Rather than return to his squad Molla stayed where he was, crouching down and drawing his las pistol as he waited for the Ork biker to arrive.

This happened very soon after, with the warbike speeding along the trail. The rider was hunched forwards as he rode his vehicle as fast as he could in true Evil Suns style. Between the speed at which he was travelling limiting his reaction time and the restriction imposed on his vision by his dust covered goggles the Ork rider failed to see the rope that was strung across the trail and the first he knew of its presence was when he rode right into it and was promptly dragged from his saddle as his bike continued onwards.

Despite hitting the ground at high speed the Ork was not injured by his fall and he roared in anger as he got to his feet and looked around. The first thing he saw was the rope that had just dragged him from his bike and he grabbed it with one hand as he plucked his blade from his belt and raised the weapon to hack through it.

"You know that rope is the property of the God Emperor himself." Molla said as he stepped out of the jungle with his pistol pointing at the Ork. Unable to speak Gothic the Ork had no idea what Molla had just said but he knew instantly that the human being standing in front of him was the reason why he had been brought off his warbike and he broke into a run, charging at Molla with his blade held high.

"Waaargh!" the Ork screamed at the top of his voice but Molla did not flinch. Instead he pulled the trigger of his las pistol and shot the Ork between the eyes.

"Molla to Captain Wolf," he said into his microbead, "target neutralised. You might want to come and take a look at him."

The Ork rider appeared little different from any other Ork that the Catachans and marines had encountered since their arrival on the planet but there was one feature about him that made him more interesting than others, the satchel that was hung across his chest and while Koroth was in the process of pulling the teeth from the body Wolf and Vance were going through the contents of this, watched closely by Aetus and Onund. "I've seen Ork glyphs painted across all sorts of surfaces before now but I don't think I've ever actually seen proper documents before." Vance said, looking at the crude writing on the rough sheets of paper he held in his hands. The Ork glyphs marked on these looked to have been made with charcoal, resulting in a number of them being somewhat smeared. Their size was not consistent and they were not arranged in either neat rows or columns, giving them the appearance of something a young human child might produce when first learning to write but it was obvious that the papers were meant to convey some sort of message. A message

urgent enough that it was worth sending a warbike to deliver it. As well as the writing, two of the sheets of paper had basic sketches on them. One of these was an elongated oval with a pattern within it that was obviously meant to represent the imprint left by the armoured boot of a space marine while the other had on it a simple drawing of an Imperial Guard smoke grenade.

"Orks are not generally known for their artistry." Aetus commented.

"Koroth come and take a look at these. We need to know what they say." Wolf called out and the Blood Axe got up from beside the body and walked over to them.

"Here." Vance said, passing him the papers.

"To da mighty Warboss Dargon Skullkrusha of da Blood Axe clan." Koroth began and Aetus smiled.

"Our enemy has a name." he said and behind him Molla leant closer to Grey.

"You know just once I'd like to meet an alien warlord with a name like Ethel or Muriel." he said and Grey smirked.

"Or Emilia." he added loud enough for Wolf to hear and she glared at him while Koroth continued to read.

"Lord of Boss Mountain, killa of da weedy Boss-" he said.

"We do not need to know every word." Aetus interrupted, "Just tell us what the message is that is being communicated."

Koroth shrugged and began to quickly glance through the papers, picking out the most important points before he continued.

"Dis wos written by da boss of da mobs sent to 'unt us." he said, "It says right at da start dat it's from a nob called Norut Deadeye. 'E's another Blood Axe."

"Sounds like this Dargon Skullkrusha is handing out senior positions to members of his own clan." Wolf commented.

"Sounds right. None of da other clans would be able to run 'is army da way it's been fightin'." Koroth said.

Then he continued to explain the contents of the documents carried by the dead courier, "Dis nob must be pretty smart and sneaky 'imself. It looks like 'e 'ad a good look around where ya took out dem wagons to see 'ow ya did it. 'E's found dem smoke bomms ya chucked into 'em and figured out dat ya used 'em to get all da lads out before killin' 'em. 'E's even 'ad a guess at 'ow many of ya is from da way ya took out four wagons at once. 'E ain't so sure 'ow ya knocked out da kans though, other dan dat one wot dat ya stuck ya choppa into." he said, looking at Onund as he explained this last part, "Den 'e goes to tell da warboss dat ya is obviously dead sneaky and probably 'eadin' for 'is 'ideout. 'E says dat 'e's followin' ya but dat ya's got an 'ead start on 'im and dat da warboss might wanna send some more Blood Axes into da jungle to keep an eye out for ya. Den right at da end 'e says dat Gurdok Trukkrider of da Evil Suns 'as got less brains in is 'ead dan dare is in a squig's arse and would da boss mind if 'e stomped on 'is 'ead for a bit to try and knock some sense into 'im?"

Wolf smiled.

"An interesting approach to discipline." she said, "But at least the warning won't be getting to the warboss."

"Has he requested any acknowledgement?" Aetus asked.

"Nah." Koroth answered.

"The rest of that force are still going to be coming up this trail though." Vance pointed out, "Maybe we should leave them a little surprise."

"Interesting. What did you have in mind?" Wolf said.

Even standing so that he could see out of the battlewagon's cupola the first that Norut Deadeye knew of a problem was when one of the Wartrakk Scorchas at the front of the column exploded, the fuel for the flame throwing weapon producing a ball of fire that rose high into the air. The driver of the next vehicle along, another lightweight tracked vehicle of a similar design was forced to swerve sharply to avoid the flaming debris but moments later this Wartrakk also exploded and it became obvious to Norut that the column was under attack. He had not seen the flash of an energy weapon or heard the boom of a projectile so the source of the attack was a mystery to him as the battlewagon he was riding in drove past the two burning wrecks. However, although the human troops he was blaming for the attack could not be seen from up on top of the battlewagon, they would not be able to hide so easy at ground level.

"Get da lads out!" he bellowed right before there was another explosion, this one rocking the battlewagon beneath him and the vehicle came to a halt with one of its wheels missing.

"Out! Out! Out!" the Blood Axe nob's yelled as they disembarked from the battlewagon, waving their arms so that the drivers of the other vehicles in the column would stop and let their passengers off.

Norut fully expected the Orks to come under fire as soon as they leapt out of their transports but oddly there was no such enemy action. Instead the jungle remained peaceful apart from the shouts and random firing of small arms from the Orks themselves.

The driver of one of the column's vehicles, an all wheeled tank that mounted a large cannon in a forward mounting decided to ignore the order to stop and sped around the others. Norut snarled as he watched this,

angry that the driver had sought to claim a place at the front when he should have been ready to provide covering fire to the dismounted infantry. Before he could begin to yell abuse and order the driver to return to his allotted position though he saw something fly out of the jungle, bouncing across the trail as it followed the Ork vehicle before there was another explosion. The blast was not enough to seriously damage the armoured vehicle but it did cause the driver to brake as the crew hunted for the source of the attack. Meanwhile Norut walked around the battlewagon he had just disembarked from, studying the ground closely and he let out a low growl when he saw a length of narrow line on the ground, barely visible among the debris from the crushed undergrowth and damaged Ork vehicles.

"Wot's up boss?" one of the other Blood Axe nob's asked, walking up behind Norut.

"Call it an 'unch but I don't reckon dat dare is any gits 'ere still." he responded as he started to walk further along the trail.

Proceeding slowly, Norut stopped when he felt something tug against his leg and on closer inspection he saw another length of the fine line stretched out across the trail. Bending down he pulled on this gently, looking each way as he did so and sure enough he saw an Imperial Guard issue Krak grenade come tumbling out of the undergrowth at the side of the trail. Norut retreated quickly before the grenade went off, creating a plume of smoke at the side of the trail.

"Mines!" he shouted, "Da gits 'ave mined da road."

Norut was furious about this. The only way to clear the mines was for someone to walk along ahead of the column to find the wires strung across the trail that triggered the explosives, most likely one of the Blood Axe Orks in his force since he did not trust any of the other clans to be able to carry out such a task and without knowing how many mines had been laid or over what distance they would have to do this for the entire length of the trail. Now instead of being able to speed along the trail to catch up with the humans they were pursuing, Norgut's troops would be limited to the same walking pace as their quarry.

9.

"I can continue." Shayal said while Torrent examined her. The astropath had not fully recovered from using her powers against the Ork dreadnought and Veneel had been supporting her for most of the journey through the jungle in a path parallel to the trail left by the Ork vehicles.

"Can she?" Wolf asked, looking at Torrent.

"I'm not even sure how to judge her captain." Torrent replied, "Physically she's fine but that was no different when she collapsed. I'm not qualified to judge mental burn out."

"What about you Veneel?" Wolf added.

"If Astropath Shayal says that she is fit to continue now she has had the chance to rest then I would not contradict her." Veneel said.

"We cannot delay any longer. If she cannot walk then we will have to carry her." Aetus said from beside Wolf before her microbead activated.

"Captain this is Quinn."

"Go ahead sergeant." Wolf responded. While most of the force had been resting Quinn had taken his veterans on ahead to scout out the terrain.

"Captain we're about six hundred metres on and we've reached the edge of a clearing and I don't think it's a natural one. I think the Orks made it and I'm pretty sure that we've found that Boss Mountain place from that letter the courier had." Quinn told her.

"What makes you so sure sergeant?" Wolf said.

"I think it's easier if you just come and see for yourself captain." Quinn replied and Wolf sighed.

"Very well, we're on our way." she said. Then she looked at Torrent and added, "Torrent you stay here and take care of Shayal."

"Brothers with me." Aetus ordered and along with Wolf's command section and Koroth he and his men made their way to where Quinn and his veterans were deployed just within the treeline at the edge of the large clearing surrounding the mountain Warboss Skullkrusha had made his headquarters.

The remains of the trees and other vegetation that had covered the ground before the Orks arrived served to confirm that the clearing was not natural but it was the change wrought on the mountain itself that seemed to confirm that this was the place the humans were looking for. Large parts of the mountain side were covered by crude scaffolding made from wood and held together by rope. This was not properly secured to the rock face, a fact made obvious by the way sections of it rocked as the Gretchin who swarmed across it moved from one section to another. More significant that the scaffolding though was the reason for its presence on the mountain. Looking at the parts of the mountain not hidden behind the chaotic framework it was plain to see that the hundreds of Gretchin on the scaffolding were working to transform the very mountain itself, turning it into a gigantic representation of an Ork face.

"Now dat's a big 'ead." Koroth commented when he saw it.

"So is that what the warboss looks like then?" Wolf said.

"Yeah of course it is. Wot would be da point in it if it wasn't?" Koroth answered, "Dat's to remind all da lad's who's da boss."

"It does make you wonder though." Onund commented.

"Wonder what?" Wolf asked, frowning.

"I thought that was obvious little wolf." Onund replied, "If the greenskins are carving their master's face into this side of the mountain then what are they carving into the other side?"

"Maybe Rull can tell us. He's gone to see how far around this clearing goes." Quinn said as he and the other Catachans grinned and laughed at Onund's suggestion.

"The mouth appears to be an opening." Aetus said as he studied the mountain and the carving set into its side.

"I see it." Wolf added as she looked through her magnoculars, "I can see vehicles inside it. Perhaps that's the cavern Shayal said she saw in her vision. But that mountain is a big place, where would the warboss be?"

"Where else?" Koroth said, "Up at da top." and he pointed to the one eye of the face that had so far been carved into the mountain and as Wolf turned her attention to this and focused her magnoculars there she saw the cave opening at the centre of the eye.

"First things first," Aetus said, "we need a way across this ground without the Orks seeing us. If they do have an army in there and they catch us in the open then I doubt that any of us will survive long enough to reach even the base of the mountain, let alone where the warboss is likely to be."

"It'll dark soon." Wolf pointed out, "We might have a better chance of getting across at night."

"Better yes, but the risk still remains." Aetus said, "We must find a way of focusing the Orks' attention away from us while we approach."

"Hey Koroth," Vance said and he pointed towards the mountain, "you say all that carving is to remind everyone who's in charge, right?"

"Yeah, dat's right." Koroth replied.

"So what happens if we blow it up? Or at least blast a few holes in it?" Vance asked.

"Den da boss'll go bezerk. 'E'll probably send every lad 'e's got out after ya. Shootin' at dat face is like shootin' at 'im even if ya don't do anythin' to it." Koroth said.

"Molla. Grey. Mayer." Wolf said into her microbead, "I need you up here now."

The three Catachan squad leaders arrived quickly and they too stared at the massive carving on the mountainside.

"What the hell?" Grey said when he saw the partially carved face.

"It's a representation of the Ork warboss." Quinn said.

"We need a distraction to get us across this open ground and attacking that face could be just what we need." Wolf said.

"Well my squad could easily put a krak missile or to into it from here." Grey said.

"Same with First Squad's heavy bolter." Molla added, "It's pretty far but against something that big we could hit it. Not that we'd be able to do much damage."

"As I understand it the level of damage is not important. Only that it is seen to be attacked." Aetus said.

"Dat's right." Koroth said, nodding his head.

"The problem is that a missile launcher and heavy bolter are both direct fire weapons that produce easily visible flashes when firing. Your positions will be revealed when you fire."

"Looks like it's over to you then bomber." Vance said, looking at Mayer while he studied the carved face through his magnoculars.

"It's easily within range from here." Mayer said.

"So you could pull further back into the jungle? Use it to conceal your position?" Wolf asked and Mayer nodded as he lowered his magnoculars.

"Yes captain. I'd say about four hundred metres." he said.

"The Orks would have to spread out to search the jungle to find you." Wolf said.

"They would be vulnerable to ambush." Aetus added.

"You think we should split our force Captain Aetus?" Wolf asked, knowing that Mayer's mortar squad would also be vulnerable to being overrun without the rest of the platoon to protect them.

"Normally that is a bad strategy I accept but on this occasion I think that two different styles of combat are called for. The first will require your platoon's heavy weapons, bombarding the mountain with mortar fire and then making use of your heavy bolter and missile launcher to attack the Orks as they enter the jungle in search of the mortars. Your ogryn squad would also be best assigned to this force as a guard unit for Sergeant Mayer's squad."

"I take it that the rest of us will be going in there?" Wolf said, looking towards the Ork held mountain.

"Correct. A smaller force optimised for stealth and close combat. We will infiltrate the Ork stronghold, locate the warboss and kill him." Aetus said.

"What about those two witches back there?" Grey asked, glancing back in the direction where Shayal and Veneel were waiting.

"Adept Veneel is a combat officer. He will join the assault group. Astropath Shayal is not suited to such an operation though. She should remain with the ambush group in the jungle." Aetus said and Wolf nodded.

"Then it sounds like we have a plan." Wolf said and Aetus nodded.

"We have until dark. Sergeant Mayer should select a suitable position for his mortars and deploy there. Then the rest of the ambush force should deploy to protect the mortars." he said.

"Sergeant Molla, you'll have command of the ambush group." Wolf said and Molla nodded.

"I guess that means the witch will be with you as well." Grey commented.

"Actually I think she'll be better assigned to bomber. They'll be in a fixed position and have Khor's ogryns to look for her as well. Any trouble and one of them can just pick her up and run." Molla replied and Mayer looked at him.

"Gee thanks." he said.

"What about him?" Vance asked, looking at Koroth.

"The Ork comes with us." Aetus said.

"Do you think he can be trusted?" Grey said.

"He has shown himself trustworthy so far." Aetus pointed out and Koroth grinned.

"Skullkrusha ain't my boss." he said, "I is an Ork of me word. Skullkrusha ain't my boss and I ain't about to sell ya out now."

"Sure." Grey said.

"Let's go. There's work to be done. Quinn keep your men here to monitor the Orks." Wolf said as she started to pull back from the jungle edge and the others followed, only Molla staying where he was.

"Something wrong?" Mayer asked.

"Just wondering bomber." Molla said as he finally turned away from the mountain and began to walk back to the Catachan's temporary camp.

"Wondering what?"

"What they're carving on the other side of that mountain." Molla said and Onund let out a laugh and slapped him on the shoulder.

"My thoughts exactly." he said as Molla staggered from the blow.

Returning to their camp, the marines and the leaders of Second Platoon found Torrent still tending to Shayal.

"Captain she just had another seizure or whatever." Torrent said when she saw Wolf appear.

"Are the Orks able to see us?" Aetus asked, moving his hand towards the bolt pistol holstered at his waist. If the astropath had become a security risk he intended to end that risk immediately by whatever means were necessary.

"No, but their psyker is close." Shayal gasped, "He's using the Emperor's Tarot as we speak."

"So wot do dey say?" Warboss Skullkrusha asked as the weirdboy laid out the cards again.

"Dey says da same as ever. Dey is comin' for ya. Da traitor, da assassin and da wolf. Dey say dat one of 'em is already 'ere and dat da others ain't far away neither." he said before he dealt out more cards, lining them up below the initial set he had used for his reading, "Dare's a scrap comin' real soon. Lots of killin'."

The warboss then turned to a nearby nob.

"Go and tell da lads dey needs to be ready for a fight. All of 'em." he ordered.

"I don't like the look of this." Quinn said as he watched an increasing number of Orks emerge from the cave opening at the base of the mountain, the one that had already been carved to look like a large mouth with massive canine teeth either side of it. The sun was setting but Quinn could see the Orks clearly through his magnoculars, added to which a number of the Orks were carrying burning torches so that they did not need to worry about being able to see in the dark.

"Do you think they're going to attack the rest of the division?" one of his men suggested.

"I doubt it. There are still transport vehicles in that cave and they haven't brought any of them out yet. I think that they're deploying to face us. Either the Ork that sent the courier has been able to sneak another one past us or something's spooked them. They've not seen us though. If they had then we'd already be up to our necks in greenskins. There must be more than a thousand of them there by now."

"Sergeant Quinn everyone back here is ready and we're on our way to you now." Wolf said, using her microbead to communicate with Quinn, "Is there any activity from the Orks?"

"You could say that captain. They're coming out of that cave in their hundreds already but then just milling about. I think they know we're around here somehow. Has that witch been telling on us do you think?" Quinn responded.

"I don't think so although she did sense the Ork psyker at work momentarily. Hold your position, we'll be with you in a couple of minutes." Wolf told him.

Sure enough Wolf's command section and Aetus' marines along with Veneel and Koroth arrived shortly after and took up positions just within the treeline.

"That's a lot of Orks." Vance commented.

"Surely we can't get through them." Torrent added.

"That's what Sergeant Mayer is going to do for us," Wolf told her, "draw them away." and then she reached for her microbead again, "Sergeant Molla is your force ready?"

"Yes captain. Grey and I have split our squads into two fire teams each. As soon as bomber leads the Orks into the jungle we'll be ready to start thinning out their numbers." Molla replied.

Wolf then looked at Aetus and the marine just nodded at her.

"In that case Sergeant Molla, kindly inform Sergeant Mayer that he may fire when he is ready." she said.

10.

Mayer had selected a small area of low ground to be the place from which his mortars would fire, providing him and his men with natural cover should the Orks get close enough to attack them directly. Further forward of this position were Khor and his remaining ogryns while the members of First and Second Squads were spread out beyond them.

"Firing single round." Mayer said into his microbead just before his gunner dropped a mortar bomb into the muzzle of the weapon they operated.

The round shot high up into the night sky and arced towards the carved mountain face, striking it and exploding just above the already carved eye and blasting apart a section of the scaffolding. Almost in unison every Ork in the clearing turned to look at where the explosion had taken place, unable to believe that anyone would dare strike so brazenly against the warboss.

"Right on target sergeant." Wolf transmitted.

"Confirmed. Firing again." Mayer replied and moments later three more mortar bombs were flying through the air towards the mountain.

The Orks roared in anger as these bombs exploded, blowing chunks out of the representation of the face of their warboss. Although the exact origin of the mortar fire was hidden somewhere in the jungle the Orks in the clearing could still see the general direction that they were coming from simply by watching the path they took through the air and it was just a few seconds before an amplified voice boomed out from speakers set into the mountainside.

"Wot is ya all waitin' for?" the warboss yelled, infuriated by this direct attack on him, "Waaargh!"

Upon hearing this one of the largest nobbs among the Orks in the clearing, a black-clad Goff, raised a hand clutching a large axe in the air and roared.

"Waaargh!"

The hundreds of Orks in the clearing all then raised weapons into the air and joined in this war cry as they surged towards the jungle, intending to find the humans shooting at the mountain. They soon reached the edge of the clearing and charged headlong into the jungle itself, hacking their way through the undergrowth as they continued into the darkness.

"Sergeant Mayer you've got their attention." Wolf transmitted when she saw the Orks heading into the jungle away from the assault group, "Adjust your fire accordingly."

"Understood captain. Adjusting fire now." Mayer responded and the next volley of mortar rounds did not fly as high into the air, instead arcing back down towards the ground sooner so that they dropped through the jungle canopy and exploded among the Orks themselves.

The rapid succession of explosions took their toll on the Orks, killing dozens of them in a short space of time but these loses did not dissuade them and they pressed on deeper into the jungle.

"Here they come." Molla said to the two other Catachans with him when they heard the loud alien voices heading in their direction. The three Catachans all raised their weapons and as soon as they saw the first Ork come into vie they opened fire with rapid blasts of laser energy lighting up the jungle.

As soon as they came under fire the Orks turned towards Molla and his men and a group of about fifty of the aliens broke off from the main force to charge towards them. Several of the Orks fell as they were hit by the Catachans' fire but it was obvious that there were too many of them for just Molla and two others to hold back.

"Pull back." Molla ordered and he and his men began to retreat.

The Catachans had never expected to be able to hold their position against the Orks though and preparations had been made for this. In falling back Molla and his men were in fact luring the Orks into a trap that began with tripwires connected to grenades that then exploded among them. These explosives were just the first part of the trap that Moilla had set for them. The next stage came when Molla led the Orks in front of an area of high ground on which his squad's heavy bolter had been set up and its crew along with a Catachan armed with a grenade launcher opened fire, sending a stream of mass reactive explosive rounds and fragmentation grenades into the tightly packed Orks.

The Orks howled as they came under this heavy fire, even a glancing hit from the heavy bolter being enough to blow off a limb or decapitate one of the infamously hardy creatures while the grenades produced enough shrapnel to injure or kill several at a time. At the same time Molla and the two men with him took cover in a position he had already scouted out and opened fire again, adding their las weapons to the barrage.

The combination of this fire proved too much for the Orks and when the last of the three nobbs to have joined it was killed there was no-one left to beat the other aliens into line and the survivors turned and fled, heading back towards the main force.

"Grey can you hear me?" Molla transmitted, hoping that Second Squad's sergeant was in range of his

microbead.

"Just about Molla." Grey responded.

"We've just had a run in with the Orks, I'd say we nailed about forty without loss. The rest are probably heading your way." Molla warned him.

"Copy that. We're waiting for them." Grey replied.

"Your men have drawn the Orks away. We shall proceed." Aetus said, looking out at the clearing that was now totally devoid of greenskins. Beyond that lay the mountain where parts of the scaffolding erected over it now burned and only here were there any signs of activity as Gretchin frantically worked to extinguish the flames.

Aetus and his men all promptly moved forwards, lying down as soon as they reached the start of the clearing and starting to crawl across the ground.

"Come on little wolf." Onund said, "More greenskins may yet come out from their caves."

"You heard Sergeant Onund. Everyone down." Wolf ordered and the Catachans joined her in copying the marines, crawling on their stomachs across the ground towards the Ork held mountain. By keeping flat on the uneven ground they were effectively invisible from a distance but as the assault force got closer to the mountain itself they heard the sound of an alien. This was not the deep voice of an Ork but the higher pitched one of a Gretchin talking to himself about something as he dragged a large piece of metal towards the same opening in the mountain at ground level that Aetus was leading the assault force towards. If they carried on going it was likely that the Gretchin would spot them even in the dark and raise the alarm.

"Brother Trethor," Aetus said to a marine whose armour bore the dark green shoulder pad of a Dark Angel, "can you take that Gretchin out from here?"

"The angle is poor captain." Trethor replied.

"Don't worry. I think someone else has a better shot." Wolf commented as she looked at the tiny glowing red dot on the Gretchin's chest. This showed up well in the poor light but the Gretchin himself remained unaware of it right up until the bullet struck him in his heart, "Thank you Rull." Wolf muttered as the assault force then continued on its way.

In the short time that they had had to prepare to defend themselves against the horde of Orks the Catachans had still been able to lay a number of traps for them, hoping to reduce the aliens' numbers without a shot being fired. The most effective traps and defences such as large barriers and deep pit traps required too much time to construct for them to have made of them but there were still others that they could employ and in addition to grenades turned into mines using trip wires to trigger them smaller pit trap lined with sharpened wood spikes had been hastily dug. These could be less than half a metre deep and needed little vegetation to cover them sufficiently that the Orks would not notice them before charging right across them, their own weight driving the spikes up through their feet. Such was the rush forwards that any Orks that fell because of this could then expect to be trampled to death by those behind him. Furthermore the fact that these traps were covered by vegetation meant that the Orks began to suspect any area of ground covered in such debris and this slowed down their advance, making the hoard an easier target.

"Now!" Grey ordered using his microbead as he looked from his hiding place and there was a 'whoosh' that was accompanied by a bright flash as a missile flew from where his heavy weapon team was concealed. Despite being fired towards a large body of infantry the missile was fitted with an anti-armour krak warhead. This had been chosen because the weapon was not aimed directly at the Orks themselves, instead the missile flew just above their head before it struck the trunk of one of the largest tree in that area of the jungle. The shaped charge warhead detonated on impact against the side of the ancient tree and blasted a hole all the way through this, the debris acting like shrapnel that cut through the Orks nearest to the tree. In addition the tree was left with a large part of its trunk missing and unable to support its own weight. This brought the tree itself crashing down on the Orks who because of the press of bodies around them could not get out of the way before being crushed beneath it.

This unconventional assault served to break up the force of Orks, those behind the tree now having to find a way around it while those in front charged towards the source of the missile. This was exactly what Grey had expected though and he and the other four members of Second Squad were lying in wait for them.

"Open fire." he said and in unison the five Catachans fired their las weapons at the Orks, Grey firing individual shots while his men fired their lasguns on fully automatic, shooting extended bursts of fire at the Orks.

Once again all the Catachans were really doing was distracting the Ork horde, doing their best to thin out their numbers and slow them down while Mayer and his mortar squad continued to rain down fire on them and as a number of the Orks tried heading towards where the missile had come from they found themselves coming under fire from Grey and his riflemen from the secondary position that they had fallen back to. Meanwhile Second Squad's missile launcher team turned their weapon on another group of Orks and fired

an anti-personnel round right into the middle of them, the blast and shrapnel sending the nearby aliens flying away from the centre of the blast. Rather than reload for a third shot the two Catachans instead picked up their weapon and ammunition and withdrew, heading back towards the position being held by Mayer and his mortar squad.

Upon reaching the near vertical cliff face the members of the assault force got back to their feet and pressed themselves up against the rock to stay hidden in its shadow.

"I should go first." Koroth said, "Check out 'ow many lads are in dare."

"Go." Aetus said and Koroth moved forwards, his pistol in one hand and a knife in the other. Whereas any of the Catachans or marines would have had to peer carefully into the cavern that had been made to look like a mouth he was able to just walk in through the entrance and look around.

Even with the departure of the armoured column sent to try and hunt Second Platoon and the marines there were still several dozen vehicles present in the cavern. Most of these were lightweight buggies and trucks for transporting troops or cargo. There were few Orks present though, all of them mekboys working on their vehicles. Had these been the only occupants then Kororth suspected that it would have been possible for both the Catachans and even the armoured marines to sneak through the cavern without being seen by using the various vehicles as cover. However, the Orks were not alone in the cavern and as usual the mekboys were accompanied by numerous Gretchin assistants. Their superior awareness of their surroundings coupled with their sheer numbers meant that sneaking past them all would be impossible. Walking further into the cavern Koroth paused to look around as a pair of Gretchin ran past him dragging a length of hose to help put out a small fire that one of the mekboys had just started. He saw that there were several exits from the cavern that led deeper into the mountain and that all of these featured a heavy portcullis that could be dropped down to block them if needed. Turning back towards the main entrance behind him Kororth also saw that there was something similar here, only this barrier was much larger and he smiled as he hit upon an idea.

"What did you see in there?" Wolf asked when Koroth emerged from the cavern and rejoined the rest of the assault force.

"I reckon dat dare's too many grots in dare for ya to be able to get past without any of 'em raisin' da alarm. Den da boss will call all 'is lads back from da jungle and we'll all be stuck between dem and any lads wot's left in 'ere." Koroth replied and he jabbed a thumb towards the cavern entrance.

"Perhaps there's another way in." Vance suggested.

"I don't much fancy trying to climb all the way up to the cave we saw near the top." Torrent commented.

"Ya don't need to. We can still get in through da garage." Koroth said.

"You said that the alarm would be sounded." Aetus pointed out.

"Yeah, so? Let 'em." Koroth said.

"Let us just be overrun? Are you sure you're on our side?" Quinn commented.

"Dare's gates set up inside, a biggun wot closes off da garage from out 'ere and more gates where passages 'ead to da other places inside da mountain. We needs to bust wot makes da big gate work so dat it'll drop and den stay dropped. Dat'll keep all da lads wot is out 'ere out and stop 'em comin' in after us. Den all we needs to do is either make it through da gates on da other side before dey can be shut or use dat zappa ya got dare to blast 'em open." Koroth said and he pointed to the meltagun that one of Quinn's veterans carried.

"How many exit points are there?" Aetus asked.

"I spotted three of 'em." Koroth answered.

"Then we split into three groups, each of which will attempt to find its way up to the top of the mountain where the warboss is likely to be located. If that is not possible then inflict as much damage and kill as many greenskins as possible." Aetus said, "Captain Wolf you will take your command section along with Adept Veneel, Koroth and Sergeant Onund through one.

"Sergeant Quinn you will take half of your squad along with brothers Trethor, Matros and Konrad through a second while the other half of your squad comes with myself and brothers Rafen, Jarick and Kai. I take it that I can count on them to follow my orders?" Aetus said and he looked at Quinn, well aware of the Catachans' attitudes towards orders given by those they called outsiders.

"They will if they know what's good for them." Quinn replied, nodded and then he looked at his men and added, "Feel free to shoot any that give you trouble."

"I hope that will not be necessary Sergeant Quinn. We may find our supply of ammunition requires conserving." Aetus said.

"Waaargh!" the swarm of Orks roared as they charged through the jungle, heading for where they could now hear the sounds of the mortars firing the bombs that continued to take a toll on their numbers. However, as soon as they came into view Khor grinned and raised his ripper gun.

"Ogryns fire!" he yelled and all four of the surviving abhumans opened fire together with their ripper guns. This produced a cloud of projectiles that tore through the first ranks of Orks and slowed down those that

came behind them as they tried to clamber over the bodies of their comrades while Mayer and his men ceased firing their mortars and instead picked up their las guns.

"Fire at will." Mayer ordered as the six Catachans joined in the firing from within the defensive position they had selected.

The charging Orks returned fire at the Imperial position but Mayer gasped when he saw the bullets slow down and come to a stop in mid air in front of him. Looking around at Shayal he saw her standing there with her arm outstretched in front of her with her fingers spread wide.

"Do not stop firing now Sergeant Mayer." she said, "I do not know how long I will be able to maintain this barrier."

Given that he was the only one that could enter the cavern without making the occupants suspicious Korothe led the assault force towards the entrance and looked inside again. Seeing a Gretchin crouched beside a nearby Ork buggy he calmly walked over to the creature and reached down to break his neck. Then he returned to the entrance and beckoned the others to follow him.

"Dare's some trukks just off to da right. We can 'ide behind 'em until we is all inside." he said.

"Advance. Move right." Aetus ordered and he and his marines moved quickly and far more quietly than armoured giants standing more than two metres tall ought to be able to, dashing into the cavern and moving into cover behind the row of empty Ork trucks. The Catachans then followed the marines behind the row of trucks and positioned themselves to be able to fire across the cavern.

"So what next?" Wolf asked.

"Ya needs to bust dat chain dare to bring down da big gate." Korothe replied and he pointed to a thick chain at the far side of the cavern opening they had just come through.

"A standard bolt round should do. I can make that shot captain." Trethor said.

"As soon as you do the greenskins will know we're here." Wolf pointed out.

"Den da guards on da inner gates'll probably shut 'em." Korothe said.

Wolf looked at the three inner gates. Each one just about large enough to permit an ogryn to pass through. One of them was fairly close and could perhaps be reached without exposing the group that went that way by but the others were further away and would also require anyone heading for them to cross the open area where the armoured vehicles despatched to hunt for them had been parked.

"We could get through there before the alarm is raised but I'm not so sure about the other exits." she said.

"Agreed. Take your unit through that gate now. Eliminate any guards as quietly as possible." Aetus ordered and Wolf nodded.

"With me." she said as she started to sneak towards the passageway leading further into the mountain. As she went she swapped her las pistol for her stub pistol again and reattached its silencer while behind her Onund and Vance just drew their knives instead.

When Wolf's unit was just a few metres from the passageway a Gretchin unexpectedly came walking through and ground to a halt when he saw the human right in front of him. He drew in breath ready to scream out a warning to the other greenskins but before he could do so Wolf shot him in his chest. Although what little sound the shot created was easily drowned out by the background noise in the cavern the Gretchin dropped the spare part he had been holding and this rolled back through the doorway where it was seen by one of the guards on the other side. Stepping forwards with the intent of mocking the Gretchin an Ork guard in the black of the Goff clan saw Wolf and her unit in front of him and he let out a roar.

"Gits!" he yelled, reaching for the lever that would close the gate and trap Wolf's unit in the garage,

Onund and Korothe both broke into a run, charging at the Ork but they were too slow to prevent the lever from being thrown and the portcullis began to fall. Onund lunged forwards just in time to get below the falling gate and it came to a stop as it hit his shoulder pad. This gave Korothe enough time to dive under the gate and tackle the guard on the other side, stabbing him repeatedly in a frenzy. There was a second Goff guard beyond the portcullis and he roared as he swung an axe at Onund only for part of the blade to break off against the hardened ceramite of his armour.

In getting close enough to use his axe the Goff had come within reach of Onund and the Space Wolf brought up his own blade, slicing open the Ork's abdomen and the alien screamed in agony as his internal organs came tumbling out onto the floor at his feet. Although critically wounded the Ork did not die immediately and he lunged at Onund, dropping his axe and reaching for the marine's throat while he was still trapped beneath the portcullis. With Onund's helmet seals still intact, the Ork could do little to injure him before he thrust his knife into the alien again with the blade angled upwards through his heart.

"Quickly little wolf. This is rather heavy." Onund said as Wolf and the rest of their team rushed beneath the portcullis and Onund was finally able to leap out from underneath it, letting it finish dropping to the floor.

As soon as the Ork guard had called out his warning Trethor fired his bolter and the sound of the shot echoed around the cavern, followed moments later by the sound of the mass reactive round exploding when it hit one of the links of the chain holding up the main entrance's portcullis. This shattered the link and the

portcullis promptly dropped down, sealing the only way into the cavern.

"Open fire." Aetus ordered and the rest of the marines and Catachans opened fire with bolters and shotguns. Reacting to this the guards on the other two exits dropped their own barriers, one of them crushing a Gretchin as it tried to flee from the unexpected attack before the guards then started firing their pistols through the bars at the Imperial troops.

Within the cavern itself the mekboys turned their attention towards the marines and Catachans. Some of them were armed with pistols of their own and they began to fire them but all of the shots they fired bounced off the trucks that their targets were using for cover. Meanwhile another of them grabbed hold of the welding torch he had been using and quickly adjusted its nozzle before pointing it towards the row of trucks and triggering the torch. Instead of a neat flame for cutting through metal this time it produced a large sheet of flame that caused all of the troops behind the trucks to duck down and shelter from the fire.

Peering under the truck he was hidden behind the marine called Kai saw the mekboy armed with the improvised flamethrower standing not far away from him, laughing loudly as he continued to spray burning fuel at the trucks. Kai acted quickly, bring his bolter to bear and firing a rapid four round burst. This was not aimed at the mekboy though but at the large cylinder of fuel he was standing beside and as the mass reactive round penetrated the armoured cylinder they exploded among the volatile chemical. The sheet of flame promptly became a ball that engulfed the screaming mekboy as it rose up and spread out across the cavern ceiling.

"Reese. Straker. Downs. King. All of you come with me and the marines." Quinn ordered, "Straker you hit that gate as we pass it." and he pointed to one of the now dropped portcullises. Quinn and his team ran, the marines Trethor, Matros and Konrad joining and easily keeping pace. As soon as they were in the open the team came under fire from the Orks but there were only a handful in the cavern and even those had only pistols. Compounding this they all targeted the three heavily armoured marines, ignoring the smaller Catachans thanks to the typical greenskin mindset of bigger is better. The effect of this was that even the shots that hit their targets just bounced off without hurting the marines. The three marines laid down fire from their bolters, the weapons having more than enough range to fire all the way across the cavern while Quinn and his men could fire only on targets closer at hand with their shotguns and in the case of King who was armed with a flamer and his stub pistol. Alone among the group Straker held his fire, not wanting to waste any of his meltagun's ammunition on individual Orks or Gretchin even when they came within range. Instead he waited until he was close enough to the portcullis Quinn had told him to destroy before dropping into a kneeling position, aimed his weapon at the barrier and fired. The bright beam of energy struck the metal portcullis and it glowed as the heat flowed through it. At the same time one of the Ork guards screamed in agony for a moment before he died when the beam burned through him as well while the metal of the portcullis softened and then collapsed under its own weight. Stepping over the remains of this guard the second guard stood in the large hole that had been melted in the portcullis to try and get a better shot at Straker, seeing him as a bigger threat than the marines thanks to the firepower he had just demonstrated. Before he could shoot though, Quinn fired first and a blast from his shotgun took the Ork off his feet. After that he kept running, heading for the final exit from the cavern that his team would go through.

"The way has been opened for us." Aetus then told the marines and Catachans still taking cover behind the trucks, "Advance with me."

"Boss! We's under attack! Dare was gits in with da wagons and now dey is wanderin' around downstairs!" a Gretchin cried out frantically as he rushed into the cave where Warboss Skullkrusha stood looking out into the jungle, watching the flashes of gunfire that escaped from beneath the canopy.

"Well wotcha waitin' for den?" the warboss snapped, whirling around and leaning towards the Gretchin, causing the creature to topple backwards in fright before scrabbling for the exit. Then the warboss strode towards another passageway and followed it as far as his private chambers where the stone walls were lined with weapons. Although he was never totally unarmed Warboss Skullkrusha decided that an attack on his personal fortress demanded something more than his basic pistol and sword and so from the wall he took a massive power claw that he thrust his arm into.

"It's dem." a voice said from behind him and Skullkrusha looked towards the entrance to his chamber where the weirdboy now stood, flanked by his minders, "Dey is 'ere for ya." and at that moment a siren began to sound.

The telekinetic shield Shayal had been generating failed abruptly and the astropath let out a gasp as she collapsed, exhausted.

"Are you okay?" Mayer asked as she slumped to her knees, supporting herself with her staff.

"I will be fine Sergeant Mayer." she answered, "Assuming that you are able to hold back the Orks of course." Mayer looked back towards the Orks once more and he heard the sound of their shots passing over his head. Even with Molla and Grey's men doing their best to distract the Ork horde it was obvious that without

the psychic barrier to hold them back they would soon be able to overrun his squad's position. However, just as he was about to give the order for both his men and Khor' ogryns to withdraw there was a strange droning sound from the direction of the Ork mountain and the alien gunfire abruptly ceased as the Orks began to withdraw.

"This is Mayer, can someone tell me what's happening?" he said into his microbead.

"The Orks are pulling back bomber." Molla responded, "Looks like they're heading back to their mountain. I hope the captain or those marines have a plan because if not then they're about to get overrun by greenskins."

The inside of the mountain was a maze of passageways and chambers of various sizes lit by a mix of burning torches and in some places crude flickering electrical lights. Some of these appeared to be natural formations but there were others that bore the marks of tools used to carve them out of solid rock. The vast majority of the Orks inside the mountain had gone into the jungle to try and hunt down the human force and now most of the greenskins left inside were Gretchin who fled at the sight of Onund and the Catachans. The actual Orks present were largely drawn from their mekboys and painboys, their equivalent of the Imperium's engineers and medicae but they were no less dangerous for it, using the bizarre tools at their disposal as weapons to try and defend themselves.

Wolf's unit continued to head upwards as they hunted for the Ork Warboss but when they suddenly encountered a fork in a passage, both ways continuing upwards they were presented with a dilemma.

"So which way now?" Torrent asked, pointing her las pistol back the way they had come in readiness to shoot any alien that appeared behind them.

"I don't suppose you can sense anything can you Adept Veneel?" Wolf asked.

"I'm sorry captain. I have a general sense of psychic power above us but nothing more." the psyker responded.

"Maybe these join up again later. What do you think?" Vance suggested and he looked at Korothe.

"Dunno." the Ork said, shrugging his shoulders, "Maybe dey do. Sometimes a tunnel gets dug from both ends at once and da two don't always meet in da middle. Den ya get two tunnels when ya only wanted one."

"If we take the wrong one then we could waste a lot of time having to double back." Wolf said and she looked at Onund, "What do you think?"

"I trust your judgement little wolf." he replied and Wolf sighed, hoping that the marine would have encountered something similar before and be able to offer her an easy solution.

"Then we split up." she said suddenly, "I will take Sergeant Onund and Korothe along the passageway to the left. Platoon Sergeant Vance, you take everyone else right. Hopefully we'll link up again further on."

"And if we don't?" Vance asked.

"Then we hope that the warboss isn't heavily guarded." Wolf replied.

12.

Surging out of the jungle the Ork horde rushed back towards the entrance to their mountain fortress. The Catchans had not allowed them to retreat peacefully though and mortar rounds continued to fall among them. However, as they approached the cavern entrance they saw that the portcullis had been closed and they were trapped out in the open. A number of the larger nobbs among the horde pushed their way to the front and roared for the way to be opened for them but even if there had been any greenskins still alive on the other side they could have done nothing while the chain that lifted the portcullis remained broken. With no way of opening the portcullis from the outside they instead began to hammer on it with whatever weapons they had to hand. The thick metal bars were designed to resist just this sort of attack though and without specialised anti-armour weapons their blows could do nothing.

The passageway that Wolf's group followed, with Koroth in the lead, continued up inside the mountain but as it passed by a number of chambers that Koroth indicated were the sleeping quarters for senior Ork nobbs there was no indication that it would meet up again with the route taken by Vance's group and Wolf started to regret splitting her unit.

"Platoon Sergeant Vance can you hear me?" she said into her microbead, hoping that the rock surrounding her would not block the signal entirely but there was no response.

"Dis is interestin'." Koroth said suddenly and he came to a halt.

"What, that I can't contact Vance?"

"I think he means the room little wolf," Onund said, "and I agree. This is interesting."

Whereas the other chambers within the mountain had either bare stone floors or perhaps a covering of straw or animal skins at the most the floor, walls and ceiling of this chamber were all covered in a prominent gold coloured wire mesh.

"It must be for a weirdo." Koroth said, "Da wire grounds 'em properly."

In Ork society weirdboys generally lived on the outskirts of their settlements in small huts built on top of tall copper poles intended to keep them as far from the crowds of Orks and the psychic energy they created as possible while safely draining away what did build up within them. This was generally held as one of the few instances where Orks were concerned with standards of safety. Obviously it was not possible to construct such a hut inside a mountain and so the only way the warboss could keep a weirdboy close to him was to have this special wire lined chamber constructed. Of more interest though were the contents of the weirdboy's quarters.

"What's a shrine to the Emperor doing here?" Wolf asked as she looked at the unmistakable statue of the Emperor of Mankind that stood in the corner of the room, surrounded by various totems of different origins.

"Da weirdo is a Blood Axe an' all. Look dare." Koroth said and he pointed to where a pair of crossed axes had been painted on one of the walls, "Wot, did ya not know dat we worshipped ya god of war an' all?"

"I would hardly call the Emperor our god of war." Wolf replied.

"But that is how the Orks see him little wolf." Onund pointed out, "Do the armies of the Imperial Guard not worship him?"

"I suppose so. This explains why the Orks are using the Emperor's tarot as well." Wolf said and then she smiled, "I wonder what Preacher Black will have to say about aliens worshipping the Emperor?"

"Perhaps you should invite some to his next sermon." Onund said and then he laughed. Unlike the bulk of mankind the space marines venerated the Emperor but did not recognise the divinity that he had sought to deny himself while he still walked among the living during the days of the Great Crusade.

"Da warboss ain't likely to be far away." Koroth said, "If 'e's keepin' a weirdo 'ere den 'e'll want 'im close."

"Then we should press on." Wolf said and the three of them continued along the passageway, still heading upwards.

Koroth took the lead again so that he could alert Wolf and Onund to any threats ahead of them and the Ork came to a sudden halt when he rounded a corner and found himself facing two more Blood Axe nobbs standing guard in the entrance to another chamber.

"Who are ya? Wot d'ya want?" one of them demanded as both pointed their pistols at him.

"I got a message for da boss." Koroth replied.

"Da boss don't want no visitors. Come back later." the guard said but Koroth continued to advance, "Didn't ya 'ere wot I said? I said-" the guard continued but before he could finish Koroth lashed out and knocked the pistol from his hand. Then Koroth brought up his own pistol, jammed it under the guard's jaw and fired it up into his skull. Before the second guard could react Onund leapt around the corner with his bolter levelled and he fired a four round burst into the alien's chest, ripping him apart from the inside as the rounds exploded in quick succession.

Koroth immediately rushed forwards into the chamber that the other two Blood Axes had been guarding but as soon as he stepped through the doorway he was suddenly struck from the side and hurled all the way across the room while the weirdboy sat in his usual spot and watched, laughing loudly. Onund was the next through the doorway, letting his bolter drop on its sling to hang beside him as he drew his bolt pistol in one hand and his chainsword in the other. Then there was a roar as he activated the chainsword's motor and its blade began to spin.

Warboss Skullkrusha was waiting for Onund as he entered the cave that formed the eye visible from the outside of the mountain and when Onund swung his chainsword Skullkrusha used his power claw to block the blow, grinning when he saw the Space Wolf markings on his armour.

"Da wolf." he said.

This was followed by the booming of a bolt shot as Onund fired his pistol but Skullkrusha was surprisingly quick for an Ork that stood a head taller than even the space marine and the round barely grazed him without detonating before it flew out of the cave.

In turning to avoid the shot Skullkrusha presented his back to the doorway Onund and Koroth had come through and this gave Wolf the opportunity she needed to strike as well, firing her las pistol into him while he was facing away from her.

The shots did little more than sting the massive warboss, not even penetrating his thick hide but he roared with anger as he was hit repeatedly. Rather than turn to face Wolf though he used his power claw to grab hold of Onund around his waist. Given enough time he could probably have cut the marine in half simply by applying continuous pressure but Skullkrusha was too impatient to do this. Instead he lifted Onund up and then slammed him down on the floor as hard as he could three times in rapid succession. Stunned by the repeated blows Onund dropped both his pistol and chainsword before Skullkrusha hurled him towards the open front of the cave. The marine landed on the floor not far from the cave opening and then slid the rest of the way before he tumbled out and started to bounce down the side of the mountain, smashing through the scaffolding as he fell before eventually becoming tangled in the ropes binding it together and hanging limply in the air.

"Dare goes da wolf." Skullkrusha said as he turned towards Wolf, demonstrating that like Koroth he too spoke Gothic fluently, "Now for da assassin."

Raising his own pistol Skullkrusha fired at Wolf twice in rapid succession. His weapon had been customised to increase its stopping power but the soft nosed bullets it fired still could not penetrate the carapace armour plate that Wolf wore on her chest and although she fell backwards gasping for breath from the power of the impacts she was otherwise unhurt.

"Wolf!" Koroth called out as he started to regain his senses and saw her fall.

Hearing this Skullkrusha turned to glare at him.

"Wot did ya say?" he hissed.

"Wolf. Dat's 'er name." Koroth said as he picked himself up off the floor, "Now 'ow about ya pick on someone a bit bigger? Or would ya rather I got some grots in 'ere for ya to fight?"

"Well if dat beaky wasn't da wolf den I can deal with dis one just as easily." Skullkrusha said and he reached down to grab hold of Wolf by her ankle.

Seeing his chance Koroth charged at the warboss and leapt at him while the weirdboy just laughed once again as he watched the fight unfold. Koroth landed on Skullkrusha's back and wrapped his arms around the warboss' neck but he was unable to stop him from flinging Wolf towards the opening at the front of the cave just as he had done with Onund. Wolf screamed as she flew through the air and out of the cave but as she dropped she struck a piece of the shattered scaffolding where Onund had already crashed through it and was able to grab hold of one of the securing ropes. Taking a moment to try and catch her breath she then began to climb back up the side of the mountain towards the cave not far above her.

Meanwhile inside the cave Skullkrusha dropped his pistol and reached over his shoulders to grab hold of Koroth, pulling him free before he could harm the warboss and tossing him onto the floor.

"It don't matter who da wolf was now. Dey is both dead. I may not know who da assassin is yet but I bet dey'll die just as easy. Now I'll deal with da traitor though." he said to Koroth.

"I ain't never worked for ya. I ain't no traitor" Koroth responded as he began to pick himself up again.

"Yeah right." Koroth said before he kicked Koroth against the wall behind him.

"E's right boss." the weirdboy said as he stood up, "E ain't da traitor." and Skullkrusha turned to look at him.

"Well if it ain't 'im den who is it?" he asked and the weirdboy grinned.

"Me." he said before levelling his staff and unleashing a sudden blast of green lightning that enveloped the warboss, causing him to scream in pain.

The lightning burned Skullkrusha's flesh but the weirdboy soon had to end the storm to prevent the power he was channelling from consuming him as well and as soon as he did the warboss lunged at him and punched him in the face. Had he been using the hand that was clad in his power claw Skullkrusha would have decapitated the weirdboy with the blow but he opted for speed over power and used his bare fist instead.

The blow was still strong enough to knock the weirdboy over though and he too fell to the floor. Enraged, Skullkrusha was about to move in to finish of the weirdboy when there was the sound of a muffled shot and the warboss felt the impact of a bullet on his shoulder. Turning around again he saw Wolf clinging onto the edge of the cave and pointing her silenced stub pistol at him.

"Da wolf ain't dead yet." the weirdboy said.

"Soon will be." Skullkrusha said and he strode towards Wolf, ignoring the pinpricks of the pistol rounds she fired at him until the magazine was empty and the weapon locked open.

Standing over Wolf, Skullkrusha lifted his foot in readiness to stamp on her to make her lose her grip and fall down the mountain. Wolf looked back up at him and smiled.

"Do it now." she said and Skullkrusha grinned.

"Ya gits ain't normally so impatient to die." he said and Wolf smiled back at him.

"I wasn't talking to you." she said, staring at the tiny red dot on the knee of the one leg Skullkrusha was standing on, "Rull do it now. Take the shot."

Rull was too far away for the shot to be heard but the bullet he fired still found its mark and shattered Skullkrusha's kneecap. The warboss screamed in pain as he fell, no longer supported by either leg and he tumbled past Wolf who looked down to see him bouncing down the mountain, his limbs flailing about wildly as he tried to halt his fall before he finally came crashing down among the Orks clustered around the entrance to the mountain fortress, still trying in vain to break in.

The warboss crushed a handful of Orks when his lifeless body landed on top of them and the rest looked around to see what had just happened. Recognising their leader instantly they stared at the broken corpse for a few moments until all of a sudden one of the Ork nob's let out a roar and struck another nearby nob, intending to eliminate a rival now that the position of warboss was open.

In an instant the Ork horde fell upon one another in an orgy of violence. Clan affiliations suddenly meant nothing when nob's from the same clans fought among themselves as they all tried to position themselves as the new warboss while their subordinates also began attacking the followers of rivals.

Not all of the Orks remained in the clearing to fight though. Some of them turned and ran, carrying word of the death of the warboss to other units of Orks and as word spread among the Orks on Rema Anta so did the fighting as every nob on the planet attempted to seize power for himself.

Koroth and the weirdboy pulled Wolf back up into the cave, the sounds of fighting coming from far below.

Wolf then looked at the weirdboy and frowned.

"Why did you help us?" she asked and the weirdboy produced his deck of the Emperor's Tarot.

"Cause ya Emperor told me to." he answered.

Aetus and his marines were lined up by the landing pad as the Corvus Blackstar dropship came into land. Only Onund could not stand, instead lying on a stretcher while Wolf stood beside him. The forward ramp of the dropship lowered to reveal Inquisitor Tobias standing inside with a number of robed acolytes behind him and he looked at Aetus who looked back at him, his helmet under his arm so that the inquisitor could see his face.

"I hear that everything has proceeded to plan Captain Aetus. The Ork warboss is dead." Tobias said as he walked down the ramp.

"He is." Aetus replied, "The credit belongs to Captain Wolf and her platoon. It was her sniper that fired the killing shot."

"Excellent." Tobias said and he looked around at the landing area as more Imperial transport craft delivered fresh troops and supplies, "Now what is the situation here?" he asked.

"Lord General Militant Enfield is landing more forces as we speak. So far they have had little cause to engage the greenskins though. The xenos are still fighting among themselves and the lord general militant is happy for them to shed their blood while preserving that of his own men. We have also received a number of defections from the Orks. Koroth and the psyker who assisted in the killing of the warboss have been able to convince around two hundred other Blood Axe Orks to switch sides. By the time a replacement warboss arises the Orks will be critically weakened while we will be at full strength."

"Excellent news. My plan worked perfectly wouldn't you agree Captain Aetus?" Tobias said.

"You abandoned us inquisitor." Aetus said.

"Oh come now, I am not a soldier captain. It was my duty to retreat to orbit. See, Captain Wolf seems happy enough to see me." Tobias replied, looking at where Wolf stood looking at him with a smile on her face.

"I do not think that you are what is making her smile inquisitor." Aetus said as he too looked at the tiny red dot that had appeared on the inquisitor's forehead.