



CATACHAN ONE NINE MARK FOUR MARK TWO

INFESTATION

BY STEPHEN J DUTTON



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6.2: INFESTATION

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The exposure of the Genestealer cult on Temperatus spurs the aliens into an open revolt even as the Imperial Guard rush to secure the local supplies of arms. Now the Catachans must locate the leaders of this uprising before the planet can fall to the forces of the cult...

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1 .

Only a single sentry stood at the gate to the Temperatus planetary defence force base as the sun began to rise over the horizon, though more soldiers sat inside the nearby guardhouse in the highly unlikely event that they were needed. The sentry expected his shift to be long and dull and even the sight of an approaching convoy of military trucks did little to gain his interest. As the trucks drew closer it became easier to see that they were not PDF vehicles and he frowned. The vehicles were dark green in colour and their markings suggested that they belonged to the Imperial Guard. The sentry walked forwards of the gate, holding up his hand for the vehicles to halt and they slowed down before coming to a stop in front of him. As soon as the lead truck had stopped a door opened and a woman jumped out.

"I'm Lieutenant Emilia Wolf of the Catachan Nineteenth." she said, "Open this gate."

The sentry looked at the woman carefully. A division of Catachan troops, the elite jungle fighters, were currently stationed on Temperatus and she was wearing the uniform of a Catachan. However, the sentry had encountered several Catachan troops and this woman did not resemble them in any way. Catachans were generally tall and had a very distinctive accent. On the other hand this woman was barely more than a metre and a half tall and her accent was not far removed from a local one.

"Show me your authorisation." the sentry said, omitting Wolf's rank.

"My rank is my authority trooper. Now open the gate." she said sternly and her hand moved towards the las pistol she had holstered at her hip.

"Stand back!" the sentry yelled, raising his weapon and the shout attracted the attention of the other troops in the guard house behind him.

"What's going on here?" a PDF sergeant said as the other soldiers emerged. Seeing this the driver of the lead truck let out a whistle and more soldiers in Catachan uniforms armed with a variety of weapons jumped down from the back it, making their way towards the front of the truck where Wolf was confronting the base sentries.

"She wants us to let her in sarge." the sentry told his superior, "She says she's a Catachan lieutenant."

"Really?" the sergeant commented, looking Wolf up and down, "Well you don't look or sound like a Catachan to me. Show me your pass."

"Problem lieutenant?" one of the other approaching Catachans asked. Unlike Wolf he had the build and speech pattern of a Catachan but the PDF sergeant did not back down because of this.

"Ah Sergeant Molla." Wolf said, "This individual wants to see our pass. Could you give it to him?"

"Of course lieutenant." Molla responded and he took a step forwards. The PDF sergeant turned to face Molla and he gave the appearance of reaching into his pocket for a pass. However, instead of producing a written pass to enter the base Molla suddenly stepped forwards and head butted the PDF sergeant, sending him sprawling across the ground behind him.

"Go!" Wolf yelled and the Catachans rushed forwards, bring their weapons up to take aim at the startled PDF troops guarding the gate.

Molla leapt over the sergeant who now lay bleeding on the ground and ran to the gate control mounted beside the door to guardhouse while the other Catachans held the startled guards at gunpoint. As soon as Molla pulled the control lever the gate began to rise and Wolf stepped out of the road to allow her platoon's transports to enter the base. These pulled in just within the perimeter of the base and the rest of the platoon, including a squad of three metre tall abhuman ogryns began to disembark from them.

"Second Platoon present lieutenant." Platoon Sergeant Vance, Wolf's second in command told her.

"Good." Wolf replied, "I want Molla and First Squad to stay here and hold the gate. Sergeant Grey is to take Second Squad and Corporal Mayer's mortar squad to secure the armoury. Sergeant Quinn will take his squad and Khor's ogryns to round up the base personnel while we head for the command centre."

"Yes lieutenant." Vance said, nodding and he waved for the other members of Second Platoon's command section to join him and Wolf before they hurried towards the nearby command centre.

The commotion at the gate could not go unnoticed for long and as the Catachans spread out they encountered more PDF troops who needed to be secured. Fortunately the base was of a limited size, holding only three companies of troops and the unexpected arrival of the Catachans had taken them by surprise, giving them no chance to arm themselves or dig in.

Most of the base personnel were located in the main barracks, preparing for their early morning inspection. This made rounding them up very easy for Sergeant Quinn and his shotgun armed veterans.

"Now hear this!" Quinn shouted as he and his men burst into the barracks, using his squad's vox set as a public address system, "This base is now under the authority of the Imperial Guard. All PDF troops are to return to their quarters until further notice."

This announcement brought some of the more senior non-commissioned officers from their quarters to find

out exactly what was going on.

“Get back to your quarters.” Quinn ordered the first of them to appear.

“Now wait one moment sergeant.” the PDF NCO responded. Quinn could see from the markings on his uniform he was a company sergeant major, thus technically outranking Quinn. However, in this case rank meant nothing. Quinn had his orders and those were all that mattered, “Just who do you think you are, giving orders around here like that?”

“Sergeant Quinn. Second Platoon, Fourth Company. Catachan Nineteenth Regiment. Now get back in your quarters while I'm still the one asking you.”

“Oh yes and who else is going to ask me as you put it sergeant?” the company sergeant major asked and Quinn smiled.

“Khor!” he shouted and he looked towards the entrance to the barracks behind him as the door opened and Khor and his ogryns bent down to fit through it.

“Ogryns ready.” Khor said slowly and Quinn looked back at the sergeant major who was now standing with his mouth wide open at the sight of the seven muscular abhumans armed with belt fed ripper guns. Even without their weapons it was widely known that a typical ogryn could rip a man apart with his bare hands.

“You heard the sergeant.” the PDF sergeant major said to the other PDF troops who had come to see what was going on, “Everyone back to their quarters.”

“Come on what are you waiting for?” Quinn shouted, “The Emperor himself has just given all your men a lie in. Are you going to turn it down?”

While Quinn and Khor were dealing with the troops in the barracks Grey and Mayer were hurrying towards the base armoury. This was the primary target of this raid and the Catachans were prepared for there to be some resistance. Second squad's grenade launcher had been loaded with riot control stumm gas and all of the Catachans had their respirators ready if this needed to be used.

As was to be expected for a building holding enough weapons to equip several companies of troops all of the doors were locked and the occupants were not likely to simply open up when ordered to. Fortunately Grey had an alternative means of gaining entry to the building and he did not bother wasting his time in simply knocking and asking politely.

“Stand back.” Grey told the other Catachans as he pulled a melta bomb from his webbing and then fixed it to the main armoury door. Then he pounded his fist on the door to alert anyone on the other side, “Door breaching! Stand clear!” he shouted before he pulled the pin from the explosive and jumped back.

Three seconds later the melta bomb went off, producing a powerful thermal reaction that swiftly burned a massive hole in the armoured door right where the two parts were locked together. After this all it took was a good hard kick from Grey for what remained of the doors to fly open and enable the Catachans to rush inside.

“Bomber you secure the weapons. We're going for the armourers.” Grey said.

“This way.” Mayer told his men and they ran for the rooms where the weapons were stored while Grey led second Squad towards the workshops and offices where the armoury staff would be located.

As befitting soldiers whose role it was to look after hundreds of powerful weapons the armourers were issued with sidearms that they carried at all times and, unwilling to risk unnecessary casualties Grey had his men treat them as hostile until they could be proven otherwise. Bursting into a workshop the Catachans found several of the armourers putting together a las cannon that they had been repairing.

“Weapons down!” Grey ordered as he and his squad burst into the workshop and the surprised armourers looked up, “Imperial Guard, I said weapons down. Now!” Grey shouted at them and one by one they released their gun belts, placed them on the floor and kicked them towards the Catachans.

One of Grey's men was just bending down to collect these weapons when another armourer burst into the workshop from an adjoining office holding a las pistol. There was a sharp 'crack' as the las pistol went off but fortunately the armourer was not an experienced shot and he missed all of the Catachans. On the other hand Grey and his men were all combat veterans and they reacted instantly, turning towards the armourer and firing their weapons before he could correct his aim. The armourer's body jerked under the repeated las blasts before he collapsed to the floor while his comrades looked on in horror.

“Anyone else want to try anything stupid?” Grey asked and some of the armourers shook their heads, “Good. Now I'm only going to ask this once and you better answer honestly. Is there anybody else in this building I need to know about?”

At the same time Grey and his men were taking the armourers into custody Mayer was leading his men to where the base's supply of weapons was kept. Small arms intended to be issued quickly were kept in movable racks that slid back and forth along rails set into the floors and ceilings of the individual armouries. This meant that only one rack of weapons, about twenty rifle size weapons in most cases could be accessed at once while the other racks were pressed together but the overall saving in space was massive because of this system. The basic weapons for three companies of troops thus fit into just three small rooms. Larger and more powerful weaponry, as well as reserve stocks of small arms were kept in labelled containers that were

in turn stored in locked storage areas surrounded by thick wire mesh. Mayer did not bother attempting to locate keys for these storage areas, instead he just used his las gun to shoot of the pad lock holding the first one shut.

“Okay,” he told his men, “let's get counting. The lieutenant wants every weapon that's supposed to be in here accounted for.”

With no ongoing military operations the base command centre was relatively quiet in the early hours of the morning. There was a single duty guard who was quickly relieved of his weapon when Wolf led her command section into the building before they made their way to the command centre itself. The handful of administrative staff on duty manning communication terminals surrendered as soon as they saw the armed Catachans and they were all herded into the main command centre. However, by the time that Wolf and her unit arrived their presence on the base had become known and as the Catachans entered the command centre they heard a panicked sounding voice coming from another room beside it.

“I don't know what they're doing here colonel but they've overrun us. You need to call the Ministry of Defence and get help to us.”

Wolf and Vance made their way towards the door leading into this other room and looking inside they saw a man in the uniform of a PDF lieutenant speaking on a telephone.

“I think you've already said enough lieutenant.” Wolf said as she strode up to the other officer and put her fingers down on the telephone to disconnect it, “Now join your men in the other room please.”

“You won't get away with this.” the lieutenant said angrily, “You've no right to be here or treat us like this.”

“Actually we have every right.” Vance told him, “Haven't you heard? As of midnight the entire planet's been under Imperial martial law.”

2.

At exactly the same moment the image on every active video screen on Temperatus was replaced by one of General Fortnam, the commanding officer of the Catachan VII Division sat behind his desk and looking directly at the pict recorder.

"Citizens of Temperatus," he announced, "my name is General Fortnam of the Imperial Guard and I command the division currently billeted to your world. It is my solemn duty to inform you that your planet has become home to an infestation. Because of the failings of your government an alien force has been able to take root here and has infiltrated many areas of your society. This force has manifested itself in the form of a heretical cult known as the Church of the Approaching Emperor that has been tolerated for far too long. After consulting with other Imperial officials on Temperatus it was decided that your government was no longer fit to remain in power and, as of midnight capital standard time, I have invoked my authority as a general in the Imperial Guard to remove your governor and his staff from power. They will be detained until a more formal investigation can determine the extent of their failure but in the mean time I am mobilising my troops to ensure that the handover of power is carried out efficiently and with the minimum of disruption to your lives and you should consider your world to now be in a state of Imperial martial law while my troops acting in concert with personnel of the Adeptus Arbites and Adeptus Mechanicus root out these vile cultists and their supporters in their hiding places no matter where they may be. In the mean time I can only ask for your understanding and co-operation. Given the grave nature of the situation my troops have been given the power to shoot to kill when presented with any resistance but it is my hope that this power will not prove to be necessary. In the name of His Divine Imperial Majesty The Emperor I thank you for your patience and promise that as soon as this emergency has abated power will be returned to a leadership made up of your own people once again."

"Broadcast terminated." the tech priest operating the pict recorder announced when General Fortnam had finished speaking.

"So how do you think that will go down with the locals?" the general asked, looking towards a cluster of men from the various Imperial organisations on Temperatus. This included the local Adeptus Arbites Marshal whose enforcers had rounded up the local government leadership as soon as the existence of the Genestealer cult on the planet became known about and a Magos of the Adeptus Mechanicus who was there to keep the general informed of progress in weeding out anyone infected by the Genestealer cult from positions of authority as well as liaising with him regarding the deployment of the military forces that the Adeptus Mechanicus had available on Temperatus.

"Most of them probably won't notice a difference general." a thin woman from the administration said, "The local police as well as the Adeptus Arbites already had pretty wide powers regarding the use of force."

"Where necessary." the Arbites marshal pointed out, "I rather think that soldiers will be quicker to open fire than enforcers. Which may lead to some minor disturbances."

"Nothing that can't be broken up with batons and bayonets though?" General Fortnam asked and the marshal shook his head.

"No. Between our forces and the regiment of skitarii that the Adeptus Mechanicus have on the planet we should be able to maintain control until we can purge the infestation."

Then there was a buzzing sound from beneath the hood of the magos.

"Comment line error." a mechanical voice said, so distorted from how the owner's natural voice would have sounded that it was impossible to tell from it whether what was left of the person under the bright red hood and cloak was male or female.

"You have an alternate viewpoint magos?" General Fortnam asked.

"Confirmed. Total available forces insufficient to carry out simultaneous duties of maintaining order and locating xenos forces. Local law enforcement exceeded our numbers by ten thousand six hundred and forty two, including reserves."

"But there were more than eight thousand reserves." the marshal pointed out, "Our forces pretty much equal the full time police in numbers."

"Omission error." the magos said, "Local forces confined to barracks must be guarded. Estimated force required for this six thousand four hundred and twenty-two troops. Additional demand also to be expected if xenos forces stage counter attacks. Ambushes targeting our forces as well as provoking violence among the civilian population have a ninety-two point four percent chance of occurring. Available resources likely to be inadequate in less than three hundred hours."

"Do you have any recommendations to counter this problem magos?" General Fortnam said.

"Assign maximum priority to screening programs for local law enforcement and planetary defence forces. Screened personnel to be reactivated and placed under direct Imperial control." the magos said.

General Fortnam nodded.

"That sounds reasonable magos." he said, "I trust I can count on you to organise the screening?"

"Confirmed."

"Excellent. In that case I'm sure we all have other duties to be attending to so we'll come to a finish here. Hopefully our forces will come up with some leads on where to find these Genestealers and their cultist brethren quickly."

Wolf was sat behind the desk of the colonel who commanded the PDF base when he finally arrived.

"Colonel Armstrong has arrived lieutenant." Sergeant Molla said as he and two other members of his squad escorted the colonel into his own office.

"Ah colonel do take a seat." Wolf said and then she activated her microbead headset and added, "Corporal Mayer could you join me in my office?"

"Your office?" Colonel Armstrong exclaimed, "Now listen to me young lady this is my office, martial law or not."

"No colonel it was your office." Wolf replied calmly, "However, now it is my office until someone can be found to fill it who is competent to command."

"Competent? Why you stupid little girl if you were a man I'd call you out for that." the colonel said angrily and beside Molla snorted, "Do you have something to add sergeant?" Colonel Armstrong added.

"Yes colonel." Molla replied, "Perhaps you should do some research on what that skull tattoo on the lieutenant's arm represents."

"And what does it represent sergeant?"

"That she's a recipient of the Honorifica Imperialis, the Imperial Guard's highest award for bravery. I'd think that a man of your experience would know better than to challenge a genuine hero of the Imperium to a duel to the death." Molla explained.

"Of course." Colonel Armstrong said, his face falling before he turned to look at Wolf again, "But will you explain what is going on here lieutenant? I have commanded this base diligently for-

"You asked to see me lieutenant?" Mayer said as he appeared in the doorway.

"Yes corporal, come in. Colonel Armstrong was just telling us what a good commanding officer of this installation he has been. Weren't you colonel?" Wolf said and then before he had chance to reply she added, "Corporal Mayer could you please tell the colonel of the discrepancies you found in the armoury he is legally responsible for?"

"Yes lieutenant." Mayer replied and he lifted a data slate so that he could read off the information, "The following items were found to be absent from the armoury with no indication that they had been properly signed out: seventy four lasguns and one hundred and sixteen charge packs. Thirty-five las pistols and ninety-six charge packs. Two missile launchers with sixty-four krak missiles and forty-one fragmentation missiles. Twelve grenade launchers with one hundred and seventy fragmentation and six-two krak rounds. Three flamers with two fuel tanks each. One heavy stubber-

"Enough!" Colonel Armstrong snapped after listening to the list, "I had nothing to do with the loss of those weapons. I inspect the armoury every week and I found nothing missing."

"Oh really?" Wolf said, getting to her feet, "Please come with me Colonel Armstrong."

The Catachans escorted Armstrong from the office in the command centre to the armoury building.

"All of the ready small arms are present of course." Wolf said as they walked past the rooms containing the movable racks of rifles, "But your checking of the rest of the armoury appears to have been somewhat lacking colonel."

"That one lieutenant." Mayer said, pointing to one of the storage areas. Like the others the lock had been shot off the gate but all of the cases of weapons that had been found inside were still there.

"The stubber?" Wolf asked and Mayer nodded.

"Yes lieutenant." he replied.

"Good." Wolf said as she entered the storage area, "Now colonel, how much does a twelve millimetre heavy stubber weigh exactly? Fifteen kilograms?"

"About that, yes." Colonel Armstrong responded and Wolf promptly reached down and picked up the case with one hand.

"Funny," she said as she lifted the case up and down, "it doesn't feel that heavy at all." then she put the case down at her feet and opened it up to expose the empty interior, "Well colonel, where is the weapon?"

"One of your men must have taken it." Colonel Armstrong said.

"Did we also put the cobweb inside the case while we were at it?" Molla asked from behind him.

"Colonel Armstrong you are under arrest." Wolf said, "Details of this case will be supplied to the commissariat who will then decide on what action is to be taken. If you fail to answer questions to the satisfaction of the investigating officer then stronger measures may be used to compel you to talk. Your fate will be decided by a court martial that you may or may not be permitted to attend or speak at. Do you understand that?"

"What? This is ridiculous." Colonel Armstrong said.

"Sergeant Molla remove the prisoner." Wolf ordered.

"Yes lieutenant." Molla replied as he reached out to place a hand on the colonel's shoulder.

"Get your filthy hands off me!" the colonel snapped at him, pushing his hand away and the two other Catachans of First Squad took aim at him with their lasguns.

"Now come along colonel." Molla said calmly, "You can either come with us peacefully or I can drag you across this base in chains."

"You wouldn't dare." Colonel Armstrong said, snarling.

"They're Catachans colonel. They would take a perverse delight in humiliating you." Wolf warned him.

"Very well lieutenant. But don't think you've heard the last of this. I have friends in the governor's office." Colonel Armstrong said as he turned to leave.

"It's nice that he has friends." Wolf commented to Mayer as Armstrong was escorted away.

"Yeah," Mayer responded, "maybe they'll end up sharing a cell before they're all shot."

Leaving the armoury Wolf and Mayer saw a Chimera fighting vehicle being waved through the main gate by the Catachans left on guard there.

"Looks like we've got company." Mayer said and Wolf nodded.

"Those are regimental HQ markings." she replied as she read the identification code painted on the side of the vehicle.

"Do you think Colonel Shryke would come here personally?" Mayer asked.

"Unlikely. It is more likely to be someone everyone who outranks me wanted kept away from them. Oh well, I suppose we'd better go and find out who our VIP guest is."

Wolf and Mayer hurried towards the Chimera as the vehicle's driver brought it to a stop outside the command centre building. Both of them were standing behind the vehicle as the main ramp was lowered and the two female passengers disembarked. The first of these was very familiar to Wolf and she smiled at her as she spoke.

"Hi Emilia." Wolf's sister Elisa said. Like Wolf, her sister Elisa had transferred to the Catachan XIX Regiment. However, unlike Wolf her sister's transfer had been requested when their original regiment, the Lyrerian XXXII had been effectively destroyed instead of being forced by being separated from it. Also she had been able to retain her position as an administrative officer instead of being placed in a combat role. However, like Wolf, Elisa remained an outsider to the Catachans and was often treated as such. The second woman to have arrived in the Chimera was also known to Wolf. Jenni Molla was Sergeant Molla's daughter and she served as a nurse at the regimental headquarters.

"Hi Elisa." Wolf replied, "What brings you here?"

"Me." Jenni responded before Elisa could answer and she held up the case she was carrying that was marked with the symbol of the Adeptus Mechanicus, "According to the cogboys this will let us tell who's been infected by the Genestealer taint."

"I thought we'd be using psykers to pick up on their psychic link to one another." Wolf said.

"Maybe at priority installations like planetary defence batteries and major airbases but at places considered so unimportant that an outsider is trusted to take them we're making do with something a little cruder." Jenni said, making sure to work in the obvious insult against both Wolf and her sister, "I'll start with the PDF's own medicae. This test takes a while to carry out so getting some help from them will speed things up a lot."

"It picks up on stray genetic material or something." Elisa added.

"And she's here because the Colonel wanted to get rid of her for the day." Jenni said, looking at Elisa.

"That's not true." Elisa said, "Emilia, General Fortnam wants updates on infection patterns as quickly as possible. We're undermanned for pacifying the entire planet as well as hunting for nests of aliens so as soon as units can be given the all clear he wants them back in service. Colonel Shryke told me to liaise directly with the general's staff regarding the test results."

"Okay. Torrent can give you a hand as well. Where do you need to set up Jenni?" Wolf asked.

"The infirmary will do. Then bring me as many of the local troops as you can keep secure for testing at once." Jenni answered.

3.

The three companies of PDF troops were lined up on the base's main parade ground under the watchful eyes of Second Platoon so that they could have the events of the past few hours explained to them properly. "Kline give me the vox." Wolf said and her vox operator passed her the handset, adjusting the vox set he carried to act as a loud speaker.

"You're on lieutenant." he said.

"My name is Lieutenant Wolf of the Catachan Nineteenth Regiment." Wolf announced, "I'm sure by now that most of you will know that the planet Temperatus has become host to a Genestealer infestation. I am sorry to have to tell you that weapons missing from your armoury suggest that this infestation may have reached this base and I have been ordered to determine the extent to which this has occurred. Therefore, each of you in turn will be tested to see if you carry the infection. Those that do will be confined and turned over to the proper authorities to be dealt with while those who do not will be returned to active duty and take part in the cleansing of this world. We will begin by testing your medicae staff so that we will have more personnel available to carry out the testing before we move on to your officers and work downwards through ranks until everyone has been tested. Until then you will be returned to your barracks where you will wait until called for. Co-operate and I'm sure that the testing can be completed rapidly and efficiently."

Wolf then passed the vox handset back to Kline and nodded at Vance.

"Okay you heard the lieutenant." he called out, "Everyone but medicae personnel back to barracks."

The officers and NCOs of the PDF troops then began to order their men back to their barracks, marching them in an orderly fashion back into the buildings under the watchful eyes of the Catachans. These troops broke formation as soon as they were inside and heading back to their dormitories.

"Believe any of that?" one said to the rest of his squad the moment they were alone together.

"Not a chance Olsen." another replied.

"So what do you think's happening sergeant?" the youngest of the troopers asked.

"Isn't it obvious? That Catachan general has decided that staging a coup and making himself planetary governor is a cushy number compared to spending the rest of his life being sent from one war zone to another." the squad leader replied.

"So there is no Genestealer cult?" the young trooper said.

"Of course not. You've read the material about Genestealers, right?"

"Yes sergeant."

"So have you seen any four armed aliens with claws that can rip through tanks around? They've made all this crap about xenos infiltration up to get rid of any opposition. Anyone they don't like the look of will be stood up against a wall in front of a Catachan firing squad before the day is out, mark my words."

"But what about the missing weapons?" the young trooper said.

"Probably taken by the Catachans themselves kid." Olsen said, "Trust me, those guys are thieving bastards. The real question is what do we intend to do about any of this?"

"I don't intend to sit here and wait to be executed." the sergeant said, "We know this base better than those Catachan thugs so I say we get out of here before its our turn to be purged." the sergeant then returned to the dormitory door and looked out into the corridor, "The coast is clear, let's go." he said softly.

"What about everyone else sergeant?" the young trooper asked, "Shouldn't we get them to come with us?"

"Get three hundred men out of this place without being spotted?" Olsen responded, "Not likely kid. this only works if our group is small enough to avoid being noticed."

"But there's only a single platoon of guard. Surely if we all rush them-" the young soldier began.

"If we all rush them they'll gun us down in minutes kid." Olsen interrupted.

"Didn't you see those ogyrns?" another trooper added, "One word from their officer and those brutes would tear our men limb form limb."

Led by their sergeant, the squad of PDF troops made their way quietly down the hallway to a storeroom at the end.

"What's in there?" the young trooper asked.

"Our way out kid." the sergeant answered as he disappeared into the storeroom. Inside he made his way to a stack of boxes at the rear of the room and began to move them aside to expose the wall behind them, "Here, give me a hand with these."

The wall behind the boxes was covered in insulated panels that the PDF troopers set about prying away using pocket knives to expose what lay behind. This was an air conditioning unit that was set into the exterior wall of the building so that warm air could be expelled.

"This is our way out." the sergeant said, "We just pull this free and then we crawl through the hole."

The sergeant had chosen this particular exit point from the barracks owing to its proximity to a particular

point on the base's perimeter fence which was less than twenty metres away. The base was not intended to be a prison camp but some of the security features to keep intruders out also made it more difficult to leave by any route other than the main gate that was still guarded by Catachan troops. Most significant among these was the razor wire topped fence that surrounded the base. However, given that the PDF troops themselves were responsible for the maintenance of the fence they knew where it was weakest and that happened to be right in front of the escaping troopers as they emerged from the hole in the wall of their barracks.

"Olsen, you and the kid keep watch." the sergeant said as he began to dig at the base of the wire link fence where he knew it to be weakest.

"Lieutenant we've got a problem." Molla said as he hurried into the office Wolf had claimed as her own. He found Wolf and her sister both going through the contents of Colonel Armstrong's personal files, searching for any indication that the colonel may have known what was going on under his command and running his own investigation while trying to keep it under wraps.

"We've got plenty of problems sergeant." Wolf replied, "What one in particular did you have in mind?"

"How about a squad of PDF troops trying to get under the fence?" Molla asked and both of the officers looked up from the dataslates they were studying.

"Where?" Wolf said hurriedly.

"Just behind the barracks. Rull spotted them taking an air conditioner out of the wall and crawling through the hole. Now they're trying to dig their way under the fence." Molla told her.

"Is anyone else responding?" Wolf said and Molla nodded.

"Quinn's taking his veterans around there now but what are Rull's orders?" he said.

Rull was Second Platoon's sniper. Once he had been part of a squad that consisted of three pairs of snipers and spotters but now he was all that was left. Even among Catachans his skills at tracking and concealment were outstanding and he invariably acted in a semi-independent role in the platoon, positioning himself as he saw fit and reporting in whatever he found.

Wolf paused for a moment while she considered this.

"Tell him that if they get outside the fence before Quinn can stop them he should fire one warning shot and then shoot to kill." she said.

"Emilia are you serious?" Elisa asked, surprised to hear her sister order what could be several summary executions.

"They were ordered to remain in their barracks Elise." Wolf replied, "Violating orders is a capital offence. Now I need to go and join Quinn. I want to find out whether there's a reason why this particular squad didn't want to stay put long enough to be tested for infection."

The sergeant pulled at the base of the fence when his digging had exposed it and lifted it far enough to provide a gap just about wide enough to crawl under.

"Company!" Olsen hissed when he saw Quinn and his squad of shotgun armed veterans running towards them.

"Okay let's move." the sergeant said and he got down on his stomach before wriggling under the fence. One by one the rest of his men followed him under the fence until they were all outside the perimeter. He was just about to issue instructions on how they were to split up as they made their escape when all of a sudden a bullet struck a fence post close to them. The projectile had made very little sound as it flew past them and there had been no sound when it was fired. This told the sergeant that they were not facing an ordinary soldier.

"Sniper! Run!" he yelled.

"Where to?" one of his men asked.

Just run, split up and head for wherever you think you'll be safe." the sergeant said and the entire squad broke into a run, each soldier heading in a slightly different direction.

There was another shot just a few seconds later and one of the fleeing soldiers fell dead, his body rolling across the ground until it came to a halt and another soldier leapt over it.

"Get back here!" Quinn shouted out from inside the break in the fence as his men pulled at the bottom to make enough room for them to get under it with their gear but the fleeing troops continued to run.

"They're coming after us!" the youngest trooper exclaimed as he risked a look over his shoulder.

"Don't look back. It'll slow you down." Olsen warned him but the warning came too late as a third shot from Rull struck the young soldier and killed him instantly.

Then there was the booming sound of a shotgun blast and Olsen was hit right between his shoulders and he too fell to the ground while the rest of the squad continued to run. The sergeant heard more gunfire and the dying screams of his men as the Catachans continued to gun them down. In his head he was counting the number of them who had been killed as he headed for a nearby gully, hoping that he would reach it before he became the Catachans' next target. The gully was just a few metres away when he heard the sound of

another shotgun blast and he felt the burning pain of being hit in the shoulder. Clamping his hand over the wound to try and stem the bleeding the sergeant staggered onwards before he fell into the gully he was heading for, landing face down in the mud at the bottom.

Quinn and his squad saw the sergeant fall and ran towards the gully themselves, expecting to find his body below them. However, instead of a corpse lying in its own blood they found the trail left behind by someone who had dragged themselves along a muddy gully until they reached the sewer access at one end.

"This is Quinn to Wolf." Quinn said, activating his microbead communicator.

"Go ahead sergeant." Wolf responded.

"Err sorry to tell you this lieutenant, but it looks like one of them got away." Quinn said.

"Hold on, I'll be right there." Wolf told him.

Rather than follow Quinn's men under the fence, Wolf and her command squad left the base via the main gate and then circled around to join the veteran troops at the gully where she found Quinn himself shining a flash light into the sewer.

"So that's where he went is it sergeant?" Wolf asked and Quinn nodded.

"He was hit though, you can see the blood along here." he told her.

"An open wound inside a sewer is going to get infected if he stays down there too long. He'll need medical treatment." Vance pointed out.

"Think he'll risk a hospital or medic's office?" Wolf asked.

"That depends on why he's running. If he's just doesn't trust us then he might think that he can get sympathy from his own people and he may well head for a public medic's facility. On the other hand if he's got something to hide then he won't risk it." Quinn said.

"You think could be running because he's infected with the Genestealer virus?" Wolf said.

"Maybe. Though he could just as easily have been taking weapons to sell on the black market." Quinn said.

"In either case he'll have contacts that could help him." Vance added, "If he's infected then he can head for his friends in the cult. If he's just a thief and black marketeer then he'll head for an underworld surgeon."

Wolf nodded.

"I need to know who this trooper is." she said.

"Sergeant." Quinn corrected her and he looked at the bodies of the other PDF troopers who had died during their failed escape attempt, "It's the sergeant that's missing."

"So he's experienced then. Even a PDF trooper on a second rate world like this doesn't get to be a sergeant without having some skill." Vance commented, "That'll make him harder to find."

"Too hard for Rull to track?" Wolf asked and Quinn and Vance smiled at one another.

"Nobody's that good." Vance said, "But the problem is he's gone underground. If he's following a prearranged route then it could be defended either with guards or booby traps and Rull's sniper rifle won't be much good to him down there. The odds will be against even him."

"Then we'll hold off on sending in Rull. Instead I'm going to check up on our sergeant's background. If we can get a clue about where he might head to find a place to hide then that's give us a head start in finding him. Then once we have some idea of where to find him we can send Rull after him." Wolf replied.

4.

"Sergeant Laran." a calm sounding voice said as the sergeant sat in an underground chamber having his wound treated and he looked up to see a tall robed man who also wore a close fitting cap over his head entering the chamber in the company of a pair of hunched figures who also wore floor length robes. Laran had never met this man before in person but he knew his face instantly, it was the face that was shown on the publicity material distributed by the Church of the Approaching Emperor and it identified him as the man who would save the entire planetary population from their sins on the day of judgement, leading them all to their final enlightenment as they were absorbed by the Emperor upon his arrival on Temperatus.

"Your eminence." he said as he began to get to his feet.

"Do not try and stand. Just tell me what happened." the cult leader ordered and Laran nodded.

"The Imperial Guard arrived at dawn and took over our base. There were only a few of them but we weren't ready for them, only a handful of us were armed and the base was theirs in a matter of minutes." he said, "They said that they were trying to trace the weapons supplied to the church and that they would be testing everyone for xenos contamination. I told the men under my command that it was a plot to stage a coup against our world so they would help me escape so that I could warn you."

"This is happening everywhere around the planet." the tall man said, "The church is under attack. They will hunt us down and exterminate us if they get the chance. They do not understand the truth or mankind's role in it. Unfortunately the Imperial forces may now have a means to locate us here."

"How your eminence?" Laran asked and a hint of a smile appeared on the tall man's face.

"You Laran. They could follow you here to us." he said and Laran's face fell.

"Oh no your eminence, I made sure that I was not being followed."

"Perhaps so. But it will only be a matter of time before the Imperial Guard or the Adeptus Arbites manage to track you down. I am sorry Laran but there is only one way to ensure that they cannot use you to get at us." the tall man said and Laran stood up straight, knowing what was coming next but willing to make the sacrifice. Meanwhile the tall man turned to one of his hunched companions and nodded.

All of a sudden a clawed hand emerged from beneath the hunched figure's robe and slashed Laran across the throat. Instinctively Laran brought his hands up to the wound as blood sprayed across the robes of his attacker and the woman who had been treating his shoulder wound.

"The body must be damaged before it is found so that it appears our brother succumbed to the wounds inflicted by the Imperial Guard." the tall man said, "Then make sure that it is left somewhere that it will be found but will not point towards the location of this place."

"Yes your eminence." the woman who had been treating Laran replied, bowing her head as she spoke to him.

Still accompanied by his hunched bodyguards the tall man then turned to leave the chamber and he made his way up a set of stairs into a part of the building that was decorated to a far more luxurious standard. From here he went to a room that was dominated by a large wooden table surrounded by chairs and sat down at the end of the table. From nearby a creature that resembled a large Terran domestic cat approached the tall man and then leapt up into his lap.

"Send them in." the tall man told his hunched companions as he began to stroke the creature.

A dozen other individuals, both men and women entered the room in silence through the various doors and lined up either side of the table, each one positioning themselves behind a chair. Some of these wore uniforms of local planetary military or law enforcement units while others were in civilian garb. When all of them were in position they looked at the tall man and bowed their heads.

"Sit." he commanded and each of them sat down. It was clear from the empty chairs on each side of the table that three of the individuals who had places reserved at it for them were missing and the tall man looked at each empty chair in turn. He knew exactly who was missing and all of them were people who worked in the civilian government of Temperatus, close to the planetary governor himself.

"I see we are missing some of our number." he said, "I do hope nothing untoward has happened to any of them."

"Under arrest your eminence." a man sat beside one of the empty chairs replied, "We have heard that the Arbites raided the homes of everyone who works at the governor's palace an hour before dawn. As far as we know they haven't been identified as members of this council but I would expect the Imperial forces to do so eventually".

"That is unfortunate. we must do everything in our power to effect their release before that can happen." the tall man said before he turned towards a man in the uniform of a PDF colonel, "So, what have we lost so far?" he asked.

"So far very little your eminence." the colonel replied, "Obviously we lost the river front and starport

warehouses along with everyone in them but the Imperial Guard and Arbites haven't tracked down any of our other assets yet. So far they appear to be trying to consolidate their position and cutting off our supply lines." "That will change soon though your eminence." a smartly dressed woman added, "The Arbites will already be looking into the ownership of the warehouses and our shell companies will not keep us hidden from them for long. We have perhaps twelve hours, twenty four at the outside to relocate our supplies to safe locations before they are found."

"And what exactly is a safe location now?" another man asked, "The Guard are everywhere. So are the Arbites and the Mechanicus."

Moving our resources will be harder now as well." a man in a local police uniform added, "We can't just drive them around in PDF trucks with a police escort when the police and PDF have been relieved of duty."

"Obviously we need to be more discrete." a woman on the other side of the table replied.

"Discrete?" the PDF colonel exclaimed, "How exactly do you be discrete when moving a forty tonne tank?"

The feline sat in the tall man's lap suddenly growled and raised itself up, its back arched.

"Bickering now will only reduce our effectiveness." the tall man said, "We do not need to find new hiding places for our weapons. Nor do we need to concern ourselves with covert movement. We shall move around the planet's population centres just as we have always done. Openly."

"Your eminence, the Imperial forces will arrest us." another man said.

"No they will not." the tall man replied, "The time has come for us to finally take control of Temperatus and the Imperium itself has given us the means to do so."

"But how your eminence?" a woman near the far end of the table asked, "Our forces are not strong enough to challenge the Imperial Guard openly."

"And they do not need to be." the tall man said, "I want the people of Temperatus to see the Imperial forces as invaders and when they rise up in anger they will sap the strength of the Imperial Guard, the Adeptus Arbites and the Adeptus Mechanicus enough that we will be able to strike wherever we want, whenever we want. We will be the liberators of Temperatus and the people will flock to us and swell our numbers."

"But how do we know that the people will rise up your eminence?" the woman said and the tall man smiled.

"Because we will make sure that they see it as their only choice." he replied.

Through its contacts in the planetary defence force and police the Church of the Approaching Emperor had adequate supplies of uniforms for those organisations but the Adeptus Arbites, Adeptus Mechanicus and Imperial Guard were another matter. The first two limited the production, possession and care of their equipment to their own personnel while the Catachan VII Division had been on Temperatus for only a short time and there had been little time for spare and waste uniforms to be traded. This meant that in order to stage a number of false flag incidents designed to provoke the anger of the civilian population against the Imperial forces convincing replicas needed to be created in a very short period of time. Fortunately for the forces of the church they needed only a small number of disguises for their troops before deploying them into populated areas by means of hidden passageways from safe houses set up many years before. Once deployed these troops would target civilians at random, demanding they answer questions and seizing property from them. Anyone who questioned this was attacked openly and in some cases accused of treason against the Imperium before being supposedly arrested and taken away. Those who were subject to these fake arrests were smuggled back into the safe houses where they were murdered to prevent them from exposing the scam.

Agents of the church would then approach those who had seen their property taken from them or had their relatives vanish and prompt them to approach the genuine Imperial authorities for an explanation. The response was of course always the same, since the arrests and seizures had been fake the authorities denied all knowledge but because of the shortage of personnel could not investigate to see what had really happened. This just made the population angrier and individual complaints soon became massed protests against direct Imperial rule and when these protests took place the Church of the Approaching Emperor made sure that it had agents waiting in the shadows nearby. These agents were armed with an assortment of hunting rifles as well as a number of weapons taken from military and law enforcement armouries by other Church agents. The hunting weapons were used to fire on the Imperial forces facing the demonstrations, provoking the Imperial troops into moving in to forcibly break up the now panicking crowds while the military grade ones were instead fired directly into the crowds to make it appear that it was the Imperial troops shooting at them. In both cases more agents from the Church of the Approaching Emperor were on hand to record events using portable pict recorders and although Imperial censors would prevent this being shown by any of the planet's main media outlets the Church of the Approaching Emperor made sure that it was distributed by other means and soon the protests became larger and louder.

"Emilia?" Elise called out as she knocked on the door of Wolf's quarters at the PDF base and Wolf opened the door.

"Hi Elise, come in." she said but her sister instead held up a dataslate.

"Actually you need to come out." she said, "You're being deployed."

Wolf took the dataslate and read the contents."

"Military assistance to the civil power." she said and Elise nodded.

"Yeah, looks like things are heating up with all these protests. Intelligence suggests that its agitators in the crowds but so far the locals are pinning the blame on us. General Fortnam is ordering as many troops as possible onto the streets to try and keep things calm."

Wolf sighed.

"One minute." she said, disappearing back into her quarters and then she reappeared fastening her gun belt around her waist, "Okay let's go." she added.

Already informed about the deployment, the squad leaders of Second Platoon were gathering their troops on the parade ground while other Catachans were being disembarked from trucks, many of whom looked very young. In addition to these young troops Wolf saw a number of Catachans she recognised from visits to the XIX Regiment's headquarters and it was obvious to Wolf that new recruits would be taking over from Second Platoon in guarding the PDF base with non-combat troops to organise them. However, there did not appear to be any officers among the

"So I guess you just got your own command then Elise?" she said and her sister smiled.

"That's right. I'll quite literally be holding down the fort while you're gone." she said.

"Just be careful, okay? We're still outsiders to these people and the new recruits can be the worst." Wolf warned Elise.

"I know. Don't worry though I've got at least one subordinate I can rely on." Elise said and she looked to where a young woman had just climbed out of a utility vehicle. Bess Quinn was the younger sister of Second Platoon's Sergeant Quinn and was far friendlier to non-Catachans than most of her fellow jungle fighters. Bess acted both as a courier and a file clerk for the XIX Regiment which meant that she served under Elise, "I intend to keep out of the way as much as I can and let her pass instructions onto the troops. Hopefully that way she'll be able to point out anything that will get me left taped naked to a tent pole."

Wolf winced, remembering how not long after she had been transferred to the XI Regiment she had managed to annoy another officer and a sergeant in Fourth Company who had stolen her clothes and tied her to the central support pole of the tent that housed her platoon's ogryns.

"Platoon present and ready to move out lieutenant." Vance said as he rushed up to Wolf and she nodded then checked the dataslate she had been given with her orders on it.

"Okay it says here that we're to move south about six kilometres and cover a commercial area of the city." she said, "How much of that stumm gas do we have left?"

"Of what we were issued, next to nothing." Vance replied, "Fortunately the armoury here held a stock of its own so we helped ourselves. We've got two hand held canisters per man plus a full drum for each grenade launcher. We also took the opportunity to grab extra smoke grenades as well."

"Looks like that's not all you grabbed. Where were they kept?" Wolf said as she pointed to the long baton hanging from Vance's belt. Looking at the rest of her platoon she noticed that each of the Catachans had one of these, only the ogryns having been left out. This was unlikely to be an issue however, the standard ogryn ripper gun was designed to make an excellent club in the hands of one of the muscular abhumans and it was highly unlikely that anyone would be able to wrestle a ripper gun away from an ogryn and turn it on the Catachans.

"Actually these were sent along with our relief and orders. Looks like Colonel Shryke expects us to have to crack a few skulls." Vance explained.

"Hopefully he's just wanting us to use something other than a volley of lasgun fire to break up a crowd." Wolf replied, "If everyone's ready then tell the platoon to mount up. We move out in fifteen minutes."

"A quarter of an hour?" Elise commented, "Surely you can be ready faster than that."

"Sure we can." Wolf said, "But our trucks are unarmed. The extra ten minutes is for my people to take some heavy stubbers from the armoury and mount them on the roofs."

5.

The convoy carrying Second Platoon moved out of the base just under a quarter of an hour later, the drivers immediately turning south to head towards the area allocated to them for their policing duties. Only Rull was not aboard any of the trucks, the sniper having gone on ahead as he usually did to scout out their route. As it happened this turned out to be fortuitous as Wolf found out when the truck at the front of the convoy that carried Quinn's veteran squad came to a halt.

"What's going on?" she said before climbing out of the cab of the truck immediately behind this when she saw Quinn climbing out of the front truck's cab and she darted forwards to meet up with him, "Why has this vehicle stopped sergeant?" she asked.

"Just got a call from Rull." Quinn replied, "he says that the area ahead of us has rather a lot of locals hanging about in clusters in it. They appear to have boxes filled with bottles with them and I don't think they're planning on any street party that we want to be invited to."

"If we try finding a way around it'll send the message that we're weak." Wolf said and Quinn nodded.

"Yes lieutenant. I suggest we have the troops stand to and see if we can get through quick enough that the locals just don't have the chance to organise a proper ambush."

"Make sure Rull knows what we're doing." Wolf said, nodding in agreement, "I want him to cover us."

"Got it lieutenant." Quinn replied before the pair of them headed back to their vehicles and once back in her own truck Wolf activated her microphone, setting it to broadcast to the entire platoon.

"We have a suspected ambush ahead. We'll be picking up the pace and I want all trucks to keep up. All squads stand to but do not open fire unless you can specifically identify a target. Squad leaders should use magnoculars to record as much as possible. If insurgents try using civilians as shields I want proof of it. Wolf out."

With her orders sent Quinn instructed the driver of the lead truck to set off again. Rather than keeping to the local speed limits as he had done since leaving the PDF base the Catachan driver now accelerated until he reached the maximum speed he considered safe for the condition of the roads while the other occupants of the vehicle kept watch for signs of the ambush Rull had warned them to expect.

The first indication of this came when the veteran trooper manning the pintle mounted heavy stubber of the lead truck noticed a cluster of locals positioned at the corner of one of the tall apartment blocks. These were all relatively young, not long out of their teenage years and one of them, a young man with a shaven head reached down into the box at their feet and took out a bottle that had been filled with flammable fluid and had a rag soaked in the same fluid stuffed into the top. One of his friends lit the rag and the man lifted it high over his head ready to hurl it at the truck.

"Contact right!" the veteran manning the heavy stubber shouted as he began to turn the weapon towards the group so he could open fire on them. However, before the young man could hurl the improvised incendiary device a bullet struck his hand and took off two of his fingers at the same time as shattering the bottle. The man screamed as he was suddenly doused in burning liquid that had supposed to have been used against the Catachans but Rull was not finished yet. One of the others in the group, this one a young woman looked down at the box of Molotov cocktails and was about to reach for another when Rull fired a second shot right through the box. The inert projectile did not ignite any of the fluid contained in the bottles but it did shatter each one it passed through before coming out of the other side of the box and burying itself in the ground. Seeing the flammable liquid now spreading across the ground towards where their burning companion had collapsed the others in the group ran.

"Keep moving." Quinn told his driver as he watched the group flee. Rull had reported multiple groups of locals and Quinn knew that stopping to investigate this one would make Second Platoon a sitting duck for the others. Of course this meant leaving the burning man to die but Quinn had no problem with that given what he had been about to do.

The convoy sped past the burning man and there was a sudden plume of flame as the expanding pool of liquid from the shattered bottles met the flames and the extra fuel combusted instantly. It was then that another local suddenly leapt out from behind another apartment block ahead of the convoy and hurled something across the road. Quinn could not make out quite what it was but he saw that it was long and trailing and as it landed it stretch across the road he and the driver realised what it was.

"Spikes!" Quinn exclaimed at the same moment that his driver slammed on the truck's brakes to decelerate before running over the metal spikes that had just been thrown in front of them.

In emerging to hurl the chain and its embedded metal spikes in the path of Second Platoon's vehicles the local man had given himself away and before he return to his hiding place there was a single shot from up high that struck him in his chest and he fell dead before the lead truck reached the spikes.

Given the speed at which the convoy had been moving, the stopping distance for the truck was greater than

it should have been and the driver was unable to bring it to a complete halt in time. The spikes embedded themselves in the truck's tyres but they were designed to resist such attacks and they did not deflate. However, as the wheels continued to turn the chain in which the spikes had been embedded wrapped itself around the axle until it pulled tight. The spikes then tore at the truck's front tyres and ripped large sections from them. The double blow out made the truck almost impossible to control even as it was slowing down and the Catachans in the rear section held on tightly as the vehicle swerved violently from side to side before it finally stopped.

Behind the lead vehicle the other trucks also came to a stop but under far more controlled circumstances and the Catachans immediately began to disembark, ready to meet the expected ambush. Climbing out of her own vehicle Wolf, along with Torrent her unit's medicae rushed towards Quinn's truck.

"Sergeant Quinn, what happened?" Wolf asked as the two women reached the lead truck.

"One of the locals chucked a spiked chain across the street. We couldn't slow down in time to clear it before we went right over the fething thing and it shredded our tyres." Quinn told her.

"Is anyone hurt?" Torrent asked and Quinn shook his head.

"No, everyone's fine for now. But it's going to take time to replace these tyres lieutenant. We'll need to grab a spare from one of the other trucks as well." he said.

"No." Wolf said as she looked around, "Sergeant I want your men to remove all the undamaged tyres and the heavy stubber from this vehicle and load them onto the others. Then have your men join my command section in truck two. I want to get to our destination as fast as possible. We'll disable this truck so it can't be taken by the enemy and abandon it."

"Contact behind!" Mayer called out suddenly when he saw several groups of locals starting to approach.

"More to the left." Molla added as he saw more locals approaching, starting to surround Second Platoon.

Looking at the gathering crowd the Catachans saw that a large portion of them held melee weapons such as clubs and knives but there were no ranged weapons visible.

"Grenade launchers." Wolf announced, "Stand by for dispersal fire." and the three members of Second Platoon armed with grenade launchers loaded the drums of stumm gas rounds into their weapons.

"Respirators." Vance ordered and the rest of the platoon began to don their gas masks so that they would not be affected by the gas themselves.

Wolf did not put her mask on right away. Instead she hurried over to Kline and took hold of the vox handset and while he was checking the seals on his gas mask she set the vox to act as a loud hailer.

"This is Lieutenant Wolf of the Imperial Guard, this is an illegal gathering and you are ordered to disperse immediately. If you do not then we will use force to make you comply." she announced.

In response to this there were jeers from the crowd and several of them hurled rocks through the air towards Second Platoon. Most of these failed to hit anyone as the Catachans dodged out of the way of the slow moving projectiles. However, one of them struck an ogryn on the side of his head and the abhuman roared with anger.

"Sergeant Khor take no action." Wolf called out when she saw the ogyrns raising their ripper guns in response to this.

"Ogyrns hold." Khor ordered and the abhumans lowered their weapons again.

"Doesn't look like they're backing off lieutenant." Grey said, raising his las pistol and reaching for the baton hanging at his side.

"Batons ready." Vance ordered and the other Catachans not armed with grenade launchers slung their weapons and drew their batons instead.

Wolf pulled her gas mask down over her face and checked that it was in position before she activated her microbead, the throat mounted microphone ensuring that even with the mask covering her mouth her words would be broadcast clearly to the rest of the platoon.

"Grenade launchers. Two rounds each." she ordered and then there was a rapid succession of popping sounds as the Catachans armed with grenade launchers each fired a pair of stumm gas rounds into the crowd that was still increasing in size.

The effect of the anti-riot gas was almost immediate and everyone who inhaled any of the gas began to cough and choke, rubbing at their eyes as the gas affected their breathing and vision. Some of the crowd used scarves to cover their noses and mouths and goggles to protect their eyes. The protection offered by these crude means was limited at best but even they began to drop to their knees, coughing as they ripped the goggles from their faces to let the fluid building up inside drain away.

One man who had obtained a proper gas mask from somewhere was able to run up to one of the stumm gas canisters and picked it up to hurl back at the Catachans. However, throwing it back required him to run much closer with the gas spewing canister in his hand and as soon as he ran forward of the main group Molla beckoned to three of his men to follow him as he rushed towards the charging man and used his baton to knock the gas canister from his hand. Then with a second swing of the baton he knocked the man's legs out from under him. He and his men then pinned the local man to the ground and began to secure his hands behind his back, ripping off his gas mask and letting the stumm gas disorientate him as he struggled against

them.

All of a sudden there was a flash of las fire.

"Hold your fire! Who's shooting?" Wolf yelled, using her microbead to address the entire platoon.

"Not one of ours lieutenant." Vance responded right before there was another flash as a second shot struck one of Molla's men and he fell across the local man.

"Pull back." Molla ordered and he and another Catachan grabbed hold of their shot comrade and began to drag him back towards the rest of Second Platoon who were already taking cover, switching back from their batons to lasguns, shotguns and other lethal ranged weapons.

"Molla, Grey, Mayer." Wolf said, "I want you to stand by to volley fire lasguns over the crowd if the gas doesn't hold them back. Does anyone have eyes on that sniper yet?"

"The green building to the north east." Vance replied, looking through his magnoculars, "I see an open window on the sixth floor."

Wolf lifted her own magnoculars to her eyes and looked for herself. Sure enough there was an open window exactly where Vance had told her. The room on the other side of the window was too dark to be able to see what was inside but as Wolf watched she saw the familiar flash of a lasgun firing and the shot struck one of the trucks the Catachans were hiding behind.

"Brooks." Wolf said, looking at the guardsman who carried her command section's grenade launcher, "Reload with frags and put a round through that window."

Brooks said nothing in reply, instead just swapping the drum of gas filled rounds for one filled with conventional explosive grenades. Brooks aimed the grenade launcher carefully before squeezing the trigger and this time the 'pop' of the discharge was followed by an explosion from inside the apartment building and smoke began to billow through the open window.

"Excellent shot Brooks." Vance said, "Somebody better let the fire department know they're needed though." Wolf nodded and was about to order Kline to pass on the message when there was an all too familiar dull rumbling sound.

"Are we expecting armour support lieutenant?" Molla asked and Wolf shook her head.

"No, I've not been told about any mechanised units operating in this area." she said.

Turning towards the source of the sound the Catachans were shocked to see a Lemman Russ battle tank rounding a corner towards them. However, this was not painted in the dark green colour of the Catachan XIV Regiment that made up the armoured portion of the VII Division, nor was it even in the mottled grey colour scheme of the Temperatus PDF. Instead its original paint had been covered in a coat of solid dark blue and the symbol of the Church of the Approaching Emperor carefully painted on each side. Clearly the Genestealer cult still had considerable armaments at its disposal and had chosen now to put them to use.

"Take cover!" she shouted before there was a loud booming sound as the Lemman Russ's main gun fired.

The Church of the Approaching Emperor may have been able to obtain the tank from the PDF's armoury but the crew of cultists that had been provided to it lacked the experience necessary to properly aim the large battle cannon, especially while it was still moving and the shell flew right over Second Platoon before striking an apartment block behind them and blasting a massive hole through the side. Then as the Catachans ran for whatever cover they could find the heavy bolter mounted in the front of the tank's hull began firing, spraying explosive rounds down the street, hitting one of Grey's men as he was just about to reach the relative safety of the corner of a building. Most of the fire from the heavy bolter struck the stationary trucks that had carried Second Platoon here though and the unprotected vehicles were easily ripped apart by the powerful automatic weapon. In one case a mass reactive round penetrated the fuel tank of a truck and there was an explosion as the contents caught fire, sending a plume of flames skywards.

"Sergeant Grey how soon can you have your squad's missile launcher ready?" Wolf asked over the microbead as she peered over the low wall she was using for cover as the tank continued to roll down the street.

"As soon as we can figure out a way of getting back to the truck for it." Grey responded.

"Throne." Wolf hissed as she considered how to deal with a tank without any of Second Platoon's heavy weapons that were aboard the trucks.

"Lieutenant we've still got the melta." Quinn reminded her and inside her mask Wolf smiled.

"Get as close as you can sergeant." she said. Although melta guns were incredibly powerful and easily able to burn through most armour, no matter how thick, their range was incredibly limited and it was necessary to get very close to a target to make maximum use of the weapons.

Quinn waved at his squad to move and they began to run, not directly towards the steadily advancing tank but towards the next apartment block along the road.

"Lieutenant we've got infantry as well." Mayer reported and Wolf saw that behind the tank ran a large group of robed men that Wolf recognised the robes as belonging to the Church of the Approaching Emperor as well. The cultist force advanced in a tight group that made counting their numbers difficult but it appeared to outnumber Second Platoon by about two to one carrying an assortment of small arms. From beneath some of the robes came rubber hoses that connected to packs on the cultists' chests, suggesting that they wore

respirators and meaning that the stumm gas that still filled the air around them would not keep the cultist infantry back.

"All squads suppressing fire." she ordered and the Catachans opened fire with lasguns and las pistols. Brooks took aim with his grenade launcher and fired a fragmentation round into the midst of this infantry and several of the robed cultists were thrown away by the force of the blast. This hail of fire from the Catachans sent the cultists running for cover as well, although their movement did not appear as organised as the Catachans' had been. Obviously these cultists came from the civilian population of Temperatus instead of one of its PDF units.

The stolen Lemman Russ tank continued to advance along the street to where it came to the rear of Second Platoon' convoy of trucks. Rather than drive around the wrecked vehicle the driver of the tank carried on in a straight line and simply began to drive over what was left of the truck. It was at this point that the Lemman Russ came past the apartment block that Quinn's veteran squad was concealed behind. The crew of the tank had seen the Catachan troops positioning themselves behind the building but the tank lacked the side mounted sponsons that were fitted to many and the hull mounted heavy bolter fired only in a narrow forward arc, not to the side. This left the tank with only its main gun to engage targets to the side and this swung around as the tank drove onwards. However, Quinn's veterans were already prepared to face the heavily armoured vehicle and the Catachan armed with the squad's meltagun already had the weapon aimed at the tank as soon as it appeared.

The meltagun produced a beam of superheated energy that shot towards the vertical side of the Lemman Russ. As well as being thinner than the frontal armour, the side plates were not angled to deflect solid shots or high energy beams and the melta blast punched right through the side of the tank. Familiar with the design of the Lemman Russ, the Catachan veteran armed with the meltagun aimed it towards the rear of the vehicle where its engine block was located and the beam burned its way right through this as well. The intense heat of the beam was able to ignite all of the fuel stored just below the engine and in an instant the tank exploded in a ball of flame that filled the interior with fire that burned all of the crew alive and raised the internal pressure so much that the turret of the tank was propelled skywards before it came crashing back down to the ground. Thankfully the ammunition for the main battle cannon stored at the rear of the turret did not get hot enough to cook off before the turret was blown off and the massive explosion that would have resulted from this did not occur.

The cultists had depended on the tank to offer them an advantage over the professional and battle hardened Catachan troops and now that they had lost it they were unsure what to do next. On the other hand Wolf experience told her exactly what to do now.

"Corporal Mayer hold your squad back to watch the civilians. I don't want them rushing us while we're engaging the cultists. Everyone else advance."

"Ogryns! Forwards!" Khor bellowed, his gas mask barely muffling his yell and the ogryns began to run towards the cultists now scattered either side of the road. The abhumans surged on ahead of the rest of the platoon and there was the roar of gunfire as Khor fired his ripper gun at the cultists and the other ogryns copied him.

Although their marksmanship was not exceptional, the sheer weight of fire from seven belt fed automatic shotguns firing in unison was tremendous and several of the cultists fell dead almost instantly. The cultists returned fire with their own assortment of small arms. These were intended to be used against human sized targets rather than anything as large as an ogryn and the shots that hit their targets did nothing more than make them roar in anger. Meanwhile the rest of Second Platoon also began to open fire, using individually aimed shots or short bursts of fire to pick off specific cultists.

The ogryns did not stop running when they reached the forward line of cultists, instead they switched from firing their ripper guns to swinging them like clubs. Wielded by creatures as strong as ogryns, the solidly built weapons were just as deadly when used like this and cultists screamed in agony as their bones were smashed. Under such an assault the front line of robed figures broke and turned to run. The ogryns were able to move faster than the cultists, however and a number of them just ended up getting trampled under the feet of the massive abhumans as they tried to escape. The ogryns were entirely focused on reaching the largest concentration of cultists and having passed through their forward line they were now surrounded. A competent military commander would have been able to use this to his advantage, withdrawing troops from ahead of the ogryns while attacking from the sides and rear simultaneously then swapping roles as the ogryns turned to react. However, it was clear to the Catachans that whoever was in charge of this force of cultists was far from qualified as a combat officer and all of them attempted to pull away from Khor's squad. In doing so they took their attention away from the other advancing Catachans and they took advantage of this to fire on them as they broke from cover. There was another explosion as a second fragmentation grenade, this one fired from the launcher carried by Molla's squad and more cultists cried out in pain as the shrapnel tore through them.

The cultists still outnumbered the Catachans and many still held the will to fight on. One of these rallied the cultists close around him and held his pistol in the air before letting out a loud shout that was somewhat

muffled by the combination of his hood and the respirator that covered his face.

"For the Patriarch!" he shouted and he and a group of cultists about a dozen strong ran to meet the oncoming Catachans, firing their weapons and screaming loudly as they ran. The cultists' charge took them towards First Squad and another of Molla's men was hit as they approached.

"Fire at will." Molla ordered his men as they ground to a halt and the entire squad returned fire as rapidly as they could, lasguns set to fire fully automatically. This barrage of fire took its toll on the screaming cultists and most were cut down before they came within arms' reach. Armed with a las pistol, Molla was able to draw his traditional large Catachan knife while still opening fire and as the cultist who had organised the charge ran right up to him he swung the blade at neck height. The most visible effect of this strike was that the respirator hose coming from beneath the cultist's hood suddenly dropped downwards, Molla's knife blade having cut right through it. Then the cultist suddenly dropped to his knees, let go of the autogun he held and reached up under his hood for his throat as blood began to pour down his robes and stain them bright red. Molla then took the chance presented to him to look around and he saw that his men were already dealing with the handful of cultists to have reached them. One was knocked to the ground by the butt of a lasgun before being shot through the head with that same weapon while the other two cultists were also finding out just how deadly a Catachan fighting knife could be, the Catachans having just dropped their lasguns in favour of their traditional blades.

Although most of the cultists were armed with ordinary rifle sized weapons there was one larger individual who carried a heavy stubber that was supported with a sling so that it could be fired without the need for a fixed mounting. There was a loud roaring sound as this individual opened fire, attempting to target Wolf's command section.

"Down!" Vance yelled as he saw the robed figure take aim before opening fire and Wolf and her unit were already on the ground before the heavy projectiles began to fly over their heads. Meanwhile Vance activated his microbead, "Rull, if you're out there we could do with an assist." he transmitted.

The cultist armed with the heavy stubber laughed as he fired another burst from the heavy weapon. he did not care that he had failed to hit any of the Catachans, just keeping the command section pinned down was enough for him right now. Then he blinked as a tiny red light shone in through one of the lenses on his gas mask and he ceased fire for a moment as he flinched. The tiny red dot remained on his head though and a moment later a bullet punched through the cultist's skull right where the targeting laser had been placed and he fell backwards with a large hole in the back of his hood.

While First Squad was dealing with the cultists who had attempted to launch a charge of their own, Quinn led his veterans towards a cluster of them that had sought cover among a cluster of wheeled waste storage bins. The shotguns that most of the veterans carried enabled them to fire a large number of projectiles accurately in a short space of time but these lacked the penetrating power of lasgun shots and the cultists remained safe behind the bins. Fortunately for Quinn and his men they also had other weapons available to them.

"Flamers." he ordered, "Light them up."

Two of the veterans in Quinn's squad carried lightweight flame throwers and there was a screeching sound as they unleashed jets of burning promethium towards the bins. Fire flowed around obstacles easily, making flamers useful weapons for bunker busting and the bins offered the cultists no cover at all from them. The gas masks they wore provided a slight amount of protection by preventing the flames from blasting their faces and passing down their throats into their lungs but it still set fire to their clothing, burned any exposed flesh and melted the rubber seals around the sides of the gas masks to their skin.

With their tank destroyed, ogyrns in their midst and now the Catachans deploying flame weapons against them took the fight out of the cultists. The Genestealer psychic link to them may have made them fanatically loyal to their alien masters but it did not remove the primitive fight or flight instinct from them. The surviving cultists began to withdraw. They did not simply panic and flee though, instead they continued firing as they pulled back and another Catachan from Grey's squad was struck.

"Torrent see to him." Wolf said and the platoon medic nodded before running off towards the injured man.

Wolf then looked towards the cultists as they withdrew and activated her microbead to address the whole platoon, "Break off pursuit." she ordered.

"We're not going after them?" Vance asked and Wolf shook her head.

"No." she replied, "Our orders didn't mention chasing after cultists. Look, the civilians have scattered as well and we've got another part of the city to protect. Kline, give me that vox handset." and as Kline passed the handset to her Wolf removed her gas mask so she could speak into it more clearly over the sound of firing as her troops continued to exchange shots with the retreating cultists, "This is Catachan One Nine Mark Four Mark Two calling Catachan One Nine Mark Four. Come in. Over."

"This is Catachan One Nine Mark Four. What's your status Lieutenant Wolf?" the voice of Major Trent, Fourth Company's commanding officer responded.

"Major I need to report an enemy contact at grid reference -" Wolf began before she paused to look around to take in her surroundings before checking them against the map on her dataslate, "reference six oh four by one three eight. One Leman Russ tank supported by sixty plus infantry. They used an ambush by a civilian

crowd to force us to stop before engaging us. Enemy vehicle destroyed and infantry in retreat with casualties. I don't have numbers for you yet."

"That's okay lieutenant." Trent said, "We're getting reports like this in from all over the planet. It looks like we could be in the midst of a full scale uprising here. Can you make it to your assigned patrol zone?"

"Yes major. We've suffered only light casualties. Our transport have been disabled but we're within walking distance." Wolf told him.

"Good. In that case I'm ordering you to make your way to your assigned patrol zone and establish a fortified position as best you can. Then stand by to receive further orders as we get more information." Trent said.

"Yes major. We're on our way now. Lieutenant Wolf out." Wolf said before she returned the vox handset to Kline and looked at Vance who, like Wolf had now removed his respirator.

"I heard." he said and he looked at what remained of the trucks that had brought them this far, "They all look pretty fethed though so I guess you were right when you said that we'll be walking." he added and Wolf nodded.

"Our heavy weapons were in them." she said, "See if any survived. If nothing else I don't want to leave them here for the enemy."

"Your eminence we have failed you." one of the four cultists now kneeling in front of the tall man.

"You were discovered before you could place the body in the sewer." he said, using his psychic powers to pull the memory from the cultist's mind.

"Yes your eminence. We saw a man approach and had to flee before he could see us. We saw him find the body and then run to one of the shuttered stores. We think he called the police."

"The police are not carrying out their duties at this time." the tall man said, "If they were then we could have used our influence to make sure that the body was only inspected when we wanted it to be. Now it will fall to the Adeptus Arbites to investigate and we have no influence with them. It was important that the body appeared to have suffered no injuries in between leaving the PDF base and getting to where it was found. Your failure means that the Arbites will have the opportunity to realise that that is not the case. We can only hope that they do not have the resources to carry out an investigation just yet."

"We are prepared to accept our punishment your eminence." the cultist said and he briefly raised his head to look at the hunched hybrid bodyguards that stood either side of the tall man before looking downwards again.

"Of course you are. I would expect nothing else. However, there is no need for you to give up your lives for nothing. Had you killed the man who discovered you then his death would have led the authorities to us instead. You did all that you could under the circumstances."

"Thank you your eminence."

"Don't thank me just yet. If you had been more careful then you could have waited until after this man had left and I still have work for you all. Our forces are outmatched by the Imperium's and the desired general uprising has yet to take place. You will draw weapons and join the next unit to be deployed. Perhaps you can make up for your failure on the front lines."

6.

Packed in protective cases, Second Platoon's heavy bolter and missile launcher had survived the fire from the Lemn Russ and only its three mortars and their ammunition had been crushed when the heavy armoured had driven over them. On the other hand three of the heavy stubbers mounted on the roofs of the trucks had survived, along with mountings and a quantity of ammunition. Leaving behind what was destroyed, the Catachan heavy weapon teams now carried the remaining weapons and ammunition as Second Platoon continued towards their destination. Having already experienced one ambush Wolf had the squads in her platoon alternate between moving and keeping watch while Rull scouted ahead yet again. Just as Major Trent had informed Wolf, the Church of the Approaching Emperor was now deploying its forces openly and the sounds of fighting could be heard in the distance as Second Platoon made its way through the city streets on foot. Mainly these were the sound of small arm fire as small units of cultists emerged from hiding places to ambush Imperial patrols but from elsewhere there were intermittent explosions as both sides deployed heavier weapons against one another. Moving stealthily through the streets ahead of the rest of the platoon, Rull was able to warn them of any potential trouble spots. Fortunately for the Catachans the cultists had counted on their initial ambush to wipe out Second Platoon and had nothing else in place to make a second attack. This limited any potential ambushes to small groups of locals to attack with mostly improvised weapons and to further dissuade this Wolf took the unusual step of ordering Khor's ogryn squad to take the lead position in the platoon instead of having it bring up the rear to follow a path determined by the Catachans who could move more quickly through the jungle terrain they were most often deployed to. However, in urban terrain the Catachans had no such advantage of experience and although they needed to be told which way to go at every junction they reached, the sight of seven ogryns armed with ripper guns was enough to scare off troublemakers from the local population.

"Lights." Khor said unexpectedly when Second Platoon was approaching their final destination, a square set in the midst of a shopping precinct. Ordinarily this area would have been bustling with people at this time of day but today the shops were shuttered and it was empty apart from the black painted armoured car that bore the emblem of the Adeptus Arbites on its sides and pulsing blue and red lights on its roof.

"What are they doing here?" Vance said when he saw the Arbites enforcers. Rull had not warned the platoon about this and their presence came as a surprise to him.

"I don't know. My orders didn't say anything about support from the Arbites." Wolf replied, "I guess we better go and find out." then she looked over her shoulder at the rest of the platoon, "Spread out." she told them, "I want a full report on the ways in and out of this area by the time I get back." and then she and her command section hurried towards the Arbites enforcers to find out what had brought them here.

"Halt." one of the enforcers said as Wolf and her command section neared them.

"Lieutenant Wolf. Catachan Nineteenth Regiment. My platoon has been ordered to secure this area. I wasn't told to expect you." Wolf said.

"We were summoned here less than an hour ago lieutenant." one of the Arbites whose armour bore the rank markings of an arbitrator who was obviously in command of this squad, "I'm Arbiter Kassan. Perhaps you ought to see this." and he beckoned for Wolf to follow him to where most of his squad was clustered around an area of neatly maintained decorative vegetation placed in the centre of the shopping precinct. Getting closer Wolf saw that a manhole cover had been left on the grass while the manhole itself was partially hidden by a hedge. However, it was not the opening of the manhole that had brought the Adeptus Arbites here, it was the dead body next to it, "A store owner came to check that his business was secure and found this." the arbiter explained, "He tried to contact local law enforcement and his call was forwarded to us. Look like this guy was PDF."

The body now outlined in white tape was lying face down but even from behind it was easy to tell that it was wearing the uniform of a PDF sergeant.

"Think this could be the guy who got away from Quinn?" Vance said and Wolf nodded.

"A PDF sergeant beside a manhole? It's a big coincidence if he isn't." she said.

"He didn't die here." Kassan said, "It may be that someone wanted it to look that way but didn't have time before the store owner disturbed them but he's obviously been dumped here."

"Obviously?" Wolf commented.

"The blood." Vance said to her and beneath the armoured visor that came half way down his face Arbiter Kassan smiled.

"Exactly." he said, "The body has been badly battered around the head and especially the face. Probably to make identification more difficult, but if that had happened here then there'd be blood all over the place and there isn't any at all. In my professional opinion this man was killed somewhere else and his body brought here to be disposed of. Am I to take it that you might know who he was?"

"It's a possibility." Wolf responded, "We were deployed to secure a PDF base and some of the troops attempted to escape. One of them, a sergeant, made it to a drain access and this body is wearing a sergeant's uniform."

"Can I take a look?" Torrent asked and Wolf looked at Kassan.

"She's my medic." she said.

"Then be my guest. I think he's beyond her help though." Kassan responded.

Torrent crouched down beside the body and slowly turned it over to expose the extent of the damage.

"No bruising." she said as she studied the dead man's face, "These injuries were inflicted after death."

"That looks like a shotgun wound there." Vance commented when he saw the torn flesh at the body's shoulder.

"It is." Torrent agreed as she studied this closer, "It's not near any of the major blood vessels though so I don't see him having bled out from that either."

"So what did kill him?" Wolf said.

"The jaw has been broken and driven right back into the neck, breaking it." Torrent said, "That could have been fatal."

"Could have been?" Arbiter Kassan said, "I need better than that for my report. I'll have to take this body back for a proper autopsy."

"You know all the injuries to the face and neck would be consistent with falling and landed heavily face first."

Torrent said and then she looked at the open manhole, "Down that for example."

"They wanted the body to be found." Wolf said suddenly and she turned to Vance, "Sergeant what would you do if we knew that this guy is the missing sergeant who escaped from us?"

"Track the path he took to get here." Vance replied and Wolf nodded.

"Exactly and if we found him at the bottom of that hole then we'd think that his injury made him fall from the ladder climbing out and he landed face first at the bottom, killing him." she said, "But what if he was brought here above ground by someone planning to throw him down the hole for us to find?"

"They'd be wanting us to think that he made his way all the way here through the drains." Vance said and he looked around, "Whereas in reality he probably left them quite a way from here."

"But if he was brought here above ground then there might be a trail to follow back to where he really died." Wolf said.

"I've got something." Torrent said suddenly and Wolf, Vance and Kassan all turned to look at her, "See here where the throat has been struck?" Torrent asked, running a finger across the corpse's neck, "Well behind this damage is a ruptured artery."

"Ruptured by what?" Wolf asked.

"Something with a point, but not any sort of knife I've ever seen." Torrent replied.

"A claw?" Vance suggested and Torrent nodded.

"It looks that way." Torrent said, "Which given the lack of large clawed creatures native to this planet I'd say the most likely explanation is that he ran into a Genestealer. I can't tell what sort though, it could be a hybrid or a purestrain."

"Throne. Here was me hoping we burned all the pure strains in that warehouse at the starport." Wolf said.

"Lieutenant." Quinn called out as he approached the group and Wolf turned to face him.

"Yes sergeant?" she said.

"We've checked out the area and it's not good." Quinn said, "There are multiple entry points that are going to spread our forces pretty thin. There are four major entry points that will take vehicles and twice that many pedestrian gates. There are also three man holes like this one and whatever ways in and out there might be inside any of these stores if the shutters were opened."

"That's only to be expected." Vance said, "This place is intended to let civilians move in and out as easily as possible. Makes it hard to keep people out when you don't want them to get in."

"I'd be asking why Colonel Shryke wanted us here but from this little garden here, I'm guessing that headquarters have decided that it would make a good landing area for Valkyries and such."

Vance nodded in agreement.

"Just burn away this vegetation with your flamers and we'd have a ready made pad." he said.

"Arbiter Kassan, I don't suppose your men can join us can they?" Wolf asked.

"Sorry lieutenant." Kassan answered, "My orders are to recover this body and any evidence and return it to the station house."

"Very well arbiter." Wolf said, nodding and then she turned back towards Vance and Quinn, "Assemble the platoon. I want to speak to them all." she said.

Feeling more at home among vegetation Second Platoon gathered in the greenery meant to provide a more pleasing environment to shoppers and entice them to the precinct for Wolf to address them.

"Okay everyone," she began, "I think you're all already aware of how difficult to defend this area is but it's vital that we do. Clearing out all this vegetation gives us a landing zone in the middle of the city that can be

used to deploy reinforcements."

"Er lieutenant," Grey said, raising his hand as he interrupted Wolf.

"Yes sergeant?" Wolf responded.

"Do you intend to tell us anything that we didn't already know?" Grey asked and Wolf frowned before continuing, ignoring the question.

"Ordinarily I'd be asking you to deploy booby traps at some of the access points so we could concentrate on defending just a few of them but this is a civilian area and even though people are staying home right now, locals could turn up at any time so we can't go leaving explosives lying around."

"Why?" a Catachan commented and Vance glared at him.

"Instead we're going to try reducing the number of access points so we can concentrate on just a few of them. Corporal Mayer?" Wolf said.

"Yes lieutenant?" Mayer responded.

"Corporal Mayer I want you to take your squad as search the surrounding area for anything that can be used to create barricades." Wolf told him and he nodded. Then she looked at Khor's ogryn squad, "Sergeant Khor?" she added and instantly Khor and his entire squad snapped to attention and saluted.

"Yes lieutenant sir." Khor said and Wolf noticed Grey smirk at her being referred to as male.

Wolf knew that the ogryns would remain at attention with their hands raised to their foreheads until she returned their salute so she did so quickly.

"At ease sergeant." she said and the ogryns relaxed as she continued, "You will accompany Corporal Mayer and his squad. Whatever they identify as suitable you are to bring back here where either myself or one of the platoon's other sergeants will tell you where it is to be put. Do you understand?"

"Ogryns carry." Khor said and Wolf nodded.

"Yes, carry." she said, "Everyone else I want this area surveyed again with a view to determining which access points are be blocked off and how many we can cover with our numbers. I'm going to contact Major Trent and let him know that we've arrived. If there's any more information I'll let you know. Now are there any questions?"

The platoon looked at Wolf silently and she glanced at Vance.

"Okay everyone we've got a job to do so let's get on with it. I want this place to be secure before nightfall. Now move!" he shouted.

"So what do you think?" Wolf asked Vance as the platoon began to disperse.

"Oh so now you're asking for help from a professional soldier?" Torrent commented from nearby.

"It's a good plan." Vance answered as both he and Wolf ignored Torrent's barbed comment that referred to Wolf's history before joining the XIX Regiment as an administrative officer rather than a combat one, "Or at least the best I think we'll come up with."

Wolf nodded.

"Thanks." she said, "I'm guessing that the colonel expected this place to be full of civilians shopping and just wanted us to act as a deterrent to trouble and be on hand if we did need to land aircraft here. Turning it into a fortress and hunting Genestealers is probably more than he bargained for us having to do."

"A pity we lost Bomber's mortars, they would have come in useful if we come under attack here." Vance replied, "One the other hand Rull should have hunting Genestealers in hand by now. What do you want to do if he does locate the enemy nearby?"

"I'm not sure. Our orders are to hold this position but I may have to detach some men to keep tabs on the enemy until we can get reinforcements. I'd probably order Quinn's squad and Rull to handle that. I'll run it by Major Trent though." Wolf told him.

"Lieutenant, do you want to contact Major Trent now?"

"Yes, pass me that vox." Wolf said and she held out her hand for the vox handset. As soon as Kline passed it to her she placed it to her mouth and switched it on, "This is Catachan One Nine Mark Four Mark Two calling Catachan One Nine Mark Four. Do you read me, over?"

There was a short pause before a reply came but this was not Major Trent, instead the voice belonged to Company Sergeant Major Stubbs, Fourth Company's most senior NCO.

"This is Catachan One Nine Mark Four, go ahead Lieutenant Wolf." he said.

"Stubbs, where is Major Trent?" Wolf asked.

"Taking a dump. His exact words were 'Unless the Emperor himself descends from the Golden Throne to offer him an audience he is not to be disturbed.'" Stubbs said.

"Well when he's done relieving himself of his breakfast could you tell him that Second Platoon has reached its destination safely? We encountered a unit of Arbites on arrival who'd been summoned to deal with a body that we identified as the missing soldier from the PDF base we secured. My platoon medicae examined the body and determined the cause of death to be a throat wound that may have been inflicted by a Genestealer. Right now I've got Second Platoon working to fortify our position so we'll at least have a chance to hold it if attacked and Guardsman Rull is attempting to locate the enemy position. I need to know what my priority is to be if he locates it."

"Okay lieutenant, I'll let the major know when he gets back. I don't think you'll be receiving much in the way of support for a while yet. We're getting reports of disturbances from all over the planet. The Genestealer cult's forces have even tried attacking the Fourteenth Regiment openly. Colonel Vorris' tanks drove them off without much trouble but these attacks are keeping our forces pinned down protecting key positions instead of actually hunting the enemy."

"So no luck in getting the local police and PDF back in action?" Wolf asked.

"Not yet. The testing is continuing but its taking longer than expected and we can't pull our troops away from the local bases until each one is fully tested."

"Okay I understand sergeant. I'll wait for further orders. Lieutenant Wolf out." Wolf said and then she shut off the vox and returned the handset to Kline.

"I'm guessing we're on our own then." Vance said and Wolf nodded as she looked around.

"We better get comfortable. We may be here for some time." she replied.

7.

"Your eminence." a cult member whose clothing and equipment marked him out as one who was part of the cult's military forces said as he stood in the door of what had become the tall man's command centre. In this room maps of various cities and important regions now covered the walls while a larger map of the capital itself was laid out to cover the table in the centre of the room around which the tall man himself and several of his advisers were gathered. The large catlike creature that belonged to the tall man rubbed up against his leg as he studied the map.

"You have news?" the tall man asked without turning his attention away from the map.

"Yes your eminence. There has been a development with the body that was supposed to be used to decoy the Imperium away from us." the cultist said.

"Explain." the tall man said, finally looking up from the map.

"The Adeptus Arbites enforcers have departed with the body but before they did so they were joined by a unit of Imperial Guard. These troops have remained in the precinct where the body was abandoned."

"That's less than a thousand metres from here." one of the tall man's advisers pointed out.

"How could the Arbites have realised the significance of the body so rapidly?" another panicked advisor exclaimed but the tall man held up his hand for quiet.

"Tell me more about this Imperial Guard force." he said to the new arrival.

"It is platoon strength your eminence and includes a unit of ogryns."

"I see. How did they arrive?"

"By foot your eminence."

"Then there is nothing to fear, their presence is a mere coincidence. If they came on foot then there would not have been enough time for the enforcers to have summoned them. They were always going to have arrived where they did."

"Your eminence that location could be used by the Imperium as a staging area or an assault on our headquarters." the adviser in a PDF colonel's uniform said, "It is large enough to land up to half a dozen transports at once if it is cleared."

"Then we must take precautions against such a thing happening." the tall man said, "How many anti-aircraft weapons do we have in this part of the city?"

"Only a handful your eminence." the colonel replied, "most have been sent into the outlying regions where our forces are most vulnerable to air attack."

"Have whatever we have placed surrounding these troops. If they try to receive reinforcements by air then we will destroy them before they can land." the tall man said.

"Your eminence," one of the civilian advisers said, "why wait? These Imperial troops are isolated. We have mortars in our arsenal, why not use them to wipe them out now?"

The tall man glared at the adviser and scowled at him. At the same time the catlike creature's back arched and it let out a hiss.

"Are you a fool?" the tall man said, "What do you think will happen if we wipe out these soldiers? The Imperium will just send more. As hard pressed as they are at the moment they will not allow such an attack to go unpunished. No, I want these troops watched. If they send out patrols then they can be ambushed but there will be no direct assault before we can provoke a more general uprising against the Imperium."

A single lasgun shot had been all it took to take the lock off one of the shuttered shop units in the precinct. To avoid any legal complications with allegations of looting a unit that had signs up on the shutter indicating that it was vacant and information on how it could be rented had been chosen for this. Despite being vacant the unit was not completely empty and some of the back rooms still held furniture.

"This looks good." Wolf said as she and her command section stood in the small office to the rear of the store, "This will be our command post."

"The communication unit still works by the way." Vance said, pointing to the communication panel on a desk, "If we lose vox contact we can try just dialling Regimental HQ. It does add one complication though, there's a back way in and out that will be outside our perimeter. I'm guessing that each of the units has one."

Wolf nodded.

"I guessed as much." she said, "What can we do to barricade it?"

"Not much. Its a pretty large door that looks like its meant for handling deliveries. On the other hand since we shouldn't be expecting any civilians to be coming through it I'd say we could wire up a nice little surprise for anyone that does?" Vance suggested.

"Okay, but not too big sergeant, I don't want the entire building bringing down around us." Wolf said and Vance looked over his shoulder at Brooks.

"See to it trooper." he said and Brooks nodded.

"Yes platoon sergeant." he replied before he hurried away.

"If there's a back way into this place then what about all the other stores?" Torrent asked as Brooks ran past her.

"Probably the same." Vance replied.

"So anyone could come in through any of the other stores then?" Wolf said, concerned that her plan to fortify the shopping precinct was already a failure.

"Oh I wouldn't worry about that lieutenant." Vance said to reassure her, "Even if anyone did get into one of the stores without attracting attention they couldn't come through into the main precinct without lifting the front shutters and that can't be done quietly or quickly. I suppose they could use explosives to blast through but they could just as easily try that with one of the barricades we're setting up across the access points we're blocking off."

"See lieutenant?" Torrent added, "We're not going to let you get us killed if we can help it."

Just then Grey came rushing into the store and called out.

"Vance? Lieutenant Wolf?"

"Out the back." Vance responded and Grey came running in to them.

"What's the matter sergeant?" Wolf asked.

"Rull's just checked in." Grey said.

"Has he been able to track the cultists to their hideout?" Vance said but Grey shook his head.

"Not yet. He's picked up their trail all right but there's been a complication that's forced him to take a bit of a detour. It looks like we've got company." he said.

"Is the enemy massing for an attack?" Wolf said.

"It doesn't look that way at the moment. In fact Rull only reported seeing two guys with a missile launcher but he said they're only about three hundred metres from here and have a crate filled with SAMs for their launcher."

"They know we're here and they've figured out how this place could be used as well." Vance said, "They could bring down Valkyries before they get a chance to drop reinforcements or supplies."

"Rull could take them out in a second." Grey said, "But then the enemy would know that we knew about them. What are your orders lieutenant?"

Wolf hesitated, considering her options.

"Tell Rull to break off from tracking the enemy to their base." she said, "I want to know exactly how compromised our position is. That means I want to know how many pockets of enemy troops there are around us. Have Rull circle around and mark every enemy position he comes across. I want strengths and equipment detailing for each. Once we know what we're up against we can take steps to deal with them."

Quinn and four of his squad, one of them armed with a flamer, gathered just inside the perimeter and Quinn double checked the dataslate Wolf had given him. This featured a map that in addition to being a navigational aide also had the known positions of the enemy missile teams marked on it.

"Okay lads this should be an easy one." he told his men, "The lieutenant just wants us to nip out and take a quick look around out there." then he held up the data slate, "Now we know the locations of four teams of enemy troops armed with anti-aircraft missiles and we'll be steering clear of each of them."

"How many per team sergeant?" one of the shotgun armed veterans asked.

"Two. Probably a number they pulled from our organisational doctrine. A gunner and a loader."

"But any one of us could take out two guys." the veteran armed with the flamer said and the others nodded and murmured in agreement.

"It's not about taking them out Dolton." Quinn replied, "Rull could take out the lot before they even knew he was there if that's what the lieutenant wanted but she doesn't want the enemy to be able to have time to replace them if we're getting resupplied from the air. So no, we won't be taking out any of them. Instead we'll keep out of their sight so they can't tell their mates where we are and see if we can get some idea of where the rest of them are hiding. Understand?"

"Yes sergeant." Dolton replied and Quinn looked at the other Catachans.

"What about the rest of you?" he asked.

"Got it sarge." one said and Quinn grinned.

"Good. Now let's get going." he said and he moved the slide of his shotgun back and forth to chamber a round before he darted beyond the perimeter, crossing the street to take cover beside a building on the opposite side.

One by one Quinn's men followed him, Dolton moving in the middle with his flamer while the four shotgun armed veterans positioned themselves around him to cover all directions. This way an attacker would have to face one of them first and it would take only a moment for Dolton to step forwards to bring his flamer to bear. In the confines of combat in a built up area the way in which a flamer spread its fuel could be devastating and Quinn hoped that this would more than make up for his patrol's lack of numerical strength.

The area beyond the shopping precinct that the rest of Second Platoon was now defending was made up of more commercial properties of various sizes. Like the stores in the precinct they had left behind, all of the stores the Catachan patrol saw were closed and shuttered despite it being usual business hours and it appeared that instead of provoking a general uprising among the local population the only effect of the Genestealer cult's actions was to terrorise the population into staying home. Quinn knew that this was a state of affairs that could not last however, there was an ancient saying that any society was only three meals away from revolution and it would only be a matter of time before the local population was forced out of their homes to seek supplies. The question then would be whether they would be emerging to obtain it in an orderly manner or if they would be rioting and looting.

The patrol was about five hundred metres away from the precinct when a brief movement attracted Quinn's attention and he signalled for the patrol to stop and take cover.

"I don't think we're alone." he said as he took out his magnoculars and began to search the street ahead for the cause of the movement. It had looked to Quinn as if someone ahead of the patrol had been peering around a corner at them and then retreated to try and avoid being seen themselves. Now that they had gone back around the corner they were out of sight and Quinn did not see whoever it was lean back around the corner. However, he noticed that the building opposite had its name written on a highly polished sign that extended along much of its front wall and Quinn pointed his magnoculars at this instead. Just as he had hoped the sign held a reflection of the person who had been watching his patrol from around the corner and Quinn smiled.

"Ah, the Emperor is with us today." he said to his men, "These guys aren't paying attention to their surroundings."

The group that Quinn could see was half a dozen strong and each man in it held an autogun. In the right hands those could be used to engage the Catachans safely from a range too great for them to effectively respond. However, Quinn doubted that they had the training and experience to be able to exploit this advantage and it was more likely that they would blaze away with their weapons on fully automatic at a closer range and rapidly expend their ammunition.

In the reflection Quinn saw that one of the group around the corner was holding a personal wireless communicator. This was not one of the microbead or vox units issued to military units of the Imperium though, instead it was a box shaped handheld device that had stubby antenna sticking out of one end.

"Reese," Quinn said to his unit's vox operator, "they've got some sort of wireless. See if you can listen in on what they're saying and who they're talking to."

Reese nodded and reached for the tuning controls of his vox set. Quinn knew that Imperial Guard wireless communication devices were designed to operate in a way that made them as difficult as possible for an enemy to listen in on, though like most humans outside of the tech priests and lay members of the Adeptus Mechanicus he had no idea how that was achieved. On the other hand he also knew that vox sets could pick up almost any signal within range, no matter how it was sent or encoded and he hoped that the conversation taking place around the corner would be understandable.

"I think I've got it sarge." Reese whispered, "Someone referring to the target being where it was expected and someone else saying that they're moving in to block retreat now."

Quinn looked back the way they had come and although he could not see anyone in the street behind his unit he knew that there were numerous places that they could be lying in wait for them to retreat.

"Okay Dolton," he said quietly, "I want a quick blast around this corner. Everyone else standby."

As the Catachans pressed themselves up against the wall behind them Dolton moved forwards with his flamer held ready. Upon reaching the corner he made sure to stand so that he was not visible from around it and looked back at Quinn standing right behind him. Then when the sergeant nodded he held the muzzle of the flamer around the corner and without looking he pulled the trigger.

There was a roar of flame as the weapon sent a jet of burning promethium along the street along the corner and the cultists lying in wait screamed briefly as they were engulfed in the flames.

"Go!" Quinn snapped and he and the other Catachans all raced around the corner to find the cultists still burning, their arms flailing as they tried in vain to extinguish the flames. Quinn was not willing to wait for the flames to finish doing their work, however and he fired his shotgun at the closest man. The blast took the cultist off his feet and as he fell dead Quinn noticed the handheld communicator on the ground nearby. It occurred to him that having one of the enemy's communication devices would make listening in on their transmissions easier and not require a vox set be sacrificed to carry out the function so he rushed forwards to scoop it up while his men continued shooting at the other burning cultists.

"Throne!" he hissed as he found the device to be hot from the fire as he tried to pick it up and it fell from his hand before breaking open as it hit the floor. The impact also shattered several major internal components and Quinn saw these scatter across the ground. Knowing that no-one in Second Platoon would have the skill to repair the communicator Quinn decided not to bother trying to pick up all the pieces and instead turned to his men who had by now finished off this group of cultists, "Reese, anything new?" he asked.

"They heard the shooting. They're on their way. One unit from behind and two more moving around to cut off

all directions." Reese replied.

Quinn nodded and looked around for an avenue of escape that the cultists may not have considered. The streets in this part of the city were wide and open to enable the maximum number of people to use them at once so there were no narrow passageways that could be used for cover. On the other hand there were the buildings themselves and there was a door right beside Quinn.

Using his shotgun, Quinn blew the lock off the door and kicked it open.

"Inside." he told his men, waving them in before following behind them. The door led to a small hallway that ended in a flight of stairs and on one wall beside Quinn there was a list of businesses that occupied the offices on the floor above, "Okay up to the next floor." he said, "Sling your weapons."

The Catachans rushed up the stair, slinging their shotguns over their shoulders while Dolton shut down his flamer.

"So what now sarge?" Reese added when they reached the first landing where there was a single door on the small landing.

"Now we go inside here." Quinn replied as he delivered a strong kick that broke open the lightweight door and the Catachans headed into the large office divided into sections by low moveable panels and filled with workstations, "Spread out and see if you can find the back door. There has to be a fire escape in here somewhere." he ordered.

While his men were doing this Quinn drew the sidearm he kept holstered at his waist. This, like the pistols his men also carried was not standard Imperial Guard issue. Instead it was one of a cache of simple stub pistols that Second Platoon had come across in the armoury of a crashed starship that dated back to the Dark Age of Technology. Perfectly preserved in the armoury's stasis field the weapons had been taken by Second Platoon to be used as backup weapons with ammunition made by Fourth Company's tech priest. Later on the tech priest had produced fresh barrels for the pistols that extended forwards of their frames and were threaded to take silencers and now Quinn took his silencer from his pouch and started to screw it onto the end of his pistol.

"Fire escape in the kitchen sarge." Reese said as Quinn's men returned to him and he nodded at them.

"Those cult guys can't fail to spot that we came in here." he told his men, "So we're going to wait for them to come in after us and take them out quietly."

"We're not slipping out the back way then?" one of his men asked.

"Okay Moss, for that stupid comment you get to watch the back door." Quinn said, "No we're not running away. We'll stand and fight and take out as many of these traitors as we can. Reese, I want you to try and raise Lieutenant Wolf. I get the feeling that the enemy knew we were on our way before we'd even left the precinct and that means they've got some means of monitoring it and the rest of the platoon needs to know before the enemy takes full advantage of that. Besides, just because we had to hunt for the fire escape doesn't mean that the enemy won't know exactly where it is and be waiting for us. I'd rather it was us doing the ambushing for once."

8.

"You wanted to see me lieutenant?" Vance asked as he entered the improvised command post where Wolf waited and she nodded.

"Yes, we may have a problem." she replied, "I've just heard from Sergeant Quinn's team. They've encountered an enemy force that seemed to be expecting them. It's Quinn's opinion that our position is being monitored somehow."

Vance frowned.

"Rull's done a full sweep of the area around here lieutenant and all he found were those anti-aircraft teams. Nothing gets past Rull, you know that." he said.

"I know. So the enemy must have something else up their sleeves. I'd say that maybe they were listening in on our vox signals if it weren't for the fact that Quinn's patrol wasn't discussed over the vox. All that leaves is direct surveillance of our position."

Vance sighed.

"It would have to come from one of the buildings just outside the precinct. Somewhere that they could have been set up before we got here." he said.

"Perhaps. But how would they have known we were going to be here in advance?" Wolf pointed out.

"The Arbites." Vance said, "They were here before us. Maybe the Genestealers sent someone to watch them and they stayed behind to keep-"

"What is it sergeant?" Wolf asked when Vance suddenly stopped talking and he walked to the front of the command post where the large glass store front gave them both a view of the entire precinct.

"I can see pretty much everything from here." he said.

"So?" Wolf said.

"So, so could anyone in one of the other stores."

"Behind the shutters?" Wolf commented.

"Sure. Look, each set of shutters has a couple of holes in near the bottom to act as handholds if they're lifted open manually. Someone inside one of the other stores could lie down on the floor and look through them. I wouldn't be surprised if whoever came to dump that body left someone behind to keep watch on what happened to it."

Wolf smiled.

"That's brilliant sergeant." she said.

"Maybe but the problem is figuring out which unit they're in." Vance said.

"Maybe not." Wolf replied, "They must have a way of reporting our movements back to their commanders, right?"

"Right."

"And the communicator in here still works." Wolf pointed out, looking towards the communicator at the rear of the store.

"You think they're just phoning their superiors lieutenant?"

"Why not?" Wolf said, "And that gives us a way of finding them." Wolf then walked back to the vox set and picked up its handset, "This is Catachan One Nine Mark Four Mark Two calling Catachan One Nine Mark Four. Do you read me? Over."

"This is Catachan One Nine Mark Four reading you loud and clear lieutenant. Do you want the major?" Stubbs' voice responded.

"No thank you." Wolf said, "He can keep his latrine schedule intact. I need to speak to Cornellius."

"Cornellius? Okay, I'll go fetch The Bastard now. Hang on." Stubbs said and Wolf waited.

Engineer Cornellius B5T-RD-3X, known informally to the Catachans as 'The Bastard' because of the appearance of his identification number when written down was the tech priest assigned to Fourth Company and was responsible for the upkeep of most of their equipment. Like Wolf he was not a native of Catachan and was thus considered an outsider but to him the term was meaningless since he had no interest in interacting with the Catachans beyond what was required of his position.

"This is Engineer Cornellius." the tech priest's augmented voice said after the short time it took Stubbs to tell him that he was wanted. The tech priest did not need to travel to Fourth Company's command tent to use the vox, instead he was able to remain in his workshop and use the wireless communication device that was among the many cybernetic implants in his body to connect to the device remotely and talk to Wolf that way, "State your message Lieutenant Wolf."

"Engineer I may have need of your expertise." she said.

"Be precise lieutenant. You either do or do not." Cornellius said.

"I do need your help." Wolf replied, "We suspect the presence of an enemy unit in the shopping precinct we

are located in. They may be using the local landlines for communication so I'd-"
"You wish me to check the local communication records." Cornelius interrupted.
"I do." Wolf said, nodding even though he could not see the movement.
"Understood. I shall access the relevant records for the information you have requested and inform you of what I find. Cornelius out." the tech priest said and then the signal abruptly ended.
"So?" Vance asked.
"So he's going to check for us." Wolf said, "Then if there are Genestealers or their followers here we'll be able to deal with them."

The cultists came rushing up the stairs making enough noise to alert the Catachans to their approach well before the first of them appeared in the doorway. Peering under a desk located very close to the doorway Quinn saw the lead cultist advance into the office slowly but held his fire, waiting for more to present themselves.

"Spread out." the cultist said softly once he had been joined by five others, "They must have come in here." The six cultists then began to spread out, making their way between the individual workstations. Quinn knew exactly where the members of his team were hiding and peering out of his hiding place he saw that one of the cultists was getting very close to one of the other Catachans. However, before he could see the concealed veteran the cultist turned away and in that moment the Catachan struck. Leaping out of his hiding place with his traditional knife in one hand, the veteran reached around the cultist's head and clamped his free hand over the man's mouth before plunging the blade into his back between his ribs. Killed the instant the blade pierced his heart, the cultist dropped his autogun and only the sling that was still hooked over his shoulder prevented it from dropping to the floor with a clearly audible clatter. The Catachan then dragged the dead cultist back into the cubicle he had been hiding in before any of the others could notice what had happened and drew his silenced pistol in anticipation of the cultists noticing that their comrade was missing. "Where's Clinton?" one of the other cultists said a few seconds later and Quinn knew that the time had come to spring the trap.

Taking careful aim with his pistol he squeezed the trigger and put a bullet in the back of the head of the closest cultist. The man instantly collapsed with blood pouring from the hole in the back of his skull and the other cultists looked around in search of the source of this attack. There were two more soft 'pop' sounds as another Catachan followed Quinn's lead and a third cultist fell dead.

"They're in here!" one of the surviving cultists yelled and he fired his autogun on fully automatic, spraying bullets all around the room. However, he held his weapon horizontally at waist height and the bullets flew over the heads of the Catachans. In response Quinn fired several rapid shots from his pistol at floor level into the cultist's feet and ankles. Unable to stay standing the cultist collapsed in agony and what remained of the ammunition in his rifle's magazine was fired up into the office ceiling. From where he lay the cultist now had a clear view of where Quinn had positioned himself and so before he could call out a warning Quinn fired again and finished the cultist off with two shots to his chest.

Moss then appeared from the kitchen with his shotgun in his hands and fired two blasts in quick succession that sent another cultist flying backwards into one of the screens that divided the office and in turn it collapsed under his weight.

The remaining cultist spun around and fired his rifle towards the doorway leading to the kitchen but Moss had already retreated from view and thrown himself to the floor so that the bullets that came tearing through the dividing wall passed over him.

While the cultist was focused on firing his rifle Dolton emerged from cover behind and pointed his pistol directly at the back of his head.

"Hey heretic." he said calmly the moment the cultist's magazine was empty and the man spun around to face him. Dolton saw the cultist gasp as he found himself looking down the muzzle of the stub pistol with only an empty rifle in his own hands and then the Catachan fired a single round that struck the cultist right between his eyes.

"Clear." Quinn said as he emerged from his hiding place and looked around at the dead cultists.

"Where to now sarge?" Moss asked from the kitchen doorway.

"Next floor." Quinn replied, "Quickly though, I want to see how long it takes for the enemy to notice that this lot aren't checking in."

The vox in the command centre activated again and Wolf quickly picked up the handset.

"This is Enginseer Cornelius Bravo-Five-Tango-Romeo-Delta-Three-X-ray calling Catachan One Nine Mark Four Mark Two. Do you read me? Over." the tech priest's voice asked.

"This is Lieutenant Wolf. I read you." Wolf responded.

"Lieutenant Wolf the communicator in commercial unit two-six has been active intermittently on four separate occasions since you reported your safe arrival at your location." Cornelius told her.

Hearing this Vance hurried back to the front of the store and stood in the doorway as he looked around the

precinct again. The unit numbers of each store were visible above the shutters on the large signs that identified the nature of the businesses and Vance quickly located Unit 26 and saw that it was advertised as a hardware store.

"I've got it." he said.

"Thank you engineer." Wolf said into the vox, "We'll handle this from here." and she shut off the vox, returning the handset to its cradle, "Let me see." she said to Vance.

"The hardware store." Vance replied without pointing out the store in Unit 26 to make sure that anyone inside would not see that their presence had been discovered.

"I see it." Wolf said, deliberately avoiding looking directly at the store.

"So what now?" Vance asked.

"If we try and assault it directly they'll see us coming and escape out of the back." Wolf said.

"We could try putting a unit on the street behind them but if they've got friends outside the perimeter they'll be pretty exposed." Vance added and Wolf nodded.

"Exactly how resilient do you suppose these shutters are sergeant?" Wolf asked and Vance glanced up at the rolled up shutter of the command post.

"They're just designed to stop people from smashing their way through the window. They might just stop a shotgun blast but even a las pistol would punch a hole right through them."

"So firing a heavy stubber at them would be pretty effective then?" Wolf said and Vance smiled.

"Very." he said and then he looked around again until he caught sight of Mayer and his men cleaning the three heavy stubbers they had taken charge of following the destruction of their mortars, "Hey Bomber!" he called out, "Get over here."

"Yes sergeant?" Mayer said as he ran up to Wolf and Vance.

"Corporal Mayer are those heavy stubbers ready for use?" Wolf asked and Mayer nodded.

"Just give us five minutes to put them all back together." he answered.

"Just one will do Bomber." Vance told him.

"I want you to set the weapon up to cover one of the remaining entry points but so that it can be turned to face the hardware store in Unit Twenty-six." Wolf added without looking or pointing towards the hardware store.

"Unit Twenty-six." Mayer repeated, nodding but also taking the precaution of not turning to face the store.

"When commanded the weapon is to be fired through the shutters with the intention of covering as much of the interior as possible with suppressive fire." Wolf continued.

"Yes lieutenant." Mayer replied before he hurried back towards his squad.

"We'll still need an assault group." Vance said and Wolf nodded.

"We have one." she said, looking towards where Khor and his fellow ogryns sat on a number of benches that looked far too small for their frames, eating.

"We won't be able to give them any orders in advance." Vance pointed out, knowing that as soon as he received orders Khor would relay them to his squad very loudly.

"I want you to take command of them personally." Wolf told him, "When Mayer opens fire you have the ogryns fall in and when he stops get them to charge. I expect they'll be able to smash their way through whatever's left of the shutters without much trouble. I'll take what's left of Quinn's veterans round the back just in case anyone tries to slip out during the shooting."

Wolf and Vance then split up, each of them making their way towards the units they would be taking charge of. Both Molla and Grey noticed the strange movement from them and Mayer but said nothing, realising that there must be a good reason for discretion if they were not being briefed. Meanwhile Mayer and his men acted as if they were setting up all three of the heavy stubbers in defensive positions around the precinct. However, after they had placed all three of the weapons' tripods they carried just a single gun and several boxes of ammunition towards the tripod set up so that the hardware store would be just within the field of fire of the weapon once it was properly mounted. The movements of Mayer and his men were calm and casual right up until the moment that Mayer himself crouched down behind the heavy stubber as one of his men loaded a belt of ammunition into the weapon's breach and Mayer pulled back the cocking handle. all of a sudden Mayer swung the heavy stubber around to face the shuttered hardware store and opened fire, holding down the trigger as the automatic weapon started to make its way through the belt of ammunition. "With me. Quickly." Wolf told the five veteran troops she had joined and the group ran towards the nearest clear exit from the precinct.

"Khor, get your squad to stand to." Vance ordered over the sound of the gunfire.

"Ogryns up!" Khor shouted and the abhumans stuffed their half eaten rations back in their webbing and picked up their ripper guns as they got to their feet and then formed a line in front of Vance, all stood at attention.

Running around the outside of the precinct Wolf and the five veterans came to the back door of Unit 26. However, the sustained fire from the powerful heavy stubber was putting holes not only through the shutters at the front of the store but were also passing through the walls behind it and some of the bullets were

passing all the way through the store into the street behind it.

"Keep back." Wolf said, "We just need to make sure no-one tries to escape this way."

Inside the precinct Mayer finally exhausted the belt of ammunition for the heavy stubber and the weapon fell silent.

"Now Khor! Vance snapped, "Attack that store."

"Ogryns charge!" Khor bellowed and then all seven of the abhumans roared as they rushed towards the badly damaged shutters. As they neared the unit they raised their ripper guns but not in a manner that would allow them to shoot them. Instead they raised them over their heads and used them to smash through what remained of the shutters as well as the already shattered window behind them.

The broken glass did not bother the ogryns as they burst through the window into the hardware store and searched for any occupants who might have survived the sustained heavy stubber barrage. Spying a figure crawling across the floor one of the ogryns growled and then threw himself towards it, swinging his ripper gun like a club and bringing it down on the injured cultist. The blow was powerful enough to smash the cultist's skull but the ogryn did not stop with just one strike and he continued to reign blows down on the cultist even though he was already dead. Meanwhile the rest of the ogryns spread out to search the store, pushing past the wreckage of the shelving units that had been ripped apart by the sustained fire from the heavy stubber. The sheer size of the ogryns limited them to searching only the actual store area itself, preventing them from passing through the doorway that led to the rear areas and staircase. However, the lock of the back door was suddenly blown off by a shotgun blast before Wolf and the veterans she had led around behind the store stormed in.

"Wolf!" Wolf called out to make sure that the ogryns knew that it was her and not a cultist that they would fire their ripper guns at. Wolf herself made her way into the store itself while the veterans searched the remaining rooms of the unit for cultists.

"Lieutenant." Vance said as he entered through the ruined front of the store and looked around, "Bomber really did a number on this place didn't he?" he added and Wolf nodded.

"Rounds were coming out the back as well. We had to stay back to avoid being shot up ourselves. Do you think he was making up for losing his mortars?" she replied.

"Maybe." Vance said and then both of them looked at the ogryn that was still pounding the corpse of the cultist despite its head and chest already being pulp.

"I think you can stop now." Wolf told the ogryn but the massive abhuman continued what it was doing so Wolf walked over to stand right in front of the ogryn and raised both her arms, "Stop!" she shouted and the ogryn looked up from the corpse. recognising her as the platoon's commanding officer and knowing that she was addressing him personally, the ogryn instantly ceased beating the already dead cultist, snapped to attention and saluted, "At ease." Wolf said, returning the salute and the ogryn relaxed and returned to where the rest of the abhumans were now gathering at the front of the store, a smile on his face at having been spoken to personally by an officer.

"I count four dead." Vance said as he counted the corpses that were visible from where he stood and Wolf looked around as well.

"Assuming that what's left of the guy at my feet is just one after that ogryn finished turning him into floor polish, yes. Four." she said.

Just then one of the veterans that had been searching the rest of the unit appeared at the back of the main store.

"One more body by what's left of the communicator but the building's clear." he said.

"Well at least now we can carry on in the knowledge that our every move isn't been communicated back to the enemy." Vance said.

"Yes, though it would have been nicer if we could have taken one of them alive to answer some questions." Wolf responded, "I'm sure Commissar Layne could have found a way of convincing them to talk eventually." All of a sudden Kline came running into the store and pointed back towards the command centre set up on the other side of the precinct.

"Lieutenant, Major Trent just made contact. He says we're to prepare to move out. Command has a lead on the enemy HQ and First Platoon is on its way here to join us for the attack. They'll be here in an hour." he said.

"An hour? They must be coming in by air." Vance said.

"The cultist AA units." Wolf said, her eyes widening at the thought of the Navy troop carriers being picked off as they came in to land.

"Major Trent said not to worry about them." Kline replied, "He said the Navy flyboys have been given the information on the enemy positions and have a surprise planned for them. We've just got to make sure that they've got somewhere to land when they get here."

Quinn emerged from his hiding place to fire his shotgun at the back of a cultist now fleeing down the stairs towards the building exit. As expected, the second group of cultists had entered the building to investigate

what had happened to the first. It had not taken them long to discover the bodies of their comrades and they had begun a search of the rest of the building to try and find Quinn's team. Had they been properly equipped professional soldiers then they would have used grenades to clear the way ahead of them and held some of their number back to provide covering fire for the lead cultists. However, instead of this they had blundered into the ambush set by Quinn and his men in exactly the same way as the first group did and Quinn and his men had dealt with them almost as easily. Only this one had escaped, running for the exit as soon as the shooting started and now his body rolled down the stairs before coming to a stop at the bottom.

"Lieutenant Wolf on the vox for you sergeant." Reese said as he stepped out of the office onto the landing behind Quinn and passed him the vox handset.

"Cheers Reese." Quinn replied before he spoke into the vox, "Quinn here lieutenant." he said.

"Sergeant Quinn how quickly can you return to the precinct?" Wolf asked.

"Assuming the Genestealers don't have any more surprises waiting for us we can be back in about ten or fifteen minutes. Why?"

"We've just received word that Captain Fear is on his way with First Platoon. Command thinks it's located the enemy HQ and we're to prepare to assault it."

"Understood lieutenant." Quinn replied, smiling and as he gave the handset back to Reese he turned to his men and called out to them, "Okay enough messing about with the dregs of the enemy forces. Looks like we're going after the head."

9.

A total of ten Imperial Navy aircraft flew over the city towards Second Platoon's position. Half of these were Valkyrie troop carriers organised into a 'V' formation so that they could all fire their main nose and wing mounted weapons forwards without fear of hitting one another while the door gunners could cover the ground below to either side. Behind these, extending the 'V' were a pair of Valkyrie Sky Talons, each of which carried a pair of lightweight Sentinel scout walkers. Finally the squadron included three Vulture gunships as escorts that flew above the main formation.

"Range to destination twelve thousand metres." the pilot of the lead Vulture broadcast to the crews of the other aircraft, "Weapons hot."

"Coming up on our assigned target." the weapons officer sat in front of the pilot commented and the pilot nodded.

"Do you have a solution?" he asked.

"Yes sir. Hellstrikes one and two locked on." the weapons officer answered.

"All craft sound off with targeting status." the pilot said to the other crews.

"Vulture Two locked on."

"Vulture Three locked on."

"Valkyrie One locked on."

The crew of each aircraft in turn repeated this, signifying that the powerful Hellstrike missiles that were carried under each of their wings were ready to fire.

"All weapons are locked on." the lead pilot announced when the last of the Sky Talons had reported a weapons lock, "Fire on my mark. Five. Four. Three. Two. one. Mark."

Simultaneously twenty heavy anti-armour missiles dropped from beneath the squadron's wings and raced forwards. Each aircraft had been assigned a building known to be occupied by cultists armed with anti-aircraft missiles and the missiles now flew towards these. With more aircraft than target buildings this meant that several targets considered higher priority could be targeted by four missiles instead of just two to ensure their destruction.

As soon as they had heard the approach of the Imperial Navy squadron, the cultist anti-aircraft teams readied their weapons. However, the smaller shoulder fired weapons they were armed with had a significantly shorter range than the aircraft mounted Hellstrikes and these were all in flight before the cultists could obtain a lock. Despite the missiles streaking towards them the cultists still held their positions, lining up their weapons on the aircraft that had not paused in their approach and moments later a volley of anti-aircraft missiles shot up from the rooftops around the shopping precinct occupied by Second Platoon.

Had the cultists run at the first sign of the incoming missile strike then some of them may have survived more than the minute or so it took for the Hellstrikes to reach their targets, but as it was all of them were still either inside the buildings or still on their roofs when the Hellstrikes hit. Though the missiles were designed for blasting holes through the armour of fighting vehicles their warheads also had a secondary bunker busting function and the blast wave of just one was enough to trigger the collapse of a building that was hit. With either two or four hitting each targeted building their destruction was assured and the booming sounds of the warhead detonations was followed by the rumble of the collapsing structures that buried the cultists not killed in the initial blasts under tonnes of rubble.

On the other hand the experienced Imperial Navy aircrews knew exactly how to react when their flight systems warned them that the cultists had launched missiles back at them.

"Break! Break! Break!" the lead Vulture pilot exclaimed and the ten aircraft all turned sharply, the squadron splitting up into three groups as all of the aircraft suddenly ejected brightly burning countermeasures to throw off the limited augur systems in the shoulder fired missiles. Faced with so many potential targets, both real and decoy, most of the cultists' missiles could not maintain their locks and all but one either flew past the squadron or spun towards the ground in pursuit of a falling decoy. The sole missile that made it throw all of the squadron's countermeasures struck one of the Valkyries in one of its roof mounted engines and this immediately caught fire and began to produce a trail of thick black smoke.

"This is Valkyrie Four, we're hit. We'll make it to the destination but we won't be able to take off again." the pilot signalled to the rest of the squadron.

"Copy that Valkyrie Four." the lead pilot responded, "Abandon your aircraft at destination and hitch a ride back with another."

"One of them was hit." Wolf said as she watched the approaching squadron through her magnoculars from the roof of the precinct.

"He's still airborne though." Vance said as Wolf lowered her magnoculars and turned towards Torrent.

"They may be coming in hard, be ready for casualties." she said.

Torrent just nodded before she hurried from the roof, heading down the stairs towards the precinct's central area. This had now been cleared of the vegetation and seating using a mix of the brute force of the ogryns and the flamers of Quinn's squad.

The two Valkyrie Sky Talons were the first craft to descend into the precinct, barely touching down before their pilots released the grasping claws that held the Sentinels they carried in place. Then as the Sky Talons rose back up into the air the Sentinels rapidly moved away from the centre of the landing zone as the troop carrying Valkyries began to descend as well.

The four undamaged craft set down together and the squad they held hurriedly disembarked through the side doors rather than wait for the main rear ramps to be opened.

From the roof of the precinct Wolf saw First Platoon's command section disembark from one of the Valkyries and she was about to use her microbead to communicate with Captain Fear, First Platoon's commanding officer when she saw another figure getting out of the Valkyrie behind the Catachans. Tall and with a slender build the figure wore a long coat of a deep blue colour rather than the green and black camouflage fatigues worn by Catachans. This man was then followed by another in different clothing, this time in priest's robes.

"Veneel." Wolf said when she saw the first of these men, "Major Trent sent a psyker."

"And no doubt Botherer Black invited himself along to watch for him turning." Vance added at the sight of the priest. Unlike Veneel, who like Wolf was an outsider, Preacher Black was a native of Catachan. However, his more devout dedication to the Imperial Cult often set him apart from his fellow Catachans. However, although the troops of Fourth Company generally tried to avoid his sermons, Preacher Black's abilities in combat were not in doubt and his presence meant that no-one else would need to be assigned to watch Veneel for any signs that his powers were getting out of control.

"Captain Fear this is Lieutenant Wolf, I'm up on the roof." Wolf signalled using her microbead.

"Do you have a command post set up?" Fear responded.

"Yes sir. It's in the vacant unit that's unshuttered."

"The one that isn't shot full of holes?"

"That's the one captain."

"Okay, I'll meet you there." Fear said as he beckoned for his command section to follow him. Behind him and his men three of the four Valkyries, now empty of troops then took off once more and began to circle as the final craft came in to land. The undamaged engines of this craft shrieked loudly as they tried to make up for the loss of thrust from the one that had been damaged. This shrieking only ceased when the Valkyrie touched down and the pilot cut the power to the engines. The damaged engine continued to smoke, however and as the crew disembarked from their craft along with the squad of Catachans it carried they carried with them fire extinguishers that the sprayed up at the smoking engine to try and finish the job that its internal extinguisher system had failed to complete.

Wolf paused to watch this for a moment before Vance tapped her on her shoulder.

"Come on," he said, "we don't want to keep the captain waiting."

"Okay I'm coming." Wolf replied before she and the rest of her command section on the roof made their way down into their command centre below.

"Ah lieutenant." Fear said as she appeared in the store to find that he had rolled out a map of the city on some desks that Second Platoon had moved together to provide a large work surface, "This is our target." and he pointed towards a building on the map that had been circled. There were several other markings on the map and Wolf recognised one of these as their current location, a green ring drawn around it. From this she could estimate the distance from their position to the building ringed in red that Fear had just identified as the enemy headquarters at about four kilometres, a distance that the Catachans could cover in about an hour on foot.

"Excuse me captain, but where did this intelligence come from?" Wolf asked.

"From you in a roundabout sort of way lieutenant." Fear answered, "After you asked The Bastard to tell you which of the communicators here had been used recently the Adeptus Mechanicus ran a check on where it had been communicating with. Apparently they can list the times and durations of any calls made through a land line here. Every call made since your arrival from the observation post I understand you discovered was made to the target building. Worryingly the tech priests say that the calls can be split into two types. One type is made up of calls lasting just a few seconds made at regular intervals, while the second are longer and more infrequent."

"Sounds like regular status checks plus messages to tell their superiors what we're up to." Wolf said and Fear nodded.

"That's exactly what we were thinking as well." he replied, "Only from the intervals between those checks we don't think that we can get to the enemy HQ before the next one is missed."

"Do you think that they'll try and leave?" Vance asked.

"It's a possibility sergeant." Fear said, "Which is why these two units are moving into position even as we speak." and he pointed to two more markings on the map, "Captain Lokk is taking Sixth Company to here

and deploying his mechanised infantry to cut them off from the highways to the north and the river to the east. Meanwhile Captain Muller's rough riders will move to cut them off to the south."

"So we hit them from the west." Wolf said and Fear smiled.

"Sounds easy doesn't it?" he said.

"Do we know how strong the enemy forces are at their headquarters?" Wolf asked.

"Unfortunately not. Aerial reconnaissance hasn't picked up much movement at all. We could be facing a few dozen cultists in the one building or an army of purestrain Genestealers spread over several in the local area. So far the last reported sighting of a Genestealer, whether hybrid or purestrain was your encounter with them at the space port that triggered this whole thing off. If it is does turn out to be more than our two platoons can handle though all we need to do is hold our ground while Sixth and Eighth companies move up to support us. Plus we've still got the Vultures that escorted us here. They may have used up their Hellstrikes but they've still got other weapons they can use."

"So when do we leave?" Wolf said.

When the tall man returned to his command centre he found a large number of his advisers frantically pointing at the map of the city laid out on the table in the middle of the room while two others were stood by the communicators attempting to contact the outside world.

"What is going on?" the tall man said sternly and the catlike creature walking alongside him growled as it sensed his mood.

"Your eminence." one of his advisers responded, bowing her head, "The Imperium is relocating two large formations of troops towards us." then she pointed at the map, "Here and here."

"That prevents us from moving out in three directions." another adviser added.

"Which still leaves us with the option of withdrawing to the west where we know that only a single platoon is stationed." the tall man said and his advisers exchanged nervous glances with one another, "I take it that there is news from the west as well." the tall man added.

"Not exactly your eminence." a third adviser said, "In fact we have heard nothing from any of the units watching the platoon stationed to the west. None of them have made their scheduled check ins."

"We sent runners to find out what why but the only one to return reported seeing smoke coming from several buildings in that part of the city." the adviser in the PDF uniform added, "The rest never came back at all." The tall man frowned.

"Summon all our forces in the city," he ordered, "and tell the guards still here to prepare to repel an attack."

The bodies of two cultists lay in the street where they had fallen, one with a bullet hole between his eyes and the other with one dead centre in the back of his head after he had tried to run away following the death of his comrade.

"Rull was right." Vance said as he studied the second body, "Probably scouts or runners sent to find out why the cultists can't make contact with their people."

"By my reckoning the target is just a couple of blocks ahead now." Captain Fear told Wolf, "I'll move in first with my veterans and Gant's sentinels to clear out any defences they have outside the building. I want you to swing around the back of the building while we keep them busy. Then open up on them with everything you've got. That should pull enough of them away from me for my engineers to create a breach we can use. Veneel, you're with me."

"Yes captain." Wolf replied, nodded and she beckoned for her troops to follow her. On this occasion Second Platoon was joined by the two regular infantry squads from First Platoon while Captain Fear took his two veteran squads and his six man combat engineer unit straight towards the cult headquarters.

The elusive headquarters of the Church of the Approaching Emperor was located in an hotel that was positioned between two large office buildings. Featuring an underground parking facility, the hotel offered the Genestealer cult an easily defended location from which to control their operations. The near empty street at the front gave them a clear view of anyone approaching while the rear garden area was walled off and had only a few small emergency exits. The largest way in and out, the entrance to the parking garage, was located to the rear as well and meant that vehicles could emerge from under the wall that isolated the hotel grounds.

To restrict the approach to the front of the hotel the cultists had erected two barriers made from civilian vehicles and furniture piled up to block the entire street to a height of about two metres and when Fear looked at these through his magnoculars, peering cautiously around a street corner to avoid being seen himself he saw that there were several sentries positioned on each of the barriers.

"Okay Gant," he said, turning towards the sergeant in command of the Sentinel squadron as he activated his microbead, "you've got two walls defended by cultists with light arms only. Make me a hole."

"My pleasure captain." Gant responded from the cockpit of her Sentinel and she smiled and she sent the lightweight walker sprinting forwards, "Let's ride boys." she added.

Three of the Sentinels were fitted with heavy flamers that their pilots discharged as soon as the rear wall

came into view. The burning promethium from these flowed over the barrier, setting fire to it and engulfing the guards in flames. This was followed by a missile from the squadron's support vehicle that flew into the nearest barrier before exploding. Gant flinched for a moment at the blast and then as the smoke from the explosion began to clear she saw that the missile had been aimed just right to blow open a gap in the barrier that Fear and his infantry could climb through.

"Captain Fear," she signalled, "you have your hole."

Wolf was studying this arrangement through her magnoculars when all of a sudden there was the sound of firing from the other side of the hotel.

"Looks like Captain Fear's men are in position." Vance said and Wolf nodded as she activated her microbead.

"Sergeant Molla, now." she ordered.

All of a sudden the sound of small arms fire from in front of the hotel was joined by the roaring of much heavier automatic fire from behind it. In addition to the heavy bolter of First Squad there were also the three heavy stubbers being used by Mayer's heavy weapons squad and a drum fed auto-cannon that one of First Platoon's squads was armed with. Meanwhile the missile launchers of Second Squad and the other squad from First Platoon were held in reserve, their gunners targeting the entrance to the parking garage in anticipation of vehicles emerging either to defend the hotel or to try and carry the cult's leaders to safety. There was a burst of small arms fire from above as a guard appeared on an upper floor balcony and returned fire. However, although First Squad's heavy bolter was forced to cease fire briefly a single silenced round was all it took for the cultist to tumble from the balcony and the heavy bolter started up again.

On the far side of the hotel Fear heard this and smiled.

"That should divide their attention." he said as he took a smoke grenade from his webbing and tossed it across the street towards the hotel. Several of his men did the same and soon the entire street was filled with thick white smoke, "Go!" Fear snapped and the Catachans burst from their hiding places to charge towards the hotel while the cultists fired at random into the cloud of smoke. Fortunately the use of multiple heavy weapons by the force attacking the rear of the hotel had convinced the defenders that that was where the main attack was to come from and most of the defending forces had begun to relocate to there, leaving only a handful of guards to defend against Captain Fear's assault team.

Despite the smoke the Catachans still kept low as they rushed forwards and took cover behind some of the few parked vehicles in the street in front of the hotel. While most of them waited there, firing at any muzzle flashes visible through the smoke the engineer team and half of one of the veteran squads rushed right up to the front door of the hotel. This had been closed and locked to try and keep the attacking force out but the engineers had charges prepared to blow the door off its hinges. However, what they were not aware of was the hidden security camera beside the door that could still see them through the smoke as they positioned themselves to set the shaped charge in place. Nor were they aware of the larger shaped charge that had been set up on the inside of the door that was connected to a trigger in the cultists' command centre.

The blast turned the heavy wooden front doors into splinters and tore apart not only the six engineers but also the five veteran infantrymen with them.

Fear and the rest of his men recoiled in shock at the size of the unexpected explosion as debris flew over their heads. Peering over the vehicle his command section was hiding behind saw the extent of the damage from the booby trap. There was nothing left of the hotel doors at all, only a gaping hole in the front of the building. However, despite the loss of his men, Fear knew that the cultists themselves had just provided him with the means to get inside their headquarters.

"Go." he ordered as he leapt to his feet and charged towards the open doorway. He was not alone in doing this though and inside the hotel the exploding booby trap also served as a signal for a unit of cultists that had been held in reserve to rush into the lobby and open fire as soon as the Catachans came in through the doorway.

Being the first man through the doorway Fear had time to take cover behind a ruined table before the gunfire started but behind him his vox operator was not as lucky and he fell to the floor with a bullet hole through his chest. Then there was a bright flash of light and Fear felt the heat of a plasma blast passing over his head before it struck a cultist and the extreme heat almost totally vaporised the man. Leaning over the table Fear added his las pistol to the fire now coming through the doorway behind him as more of his troops followed him into the lobby.

It was not only the Catachans that were reinforcing their position in the lobby though and more cultists appeared at doorways all around began firing at Fear and his men.

"Captain lookout!" Veneel yelled from just outside the hotel and he fired his las pistol past the Catachan officer to where a hooded cultist had suddenly appeared from behind the hotel's main desk. The shot struck the cultist in his shoulder and he twisted but kept on coming, the blast deflected by something hidden under the cultist's robes.

Captain Fear got to his feet to meet the charge, firing his own las pistol again but also failing to stop the unusually durable cultist. Suspecting that the cultist was wearing armour beneath his robes, Fear drew his Catachan knife from his belt and hurled himself at the cultist in the hope of disrupting his charge. "Captain no!" Veneel called out but his warning came too late and it was only at the last moment that Fear saw the clawed limb extend from beneath the cultist's robes before it was thrust under his armoured vest and upwards into his chest cavity. Fear's eyes widened in his last moment of life before he went limp and the Genestealer hybrid pulled its arm free of his body. "Foul xenos!" Black called out after witnessing the death of Captain Fear and he fired his shotgun at the hybrid. The spread of pellets found gaps between the hybrid's natural armour plating and it let out a shriek before Black fired again, "Damnation awaits you abomination!" he yelled as his second blast caught the creature square in its face and its body fell backwards and landed not far from where Captain Fear now lay.

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The sound of the booby trap was heard clearly from the other side of the hotel and Wolf gasped.

"That wasn't a breaching charge." she said.

"They were expecting us after all." Vance said, nodding in agreement, "We need to find a way to take the heat off Captain Fear."

Wolf activated her microbead.

"Missile launchers, target the entrance to the parking garage. I want it to look like we're going to make an entry through it. Fire at will." she ordered.

"You heard the lieutenant." Grey said, turning to his squad's two man missile launcher team, "Make a hole."

One after another two missiles shot from the Catachan positions towards the parking garage. Both of these were fitted with anti-personnel fragmentation missiles. These had far less penetrating power than a krak missile would have but they had the advantage of creating a significant cloud of shrapnel that would create holes in the shuttered garage entrance large enough for a person to get through instead of the small holes that the krak missiles would punch through it. Two more missiles followed these as rapidly as the weapon teams' loaders could insert new rounds into the launchers and the combination of all four warheads reduced the metal barrier blocking the entrance to the parking garage to nothing but scrap.

"Sergeant Quinn, Sergeant Khor," Wolf signalled using her microbead, "lay down smoke and see if you can get into that garage. Don't worry if you can't but make it look good. Everyone else give them as much covering fire as you can."

"Ogryns charge!" Khor bellowed as Quinn and his men threw smoke grenades into the gap between their positions and the entrance to the garage. The ogryns then rushed from cover, roaring as they fired their ripper guns towards the hotel. The massive abhumans were able to cover the ground between their starting positions and the garage much faster than Quinn's veterans could and they rushed through the gaping hole in what little was left of the shutter. The Genestealer cult had been prepared for an assault through this entrance just as they had been through the front door but the four missiles had already triggered most of the explosives set in anticipation of it. Some still remained, however and these were triggered the moment that the ogryns came through the doorway and they were showered with shrapnel.

Only one of the ogryns was struck by enough of the flying debris to be killed, staggering forwards several paces as he tried to figure out why it was suddenly feeling so weak before it collapsed into a pool of his own blood. Meanwhile the other six abhumans turned their ripper guns on the defending cultists who had appeared further into the garage.

"They made it." Wolf exclaimed, smiling. But then her microbead picked up a signal from the front of the hotel.

"Fear is down. I say again, Captain Fear is down." Sergeant Gant's voice suddenly exclaimed as she used her Sentinel's vox system to broadcast the news to the all of First and Second Platoons.

"Throne." Vance hissed and he looked at Wolf, "You're next in line." he said and Wolf's jaw dropped. She knew that the Catachans of Second Platoon would follow her orders and for now the two squads from First Platoon had been content to serve under her while she was acting under the orders of Captain Fear.

However, now that he was dead she did not know whether his men would follow her orders or if one of his squad leaders would attempt to assert command instead. Wolf knew that that would be a recipe for disaster, having conflicting orders issued in the heat of battle would only serve to get people killed. However, she had no time to try and talk to the squad leaders of First Platoon to judge their mood and so she did the only thing she could.

"This is Wolf," she responded, using her microbead to address the entire assault force, "I'm taking command of the attack. All units at the front of the hotel are to keep up the pressure if they can but withdraw if they can't. We have a foothold to the rear so we're going to try and take advantage of that instead." then she looked at Kline and added, "Inform Major Trent that Captain Fear has become a casualty and tell him that we may need the Sixth and Eighth companies help here."

"This is not going to work." Torrent said, glaring at Wolf, "She's not one of us."

"Just shut up and do as you're told Torrent." Vance responded before Wolf drew her las pistol.

"Come on." she said, "Quinn and Khor have given us our foothold. Let's go and finish this."

When Quinn's veteran squad entered the garage behind Khor's ogryns they found the abhumans clustered together and firing their ripper guns as rapidly as the burst limiters fitted to them would allow. Without these a mind as simple as an ogryn's would just empty the entire drum of ammunition in one go. The limiters forced them to pause their shooting and gave them the opportunity to seek out new targets. With cultists firing from almost every direction at them this meant the ogryns were firing all around them but the combination of the structure of the garage and the vehicles parked inside it meant that the cultists had plenty of places to hide.

Quinn saw one group using a thick support pillar as cover as they fired their autoguns at the ogyrns to little effect. Strong enough to support the hotel above the garage, the pillar was more than capable of resisting the fire from the ogyrns' powerful ripper guns. His squad's meltagun would undoubtedly burn a hole right through the support but that would risk bringing down the ceiling on top of them all and that was the last thing he wanted to do. Fortunately he had other weapons perfectly suited to clearing defended positions.

"Flamers." he said, pointing towards the support and the cultists using it for cover, "Light them up."

Prolonged use of a flame weapon inside the underground garage would be as dangerous to the attacking Catachans as it was to the defending cultists so Quinn's two flamer equipped veterans used rapid bursts of fire to force the cultists from their hiding place and as they fell back, panicking at the thought of being set alight the rest of Quinn's men opened fire with their shotguns, the spread of pellets devastating in the enclosed environment.

"Sergeant Quinn! Report." Wolf shouted out as she led her command section into the garage at the head of the rest of the Catachan force.

"Looks like they had a sizeable force down here lieutenant." he replied, "I'd say about thirty men initially. Only a few left now mind you."

"What about exit points?" Wolf asked.

"We've got lifts and stairs all around. take your pick." Quinn said and then Kline tapped Wolf on her shoulder.

"That's a communication panel lieutenant." he told her, pointing to an cabinet mounted on a wall that was open to reveal the bundles of wires it contained. Most of these disappeared into a duct that led from the top of the cabinet but there were more of them that instead came out of the open front of the cabinet and were tied to the wall at irregular intervals before they passed through a doorway labelled 'STAIRS'.

"Looks like someone's been adding more land lines." Vance said.

"The sort of thing you'd do if you were putting together a military command post?" Wolf asked and Kline nodded.

"That's my guess." he answered.

"Then that's our target." Wolf said, "Sergeant Quinn bring your squad with me. I want each infantry squad to take a different route out of here to keep the pressure on the enemy everywhere. We can't let them concentrate their defences." the she activated her microbead, "First Platoon we've made it into the car park. I you can force a way in through the front then do so. We're heading up to their command centre to see if we can cut the head off this beast."

A grenade thrown in through the front door cleared the last of the cultists in the hotel lobby and the survivors of First Platoon's veterans and command section rushed in and spread out. As Veneel ran inside the the building he suddenly came to stop and gasped.

"What's the matter witch?" Black asked.

"The psychic bond." Veneel replied, "The link between Genestealers and their progeny. I can feel it here in this building. There are more hybrids present and one of them is a powerful psyker. Lieutenant Wolf is in great danger."

"Then it is our duty to save her." Black said and he turned towards the nearest veteran sergeant, "Sergeant Reilly, the witch may be able to lead us to our quarry. Are you ready to do the Emperor's work this day?"

Reilly looked around and smirked.

"I thought we already were." he replied.

The presence of unarmoured communication lines meant that the cultists had been unable to booby trap the staircase that Vance led the way into, pointing his las pistol upwards and immediately gunning down a man armed with a crude double barrelled shotgun that had been cut down to increase the spread pattern of its shot before he could use the weapon.

"Waste not, want not." Vance said as he scooped up the shotgun after it clattered down the stairs to towards him.

"The Emperor provides hey?" Wolf commented and Vance frowned.

"Let the Emperor find his own shotgun." he replied and he began to climb the staircase.

The trap set on the staircase Grey led Second Squad up was simple. A thin length of wire stretched across the stairs at ankle height was tied to the safety rail at one side and around the body of a grenade that had been stuffed inside a can at the other. With the safety removed from the grenade all that kept the lever in place was the can itself so if someone pulled on the wire with their foot as they came past they would pull the grenade from the can and it would explode. Unwilling to chance that all his men would be able to step over the wire without accidentally tripping it Grey found a better way to deal with the trap instead. Placing his boot across the open end of the can so that the grenade could not be pulled free he used his knife to cut through the wire.

"Keep it quiet." he told his squad, "They'll be counting on that to alert them to when we're coming up the

stairs." and then he continued on his way up to the next floor where the landing was marked with a large number '4' painted on the wall.

Rather than risk just opening the door Grey waved three of his squad forwards onto the landing the Catachans all knelt facing the door with their lasguns pointed at it. Grey then raised his hand and quickly brought it down. At that moment the three Catachans all fired their lasguns on full auto. From point blank range the door from the staircase could not block the energy blasts and they tore through it to the other side from where Grey heard the satisfying sound of screams. When their charge packs were emptied after the sustained fire the three Catachans threw themselves to the floor of the landing right before the surviving cultists on the other side of the door returned fire in kind with bursts of shotgun fire and shotgun blasts ripping more holes in the door. From his position at the top of stairs leading up to the landing, Grey saw a large hole created by a shotgun blast that was within his reach and he pulled a frag grenade from his webbing that he then hurled through the hole. The detonation of the grenade a few seconds later destroyed what remained of the door and Grey charged through the now empty doorway into the room beyond, firing his las pistol anything he saw moving.

Molla almost ran right into one of a pair of cultists as they both ran towards a junction in a hotel hallway from different directions. With his knife in his hand, Molla was able to react faster than the cultists and he plunged the blade into the stomach of the man right in front of him at the same time as he shot the man to his side. Looking around to see if there were any more cultists nearby Molla saw no-one but his own troops in the hallway. However, he did hear the sound of firing from close by and he activated his microbead.

"Anyone else on five?" he broadcast.

"Negative Tari, I'm down on four." Grey responded, "I think we've found a supply depot."

"Molla this is Reilly from First Platoon, we're on our way up to five now but are encountering resistance. Can you back us up?"

"Copy that Reilly, we're on our way. We'll follow the sound of the shooting." Molla said and he and his squad began to run towards the sound of battle.

They slowed down as the sound of firing became louder and Molla peered around a corner to see a group of cultists firing towards the open door to a stairwell. Through this he occasionally saw a Catachan trooper lean out to fire his lasgun back at the cultists. Unfortunately the cultists had reinforced their position well and the lasgun fire was simply striking the barrier they had created from packing crates. However, although this provided them with excellent cover from the stairwell it let them completely exposed to the rear and Molla took immediate advantage of this by firing his las pistol at them and shooting one of the cultists in the back of his head.

This produced a brief lull in the cultists' shooting and inside the stairwell Veneel took full advantage of this, leaping to his feet and rushing past the Catachan troops to get to the next flight of stairs.

"Where are you going witch?" Black called out.

"To find our foe." Veneel shouted back and his cry attracted the attention of the cultists in the hallway. One of them then raised a meltagun and fired the powerful energy weapon at the doorway. The Catachan just inside the stairwell ducked back as the beam of intense heat passed close by him and it struck the staircase itself, just missing Veneel. The beam burned right through the flight of stairs and it collapsed suddenly, leaving Veneel dangling and clinging onto his staff that was wedged between what remained of the safety rail and the landing of the next floor.

"Let go witch." Black called out, "The fall is not far."

"No." Veneel replied as he dragged himself upwards, "I must continue." and after pulling himself up onto the landing he continued to climb the stairs.

Vance discharged both barrels of the shotgun at once, blasting the two cultists that stood guard just inside the stairwell on the floor that the communication lines left it at.

"Clear." he said, tossing aside the shotgun and rushing through the doorway.

"Vance be careful." Wolf called out after him as she followed and they both came to a halt in a darkened hallway.

"I've got a bad feeling about this." Vance said softly.

"You mean like all the hairs on your neck just stood on end?" Wolf asked and Vance nodded.

"The lines split up here." Torrent commented as she too stepped through the doorway.

"Then we need to as well." Wolf said, "We need to search this entire floor. Sergeant Quinn take half your men to the left and half to the right."

"I guess that leaves us with straight on." Vance said and Wolf smiled.

"Lead the way please sergeant." she said.

The Catachans began to spread out, following the trails of wires pinned to the walls and ceiling that they hoped would lead them to the leadership of the Church of the Approaching Emperor. They could hear gunfire in the distance, both firearms and energy weapons but this was all from below them as the rest of the assault force fought it out with the cult's forces. Having dealt with the guards in the stairwell, it appeared that there were no more left to defend the upper level of the hotel.

"Anyone found anything yet?" Wolf asked over her microbead.

"Negative lieutenant." Quinn responded, "We've followed a few of those comm lines into rooms but not found a thing. Anyone else starting to think that there's more to this place than meets the-

"Sergeant Quinn? Are you still there?" Wolf asked when the signal was suddenly cut off.

"Molla do you read me?" Vance said using his own microbead but all he got in response was static and he shook his head at Wolf.

"Kline?" Wolf said, looking at the vox operator.

"All channels jammed." he said, "I don't understand it. We didn't see any antennas for equipment like that from the outside."

"And nor would you." a voice said from out of the darkness, "Only by my will will you have contact with the rest of your troops and it is by my will that I forbid it."

The tall man then emerged from the shadows accompanied by two more Genestealer hybrids. These were obviously of an earlier generation to the almost human appearing tall man and each of them held a short barrelled lasgun and plates of carapace armour were visible under their robes.

"Kill them." the tall man said and as he turned to leave his bodyguards raised their weapons and opened fire. The laser blasts lit up the darkened hallway as the Catachans dived for cover. Brooks was too slow and he landed in a heap, his grenade launcher sliding across the floor. Kline returned fire with a burst from his lasgun that struck one of the hybrids but the shots were absorbed by the thick ceramite plate that protected the creature's chest.

"Their leader's getting away." Wolf said as she spotted the shape of the tall man disappearing around a corner, "Keep shooting. I'm going to try something."

"What?" Torrent asked.

"Never mind, just do as she says." Vance replied and as the Catachans continued to exchange fire with the armoured hybrids Wolf began to crawl back down the corridor the way they had come until she came to a junction and she rolled around the corner before getting to her feet. Then she pulled a compact flash light from her webbing and pointed at the wall.

"I knew it." she said to herself as she saw the floor plan of the hotel's upper floor. She quickly found the doorway that the tall man had disappeared through on this plan and just as she had expected she also found another route around that might allow her to intercept him without having to go through his bodyguards. This presented Wolf with a dilemma though, if she called for the rest of her command section to follow her then it would alert the Genestealers to her plan. On the other hand she was unable to use her microbead to contact Quinn for support.

There was however, still a chance that she would encounter some of Quinn's men on the way to intercept the tall man and, given that she was hunting for an individual Wolf decided that it was worth the risk to go after him on her own.

"Looks like the outsider finally decided to run away and leave us to die." Torrent comment while she reloaded her las pistol.

"She's got a plan I'm sure." Vance said before muttering, "Or at least she better have."

Holding her las pistol in front of her Wolf made her way through the darkened hallways of the hotel. The uppermost floor was a mix of luxury suites and meeting rooms of various sizes and it was by cutting through one of the latter that Wolf was able to get into the hallway that she had seen the tall man turn down. She could see flashes of light from further down the hallway that told her the rest of her command section were still fighting and she smiled momentarily before she continued after the tall man.

Although this hallway was also in darkness Wolf could see a thin band of light at floor level. This was obviously coming from beneath a closed door and Wolf crept up to this. Knowing that she was not strong enough to be able to kick the door open Wolf knew that she would have to open it as rapidly as possible before rushing into the room. With her las pistol pointed towards the door Wolf reached out for the handle and then took several deep breaths before she pushed down on the handle and leapt forwards at the same time as she opened the door.

Wolf found herself in a luxuriously decorated office that as she had expected was well lit. A large desk was located at the far end of the room and behind this was a chair that faced away from her.

"Turn around." she said, pointing her las pistol at the chair and it slowly rotated to reveal the tall man sat in it with his feline pet sat in his lap.

"You." he said, "Yes, I thought I recognised your appearance. You are the officer that led the attack on our warehouse and put many of the brethren to the flame."

Wolf smiled.

"And now I'm placing you under arrest. You will be handed over to the commissariat for-"

"I don't think so." the tall man said, getting to his feet and setting the feline down on his desk. The creature then jumped down onto the floor as the tall man strode around the desk to confront Wolf directly and it hissed at her, "What did you think you would achieve by confronting me?" the tall man continued, "Do you believe me helpless?"

"I'm the one with the gun." Wolf said, aiming her las pistol at his head but the tall man just waved his hand and she felt a sudden tug that ripped her weapon from her hand and sent it flying across the room. Then with another gesture Wolf was lifted up off the floor and she found herself unable to breathe. Now hanging unsupported in mid air Wolf reached for her throat as she desperately tried to inhale.

"There is no point in struggling." the tall man said, "I can draw on powers that you cannot possibly understand."

"But perhaps I can." Veneel said suddenly from the doorway and as the startled tall man turned to face him the sanctioned psyker pointed a hand at him and unleashed a storm of psychic lightning. This hurled the tall back against the far wall and caused him to release his hold on Wolf. No longer supported by the tall man's power Wolf dropped to the floor and gasped for breath as Veneel walked into the room, holding his staff in front of him.

The tall man looked up from where he had landed and released a lightning bolt of his own. However, Veneel just held up his staff and the bolt vanished as it struck it. All of a sudden the feline creature leapt towards Veneel and the psyker whirled around, using his staff to strike the creature in the air and it was hurled away. The creature struck a wall with a deep 'thunk' and then dropped to the floor where it lay still. Meanwhile the tall man flinched and lifted his hands to his head at the moment the creature was struck and a smile spread across Veneel's face when he saw this.

"Perhaps your powers are not as great as you think." he said to the tall man, "The problem with a familiar is what happens when it is lost."

"You cannot win." the tall man said as he used the wall behind him to support him as he got back to his feet, "The patriarch will have this world."

"I doubt it." Veneel said, "The Imperial Guard is quite set on defending it. In any case, regardless of how this war ends you won't be around to witness it." and then he drew his own sidearm and shot the tall man in the forehead.

"What was he talking about? What's the patriarch?" Wolf gasped.

"I do not know lieutenant." Veneel replied, turning to look at the feline creature, "Most interesting." he added.

"What is that thing?" Wolf asked as she staggered back to her feet.

"A gyrix." Veneel replied, "A creature sensitive to psychic powers such as mine or those of the magus over there. They are incredibly rare and valuable. They grant their owners increased power but the sudden withdrawal of them can be disorientating."

"Then let's kill it and get out of here." Wolf said, picking up her las pistol.

"If you would grant me one indulgence lieutenant, I would rather like to keep it." Veneel said.

"Can you use it too?"

"Perhaps. It will take some time for it to adapt to me but I think it can be done."

"Okay then. I won't stop you keeping it but I can't guarantee what anyone else will have to say about it." Wolf said before her microbead unexpectedly came to life.

"Lieutenant do you read me?" Vance asked and Wolf smiled as she replied.

"Vance, it's good to hear your voice. What's happening?" she said.

"I was about to ask you the same thing lieutenant. All of a sudden the cultists freaked out. It's the same throughout the building. Whatever happened to them it's like they can't focus on anything. They're not even defending themselves properly."

"The magos." Veneel said, "With his death the Genestealers and their infected slaves here have had their connection to the hive mind disrupted."

"Sergeant Vance tell all units to continue their advance." Wolf ordered, "The leader of the cult is dead and he was linked to all the other cultists and Genestealers."

"Dead? So our mission is done then? We've won." Vance replied and Wolf looked at the body of the tall man, remembering his words.

"The patriarch will have this world."

"Our mission has been a success platoon sergeant, but I don't think that this war is over yet." she told him.