



CATACHAN ONE NINE MARK FOUR MARK TWO

THE NEST

BY STEPHEN J DUTTON



6.3: THE NEST

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The destruction of the genestealer cult undermining the Imperial world of Temperatus does not mark the end of the campaign for the Catachan VII Division. Somewhere on the planet, the original creature that was the source of this infestation still lurks and unless it and all its progeny can be wiped out then the genestealers will rise again...

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1.

"The result of the vote is in." Sergeant Molla said as he sat down at the table with the other squad leaders of Second Platoon to eat his breakfast.

"So who won?" Lieutenant Emilia Wolf, the platoon's commanding officer asked in response. Unlike all of the the soldiers in the mess tent Wolf was not a native of Catachan and her assignment as a combat officer to a regiment of the famed jungle fighters had been entirely accidental. It had also not been a smooth transition for her. Catachans were infamous for being distrustful of outsiders, especially those who attempted to give them orders and she knew that she would always be an outsider to them.

"Reilly I bet." Sergeant Grey said.

"Muller might be in with a shot. He knows what he's doing." Vance, Wolf's platoon sergeant added.

"No, it's Reilly." Molla said and Wolf frowned.

"Something wrong Lieutenant?" Quinn, the leader of Second Platoon's veteran squad asked.

"Big guy." Grey said, smiling.

"Oh ha-ha. Everyone in this outfit is big compared to me." Wolf said in reference to her own height of barely one and a half metres compared to the generally large physical size of Catachans.

"What about Short Arse Selena?" Molla asked, referring to Lieutenant Anna Selena, the company's supply officer.

"Do you listen to what you say when you say it? Or even better think about it before you say it?" Wolf said. Then after a brief pause she added, "Wait, no of course you don't."

"She's got you there Tari." Vance said.

"This could be trouble." Corporal Mayer said from the end of the table.

"What Bomber?" Vance asked and the leader of Second Platoon's mortar squad pointed towards the entrance to the mess tent where another Catachan had just entered and was walking towards the table occupied by Second Platoon's senior staff.

"Company Sergeant Stubbs." Wolf said, looking up at the new arrival, "How may we help you?"

"Major Trent wants to see all the company's officers in his tent in twenty minutes." Stubbs told her. Then he looked at the gathered squad leaders and added, "And he wants the entire company ready to move out within two hours. Get your stuff packed."

Stubbs then turned around and walked back out of the mess tent, leaving Second Platoon to consider what he had said.

"Sounds like we're out of here. Off to another interesting world inhabited by interesting people for us to kill."

Molla said and Wolf sighed.

"Don't let the leashes see you react like that to the idea of waging the Emperor's holy wars lieutenant. They'll have you in front of one of the firing squads they've had running round the clock these past few days." Grey said.

"I don't object to going to war sergeant, I've become quite used to it after spending a few years with you guys but I had hoped we'd be able to stay here a while longer and actually get some of the rest we were supposed to be getting when we arrived." Wolf replied.

"How inconsiderate of those Genestealers to ignore your need for a break." Quinn said.

"Doesn't it bother any of you?" Wolf asked, looking around the table.

"We're Catachans. Every day on Catachan is a war for survival. Shooting at heretics and aliens is a quiet life for us." Quinn replied and Wolf sighed again at the reminder that she would always be considered an outsider even by her own troops.

Wolf arrived at Major Trent's command tent with Lieutenant Lore of Third Platoon. Even by Catachan standard Lore was tall and the difference between their heights was striking as they entered the major's office within the tent to find that all of the other company officers were already there. Now that she saw the newly promoted Lieutenant Reilly, Wolf did recognise the man as the former sergeant of one of First Platoon's veteran squads and she smiled at him before she sat down between Lieutenant Selena and Fourth Company's medical officer Doctor Altman. With the death of Captain Fear, First Platoon's former commanding officer Doctor Altman was technically second in command thanks to his rank of captain but it was rare for him to take on a command role. There were also two other individuals present at the meeting and like Wolf neither of them was a native of Catachan. Commissar Layne's function with the company was supposedly to maintain discipline and ensure that guardsmen did not fail in combat. However, in practice the Catachans kept order among themselves effectively and it was not unknown for Layne like any commissar assigned to a Catachan unit to suffer an unfortunate accident just prior to the start of an operation that prevented him from being present on the front line. The other none Catachan present concealed his features

beneath a red robe that marked him out as a tech priest of the Adeptus Mechanicus. Cornellius B5T-RD-3X was responsible for maintaining the vehicles and more complicated used by Fourth Company and uniquely among the non-Catachans who were part of the company he cared nothing about whether he was considered an outsider or not, the tech priests of Mars considering themselves above such emotion. "Wolf. Lore. Now you're here we can begin." Commissar Layne said and he looked at Trent. In response the major kept his gaze away from the commissar, instead picking up a dataslate in one hand and a mug of recaf in the other before taking a sip. Only after he set his drink down did he address the officers he had gathered together.

"Okay let's get down to business." Trent said, "As I'm sure Stubbs has explained we're moving out."

"Do we have any information on the next planet we're heading for yet sir?" Wolf asked.

"We aren't leaving Temperatus just yet." Trent replied, "The reinforcements from Catachan haven't reached us yet for one thing. For another we still have work to be done here dealing with the Genestealer infestation."

"I was starting to think that the war was over. I thought that maybe the Patriarch that the cult magus mentioned didn't exist." Wolf said, "We took out their militia and the commissariat has been shooting the infected for four weeks straight."

"Infected humans represent only one part of Genestealer infiltration lieutenant. The creature known as a patriarch is typically the oldest of the purestrain Genestealers present on a planet, the one from which the infestation began." Cornellius said, his voice sounding as mechanical as many parts of his body were thanks to the cybernetic implants in his throat.

"But we dealt with the purestrain aliens at the space port where they first arrived on Temperatus." Wolf pointed out.

"Intelligence no longer believes that the space port was the Genestealers' first point of arrival on the planet." Trent said, "In fact they are now working on the assumption that those creatures could have been intended to depart from Temperatus to spread the infestation to other worlds in the sector. A message to that effect has already been sent and neighbouring worlds are already taking precautions to deal with any further infestations before they can become as advanced as it has here."

"So there are more of them then?" Reilly said and Trent nodded.

"Divisional HQ has had its psykers searching for signs of the telepathic bond the aliens and the infected humans all shared. I don't know how it works but somehow they're all connected through the warp." he said.

"Yes, Veneel could sense it when he was close to them." Wolf said, referring to the psyker assigned to the company. Veneel was also not a native of Catachan but the mistrust the other soldiers had in him had more to do with his powers than his being an outsider as well.

"Well an entire battery of psykers has been searching the warp for the same thing Veneel picked up on and they have confirmed the presence of more of the aliens away from larger population centres." Trent said.

"I didn't think there was much outside the cities." Altman commented.

"There are a few mining concerns and private farms growing organic food for the planetary elite but apart from that there is little but wasteland." Commissar Layne told him.

"Lots of places for aliens to hide." Trent added, "Few people go out there so who's to know what's hiding there?"

"So the company is being sent after them?" Selena asked.

"The entire division is going." Trent answered, "The psykers can't pinpoint the location of the aliens or even tell us how many of them are left so we have to assume that there are still a sizeable number and they could be supported by a significant human force armed with weapons taken from the planetary defence force arsenal. The Nineteenth Regiment will conduct search operations in the target area and report any suspicious activity to divisional command for General Fortnam to decide on what action is to be taken. We'll have air cover from the Navy of course so if you end up in a tight spot you can always call for extraction or a bombing run. Try not to get those mixed up by the way. Now are there any questions?"

"Sounds like a standard op to me." Reilly said.

"It is. There won't be any subtlety or finesse about this. We won't be making any secret of what we're doing. We'll go in and tear the search zone apart. The Fourteenth Armoured Regiment along with the general's own divisional HQ will be deployed to the far side from us while the Twelfth and Twenty-Fifth hold the flanks. If the Genestealers try and run then they'll run right into our troops in entrench positions and get cut to pieces."

Trent said, "All the mission data will be provided to you on your dataslates. Before I dismiss you all though there is one other thing that needs to be discussed. The matter of Captain Fear's replacement."

"But I thought Lieutenant Reilly had been voted in as First Platoon's new commanding officer." Wolf said, looking at Reilly.

"He has. But I need a second in command to take over if anything happens to me before a vote can be taken on a permanent replacement." Trent said, "With that in mind I'm promoting you to the rank of captain and making you my number two."

Wolf's eyes widened.

"Me?" she said, "But why me? As people keep reminding me I'm not even a Catachan."

"That's obvious." Selena muttered.

"Perhaps not, but when the company thought I was dead and held a vote you were set to be in a run off with Captain Fear. You've shown that you'll listen to your platoon's advice and the troops know you're not one of us but they know that you won't throw their lives away by making a stupid mistake because of this.

Combined with the considerable experience you've built up since joining us you are the natural choice."

"Congratulations Captain Wolf." Reilly said.

"Yes, congratulations Captain Wolf." Lore added in agreement.

"I don't like the look of this." Molla said when he saw the expression on Wolf's face as she walked across the parade ground towards the rest of Second Platoon.

"Neither do I." Vance added when he looked towards her as well.

"The outsider probably just had a bug drop down the back of her neck." Guardswoman Torrent, Second Platoon's field medic commented, "What's up lieutenant?" she then called out.

"What?" Wolf responded as she came to a halt where her command section was standing with the other squad leaders apart from Khor, the leader of the squad of massive ogryns attached to the platoon.

"I said what's up lieutenant?" Torrent said, "Do you need someone to squash an insect for you?"

Wolf frowned for a moment and then smiled.

"I can squash bugs myself specialist." she said, "But it's captain from now on."

"Oh feth he didn't." Quinn said.

"I'm Major Trent's new second in command." Wolf said.

"Congratulations." Grey said with a smile, "That makes you that bit closer to being transferred to a position far away from platoon command. Then we can get a proper officer in to take your place."

"Cut it out Grey." Vance said before turning towards Wolf, "So what are our orders captain?" he asked.

"We're being sent to hunt down the last remaining Genestealers. The platoon needs to be ready to carry out a search operation over rough terrain. The Navy will fly us out in under an hour so we don't have much time."

"Don't worry captain, we'll be ready." Quinn replied, "We wouldn't want to make you look bad on your first day as captain now would we?"

2.

Given the number of troops and vehicles to be relocated from their camps around the capital to an area of wilderness hundreds of kilometres away the Navy was forced to press almost every shuttle and transport available to it into use to carry out the task in a reasonable time frame. With the XIX Regiment having to carry out the search itself, it was the last of the Catachan regiments to be moved into position, guaranteeing that by the time they began to move it would already be too late for the Genestealers to get through the cordon without being seen.

At some point in the distant past the planet Temperatus had boasted a varied ecosystem that was capable of supporting the human colonists who had first settled here. However, after thousands of years of almost unchecked industrial development most of the native lifeforms were extinct. Therefore, the landscape into which Second Platoon deployed from one of the Navy's heavy lift shuttles was bleak with only a few patches of green set against the largely brown and grey terrain.

"According to my map there are several small settlements that way." Wolf said as she studied her dataslate and compared the map he had been provided with to several landmarks visible to her.

"You want to ask the locals if they've seen anything?" Vance asked and Wolf nodded.

"I want to handle this in two ways." she replied, "I want Quinn's squad to advance ahead of the rest of us and keep out of sight. Then we'll move in openly and ask about anything they've seen. If they do have something to hide then hopefully they'll try and get rid of it before we can get there."

"And run right into Quinn." Vance said, nodding.

"Just in case we'll have Mayer and his mortar teams stay back here to cover our rear as well." Wolf added, "Everyone else will move in right down that road there." and she pointed to a rough roadway that ran through the landscape.

Giving Quinn and his squad time to get a reasonable distance ahead of the rest of the platoon Wolf then had the main force start to advance along the road. Up close the road appeared only slightly better for travelling along than the terrain either side of it and it was obvious that the planetary government put few resources into maintaining the infrastructure outside of the major population centres. However, it still provided a means by which to navigate travelling through this area of countryside.

For Quinn's squad the advance to the nearest settlement was slower going, not because of any difficulty with the terrain which was not much worse than the road but since his men also had to focus on keeping out of sight while Wolf did not care if her force was seen as it approached.

When the first of the settlements came into view Quinn took the opportunity to study it through his magnoculars. The settlement consisted of just over a dozen small buildings clustered around the road but from their appearance alone Quinn could not determine what the main focus of the settlement was. Although the structures were obviously made from prefabricated components made in accordance with Standard Template Construction patterns it lacked the large greenhouses needed to grow crops in the difficult growing conditions of Temperatus while also lacking the telltale ore silos or slag heaps of a mining town.

"Okay if they're going to make a run for it when the captain turns up with the rest of the platoon then they'll either head down the road in that direction or that way between those hills to try and stay out of sight. We'll have to split up to cover them both. Reese, you're with me. Same for Downs, Jackson and King. We'll cover the road, everyone else head between those hills."

With the squad now split into two groups, the veteran soldiers positioned themselves to cut off the likely avenues of escape if the occupants of the settlement tried to flee when they saw Wolf approaching. Despite the lack of dense vegetation that the jungle fighters were used to, the uneven nature of the Temperatus landscape still provided them with plenty of places to hide as they waited to see how the local inhabitants would react when they saw that they were about to get visitors.

"Movement." Downs said suddenly, the soldier bringing his shotgun to his shoulder while Quinn peered out of his hiding place and used his magnoculars to study the settlement once more. Now the inhabitants that had been moving about as if they had no cares in the world when he had first studied them were rushing around as if their lives depended on it and Quinn saw them all rushing to move unmarked boxes from several structures to any one of the Goliath transport vehicles parked around the settlement. Goliaths were a common sight across the Imperium, used in a wide variety of construction and mining roles. The rugged dependability of the design, paired with a respectable rough terrain performance from a civilian wheeled vehicle made them a logical choice for a settlement this far from well maintained roads and Quinn had not been surprised to see the vehicles present. These particular examples were all configured for a transport role, with the usually open equipment bays at the rear covered to either protect their cargo from the elements or to keep it hidden from sight and given that such anonymous modes of transport was well suited to moving Genestealers without attracting attention this made Quinn suspicious.

"Reese. Vox." he ordered and Reese passed him the handset to the squad's vox set, "Quinn to Captain Wolf, do you read me? Over." he transmitted and after brief pause he heard Wolf's voice reply.

"Reading you Quinn. There's some disruption though. Over." she said and Quinn could not help but notice the static on the channel as well.

"Captain are you in sight of the settlement yet? Over." he asked.

"Yes sergeant. We first spotted it about five minutes ago. Over." Wolf answered.

"Then I think you've been spotted. I can see them loading boxes onto transports as if their lives depend on it. Over."

"Can you stop them? Over." Wolf asked and Quinn took another look at the Goliaths. He could see four of the vehicles being loaded with boxes and although they lacked the thick armour protection of military fighting vehicles they were tough and durable, with only a narrow vision slot through which the driver would be vulnerable to small arms fire such as that from the shotguns most of Quinn's squad carried. In Quinn's group King also had a flamer and Jackson carried the squad's melta gun which was capable of destroying even the most heavily armoured vehicle. However, Quinn was hoping to be able to avoid using such a level of firepower if he could help it.

"Jackson, do you think you can blow the wheel off one of those Goliaths without blowing up the entire vehicle?" he asked and the other Catachan paused to think for a moment.

"I should be able to sarge. It all depends on how fast its going." he replied.

"Okay captain we can do it. Over." Quinn transmitted to Wolf.

"Good. Don't let them get away from us. Wolf out."

"Jackson," Quinn said, looking towards the melta gun operator again, "get yourself set up about twenty metres back down the road. King deploy opposite him. Downs you get over the other side of the road here. When those truck come towards us we'll order them to stop. If they don't then Jackson is to take the front wheel off the first one. That should convince the rest to stop but if it doesn't then we'll just have to torch the lot."

The Catachans quickly spread out to create a box formation with Quinn doubling up with the vox operator Reese and keeping hold of the unit's handset. For now all of them kept low and out of sight, waiting for the four Goliaths to start coming down the road towards them and it was only when the lead vehicle in the convoy was about half way between the settlement and Quinn that he and Reese stood up with his shotgun pointed towards the approaching vehicles. Across the road Downs also got to his feet and took aim at the Goliaths. Meanwhile Quinn adjusted the vox unit to function as a loud speaker and lifted the handset to his mouth again.

"Imperial Guard. In the Emperor's name I order these vehicles to halt and submit to search." Quinn announced, his voice amplified sufficiently that it was also heard on the outskirts of the settlement. However, although there was little chance that the drivers of the Goliaths could not have heard Quinn's order all four of the vehicles continued to drive along the road towards the Catachans, "If you do not stop then you will be fired on." Quinn warned as the Goliaths continued to approach but the sight of three Imperial Guardsmen armed only with shotguns did not dissuade any of the drivers from continuing to advance along the road. Returning the vox handset to Reese, Quinn now also took aim.

"Give them a couple of shots when they get near. That'll be their last chance to change their minds." he told the two other Catachans with him and Downs nodded.

Meanwhile the Goliaths continued along the road, still picking up speed despite the poor state of the road itself and when the first vehicle was just a few metres away Quinn opened fire with his shotgun, firing two blasts as rapidly as he could work the weapon's slide at the driver's cabin. Downs and Reese also fired their weapons as the lead truck drove past them but as expected they did no more than cosmetic damage to the durable vehicle and all four continued to speed past the three Catachans.

"Okay Jackson, you're up." Quinn said into his microbead, avoiding the need to shout to the other Catachan and risk alerting the drivers of the four Goliaths.

Unlike Quinn, Reese and Downs, Jackson did not get to his feet to fire his powerful weapon. Instead he remained lying prone on the ground with the front end of the melta gun resting on a large rock that was flat on top. Rather than turning the weapon towards the lead Goliath Jackson kept it pointing across the road at an angle and the moment that the truck came into his field of fire he pulled the trigger to unleash an intense beam of energy that burned through the front of the Goliath in an instant and blew the wheel clean off. This brought the vehicle to an immediate halt and Jackson released the pressure on the melta gun's trigger. However, before Jackson could cut off the beam though it also burned through into the engine compartment and there was an explosion as the Goliath burst into flames.

"You were only supposed to blow the bloody wheel off!" Quinn snapped over his microbead as he watched the burning Goliath. The destruction of the lead vehicle now gave the drivers of the rest of the convoy a stark choice between stopping or trying to get around the burning truck ahead of them. Aware that there was at least one more Imperial Guardsman ahead of them armed with a vehicle destroying weapon the three

remaining drivers all opted to instead slow down and they brought their vehicles to a halt before reaching the burning Goliath.

"Out! Get out and get your hands in the air!" Quinn yelled as he and his men began to close in on the now stationary Goliaths and from each of the surviving vehicles a single driver opened his door and got out. All three men wore similar tattered but clearly functional clothing but carried no obvious weapons. Two of them remained stationary after disembarking from their vehicles but the third, obviously the youngest began to run towards the burning Goliath at the head of the convoy.

"My pa! You killed my pa!" he shouted.

"King! Stop him before he burns himself." Quinn shouted.

With his flamer slung over his shoulder, King then emerged from his hiding place and ran to head off the young man before he could get to the burning vehicle.

"Stop right there." he ordered but the local man ignored him and so as he drew level with King the Catachan simply reached out to grab hold of him.

"Get off me! Fething murderer!" the young man yelled as he tried to break free and in response to this King pulled him closer and butted him in the face. There was a 'crunch' as the young man's nose was broken and he promptly went limp, kept from falling to the ground only by King holding him up.

"Get them lined up and secured." Quinn ordered, "Downs, you and I are going to find out what's so important that they didn't want us seeing it."

While the rest of the unit was securing the prisoners the two Catachans made their way to the nearest intact Goliath and peered inside, both men keeping their shotguns ready just in case anyone other than the driver had been lurking inside. Seeing nothing but boxes though, Quinn climbed aboard and walked up to the nearest box. Upon opening this he expected to see some sort of obvious contraband, though whether that would be illegal weapons, narcotics or even heretical literature Quinn did not know. Therefore, it came as something of a surprise to him when he saw that the box appeared to contain only parts for some sort of machine.

"What are these sarge?" Downs asked when he found only more machine parts in other boxes.

"I don't know. There doesn't appear to be anything hidden inside them." Quinn replied as he peered inside one of the parts, "Maybe the captain will be able to get some answers when she gets to the settlement."

3.

"Weapons ready!" Vance shouted as Second Platoon walked towards the outskirts of the settlement. What movement had been visible from further away had vanished as soon as Quinn's squad opened fire on the fleeing Goliath trucks and now the Catachans were prepared for combat.

"Sergeant Grey I want you to take your squad in first." Wolf ordered, "My command section will follow along with Khor's ogryns. Molla that leaves First Squad to bring up the rear. Be ready to deploy your heavy bolter if we come under attack. Does everyone understand?"

"Ogryns follow." Khor replied simply while Grey and Molla merely nodded their understanding and their squads repositioned themselves according to Wolf's orders.

As Grey led Second Squad into the settlement ahead of the rest of the platoon he had his men spread out along both sides of the main road running through it that the Catachans had been following and they peered down each side street they passed only to find them as empty as the main road was.

"Everyone seems to be keeping a low profile." Grey said into his microbead, using it to broadcast to all the Catachans within range.

"We saw people around earlier sergeant. Try knocking on some doors. We're here to search the place after all." Wolf responded and Grey walked up to the nearest doorway. Seeing that the door was of only lightweight construction Grey decided that rather than knock and ask permission to enter he would instead open the door himself by delivering a strong kick to the lock. The result of this was exactly what he had hoped with would be and the lock broke off the door as it flew open and Grey was able to see inside the building. However, before he could take in exactly what was inside there was a sudden gunshot from within it and he dived aside to avoid it.

"Contact!" he shouted before one of his men fired a burst from his lasgun through the open doorway before charging inside.

It was at that moment that gunfire erupted from numerous locations in the settlement as locals armed with a mix of rifles and shotguns opened fire on the Catachans. The vast majority of these were solid projectile weapons but Wolf saw the characteristic flash of a laser weapon as well. Fortunately the weapons fire was sporadic and poorly disciplined and all of the Catachans in Second Squad were able to get into cover before any of them were hit.

"Molla deploy the heavy bolter. I want covering fire." Wolf ordered as her command section rushed to support Grey's men who were continuing to come under fire.

The Catachans returned fire wherever they were able to identify the source of an attack, firing several shots in rapid succession each time into the windows and doorways being used by the locals. However, apart from the occasional scream as someone was injured there was little to tell the Catachans how effective their fire was being unless no more shots came from that location.

Grey fired his pistol through the doorway again as he rushed towards it and when he could see into the next room he found a man fumbling in a bag for another pair of shells to reload his double barrelled weapon.

Although the weapon was currently broken open Grey did not want to give the man the chance to finish reloading it and he fired his las pistol again, shooting the man in the head and killing him instantly.

In the street outside Khor and his ogryns looked around, confused. With gunfire coming from many different directions but no attackers visible the simple minded abhumans did not know what to do. Or at least that was until one of them was hit by a rifle round in his arm and he roared in pain and Khor came to a decision.

"Ogryns attack!" he bellowed, raising his ripper gun and firing it randomly in short bursts at the surrounding buildings.

The barrage of fire from the high calibre automatic shotguns carried by the ogryns proved effective at limiting the fire coming from the nearest buildings but there were more armed locals further away, either outside of the ogryns' field of fire or simply out of range and the firing from these positions continued as the Catachans spread out.

"Get inside." Wolf broadcast using her microbead, "Split up and secure each building in turn. Sergeant Molla where is that heavy bolter?"

"Ready now captain." Molla responded and then Wolf heard the roar of the powerful belt fed weapon as it was fired towards the settlement in short bursts. These short bursts were all that was needed for the mass reactive explosive rounds to tear apart the lightweight structures wherever they were hit.

"I want to get to the centre of town." Wolf told her command section over the sound of the shooting.

"Thinking that's where the locals have their command post?" Vance asked and Wolf nodded.

"Either there or on the far side from where we approached but either way starting in the middle makes sense to me." she said.

"Then lead the way captain." Vance replied.

Sprinting from one hiding place to another, Wolf's command section made its way towards the middle of the settlement with Khor and his ogryns following behind them. They came under repeated fire from various buildings but this consisted of only one or two gunmen at any time and a sudden barrage from the ogryns was enough to force them to cease fire long enough for the Catachans to move to their next hiding place. This pattern was broken when Vance rounded a corner and suddenly leapt back behind it again when there was a volley of gunfire from the street around it.

"What's going on sergeant?" Wolf asked.

"Looks like about a dozen or so of the locals have set up a strong point." Vance told her and Wolf peered around the corner just long enough to see where numerous concrete blocks had been gathered together to form a large, reinforced position that was now occupied by a group of locals armed with rifles and shotguns. "So much for the command post being in the centre of town." Torrent commented.

"This doesn't look like a command post to me." Vance told her, "There's no command and control." and then he quickly fired his las pistol around the corner in the vain hope that he might hit one of the gunmen. However, the shot merely struck one of the blocks and although it did take a piece out of it this was small and the overall structure of the strong point was not affected.

In response to this one of the locals in the strong point grinned as he slung his shotgun over his shoulder and reached down into a crate on the ground that contained a number of crude pipe bombs with short fuses extending from one end. Picking one of these up the man took out a lighter and held it close to the end of the fuse.

"Let's see how those bastards like this." he said, lighting the fuse and lifting his arm up ready to hurl the bomb towards the Catachans. However, just when he was about to throw the bomb he blinked as the light from a laser beam shone straight in his eyes. This was not the powerful beam from an Imperial Guard issue laser weapon though, instead it was the targeting laser from a sniper rifle and a moment later a bullet punched through the centre of the man's forehead and as he died he dropped the bomb with its burning fuse where he stood.

"Everyone out!" another of the locals inside the strong point shouted when he saw this and everyone remaining inside attempted to climb over the thick blocks that made it up before the fuse could burn all the way down. However, in their haste to create a position that would protect those inside from small arms fire the locals had not put any thought into how quickly it could be evacuated and the bomb exploded before any of them could escape. In turn this explosion triggered off the entire stockpile of pipe bombs that was stored inside the strong point and they all exploded simultaneously, blasting the entire strong point apart from the inside and killing everyone inside it.

"Thank you Rull." Vance said, smiling as he recognised the handiwork of Second Platoon's sniper.

"Thank him later." Wolf told him, "We've still got a command post to find."

Meanwhile Grey charged into the building he had been attacked from to join the other Catachan and the pair of them found the body of a woman on the floor with an old fashioned revolver pistol next to her hand. Hearing footsteps through a nearby doorway Grey fired his las pistol through it and the body of a man armed only with a length of metal pipe fell through.

"We've got two bodies in here." he transmitted using his microbead, "We'll keep checking the rest of the-" but before he could finish there was the booming of a shotgun and the other Catachan soldier was thrown backwards as he was hit.

Leading her command section towards the centre of the settlement, Wolf found a structure decorated in the usual gothic style of the Imperial Administration that stood out against the more mundane architecture used elsewhere although even this structure looked as run down as all of the other buildings did.

"How about that as a command post?" Wolf said when she saw this and she started towards the main entrance that was visible directly ahead.

"Look out!" Vance yelled suddenly as they ran towards the building and he saw a burning object thrown from an upper window. At the same time he threw himself on top of Wolf, pushing her to the ground and landing on top of her just as the fuel filled incendiary device hit the ground ahead of them and broke open to create a pool of burning liquid.

"Grenades!" Wolf shouted while dragging herself out from beneath Vance, "I want that bomb thrower taken out."

The Catachan armed with the command section's grenade launcher nodded and dropped to his knees before he raised his weapon and there was a 'pop' as he fired a single explosive round. This passed right through the window that the Molotov cocktail had been thrown from and seconds later there was the sound of an explosion from inside. It was immediately clear that the room had contained more of the improvised incendiary devices when the grenade blast was accompanied by a massive fireball that erupted out of all of the nearby windows.

"Sergeant Khor, secure that building." Wolf ordered and Khor grinned.

"Ogryns! Charge!" he shouted and the massive abhumans roared as they ran in a tight group towards the

main entrance to the central building. While most of the structures were built only with baseline humans and similar sized abhumans in mind Wolf knew that the administration building would have larger doors and taller ceilings, enabling the ogryns to move about inside. Several defiant gunshots came from the already burning building when the occupants saw the ogryns charging towards it but these did nothing to the abhumans and the front door easily splintered as Khor and another of his squad smashed into it simultaneously.

Immediately inside in the reception area the locals had chosen to set up one of the few military specification weapons they possessed, a belt fed heavy stubber mounted on a tripod behind a crude barrier of wood and metal boxes, but before they could fire the weapon Khor and his ogryns opened fire with their ripper guns again. These tore away at the barrier as the ogryns charged towards it as well, kicking what remained of it out of the way before they swung their solidly built ripper guns like clubs to beat the trio of locals cowering in front of them.

It was then that Wolf and her command section entered the Administration building behind the ogryns and looked around

"Sergeant Khor, search this floor. We'll take the up stairs." Wolf ordered and she immediately began to lead the command section up the large flight of stairs that dominated the reception area. A blast from a shotgun caught Vance in his arm just as he reached the top of the stairs and he fell to the floor, clutching at the wound.

"I've got him." Torrent said as Wolf looked around and while the medic was opening her medical kit Wolf turned back around and fired her las pistol towards the doorway the shot had come from. Corporal Kline, the command section's vox operator took advantage of Wolf's fire to rush the doorway himself, firing his lasgun through it and when he burst through he turned his weapon around and used the butt to strike the man he found cowering in the next hallway.

"Clear." he called out, delivering a kick to the man now lying on the floor.

"Where are your leaders?" Wolf demanded when she came through the doorway and saw the man on the floor.

"Feth you." his hissed back at her.

"He's no use to us Corporal, finish him." Wolf said and Kline drew his traditional long Catachan knife from its scabbard.

"No wait!" the local man cried out suddenly and he pointed down the hallway, "The council chamber. They're using the council chamber."

Wolf nodded at Kline, who in response returned his knife to its scabbard and then clubbed the man on the side of his head with the butt of his lasgun, rendering him unconscious.

"Kline, Rushford. With me. Let's find this council chamber." Wolf said and then leaving Torrent to treat Vance the other members of the command section hurried along the hallway.

The Administration building was well signposted and the locals had either not had the opportunity or not thought to remove these to confuse the attacking Catachans. This allowed Wolf and her two men to quickly find their way to the main council chamber where another of the locals stood on guard. This man had his back to the Catachans when they first spotted him, apparently distracted by the sound of fighting outside the building and Wolf waved at her men to fall back around the corner before they were seen.

"Do it quietly." she whispered and the two Catachans with her both drew their knives and peered around the corner again.

Seeing that the man was still facing in the other direction the two Catachan soldiers began to creep towards him, making their way forwards without a sound. It was only as they were getting close that the guard started to turn towards them and in that moment Kline and Rushford both lunged at him. Rushford got to the man first and thrust his knife between his ribs, twisting the blade to not only open up the wound to make the bleeding worse but also so that the release of pressure from inside the guard's chest cavity would prevent him from calling out a warning before he died. Lowering the body of the guard to the floor Kline beckoned to Wolf and she darted along the hallway towards them and all three stood outside the door to the council chamber.

"Go!" Wolf snapped and the Catachans threw open the door to reveal the room on the other side. This was dominated by a large meeting table that was currently covered in maps of the settlement while around it stood several of the locals, all of them wearing the same utilitarian clothing as the other encountered so far.

"Nobody move. You are all under arrest for treason." Wolf shouted and the startled locals all turned to look towards the Imperial Guard troops standing in the doorway. There was a weapon resting on the table with the maps, a compact automatic firearm and the local closest to this reached for it but before he could grab hold of the gun Wolf saw what he was doing and shot him, "If anyone else wants to try anything I can just have my men shoot you all." she added and the local leaders exchanged nervous glances with one another.

"We surrender." one of them said and slowly all of them raised their hands and stepped back away from the table, giving Wolf the change to walk up to it and look at the maps herself. She noticed that a lot of the maps were marked in places where she recalled seeing gunfire coming from earlier and she immediately realised

that these represented the positioned of armed locals.

"I take it that this map shows your deployment." she said, looking at the man who had announced the surrender of the local leaders but he did not reply, "You know it's going to be easy for me to give this information to my platoon and we'll be able to isolate everyone of your men before killing them all." she said, "Unless one of you wants to get them all to stand down."

"They're going to shoot us all anyway." one of the locals said, apparently having second thoughts about giving up.

"Perhaps. But there are worse alternatives." Wolf pointed out and then she picked up a communicator that was on the table in front of her, "Now who wants to tell all your men to lay down their arms?"

The firing by the locals came to a sudden halt but for the time being the Catachans continued to fire at where they thought the shots had been coming from until they heard Wolf's broadcast from the council chamber.

"Second Platoon cease fire unless you are still being fired upon. The local leaders are in custody and have ordered their people to stand down in exchange for a guarantee that we will not carry out any summary executions. Gather all the locals in the main square. I want to know what's going on here."

As Wolf ordered the Catachans began to round up the surrendering locals, bringing them all to the main square in front of the Administration building. At the same time Quinn and his men brought the three surviving Goliaths back to the settlement where they began to unload the contents of their cargo compartments and lay out the machine parts on the ground nearby.

"I don't get it Bomber." Molla said as he watched Mayer examining the parts, "What's so special about all of this that the locals would want to hide it from us and even risk shooting at us over it?"

"Nothing that I can see." Mayer responded, "This stuff isn't even new as far as I can see. All of it has been reconditioned."

"Anything to report?" Wolf asked as she walked over to find out what Mayer had discovered.

"Sorry captain. I was just telling Sergeant Molla that there's absolutely nothing special about any of this. All of it is just regular machinery."

"So it doesn't have any military application then?" Wolf said.

"Some of it could. It all depends on how you use it." Mayer said and he started to point out specific parts, "These are from fuel pumps that could be used on civilian tractors or anything with a Chimera hull and that is the pressure regulator for a pump. Good for pumping water out of a flooded tunnel or feeding fuel into a missile before launch."

"So why hide that they've got it?" Molla said as Wolf looked around.

"Where did they get it?" she asked and the Catachans beside her also looked around.

"She's right." Mayer said, "There just isn't the machinery here to justify them having all these spare parts." and he started to pick up some of the parts and inspect them one at a time.

"What are you doing corporal?" Wolf said.

"Checking for owner's marks." Mayer answered as he continued to examine the machine parts laid out on the ground. Most he put down again but when he found two that interested him he stopped and showed them to Wolf, "Look at these." he told her and Wolf looked at the parts he was holding out towards her.

"I don't get it." she said.

"These parts have both been stamped by their owners to keep tabs on them but the marks are different. They came from different places. My guess is that these people are tech pirates. They go around old mine workings and fabrication centres and plunder them for parts left behind by the owners because it's cheaper to leave them in place than move them. Then they recondition them and sell them on to people who want to buy them for less than the Adeptus Mechanicus will charge for new ones." Mayer explained.

"That would certainly explain why they didn't want us to find them." Wolf said.

"That's an understatement if ever I heard one captain." Molla added, "From what I've heard about this planet the local mining combines and production cartels aren't much more tolerant than the tech priests are for people scamming them to make few coins. They'll be lucky if all that happens to them is that they get lobotomised and turned into servitors."

"Maybe we can use that to our advantage." Wolf said, "If these people have been scouring all these abandoned places for this stuff then maybe they can point us towards anywhere that could be being used by Genestealers as a hiding place. In exchange for them helping us then maybe we can see to it that the commissariat will prosecute them for attacking us rather than handing them over to the planetary authorities to be dealt with by the Adeptus Mechanicus and native corporations."

"Do you really think the leashes will go for that captain?" Molla asked, "They might prefer to hand them over to the local enforcers just to save themselves the hassle of the paperwork for executing civilians."

Wolf shrugged.

"I never said I was going to ask a commissar before I made the offer." she said, "If they chose not to go along with it later then it's hardly my fault now is it?"

4.

The first Valkyrie troop carrier that landed just outside the settlement had a squad of Catachan troops rush down the ramp at the rear of its fuselage and form a wide circle around the aircraft before it rose back up into the air, kicking up a cloud of dust as it did so. Then as Wolf watched the second of the three circling Valkyries came into land within the circle of troops and Major Trent's company command section disembarked before making their way directly towards Wolf. The five Catachan troops were not the only passengers aboard the aircraft though and Commissar Layne as well as Engineer Cornellius, the psyker Veneel and Ministorum priest Mordecai Black followed Trent's command section.

"Captain Wolf." Trent said when he got to where Wolf was waiting, "I believe you have news for us. Though your signal was rather garbled."

"Yes major. Vox conditions in this area are very bad." Wolf replied.

"That is a result of the high metal content of the terrain combined with frequent electrical storm activity in this region." Cornellius commented.

"Never mind that now." Trent said, "I'm not the only one who wanted to hear what you had to say in person." and he looked around to where the third Valkyrie had just touched down within the circle of Catachan troops and now Wolf saw the reason for the presence of the protective detail made up of soldiers she knew did not serve with Fourth Company as Colonel Shryke, the XIX Regiment's commanding officer disembarked with his regimental command section. Like Trent he was also accompanied by more than just his command section though and Wolf immediately recognised Regimental Commissar Garratt as well as the green robed astropath who the colonel often kept close to him so that he always had a means of communication not dependent on vox sets that were not always reliable. Last off the Valkyrie was a young woman who pushed a lightweight motorcycle down the aircraft's ramp before she turned to Wolf and called out to her.

"Lieutenant, where's Ibram?" she shouted.

"Over there." Wolf shouted back at her, pointing to where Quinn's squad of veterans was still conducting a search of part of the settlement. The young woman with the motorcycle was Guardswoman Bess Quinn, the younger sister of Wolf's veteran sergeant. Bess was more friendly towards non-Catachans than most of her fellow jungle fighters were and she waved back at Wolf as she started to push the motorcycle in the direction the officer had indicated.

"Aren't you going to reprimand her for failing to address you properly captain?" Commissar Layne said when Wolf failed to call out the young Catachan's use of her previous rank.

"She probably hasn't heard about my promotion yet." Wolf pointed out, "It's not like Catachan troops wear any rank markings after all." and she noticed Trent and the other Catachans smiling, pleased that she knew better than to stick to the letter of regulations for such a trivial matter.

"Captain Wolf." Colonel Shryke said as he and his fellow passengers reached where she and Major Trent's command section waited, "I understand that you may have a development in our hunt for the remaining Genestealers."

"I think so colonel. If you'd like to come with me I'll show you what we found here." Wolf replied.

Wolf then led the newly arrived officers and their staff to the council chamber in the Administration building, the fire having been extinguished by this point but the damage to the exterior still visible. Upon entering the room Wolf found her own command section waiting for her, along with one of the locals who had been in this room when the Catachans had stormed it. He now sat between Kline and Rushford, his hands bound by a plastic tie in front of him.

"Officer present!" Vance snapped uncharacteristically and he and the rest of the command section snapped to attention, dragging the prisoner to his feet as well. Wolf knew that this was entirely for the prisoner's benefit, the more casual approach generally taken by Catachans did not always fit well when trying to present a disciplined image to civilians. The maps of the settlement that had been used to try and plan its defence against the Catachans were gone now, replaced by larger scale maps of a wide area surrounding the settlement as well as several others.

"So this is one of the heretics?" Black said, glaring at the prisoner as soon as he saw the man. The priest's accent demonstrated his Catachan origin that allowed him to remain with the XIX Regiment without being labelled as an outsider and treated as such.

"Yes, he was among the ring leaders we captured in this very room." Wolf said, "Since then he has been quite co-operative."

"Treason must be dealt with." Commissar Garratt said.

"I have suggested that in exchange for his assistance the townsfolk will be prosecuted by an Imperial Guard court martial rather than by the civilian authorities." Wolf said and Trent frowned.

"You realise that means either a firing squad or a noose?" he commented and Wolf smiled.

"Perhaps I should explain how the local economy operated sir." she said and she picked up one of the machine parts that also rested on the table before handing it to Cornelliuss, "Enginseer Cornelliuss could you tell me exactly what this is and what it is used for?"

"It is a mark seven-seven-alpha fluid flow regulator. It is used for regulating coolant in large scale refrigeration systems." the tech priest told her.

"There are no such systems within at least a hundred kilometres." Wolf said.

"So why do the locals need it?" Commissar Layne asked, confused.

"To sell." Wolf replied.

"You are in error Captain Wolf." Cornelliuss said as he continued to study the part, "This component is degraded and does not meet with the standards laid down in Regulation bravo-six-

"The locals stole it." Wolf interrupted, "They took it from where its legal owners had left it after they were done using it and brought it here. Then they cleaned it up and fixed the worst of any damage and if we hadn't come along and disturbed them then they would have sold it to someone who needed something like it cheaper than the Adeptus Mechanicus or a licensed dealer would charge. Of course if the genuine owners ever decided they wanted to make use of their equipment again then they'd be out of luck."

"Tech piracy." Colonel Shryke said, nodding, "I've heard of it but never come across it before. So how does this relate to our hunt for the Genestealers Captain Wolf?"

"The locals have kept meticulous records of where they have plundered equipment from colonel. If you take a look at this map you can see all the places they have been." Wolf said and she pointed to the map on the table. Looking at this the senior officers saw that there numerous annotations had been added where the map shown other settlements.

"All these marked locations look like mines and manufactorums." Commissar Garratt said and Wolf nodded.

"They are sir. They are also all listed as being inactive. When they were closed down it wasn't worth the owner's time moving every last piece of equipment so it was just placed in storage on site. If you read a few of the notes you'll see that they have been marked with the dates that they were last visited and the sorts of equipment that could be found there. However, the more interesting sites are over in this region here." Wolf explained and she moved her hand across the map to where a cluster of three locations had been circled and simply crossed out.

"What does that mean?" Trent asked and Wolf looked at the prisoner.

"Tell them." she said.

"Those are places that no-one comes back from." he said.

"I take it that you don't just think that these places are unsafe because of age and lack of maintenance." Colonel Shryke said.

"No sir. Someone would still make it back to tell the tale if people were just having accidents. I think that anyone who goes to these places is killed, or alternatively infected by the Genestealers." Wolf said.

"So why not send them back here to spread their curse?" Layne commented.

"I have had Torrent checking the locals just in case." Wolf said and she looked at Second Platoon's medic.

"No-one showed any signs of infection and there is nothing to suggest any hybrids have been born here." Torrent added, "The population here probably isn't large enough to warrant them coming here. If there were any survivors then it would make more sense to send them to the larger cities with populations in the millions where they can hide more easily and there is a much larger pool of victims."

"Colonel I think we should move the search to these installations as quickly as possible." Wolf said.

"You realise that Second Platoon is the closest unit?" Trent said.

"I thought that would be the case, yes sir." Wolf answered.

"Okay Captain Wolf, you can deploy your troops to search these three locations. I'll see if the navy can spare you a transport to get you there and provide you with some aerial surveillance." Colonel Shryke said.

"You better take Veneel along with you as well." Trent added, "he may be able to sniff out that psychic link the Genestealers have with one another."

"If the witch is going then I will go along as well to make sure he doesn't become corrupted." Black added, staring at Veneel while the psyker refused to make eye contact with him.

"If transport is available then I'm going to assign Sergeant Gant and her Sentinels to you." Trent said, "You've got a lot of ground to cover and her walkers should make that a lot easier. Not to mention the extra firepower they'll give you."

"Thank you major. I'm sure they'll come in useful." Wolf replied.

"Colonel there is an issue that should be considered." Cornelliuss said, "The conditions that cause the vox disruption we are experiencing are centred in that area."

"I don't like the idea of dropping my people into the middle of a communications black spot." Trent added, looking at Colonel Shryke.

"How did the facilities in that area stay in contact with the outside world when they were operating?" Shryke

asked and Wolf turned towards the prisoner."

"Well?" she said, "I bet you know the answer to that."

"There was a las line running to a repeater station in town." the man said, "But the line's not there any more."

"Something else that was stolen?" Commissar Layne commented.

"How long will it take to lay a new line?" Trent said.

"A surface line may be dropped by low flying aircraft. Possibly the same transport that takes Captain Wolf and Second Platoon to their destination. Of course an expert will be required to set up the necessary equipment. I suggest that I accompany Second Platoon with several servitors. With them I can provide ongoing technical and fire support for the platoon." Cornellius said.

"A surface line is easy to cut." Commissar Layne pointed out.

"And then we'll know that someone is around to have cut it." Vance replied.

"We have a green flare ahead captain." the pilot of the Navy transport told Wolf over the intercom as the craft flew towards the old mining camp that had been identified as the most suitable location for a forward operating base. This camp was one that the tech pirates had visited on numerous occasions to plunder the equipment left behind when the seams of minerals that were mined here began to run dry and the cost of extraction exceeded their value on the market.

"Good." Wolf replied, "That means Sergeant Quinn has determined that the site is suitable for our purposes. Take us in."

The navy's heavy transport now carrying the bulk of Second Platoon along with the four lightweight Sentinel walkers of Sergeant Gant's squadron was flying at both low altitude and low speed. Though it was capable of operating at supersonic speeds even at relatively low altitudes, the requirement for the aircraft to also be laying an optical data line from the drum mounted beneath one of its wings meant that this had to be limited to far less than this. Therefore, to avoid any hostile forces in the area being able to take advantage of this to lay an ambush for the Catachans Wolf had sent Quinn's veteran squad as well as Rull on ahead in a faster moving Valkyrie. Their task was to conduct a quick sweep of the camp and confirm that it matched the description of it provided to the Catachans by the tech pirates who, although supposedly bargaining for a supposedly more merciful sentence from an Imperial Guard court martial than they would get if left to the local authorities were not considered totally trustworthy.

"Captain as soon as we land I shall begin setting up our communication terminal." Cornellius said and Wolf nodded.

"How long will that take?" she asked.

"I estimate seventy-four minutes, plus or minus two minutes." Cornellius told her, "That is based on all equipment being present and intact on our landing."

"I thought you checked it all before we left." Vance commented.

"I did. However, there is the possibility of damage in transit due to human error." Cornellius said.

"He's talking about you guys." Grey said to one of the transport's Naval crewmen and in return the man just grunted.

"Let's say it all works right out of the box." Wolf said, "I take it that you'll have us hooked into the planetary communication network before it gets dark. That's good."

"Correct Captain Wolf. Nightfall will take place one hundred and twenty three minutes after we arrive at our destination. That gives us a margin of error of forty-nine minutes to complete the task. Far outside acceptable parameters." Cornellius said.

"Let's hope so." Wolf responded.

Quinn was waiting at the side of the mining camp's landing pad when Wolf got off the transport and she walked straight over to him.

"Report sergeant." she said.

"Everything's as we expected it captain." he told her, "The tech pirates picked the place clean of anything that wasn't fixed down and they used cutting equipment to take a lot of what was. They did, however leave us with the pump that brings the camp's water up from an underground spring so we don't need to worry about that. Of course they took the motor that goes with the pump so it all needs cranking up by hand. My men have brought up a couple of gallons already so we've got a small stock in addition to what we've brought with us."

"What about signs of activity in the local area?" Wolf said.

"This place is dead captain. We've not seen any signs of life. Not even any animals." Quinn told her, "Mind you Rull's still making another sweep of the area just in case we missed anything the first time."

"Okay, now what about the buildings? What do we have?" Wolf asked.

"Not much. As I said all the equipment's been taken, not that I think we'd have had much use for most of it but I hope you brought some heaters among all of that lot." Quinn said and he looked past Wolf to where the supplies brought along on the transport were being unloaded.

"Heaters, air conditioners, water purifiers. Everything we could possibly need but may not be able to request via vox." Wolf said.

"What about the las line the Bastard is supposed to be setting up?" Quinn said, using the nickname many of the Catachans used for Cornelius that was derived both from his identification number and his lack of consideration for the value of human life when suggesting a course of action.

"He'll have it done by dark but if anything goes wrong then our only means of communication with the rest of the regiment is to send out Bess on her bike and I don't want to risk that unless it's absolutely necessary." Wolf said.

"In other words you're only sending my little sister if we're all in danger. Thanks." Quinn said.

"Just show me around. I want to decide where my new command post is going to be." Wolf replied.

5.

When it had been operational the mining camp had housed several hundred miners plus their equipment so there was plenty of room for the Catachans to choose from when setting up their own camp. The camp's perimeter was wide open and combined with its size this made defending it all with just a single platoon a daunting proposition, therefore instead of attempting to set up defences to cover all of the camp the Catachans confined their operation to a small section surrounding the point where Cornelliuss was connecting their communication system. The tech priest had chosen to do this inside what had been a garage for mining vehicles though all but a few rusted parts of these were now gone, leaving a space large enough not only for all of the tech priest's equipment but also for Sergeant Gant to bring her four Sentinel walkers inside as well. Furthermore the offices and storerooms on the upper floors of the building provided sufficient room for Second Platoon to use as a barracks and a command post.

Only a few of the Catachans needed to be deployed outside of this building, Mayer's mortar squad could not fire their weapons either from inside or on the roof of the building so they set to work filling sandbags so that a fortified position could be constructed for them beside the camp's landing pad, enabling them to protect this vital location as well. A lookout was set on top of the camp's water tower, the water tank itself having been stolen long ago but the tower itself still intact and now possessing a flat top that made an excellent lookout point. It was also agreed with Enginseer Cornelliuss that one of his servitors, fitted with a heavy bolter would also be located at the top of the tower from where the half human machine would have a clear field of fire far around the camp. This left only the ogryns to be quartered and rather than bringing the bulky abhumans with their almost non-existent hygiene into the garage with the rest of Second Platoon they would be quartered in a different building nearby. Fortunately mining facilities across the Imperium valued ogryn workers for their brute strength and loyalty to their employers and this camp had obviously included a number of abhumans in its workforce at some point and the building where they had been quartered was still intact and located close enough to the garage that they would be close at hand if the camp came under attack. However, despite getting Second Platoon in place being straight forwards enough there was still one major complication.

"I regret to inform you Captain Wolf that the las line will not connect." Cornelliuss reported when Wolf and Vance went to see how the tech priest's work was progressing.

"Is it a problem with any of this stuff?" Vance asked, looking at the equipment Cornelliuss had brought along with him.

"Negative Platoon Sergeant Vance. All of my equipment is functioning at one hundred percent effectiveness. I have confirmed using a loop back that my transceiver unit is able to both transmit and receive pulse coded data bursts at up six hundred gigabits per second." Cornelliuss replied and Vance leant towards Wolf.

"Do you have any idea what the cog boy just said?" he whispered.

"Not whatsoever." Wolf whispered back, "Just nod and act like it made perfect sense." then she looked at Cornelliuss and added, "I guess that means that there must be a break in the line then."

"Correct Captain Wolf and since no change in tension was monitored during the deployment from the transport it can only have occurred after we landed here." Cornelliuss said and Wolf sighed.

"So someone was watching and acted to cut us off." she said.

"That probably means that we've got company coming soon." Vance added and Wolf replied.

"We can't afford to remain out of contact. Enginseer Cornelliuss can you repair the line if you can find the break?" she asked.

"Of course captain. I have included several repair modules that can be installed at the point of a break to reconnect the two broken ends." Cornelliuss told her.

"Very good. Gather up what equipment you need and I'll have Sergeant Molla and First Squad escort you." Wolf said.

"Molla? Not Quinn?" Vance said and Wolf shook her head.

"No, that line was probably broken on purpose and Molla is more likely to be able to pick up on whatever tracks they left behind. Rull should go as well to scout ahead just in case it's a trap to draw out part of our force." she said.

"Your reasoning is sound captain. I shall prepare my equipment and configure my servitors for combat duties just in case the camp is attacked while I am away." Cornelliuss said.

"And I'll go and give Tari the good news." Vance added.

The sun was already setting by the time Cornelliuss and First Squad were prepared to leave the camp and Molla's men checked their flash lights before setting off.

"We go dark." Molla told his men, "Rull's already gone on ahead and he's not given any signals to say that there's anyone waiting just outside the perimeter but I don't want to give anyone any advanced warning that

we're on our way as well. Remember, a flash light beam is visible from well over than a thousand metres." then he looked at where Cornellius stood, "Are you okay with that as well engineer?" he asked.

"Affirmative Sergeant Molla. My enhanced vision gives me superior low light visibility to you and your men. I can not only locate the break in the line we are looking for in pitch darkness, I should also be able to give advanced warning if there is an enemy close at hand."

"That could come in useful. okay, since we're following your las line you may as well take the lead." Molla said.

"Agreed. You may follow me." Cornellius responded before promptly turning around and starting to walk away from the mining camp, following the path marked out by the las line that was supposed to be Second Platoon's link back to the rest of their regiment.

Given that the las line had been deployed from an aircraft it did not run flat along the ground and occasionally Cornellius would pause to move it from where it had landed on something that he did not want it resting on.

"Could something like this have caused the line to snap of its own accord?" Molla asked when he saw Cornellius doing this for the third time.

"It is not out of the question sergeant. However, it is unlikely. The material of the las line is designed to resist accidental breakage. In any case, any such damage would have occurred not long after the line was deployed and would have caused a sharp difference in tension on the reel that would have been detected. Deliberate sabotage is still the likely answer to our problem." the tech priest responded.

"If it's so strong then why bother moving it from where it landed on rocks?" Molla added.

"Each time I do so I exert a force on the line to test whether we are close to the point of the break. The amongst of resistance tells me whether there is still a significant length of line between our location and the break."

"And are we? Close to it I mean." Molla said.

"I will know only once we are within five hundred metres of it sergeant. I will inform you then." Cornellius answered and Molla glanced over his shoulder at his men.

"You heard the tech priest. He'll tell us when we're within five hundred metres." he said.

The sun was down and the lights from Second Platoon's camp were out of sight when Cornellius suddenly came to a halt and pointed at the ground ahead using the large power axe he carried in one hand as if it was weightless.

"I have detected the break sergeant." he said.

"Okay everyone spread out twenty paces around the break." Molla ordered, "I want the engineer covering from all directions but everyone needs to stay in visual contact of at least two others. Remember, no lights. Anyone who wants a smoke can wait until we get back to camp."

While Cornellius made his way directly to where the las line was broken and located the two end points the Catachans spread out around him and crouched down with their weapons held at the ready. The squad's heavy bolter had been left back at the camp to keep their load as light as possible so their grenade launcher now represented their most powerful weapon and Molla made sure that he was next in line to the operator of this weapon as they got themselves into position.

Once he was crouched down Molla took out his magnoculars and began to search the surrounding area using the device's light amplification mode to make what he saw as clear as day. Molla was hoping to find some trace of whoever had cut through the las line. He was well aware that such searches were always best done under natural light from close up but for now he would have to make do with looking through the magnoculars instead.

"Sergeant you may wish to concentrate your search on a bearing of one hundred and twenty-six degrees." Cornellius said, "There are tracks moving to and from the break in the las line heading that direction."

"Human?" Molla asked as he turned to face the direction Cornellius had indicated to him, using the direction indicator of his magnoculars to tell him when he was facing the right way.

"They appear to be ordinary boots of local manufacture." Cornellius told him, "That could indicate more local criminals, human servants of the Genestealers or hybrids with humanoid legs and feet."

"Okay I get it." Molla commented right before he noticed a pulsing beam of light coming from behind a rise in the ground. Lowering his magnoculars he saw that the beam was not visible to the naked eye and Molla smiled as he realised what it was, the targeting laser from a sniper rifle being switched off and on at regular intervals telling him to follow the path of the beam, "Everyone stand by." Molla said softly into his microbead, broadcasting to the entire squad as well as Cornellius, "I think Rull is marking a target. Engineer, how long until that line is fixed?"

"I have made test transmission along both sections of the las line and made contact with the terminals at both ends." Cornellius replied, "This confirms that there are no further breaks in the line. As soon as I am done with this break we will be able to make direct communication with our regimental command from the camp."

"I asked how long it will take." Molla said impatiently.

"Another twenty-six seconds if I am allowed to continue undisturbed sergeant. Longer if I am required to answer more questions." Cornelius told him.

"Just tell me when you're done." Molla said, pointing his las pistol towards the rocks being marked out by Rull and waiting for Cornelius to confirm that the repair to the las line was complete.

"I am finished Sergeant Molla." Cornelius said but Molla did not check to see how many seconds had elapsed since being given a time estimate for the repair to be completed.

"Okay let's do this." Molla said, "Anders I want a frag round in the rocks two hundred metres to the east as soon as I fire the flare. Understood?"

"Understood sergeant. HE frag goes in with the flare." Anders replied, turning his grenade launcher towards the rocks.

Molla put his magnoculars away and placed his las pistol down on the ground by his feet so that he would have both hands free to trigger the distress flare he took from his webbing. Back at the camp he knew that there was someone watching for this flare that would indicate the repair to the las line had been completed but to Molla and his men it would provide them with enough light to see by in a radius of several hundred metres. Molla pointed the flare skywards and pulled on the firing tab. The flare kicked in his hands and the rocket itself rushed skywards before there was a brilliant burst of light.

The moment the flare ignited Anders fired his grenade launcher at the rocks that were now clearly visible to him. The explosive projectile flew in an arc before landing among the rocks and exploding, producing not only another burst of light from the explosion but also the sound of several inhuman shrieks as the creatures concealing themselves there were caught up in the blast.

The light of the flare also illuminated a pair of hunched figures wearing dark cloaks that had helped them blend into the background and both of them opened fire with compact automatic weapons. Fortunately they were still beyond the effective range for firing these at the Catachans and the bullets impacted on the ground in front of them, kicking up plume of dust and rock fragments. In response the Catachans fired at the hooded figures with their lasguns. These weapons had a much superior range to the auto pistols being fired at them and one of the figures fell backwards as it was hit.

The second figure fired another defiant burst from its weapon, despite seeing how ineffective its first attack had been and it leapt up and began to fall back. There was a dip in the ground not far from where the figure was and as shots from lasguns flew past it the figure jumped into this and vanished.

"Everyone stay put." Molla ordered when two of his troops got up to give chase to the hooded figure that had just vanished and moments later there was another burst of projectile fire as another figure appeared from the direction of the rocks where the first group of assailants had been hiding. This figure was moving as it fired, heading towards the rocks which suggested it was not a survivor of the grenade attack. Equipped with a rifle that had at least equal range to the Catachans' lasguns the bullets flew past them and Molla threw himself to the ground. Behind him he heard the sound of a bullet bouncing off armour plate and Molla realised that Cornelius had been hit. Looking around he saw that the tech priest was still on his feet though, the thick powered armour that covered his cybernetically enhanced body had protected him from the bullet.

"Sergeant Molla I recommend relocating from this position as soon as possible. It is likely that the enemy chose this as somewhere suited to an ambush but are still moving to surround us." Cornelius said.

Molla knew that the tech priest was correct. The enemy had chosen this place as somewhere that they could trap and destroy the Catachans when they came to repair the damage to the las line and had expected to be able to use the cover of darkness to surround the Catachans before they had launched their ambush and now that the fighting had started early they were rushing to get into position to complete their plan.

"The rocks." Molla said, "They obviously want to hold them and they'll offer us cover. Let's move."

The Catachans got to their feet and began to run towards the rocks. This triggered more hooded figures to appear, individually and in pairs, that were armed with a mix of projectile weapons and the air was filled with the sound of their firing. The Catachans returned fire with rapid bursts from their lasguns meant to keep their attackers from firing rather aimed at specific individuals but this suppressing fire was insufficient to stop a bullet hitting one of the Catachans in the leg and she screamed as she fell.

"Berlin." Molla called out.

"I will assist her Sergeant Molla." Cornelius said when Molla started to turn back to help the fallen trooper and Molla nodded, knowing that the tech priest would be able to keep up his regular pace even while supporting the injured Berlin.

The figure that had been running towards the rocks reached them ahead of the Catachans and used them for cover as he took aim. However, before he could fire a red dot appeared on the side of his hood unnoticed before a single bullet punched through his skull and killed him.

Molla was next to reach the rocks and he vaulted over them to find four corpses hidden among them, one with a gunshot wound to his head and the others with obvious shrapnel injuries. While the rest of First Squad was also making it to the rocks Molla crouched down beside one of the bodies and pulled back the hood,

curious to find out exactly who it was that was attacking him and his squad. As he had expected Molla found himself looking at bulbous and inhuman head of a Genestealer hybrid, the descendent of humans infected by a Genestealer. Although not a first generation hybrid that would have appeared far more alien the way in which the cloak bulged told Molla that the creature still had a third arm that would end in three large claws underneath.

"They're Genestealers all right." he said as the other Catachans arrived and began to take cover among the rocks. Cornelius set Berlin down next to one of the rocks and another of the squad took out a field dressing and began to treat her wound.

"This position is far more defensible." Cornelius said and Molla nodded in agreement before peering out from around one of the rocks to see the shapes of more hooded figures moving towards them.

Its descent slowed by a parachute, the flare that had been providing the Catachans with illumination now landed and moments later ceased burning.

The gunfire from the other Genestealers continued from the darkness, aimed towards the rocks. However, the muzzle flashes were clearly visible in the darkness of the night and each time they fired they were revealing their positions to the Catachans. From the dispersal of the muzzle flashes it appeared to Molla that now that First Squad had reached the rocks it was no longer surrounded but the sheer number of them indicated that they were still vastly outnumbered by the Genestealers who were closing in on them primarily from two sides now. There were also some to a third side but this direction of approach was covered by Rull and the unseen sniper continued to pick them off one by one as they tried to slip past him. The most impressive example of this occurred when a hybrid with a large fuel tank on his back for a flamer attempted to get close to the Catachans' new position and rather than targeting the alien creature itself Rull fired a round into the fuel tank and the hybrid shrieked as it was turned into a brightly burning torch.

Rull could not hold back the entire force on his own though and it was up to First Squad to defend their own position by aiming at muzzle flashes wherever they saw them. In addition to this Cornelius was able to use his superior night vision to pick out any hybrids who attempted to sneak closer to the Catachans without firing, picking them off with his las pistol.

All of a sudden the small arms fire from the hybrids was joined by the more powerful fire from a belt fed heavy stubber and the combination of high calibre rounds fed from an almost unlimited supply forced the Catachans to take cover rather than continuing to fire. Even Engineer Cornelius clad in his powered armour opted to drop to his knees rather than test its effectiveness against this new threat.

"Anders, can you put a grenade on that stubber?" Molla asked over the sound of gunfire.

"I'll give it a go." Anders replied before firing three fragmentation grenades in rapid succession towards the source of the heavy stubber fire. However, although there were three loud detonations in equally rapid succession a few seconds later the fire from the heavy weapon continued.

"Damn they're dug in." another Catachan commented.

"The enemy is also using the fire from that weapon to get closer to us." Cornelius said as he risked taking a quick look around the rocks and saw several hooded figures crawling forwards under the covering fire of the heavy stubber.

"We need a way out." Molla said, taking out his magnoculars. He then began to search the ground in the one direction that there were no Genestealers approaching from, hoping that it would offer another suitable place to take cover that was out of the field of fire of the heavy stubber. However, it was clear that the ground behind the Catachans was too flat and open to offer any real protection for at least a hundred metres and attempting to cross it would give the hybrids manning the heavy stubber more than enough opportunity to mow them all down.

All of a sudden there was a 'whoosh' sound that was followed by a ball of flame and the sound of an explosion from the position of the heavy stubber as a missile fired from a distance flew in and destroyed both the weapon and its crew.

"What the feth?" Molla exclaimed, turning his magnoculars in the direction the missile had come from and he grinned as he saw the familiar shapes of Imperial Guard Sentinel scout walkers bounding towards them from the direction of the mining camp, "It's Gant!" he shouted, "Wolf must have sent her, but how in Him on Earth's name did she know we needed help."

"Perhaps because I was able to transmit a distress signal sergeant." Cornelius said.

"What? When? And how? Vox signals don't work out here." Molla asked, confused.

"The effectiveness of wireless communication is severely disrupted by local conditions but it is not completely ineffectual Sergeant Molla. The patch used to fix the las line features a short range vox receiver for wireless interface and I was able to communicate with that, using it to relay the message to our camp along the las line. Of course I had no way of knowing if anyone other than a servitor would be listening so I included an instruction for the message to be passed on to Captain Wolf immediately. Evidently it was." the tech priest explained.

Now that Gant's Sentinel squadron had revealed its presence the pilots of the four walkers activated the

spotlights built into each vehicle, using them to illuminate the ground around the rock formation First Squad was using for cover and the exact locations of the startled Genestealers was revealed.

"Open fire!" Molla yelled and taking full advantage of the surprise arrival of the Catachan reinforcements the soldiers among the rocks opened fire again, using rapid bursts of fire to target the Genestealer hybrids who were still in a state of shock from the sudden destruction of their most powerful weapon.

Another missile flew from the support Sentinel and landed among a cluster of the hooded hybrids and the blast sent them flying through the air. So far this was the only one of the four approaching walkers to have opened fire, the other three being armed only with heavy flamers that required them to get much closer before they could be effective and this gave the remaining Genestealers the chance to flee. Some of the hybrids fired their weapons at the rocks where First Squad were located, hoping to keep them pinned down as they withdrew while others just turned and fled.

"Hold your fire. Save your ammo." Molla ordered when some of his squad continued to fire on the retreating hybrids, "We've got a long walk back to camp and I don't want anyone out of ammo if they come at us again." Giving the Genestealers the opportunity to get away, Molla emerged from the rocks just as the four Sentinels came bounding up to First Squad's position and Sergeant Gant looked down at him from the cockpit of her open topped walker and smiled at him.

"Hey Tari, how did the repair to the las line go?" she said.

"Fething great Ursulla." Molla responded, "Enginseer Cornelius fixed the line and then we found ourselves almost overrun by Genestealers."

"Genestealers? Are you sure?" Gant said and Molla nodded.

"Just check any of the bodies and see for yourself. I'd say that we're close to wherever they're hiding out." he said.

"Then we better get back and let the captain know. I'm sure she'll want to hear all about your adventures so we can send someone to track them when it gets light."

6.

"The break in the line was located at these co-ordinates Captain Wolf." Cornelliussaid, pointing to the map laid out in the room acting as Second Platoon's command post. All of the squad leaders in addition to the attached advisers were present for this meeting, Wolf was keen for all of them to know what it was that they were up against. Only Khor had been left out since even with the chemical and cybernetic enhancements made to his intellect that turned him into what was known as a BONEHead, he still lacked the intelligence to take part in planning.

"And you found tracks?" Wolf asked.

"Correct." Cornelliuss answered, "They both approached and led off in this direction." and he used a stylus built into one of the cybernetic tentacles connected to his body known as mechandrites the tech priest drew a perfectly straight line across the map, starting with the location of the ambush earlier that night and continuing as far as the edge of the map.

"That takes it right between the three target locations." Quinn commented.

"Doesn't narrow anything down for us then." Mayer added.

"No, but at least we know we're on the right track." Wolf said and she looked at Molla, "You say that you definitely saw Genestealers?" she asked him.

"Sort of, I saw hybrids. All of the enemy who ambushed us wore the usual hooded robes we've come to expect from their cult but the ones I managed to get a proper look at were definitely hybrids. They were all armed as well so from the later generations." he told her.

"That's disappointing, We've encountered hybrids before. I was hoping that we'd encounter some of the purestrain variety." Wolf said.

"You want us to meet those things?" Grey said, "You know what they are capable of doing with those claws don't you?"

"Yes but until we find them this planet will never be rid of the things." Wolf said.

"Death to the xenos." Black added sternly.

"Death to the xenos." Wolf repeated.

"What about you Veneel?" Vance said, looking across the room at the psyker, "Can you and your new pet sniff them out for us?"

Veneel was stood back from the table cradling a large feline in his arms as he took in what was being said. According to the psyker the creature he held was known as a gyrix, a species that was psychically attuned and could boost the powers of an owner who possessed such abilities themselves. It had been discovered in the possession of the Genestealer magus and Veneel had been able to trap the creature. At first it had been hostile towards anyone who came near it but as Veneel had explained it had an innate need to find an owner with psychic powers and so in the absence of anyone else it had bonded with him. Now the gyrix did its best to remain close to Veneel though to anyone else who came close it retained the vicious temperament it had had when first captured.

"I regret not." Veneel replied, "Though I am able to sense the warp more clearly the more the gyrix an I grow attuned to one another it has not granted me anything like that level of power. It took whole batteries of sanctioned psykers to determine that there was still a Genestealer presence on this world."

"That creature is an abomination and should be destroyed." Black hissed glaring at the gyrix.

"He is harmless." Veneel said, "I was thinking of giving him a name. What do you all think of Mordecai?" and Black snarled at the suggestion that his name should be used for the creature he considered to be heretical.

"Harmless?" Wolf said, frowning, "That thing tried to take a chunk out of my hand when I tried to stroke it."

"It's smart then at least." Grey commented, "Try stroking me and see how I react."

"I'd-" Molla began and Wolf winced.

"Say that you'd be happy for me to give you a stroke and I'll think up the worst duty I can assign to anyone and assign it to you for a year." she interrupted.

"I was about to say that I'd disagree with that statement actually captain." Molla said. Then when Wolf looked away from him and the other squad leaders looked towards him he smiled and shook his head.

"The Navy are scheduled to do flyovers of those locations at first light tomorrow." Wolf said, "Now that we've got communications with headquarters they might be able to give us some more information but we can't afford to rely on whatever the Navy can spot from a kilometre up so we'll need to investigate those tracks from the ground. Sergeant Gant, do you think that you'll be able to follow them?"

"That depends. It was too dark for me to pick up on them earlier even with spot lights." Gant replied,

"Sentinels are meant for scouting ahead for enemy formations, not following footprints."

"You'll have to send a foot patrol captain." Vance said.

"That means First Squad. I'm the best tracker out of all of us here." Molla said.

"Unless we rely on Rull." Quinn pointed out, "Rull's better even than you."

Before Wolf could make a decision on how a patrol would be composed the door to the office flew open and one of the other Catachans burst in.

"What's so urgent Tucker?" Grey asked the man from his squad.

"There's a problem with the las line." Tucker replied rapidly, "It's gone down again and this time the servitor up on the water tower is telling us that it can detect movement."

"From where?" Wolf asked.

"From everywhere." Tucker answered, "Captain we're surrounded."

Wolf and her command section rushed onto the roof of the building the Catachans were using as their headquarters and both she and Vance started to search the surrounding area with their magnoculars. They were joined in their search by Cornellius making use of his implants to be able to see through the darkness. Sure enough everywhere the three of them looked they saw group of figures in hooded cloaks starting to converge on the mining camp. Worryingly a number of these individuals could be seen to be carrying large equipment case between them.

"Looks like this lot have got some heavy firepower." Vance commented.

"Time to show them that we have as well." Wolf responded and she activated her microbead, "Corporal Mayer are your men ready to fire?"

"Yes captain." Mayer replied, "All we need is a target."

"Bearing seven three degrees. Range twelve hundred metres. Make it rain." Wolf told him and in the sandbagged emplacement Mayer used his own magnoculars to study the location Wolf had given to him.

"I see them." he said when he saw a cluster of figures carrying several large cases. Hanging his magnoculars around his neck Mayer turned to the rest of the squad and began to give them orders, "Range twelve hundred. Bearing seven three. Two rounds per tube, fire at will." he said and three of the six Catachans hurriedly began fixing propellant charges to mortar rounds while the other three aligned the mortars on the chosen target. As soon as the mortars were aimed and the rounds ready Mayer's men dropped them into the tubes and they fired immediately, shooting high up into the air before arcing back down towards the Genestealers. The rounds travelled slow enough that the second projectile from each mortar was fired before the first landed and Mayer lifted his magnoculars back to his eyes to watch how effective his squad's fire had been.

The six mortar rounds landed in close proximity to one another and in close succession, creating a rapid series of explosions that sent the hooded figures flying. Mayer focused his view on where each of the figures landed one at a time to check on each of them. As he had hoped none of the figures moved after landing and Mayer activated his microbead.

"Targets destroyed captain." he transmitted.

"Well done corporal. Continue to fire on targets of your choosing." Wolf told him as she and Vance continued to search the surrounding area.

"Captain this is Gant. Sentinels are ready to go." Gant reported from her vehicle in the garage below.

"Understood sergeant. Deploy you unit around the water tower. All squads are to engage targets as they come into range. Enginseer Cornellius we are going to need your servitors prepared for battle." Wolf ordered.

"I will attend to it immediately Captain Wolf. It will take approximately sixteen minutes to complete the conversion."

"They'll be here before that." Vance commented.

"Go." Wolf told the tech priest.

The sound of mortars continued as Mayer's squad bombarded the approaching Genestealers wherever they could. At the same time the rest of Second Platoon hurried to set themselves up in suitable firing positions in and around the building they were using as their camp. Molla had his squad deploy within the building along the side facing outwards from the mining camp so that their heavy bolter could lay down fire over the widest possible arc. The missile launcher that Grey's squad was armed with could not be fired safely from inside the building and so his squad also made their way up to the roof where Wolf's command section was located.

"Spread out." Grey told his squad, "Prince and Lesser keep that missile launcher back until we have a specific target."

Equipped only with short ranged weaponry, Quinn's veterans and Khor's ogryns could not take action while the Genestealers remained at a distance and so they took cover among the nearby buildings while the squads armed with longer ranged weapons began to engage them.

The Genestealer hybrids surrounding the mining camp were not unprepared for this though and those carrying the large equipment cases found cover while still several hundred metres away from the mining camp and began to unpack the heavy weapons they contained. Most of these were more heavy stubbers that offered a long range but had far less firepower individually than the heavy weapons Second Platoon was equipped with but there were also several more powerful weapons among their armoury as well.

"Whoa!" Torrent exclaimed when a chunk of masonry was blasted away from the edge of the roof and all of the Catachans up there dived for what cover they could find.

"That's an auto cannon." Vance added.

"Where's it coming from? We need to find it." Wolf said and she tried searching for the powerful weapon. However, the muzzle flash of the auto cannon looked too similar to that of any of the heavy stubbers for her to be able to tell the difference between them. Vance and Grey both joined Wolf in searching for the powerful weapon and Grey noticed that there was more going on than just long range fire. Darting between terrain features they were obviously using as cover there was another cluster of hooded figures still moving towards the mining camp.

"Looks like we've got infiltrators." he called out, "Probably using the gunfire as cover."

Wolf and Vance looked through their own magnoculars and quickly spotted the same group of hooded figures moving in short bursts from one piece of cover to the next.

"Throne, they're moving quickly." Wolf said when she saw them.

"I don't think they're human, even partially." Vance said.

"Purestrains?" Wolf asked.

"We knew they had to be around somewhere." Vance replied.

"Well we better make sure they don't get too close." Wolf said as she activated her microbead, "All units watch out for infiltrators. We may have purestrain Genestealers approaching our position from bearing two four seven. If anyone has a shot then take it and watch out for more of them."

A stream of rocket assisted projectiles shot from the top of the water tower as the servitor placed there opened fire with its heavy bolter towards the rapidly closing figures and one of them was struck by several shots. Each of the mass reactive rounds exploded inside the figure and it simply burst apart under the combined explosive force, leaving nothing behind but a red smear across the ground mixed in with the burned remains of the cloak. Seeing the destruction of their comrade, the other figures in the group scattered and began to rush towards the mining camp individually rather than together to make them a less tempting target for someone armed with a heavy automatic weapon. Sure enough, although the servitor continued to fire at the closing figures it switched between targets after firing shorter bursts at each that only managed to bring down one more of the group before there was a brilliant beam of light from out of the darkness as another hybrid weapon team fired at the top of the water tower and the upper section collapsed, bringing the servitor crashing down to the ground.

"Him on Earth!" Gant exclaimed before activating her vox set built into her Sentinel, "Wolf did you see that? The enemy has a las cannon out there. If that thing targets my Sentinels then we're done for. No way can we repel firepower of that magnitude."

"Yes we saw it. Does anyone have eyes on where the beam came from?" Wolf responded.

"Yes I saw it." Molla replied, "There's a hill at bearing one eight four degrees at about six hundred metres. It came from behind there."

"Mayer that's your next target. Saturate that area and see if you can land a round right on them." Wolf ordered.

"Yes captain. Adjusting our fire now." Mayer responded and he and his men quickly set to work turning their mortars towards the hill. They were not quick enough to prevent the Genestealer hybrids from firing their las cannon again and the beam only narrowly missed one of Gant's Sentinel squadron.

"We need to move." Gant transmitted to Wolf.

"Okay fall back to the other side of the perimeter. See if you can do something about those infiltrators trying to get inside." Wolf replied.

"Moving." Gant said and the four Sentinels of her squad began to move, dashing across the mining camp towards the opposite side of the perimeter.

"Targets at ten o'clock." one of the other Sentinel pilots announced when he spotted another group of hooded figures that was making its way towards the mining camp but still some distance away.

Gant turned the cabin of her Sentinel in the direction given to her and checked the vehicle's auspex system. As a dedicated scout the Sentinel was fitted with a good detection system and she saw that it was picking up a cluster of about a dozen figures heading towards the camp.

"Let's go." Gant ordered and her squadron turned towards the Genestealers before charging towards them.

The Sentinels organised themselves into a diamond formation with the missile launcher armed support Sentinel taking up the rear position while the three flamer armed scouts moved ahead. The hooded Genestealers did not flinch as the Sentinels charged towards them and the gap between the two sides rapidly closed to the point where Gant's pilots were able to unleash their heavy flamers and jets of burning promethium washed over the Genestealers, roasting them alive.

One of the aliens was able to slip past the flames and it leapt up at one of the Sentinels, casting aside its cloak to reveal its alien appearance. As had been suspected the creature was a purestrain Genestealer rather than a hybrid and it clung onto the Sentinel's safety cage with its human-like hands it thrust both

clawed hands through the cage and the pilot did not even have the chance to scream before he was decapitated.

"Torch it!" Gant snapped as the Sentinel toppled over with the Genestealer landing on top of the machine and tossing the severed head of its pilot aside while it turned to face the remaining light walkers. At once both of the other flamer armed Sentinels fired their weapons and the toppled machine along with the alien perched on top of it were engulfed in flames.

Another blast from the las cannon proved that the weapon was still operating despite the constant barrage from Mayer's mortar crews and Wolf flinched when it took a chunk from the side of building she and her command section were on top of.

"Captain that thing can take this building apart one piece at a time." Vance said and Wolf sighed.

"I know. I think we need to send Quinn and his men out to try and find it." she said.

"We'll have to get Bomber to stop firing at it then. I don't think Quinn would like being bombed by our own side." Vance pointed out and Wolf reached for her microbead.

"Corporal Mayer cease your fire and readjust for other targets at least thirty degrees either side of your current bearing. Sergeant Quinn I want you to take your squad out to locate that las cannon and take it out. Adept Veneel head down and join Sergeant Khor's ogryns. I want someone with him to make sure his squad stays in place until we need them." she broadcast.

"Adjusting fire captain." Mayer replied.

"Thanks Bomber." Quinn added, "We're moving out now."

"Enginseer Cornelius how far along are you with getting those servitors ready?" Wolf asked.

"Weapons are fitted Captain Wolf. I am loading ammunition now." the tech priest answered.

"We could do with him protecting Bomber's position." Vance suggested, "We've still got Khor downstairs but he's stuck out there on his own. Six lasguns isn't much if those Genestealers get close." and Wolf nodded.

"Enginseer Cornelius please deploy to protect Corporal Mayer's position and the landing pad."

"Confirmed Captain Wolf. I am proceeding there now." Cornelius responded.

7.

With heavy weapons being fired in both directions Quinn and his men kept low as they moved across the mining camp to hunt down the enemy las cannon and its crew. Fortunately for his squad it was easy to determine the source of the powerful energy blasts simply by following the beam of light produced each time the weapon was used. The las cannon was not the only heavy weapon that the Genestealers had in this direction though and just as Quinn's veterans reached the edge of the mining camp they spotted another pair of hooded hybrids who had just set up a heavy stubber in the ruins of a small structure and were now loading a belt of ammunition into the weapon.

"Down!" Quinn hissed, knowing that if his men were seen by the heavy stubber crew they would be torn apart. Taking out his magnoculars Quinn began to study the heavy weapon more closely just as its crew opened fire on the building the Catachans were using as a camp, "Okay we're going to take out this pair of xenos scum as well." he said while he returned his magnoculars to his webbing, "I want a couple of smoke grenades tossed into their current line of fire that'll make them think we're coming from that direction as well as making it more difficult for them to keep shooting at the rest of the platoon. Then when they're watching that direction we'll sneak around and take them out quietly. Fix silencers."

Slinging their primary weapons over their shoulders Quinn and his veterans drew the stub pistols they all had holstered in their webbing. These were not a standard Imperial Guard issue weapon, instead Second Platoon had discovered a significant cache of the pistols in a crashed starship and taken them for themselves. As well as being useful for exchanging with other troops for additional resources the pistols now served as backup weapons for all of the ordinary humans in Second Platoon. These had later been modified with extended and threaded barrels to take silencers for use in a covert mission and now Quinn's men fitted these once more.

"Pop the smoke." Quinn ordered when his men were ready and two of them each took a smoke grenade from their webbing, primed them and then threw them. Instead of throwing the grenades directly towards the Genestealers crewing the heavy weapon they threw them so that when they burst open the cloud blocked their line of sight to the building being used by second Platoon as its headquarters. As expected the Genestealer gun crew thought this meant that there were Catachans attempting to get close to them by using the cloud of smoke as cover and they lowered the angle of their heavy stubber before firing it directly into the cloud. While they were firing in the wrong direction Quinn led his men around the Genestealers' position. Quinn kept his pistol trained towards the heavy stubber crew while others in his squad also covered other directions just in case. Getting closer to the heavy stubber and its crew Quinn held up his hand for his squad to come to a halt. Then he began picking out individual unit members and pointed them towards specific hiding places, deploying his men to cover the heavy stubber from several different places. With his squad in place Quinn then lined up his pistol on the Genestealer gunner and squeezed the trigger.

The muffled sound of the gunshot went unheard by the Genestealers owing to the continuing roar of their own heavy stubber and the loader looked around in surprise when the gunner suddenly ceased fire and slumped forwards over the weapon. Unable to locate the Catachans the loader reached for his own weapon, an autogun with a folding stock that the hybrid began to unfold. However, before he could bring the weapon up to his shoulder another of the Catachan veterans fired two rapid shots into him and he fell backwards.

"Okay we've still got a las cannon to deal with." Quinn said, "Let's move."

The veterans turned and started to continue towards the estimated position of the las cannon and its crew. The weapon had ceased fire for the time being and Quinn considered the possibility that it had exhausted its power cell and that the crew were currently reloading. However, if the Genestealers had been doing this then they were able to reload their powerful weapon in good time and there was another bright flash of light as they fired it again. This time they were not aiming at Second Platoon's camp, instead they had responded to the heavy stubber suddenly ceasing fire by bringing their weapon to bear in its direction and when one of the veterans armed with a flamer attempted to dart between two pieces of cover he was struck by a blast from the weapon. Designed to penetrate the heavy armour of tanks, the las cannon easily burned through the unfortunate soldier. In addition the beam struck the fuel tank loaded into the flamer he still had slung over his back and ignited it all in one go to produce a large explosion that was accompanied by a ball of flame that shot upwards and illuminated the area around where the Catachan had been when he was hit.

"Dolton's hit!" Quinn yelled, "Everyone get down."

The other veterans threw themselves to the ground as a second beam of energy passed overhead, sweeping above their heads. With nowhere for his squad to move to without exposing themselves to hostile fire and the enemy gun crew still well out of the range of the Catachan's own weapons Quinn pulled a smoke grenade from his webbing and threw it towards the source of the las cannon fire, providing them with a screen as soon as the grenade burst open. The Genestealer hybrids crewing the las cannon now switched

from a constant beam to firing short blasts through the cloud of smoke that gave Quinn and his men the chance to dash for cover while still moving towards the las cannon position. Looking through his magnoculars Quinn was now able to see the las cannon emplacement. This had been set up behind a piece of rusted machinery that even tech pirates had considered to be worthless. The cases for the weapon and bulky power cells had been stacked on top of one another beside this to provide cover from multiple angles. As well as the two hooded figures needed to crew the las cannon properly there were also three others armed with an assortment of small arms crouched nearby and Quinn guessed that they had been the ones to carry some of the cases of ammunition he could see stacked up.

"We're almost there." Quinn said, "There are sentries and I don't think we can take them out without being spotted so we'll have to try something different. Reese, I want you to stay put here with Downs, Howser and Moss. Everyone else will come with me and see if we can outflank the stealers while you lay down covering fire. Okay let's move."

Quinn and his section of the squad broke into a sprint as they began to circle around the hybrids' position while the other veterans started to fire their shotguns towards them. Due to the range these had little effect but the simple fact that they were coming under fire did cause the Genestealers to turn their attention in that direction, not noticing Quinn as his unit crept around them. Once his unit got close enough to one of the Genestealer sentries Quinn fired his shotgun twice in rapid succession and they fell to the ground. This alerted the other Genestealers to the presence of Quinn's veterans close to them and they quickly turned their attention towards them. The two other sentries opened fire with autoguns and a burst of bullets struck the ground close to Quinn's position and he threw himself to the ground. Looking up he saw that he was now fewer than twenty metres from the las cannon emplacement and rather than attempting to engage them with his shotgun he took a fragmentation grenade from his webbing and hurled it towards the gun crew. The grenade went slightly wide and landed behind the weapon team unnoticed by either of them before it exploded.

As soon as Quinn heard the sound of the grenade going off the flashes of light from the las cannon ceased and he looked up to see that the two crew were now slumped forwards over the las cannon and its power cell while a spare power cell located nearby was now burning after being hit by shrapnel. Hearing footsteps from close by Quinn looked around to see the hybrid who had already shot at him once now standing over him and pointing his autogun down at him. However, before the hybrid could fire there was a muffled pistol shot and the sentry collapsed.

"Thanks King." Quinn said as he looked over his shoulder to see the other veteran crouched there pointed his stub pistol towards where the sentry had stood while his flamer was still slung over his back.

"You're welcome sarge." King replied.

There was only a single sentry left now and facing almost an entire squad of Catachans was too much for him. Firing his auto gun on fully automatic he fired several rapid bursts to cover his withdrawal but the moment he had to pause to reload a shotgun blast took him off his feet.

Streams of heavy bolter fire told Mayer and his men that Engineeer Cornelliuss and his servitors were approaching. Using his impressive night vision, Cornelliuss was able to feed targeting data to his half human cyborg servitors so that they could target the group of purestrain Genestealers now rushing towards Mayer and his mortar teams.

"Continue your bombardment corporal." Cornelliuss said flatly as his servitors walked around the sandbagged position to form a line towards the perimeter of the mining camp, "We will keep the enemy away from you." Mayer nodded and turned back to his men.

"Okay you heard the engineeer." he said, "I want another volley at six hundred metres to the south." and the mortar crews began to prepare another volley of bombs.

8.

Standing just outside the garage where Engineer Cornelius had set up his workshop Veneel could tell that the ogryns were becoming agitated at the lack of activity for them.

"The ogryns are growing impatient." he said to Black and the priest frowned back at him.

"They are eager to bring the vengeance of The Emperor to his enemies witch." he said sternly.

"Well I hope that we get an order for them move soon or-" Veneel began before he suddenly sensed the presence of the telepathic link that connected all of the Genestealers together, "Shush." he told Black.

"What witch?" Black asked.

"Shush!" Veneel snapped and the gyrinx he held hissed at the priest.

"What? How dare you-" Black said angrily.

"The Genestealers are here." Veneel exclaimed and he looked down at the ground at their feet, "Right below us."

Dropping his gyrinx to the ground Veneel hurriedly drew his las pistol and rushed back to the open doorway to the garage, reaching it just in time to see a manhole cover be hurled across the room when a purestrain Genestealer burst out of the tunnel beneath the building. Veneel fired his weapon at the creature but although it let out a shriek of pain the Genestealer was not killed and it charged towards the psyker while more of its kind burst out of the manhole, being brought down only when Black fired his shotgun into its face at point blank range.

"Sergeant Khor, your Emperor needs you!" Black shouted and upon hearing The Emperor mentioned all of the ogryns turned towards him.

"Ogryns charge!" Khor bellowed and the seven massive abhumans went charging into the garage.

The purestrain Genestealers rushed to meet the ogryn charge only to run into a wall of shot from the abhumans' powerful ripper guns and the first rank of the aliens was shredded by the fire from the ogryns.

The next wave of Genestealers leapt over the bodies of their fallen comrades and then at the ogryns themselves. More of these were simply gunned down but for every one shot by a ripper gun another made it through to be able to strike at the ogryns with their claws.

"Ogryns do your duty to your Emperor. Death to the xenos!" Black shouted as he continued to fire his shotgun at the Genestealers.

"Ogryns smash!" Khor shouted as he swung his ripper gun around, knocking one of the Genestealers to the floor where the BONEHead brought down a booted foot to stomp the creature to death. The other ogryns also switching from firing their ripper guns at the Genestealers to swinging them like clubs, striking at the alien creatures furiously.

In close combat it was common for Genestealers to attempt to implant their opponents with their genetic material, injecting this through their tongues. The primitive intellect of ogryns made them poor choices for being implanted though and so the Genestealers just struck at them with their teeth and claws. However, behind the ogryns the Genestealers saw both Veneel and Black and some of them attempted to get past the bulky abhumans in favour of targets that they might be able to use to spread their genetic material.

Black gasped when he turned to see a Genestealer leaping towards him while he was distracted reloading his shotgun. Before the alien could get within reach of him Black saw it suddenly enveloped in pale blue lightning and it screeched as it dropped to the floor just before being able to slash at the priest. Black's head spun around and he saw Veneel's arm stretched out towards where the Genestealer had just been struck by his psychic lightning. Then he unleashed another blast of lightning and a second purestrain Genestealer was struck down.

"Perhaps concentrate on your own defence as well priest." Veneel said before he raised his las pistol and fired off a rapid pair of shots at short range that burned through the carapace of another Genestealer and killed it instantly.

"I need no lectures from you on killing the Emperor's enemies witch." Black hissed as he chambered a round in his shotgun and began firing at the Genestealers once more.

Not all of the Genestealers charged towards the ogryns though and some of them headed for the stairs that led up to the next level of the building where Molla and First Squad were deployed. Fortunately for the Catachans they had been alerted to the presence of the aliens on the floor beneath them by the sound of gunfire from the ogryns' ripper guns and the first to try rushing up the stairs was gunned down by a burst of fire from a Catachan's lasgun.

"Get back to the window." Molla ordered the trooper who had just killed the alien on the stairs, knowing that the lasgun was better suited to keeping watch from the upper floor window than fighting room to room and he rushed to take the man's place with his las pistol and Catachan blade. He was just in time to meet another Genestealer coming up the stairs and he held out his knife right as the creature lunged towards him,

thrusting it up under its jaw. The Genestealer quivered as Molla held it impaled on his knife while reaching over it with the hand holding his las pistol to shoot the next of the creatures to come running up the stairs.

"Clear the garage." he broadcast with his microbead.

"Give no ground against the alien." Black responded.

"Just get out of there preacher, unless you want to be there when I toss this grenade in." Molla said sternly.

"We're pulling back sergeant." Veneel said and he turned towards Khor and called out to him, "Sergeant Khor, fall back outside."

"Ogryns backwards." Khor shouted and the ogryns began to back up, still swinging their ripper guns at the Genestealers surging towards them. One of the aliens was able to get close enough to one of the ogryns to swipe a claw at the abhuman before its skull was split open by a ripper gun and the ogryn collapsed, his leg torn open.

"Pull him!" Veneel shouted, pointing at the fallen ogryn. Then when another of the abhumans, the only female in the squad saw him gesturing she was able determine what he wanted she reached down to grab hold of her fallen squad mate by his wrist and began to drag him across the floor towards the exit from the garage.

"We're clear." Black shouted when the last of the ogryns crossed the threshold of the garage and from the top of the stairs Molla shot another Genestealer attempting to gain access to the next floor at the same time as he returned took a grenade from his webbing. Pulling out the pin he tossed the grenade down the stairs and jumped back from the top before the explosive went off.

The blast and shrapnel from the grenade ripped through the Genestealers inside the garage and Molla took advantage of the lull in aliens attempting to get up the stairs by rushing down them, pulling another grenade from his webbing as he descended into the garage. Though the grenade had created a pause in the flow of purestrain Genestealers coming up out of the manhole this was not permanent and Molla saw another of the creatures reach up out of the hole. He fired his las pistol at the hand reaching up from the manhole and it recoiled, the Genestealer screeching in anger and pain. Then Molla pulled the pin from his grenade before rolling it across the floor of the garage rather than throwing it so that it dropped into the manhole less than a second before it exploded in the tunnel below.

"What in the name of Him on Earth is going on down there?" Wolf asked via her microbead after the second grenade went off.

"Just a little pest control from the sewers captain." Molla responded before he looked towards the garage's exterior doorway and called out to the ogryn squad outside, "Get in here and cover this hole." and led by Veneel and Black, Khor's ogryns came rushing back into the garage.

"Ogryns wait." Khor said as the abhumans gathered around the now lifeless manhole.

"I can't sense a Genestealer presence down there sergeant." Veneel said.

"Good. Hopefully that means the grenade did the trick." Molla replied.

"Trust not the word of a witch." Black commented and the gyrix currently rubbing itself against the psyker's leg growled at him

"I'm not. That's why I want you to keep an eye on the hole while I get back upstairs." Molla told him and then he turned and rushed back up the stairs to join the rest of his squad.

The pounding of the auto cannon ceased and Wolf looked through her magnoculars towards the gully where it had been firing from. Now the muzzle of the weapon was pointed upwards thanks to the weight of the now dead gunner slumped forwards over it while the loader lay sprawled out beside it, having knocked over a stack of spare ammunition magazines.

"Looks like Rull took care of them for us." she said, "Combined with Quinn taking out that las cannon that deals with most of their firepower."

"And is it just me or is that stubber fire slackening off?" Torrent asked and Vance nodded as he looked through his magnoculars as well.

"It is." he responded.

"Maybe we took the fight out of them." Wolf suggested.

"Captain Wolf," Cornelli's voice said through her microbead, "the enemy appears to be pulling back."

"Confirmed captain." Gant added, "My auspex shows them retreating. Do you want us to pursue?"

"They might lead us back to their hideout but then again if they're smart they'll set up an ambush to take out anyone we send after them." Vance commented and Wolf nodded.

"Negative sergeant, fall back to the perimeter and make sure it's secure. All other squads report." she broadcast to the entire platoon.

"Same here. I see a few guys falling back but nothing else." Grey said, using his microbead despite also being on the roof so that the rest of the platoon could hear his response.

"No enemy activity visible from down here." Molla added.

"This is Quinn," Quinn said, "We just had a couple of hybrids try to get past us while retreating. We took them

out easily enough though and it doesn't look like anyone's coming to try and help them."

"Captain it's just like Enginseer Cornellius said. It looks like all the Genestealers are pulling back." Mayer said, "Do you want my squad to keep shooting?"

"How's your ammunition level?" Wolf asked.

"I'd say that we've used just under a quarter of it." Mayer told her.

"Then hold your fire for now unless you see any particular large concentrations of enemy troops. We've driven them off and that's enough for now." Wolf said.

"Captain Wolf there is no indication that any more Genestealers are attempting to use the sewers beneath the camp to attack us." Veneel said.

"That might be why they suddenly decided to pull back." Vance said, "All the firing was just a distraction to try and keep us from realising that they were coming through the sewers until it was too late."

"Fortunately Adept Veneel was able to sense them." Wolf added and then she went back to her microbead, "Rull, you follow them from a discrete distance and see if you can figure out where they're going. If they are just regrouping then try and let us know that they're coming back if your microbead can get through with all this interference. You may engage targets of opportunity at your own discretion." the last part of Wolf's order was a mere formality. She knew that the expert sniper would attack if he thought it the right thing to do whether she gave him permission or not, "Other than Rull I want all squads to stay at their posts for now and call in any signs of enemy activity. They might be giving up or they could just be regrouping for another strike. If they don't come back tonight then we'll move out after it gets light and see if we can track them back to their base."

"Rull followed them for about a kilometre and says they rendezvoused about here and then made off in this direction." Vance told Wolf and the other gathered leaders of Second Platoon the next morning when they gathered in the command post once more and he ran his finger across the map laid out between them.

"Combining this information with the bearing taken by the units that attempted to ambush myself and Sergeant Quinn's squad when repairing the break in the las line last night gives a point of intersection here." Enginseer Cornellius said, indicating a point along the line he had already drawn on the map, "I suggest an expanding search pattern centred on this exact location. However, there is still the matter of the damaged las line. We are currently out of contact with our headquarters. They will be aware of this, but will not know the latest information we have regarding the location of the Genestealer nest."

"You still have four operational servitors equipped with heavy bolters, correct enginseer?" Wolf asked.

"Affirmative Captain Wolf." the tech priest answered.

"Okay, so are they enough to provide you with an escort if I send you out to find the break in the las line?" Wolf added.

"That depends on the size of the force the Genestealers are willing to commit to staging an ambush anywhere along the route of the las line captain." Cornellius responded.

"How do they compare to me detaching Sergeant Quinn's veterans again?" Wolf said.

"They carry superior firepower to any squad in your platoon and are more heavily armoured. Combined with my ability to directly command them they are a more efficient escort than your troops." Cornellius said.

"Gee, thanks." Quinn said sarcastically.

"That was a simple statement of fact Sergeant Quinn. Your gratitude is not necessary." the tech priest said, missing the sarcasm in Quinn's comment.

"Enginseer Cornellius I want you to take your servitors and locate and repair the break in the las line. Then bring headquarters up to speed with what we've found out." Wolf said.

"If that is your wish Captain Wolf. However, I would suggest that repairing the las line is an inefficient move. My implants make me quite capable of connecting to the las line myself even without the use of a patch unit. I recommend that I locate the break furthest along the line and contact headquarters myself from there." Cornellius said and Molla looked at him.

"You think there could be more than one break?" he asked.

"It is a possibility that cannot be overlooked." Cornellius answered, "However, as soon as I find a termination point where I can connect to the main planetary communication network I shall do so."

"Okay do it." Wolf said.

"What about sending Bess back to tell them what we've found?" Quinn suggested.

"No. I want her with us. If for any reason Enginseer Cornellius is unable to contact headquarters then I'll send her back as soon as we've confirmed the location of the nest."

"So we're going with the cog boy's plan then?" Grey said and Wolf smiled.

"We are so everyone needs to get kitted up. We've got a long walk to get to where we'll be starting our search from." she said, pointing at the map where Cornellius had suggested their search be based around.

9.

The troops of Second Platoon, like the vast majority of Catachan troops were used to undertaking long marches on foot and even Wolf had become used to it after several campaigns with the XIX Regiment. The Catachans also considered the somewhat desolate terrain to be easy going by their standards. In the thick jungles they were used to travel could be measured in hundreds of metres per day, especially if the planet was a death world like Catachan itself. On the other hand the terrain beyond the cities of Temperatus presented very few obstructions to travel and none of the lethal flora and fauna they had grown up watching out for. Second Platoon was able to carry all of its equipment with it, with heavy weapons split between their gun crews and the heavy ammunition for the mortars loaded into packs that the muscular ogryns carried while Bess Quinn's motorcycle had been lifted up to the cab of one of Gant's Sentinels and strapped in place so that she would not need to push it the entire way along with several drums of additional fuel for the vehicles.

As one of the platoon's best trackers, second only to Rull who as usual travelled apart from the rest of the force, Molla took the point position as they followed the tracks left behind by the retreating Genestealers the night before. Though they had made crude efforts to try and destroy the tracks they had left these were meaningless thanks to Rull already having provided the rest of the platoon with information regarding which way the Genestealers had gone and whenever the track disappeared the Catachans simply continued along their previous heading until Molla was able to pick them up again until Wolf ordered the platoon to come to a stop.

"This is it." she called out, not even bothering with her microbead, "This is our starting point. I want to see squad leaders immediately."

"So do you have a search pattern in mind?" Vance asked when the other squad leaders had gathered around the platoon's command section, including Gant who disembarked from her Sentinel to join them.

"Hang on." Wolf said as she checked her dataslate for a map, "Ah, here we go. As you know there are abandoned facilities around here that would be suitable for use as a hideout but it's possible that the Genestealers could have set up their nest somewhere else entirely so we need to check everywhere. Sergeant Gant that's what I want you and your Sentinel squadron for. You'll conduct the area search, circling out from here to cover everything within ten kilometres."

"That's a lot of ground for three vehicles to cover." Grey commented.

"Hey, you worry about whatever job the outsider gives you and me and my pilots worry about what we're doing." Gant responded.

"What will the rest of us be doing captain?" Molla asked.

"We'll head straight for this old refinery." Wolf said and she held out her dataslate to show a map indicating the presence of a refinery complex, "No-one that the tech pirates sent here came back so it's a fair bet that even if the Genestealers aren't based here they are visiting it regularly. If we can't find anything there and Sergeant Gant hasn't got back to us then we'll move on to the next site and see if we can find anything there."

"Sounds straight forward enough." Vance said, nodding.

"Good. We'll take an hour break to eat and refuel the Sentinels but I want to get underway as quickly as possible after that."

When Gant's Sentinel squadron set off they moved in a spiral pattern using their auspexes to watch for indications of life or construction. However, the first thing they found other than barren terrain was neither of these.

"Sergeant look up ahead. Is that a body?" the pilot of the other remaining Scout Sentinel asked from his vehicle.

Gant, who had been concentrating her search to the left of their direction of travel now turned her auspex forwards and she immediately saw what the other pilot had seen. It was obvious that a body had been left out in the open at some point in the past.

"Let's check it out." she said as she guided her Sentinel towards the corpse. As they got closer it was easy to see that the body had been here for some time. Although there were no scavengers left in this area to consume the body's flesh there were still enough bacteria in the environment to cause decomposition and as such the body was badly decayed, "Throne that stinks." Gant exclaimed when she brought her Sentinel to a halt and then disembarked to examine the body.

Although the body itself was badly decomposed its clothing was still mainly intact, large tears that Gant guessed had been inflicted by either a purestrain or early generation hybrid Genestealer were the only signs of damage and it was obviously the sort of utilitarian design that a worker, whether operating legally or not,

would wear.

"Sergeant I've got a large magnetic resonance bearing zero four eight degrees." the missile launcher armed support Sentinel's pilot reported and Gant turned around and darted back to her vehicle, grabbing hold of her magnoculars and then rushing off in the direction the pilot had stated. The ground sloped upwards in this direction until it reached a sudden drop and Gant crouched down as she reached this so that she would not stand out as she looked over the edge of the drop. What she saw made her pause before she brought her magnoculars up to her eyes to examine it closer. Although nowhere near as massive as any of the great warp-capable craft that moved passengers and cargo between star systems, the landing craft that Gant was now looking at was still more than a hundred metres in length according to the readings her magnoculars were showing.

The craft had obviously been here for a long time and it was partially buried, although whether this was a deliberate attempt to conceal it that was failing because the elements were uncovering it or because dirt and dust was being blown onto the immobile vessel could not be determined by such a scan. Regardless of why the shuttle was partially buried it was still easy to see that it was far from intact, with several large holes visible in the hull and when Gant zoomed in on one of these close to the rear of the shuttle she saw that machinery of some sort had obviously been removed from it. She could also see that the shuttle was still standing on its landing gear and the level nature of the ground visible all around the remains of the shuttle told Gant that it had made a controlled landing.

"Well, well. Look what we have here." she said to herself and then she called out to the other Sentinel pilots, "I think we just found how the Genestealers arrived on the planet in the first place. See if you can raise the outsider and let her know."

The other Scout Sentinel pilot attempted to use his vehicle's vox set to contact Wolf but the interference that was widespread in this region prevented him from establishing a link.

"Sorry sergeant, I'm just getting static." the pilot told Gant.

"Then we'll just have to go and tell her in person. Let's ride." she replied.

Unlike the mining camp where the Catachans had established their own base of operations, the refinery Wolf opted to begin their search at looked relatively intact. There were a few places where some sort of heavy equipment had been removed but most of it was still in place and apart from the lack of any workers the site looked as though it could still be operational. The equipment present included a number of vehicles that had been covered but there was also a single Goliath truck that had the same covered rear cargo area as those used by the tech pirates out in the open and it was to this that Molla and his squad hurried when they first saw it.

The door to the driver's cabin had been ripped off and Molla guessed that this had been done by a Genestealer to get at the occupant. Sure enough when he reached the vehicle and looked inside Molla saw a body leaning backwards in the driver's seat that had its throat ripped wide open.

"Captain Wolf, I think we just found one of the tech pirates who never made it home." he said into his microbead, "Looks like he was found by Genestealers first though. His throat was ripped wide open."

"Hold your position while we catch up." Wolf ordered, "We need to check the rest of this place out completely and I don't want to split us up too much."

"Understood captain." Molla replied before he turned to his men, "Spread out and keep watch."

Molla's squad formed a circle around the Goliath while the rest of Second Platoon moved quickly to catch up with them.

The refinery consisted of one central floor storey structure that was surrounded by several much smaller ones and this made Wolf's decision on how to proceed an easy one.

"We'll search the main building first, one squad per floor. Corporal Mayer, I want you and Sergeant Khor's ogyrns to remain outside and keep watch for anyone moving in from the other buildings. Guardswoman Quinn will remain outside as well just in case she needs to raise the alarm quickly. Adept Veneel, you and Adept Black will accompany my command section on the first floor. Then First, Second and Third Squads will take the floors above in order. Remember that although this is a civilian facility it is supposed to be empty. Anyone inside may be considered a looter and shot so don't hesitate."

"Does that include us?" Grey commented.

"Let's just move. The sooner we get this done the sooner we can check all of the outer buildings." Wolf said. It did not take long for Second Platoon to locate an entrance to the main building and it was immediately clear that they were not the first ones to have come here since the facility was mothballed, the external locks that were applied to the doors to seal them having been broken off at some point. Moving inside the building the Catachans divided themselves up by squads just as Wolf had ordered, with one squad searching each floor of the building and Wolf's command squad been supplemented by Veneel and Black.

"Sense anything?" Wolf asked the psyker as they moved between the refining machinery that looked to still be intact, confirming that the tech pirates had not been able to plunder the refinery.

"No captain." Veneel replied, shaking his head.

"So if the tech pirates never returned from here but there aren't any Genestealers around, then what killed them?" Torrent asked.

"Maybe some of the creatures we killed last night." Vance suggested, "Though I wouldn't count on it. Keep your eyes open."

While the rest of Second Platoon were searching inside the building Mayer stood outside using his magnoculars to monitor the area around the refinery and he immediately noticed when a trio of Sentinel walkers appeared over the horizon, undoubtedly moving towards the refinery at high speed.

"Stand to." he called out, unable to tell at first whether the vehicles were friendly or examples of those looted by the Genestealer cult from the forces of the planetary defence forces. In response Mayer's men took cover while Khor's ogryn squad formed a line blocking the entrance to the refinery and all pointed their weapons in the same direction as the Catachans. Then he looked at Bess and added, "Get out of sight. If this is an attack then you need to be able to get away and tell headquarters."

"Sure." Bess responded, pushing her motorcycle around a corner and out of sight while Mayer continued to watch the approaching Sentinels through his magnoculars.

He soon recognised them as the scout vehicles of Fourth Company and shortly after saw the face of Sergeant Gant inside her cockpit, confirming that the Sentinels were friendly.

"Stand down." he ordered and his men lowered their weapons, the ogryns copying this and soon after the three Sentinels bounded up to them and then came to a halt.

"Bomber." Gant called out as she stood up in her cockpit, "Where's Captain Wolf?"

"Inside. Searching the building." Mayer responded.

"Are your comms working? Or do you need to send someone inside to get her?"

"Captain Wolf do you read me?" Mayer said, activating his microbead.

"Yes corporal. What is it?" Wolf responded.

"Sergeant Gant has arrived, she wants to speak to you." Mayer told her.

"Okay I'm on my way out." Wolf replied and soon after she emerged through the doorway of the refinery,

"Sergeant Gant, I take it you have found something." she said.

"You could say that, yes. There's a half buried spaceship about eight kilometres that way." Gant told her, pointing in the direction of the mysterious ship she had found, "It doesn't look like anything special but it's half buried and it looks like it made a controlled landing before someone stripped it for parts."

"A ship? Do you think it is how the Genestealers first arrived on Temperatus?" Wolf said.

"Seems reasonable to me. More importantly I think the nest is likely to be close by." Gant replied and Wolf activated her microbead.

"All units break off the search. We have a target." she broadcast.

The rest of the platoon exited the refinery quickly while Wolf and Gant discussed the location of the spaceship and the terrain around it.

"You found the nest?" Grey asked when he appeared and saw Gant.

"Not exactly but I found a big clue." she replied.

"Sergeant Gant may have found how the Genestealers arrived here." Wolf told him, "Here." and she held out her dataslate so that the other Catachans could see where she had marked on the location of the shuttle.

"That's quite a way." Molla commented, "We'd be best camping here overnight and heading out at first light."

"What about them?" Grey asked and he pointed to the row of Goliath trucks under large covers that had been left behind when the refinery was abandoned.

"Check them." Wolf said, "If they don't have fuel then we'll need to hope that the spare barrels for the Sentinels is enough for them."

Checking the Goliaths did not take long. The vehicles were all intact and included a limited amount of fuel in their tanks that would nevertheless be enough to get Second Platoon the eight kilometres they needed to travel. The only issue was that the batteries had drained after being left connected to inactive vehicles for so long. However, the tech pirates' vehicle would still start and this was used to jump start all of the other Goliaths that the Catachans needed to get them to the spaceship.

When Wolf embarked on the vehicle her command section she climbed up to the rooftop hatch and opened it so that she could stand looking out of it and give orders.

"Sergeant Gant I want your Sentinels to take the lead, you've got the only armed vehicles we have so if we do run into trouble you'll need to hold them off while Second Platoon disembarks. Guardswoman Quinn load your bike onto this vehicle to save its fuel and ride with us. We'll leave as soon as everyone is aboard a truck and head straight for the ship."

10.

Now fully motorised, Second Platoon sped across country from the refinery to the point where Gant had observed the partially hidden spaceship and while Second Platoon disembarked from the Goliaths Wolf took the opportunity to study it for herself with her magnoculars.

"See what I mean captain?" Gant asked, walking up behind Wolf and she nodded as lowered her magnoculars.

"We need to investigate it." she said.

"Sending in Quinn?" Gant said but Wolf shook her head.

"No, I'm going myself with my section and Adept Veneel. I want everyone else to secure the ground around it." she said.

The Catachans spread out as they advanced towards the shuttle, aware that any of the holes in its hull would make excellent places for snipers to conceal themselves. The shuttle was several hundred metres distant from where Gant had first examined it and when Second Platoon was about half way there Veneel suddenly let out a gasp, doubling over and dropping his gyrix to the ground as he did so. As soon as it landed the gyrix arched its back and let out a hiss.

"The witch is possessed!" Black exclaimed, "Even the xenos creature knows it." and he swung his shotgun towards the psyker.

"No!" Wolf called out and at the same time Vance leapt towards the priest, grabbing hold of his shotgun by the barrel and pushing it skywards just as Black's finger tightened on the trigger.

"Throne!" Vance snapped, flinching as the shotgun went off close to him and he staggered back and brought his hands up to his ears, "As if getting shot in the arm wasn't bad enough, now I've got my own side trying to deafen me."

"Lower your weapon Adept Black." Wolf said sternly as she walked over to Veneel and he straightened up, "Adept Veneel are you - Ouch!" Wolf suddenly leapt back again as the gyrix swiped at her with its claws when she got close to Veneel, cutting through even the tough fabric of her combat trousers and breaking the skin of her leg underneath.

"I told you it's smart." Grey called out.

"Oh very funny." Wolf said while several members of the platoon laughed at her, including Torrent.

"Don't worry captain, I'm sure you'll live. Though you may want me to amputate your leg just in case that animal has any weird alien diseases." the platoon medic said and Wolf scowled at her.

"Adept Veneel, are you alright?" Wolf said, completing her question now that she was far enough away from him that the gyrix once again rubbing itself against his leg could not attack her.

"I'll be fine captain." the psyker replied, "However, we should be cautious. The Genestealers are close I am certain."

"You can sense their telepathic link?" Wolf asked and Veneel nodded.

"Yes and it is strong here, stronger than I have sensed it before." he said.

"Stand to. Call out anything you see." Vance shouted and the Catachans began to search the area around them. For the time being though other than the shuttle there was nothing out of the ordinary in view.

"Can you keep going?" Wolf asked Veneel.

"I think so captain. The strength of the link is not constant and it is subsiding again. That probably explains why I was able to get here without sensing it earlier." he said and he picked up his gyrix, "Please continue."

"Okay let's go. I want a perimeter around the ship at fifty metres." Vance called out and the other Catachans rushed to form a ring around the shuttle while Wolf and her command section headed directly for the shuttle. There was a hatch that had been left open when the shuttle landed and the command section headed for this to gain entry to the ship. Vance was the first to reach the hatch and he peered inside to see what it contained. The interior of the shuttle was unlit but there was just enough light getting in through the hatch for him to be able to make out large features.

"What do you see sergeant?" Wolf asked.

"It's the hold." he answered, "If anything was removed then I can't tell." and then he climbed through the hatch into the shuttle before holding out his hand to help Wolf through after him. Looking around as soon as she was inside the craft Wolf saw that they were standing in a cargo bay that had pallets of cargo stacked up though this filled less than half the available volume of this room and it was not possible to tell whether the remaining space had been empty when the ship had landed or if it had been removed since then. Curious about the cargo Wolf walked over to the nearest pallet and shone her flash light on the shipping label fixed to the side.

"M-forty, eight-nine-four." she said, reading off the date of loading, "Barring any extreme time distortion during the warp jump from wherever this came from this has been here for more than a hundred years."

"That would fit with the number of generations of hybrids." Torrent commented as she entered the shuttle in time to hear Wolf's explanation.

"Does the label say where it came from? I bet segmentum command would love to know that." Vance said.

"Jeros." Wolf said, reading from the label again.

"Where's that?" Torrent asked.

"Beats me." Wolf replied and then she turned around and shone her flash light towards the front of the hold where there was another hatch that stood open, "I want to see the cockpit." she said.

With both Veneel and Black joining them, the command section made their way towards the front of the shuttle, following the narrow passageway on the other side of the hatch. This led to an area that was obviously intended for the crew to spend their off duty time in, containing several bunks and food processing equipment. It was also here that the command section found the first signs of the crew.

"There's a skeleton over here." Vance called out and Torrent pushed past Wolf to see it for herself.

Sure enough there were bones on the floor of the crew area. There was no soft tissue left and all that covered the bones was the clothing that the person whose bones now lay on the floor had been wearing when they died.

"They're human." Torrent said as she crouched down to examine the remains. Noticing that there were small fragments of bone around the skull she picked it up and turned it around to expose a large hole when it had been struck.

"I'm guessing that was the cause of death." Wolf said and Torrent nodded as she examined the hole in the skull more closely.

"It's a fair assumption. The edges are sharp so even if it wasn't then it was inflicted not long before death." she said, running her finger along the edge of the hole slowly.

"That wasn't an accidental injury was it?" Vance asked.

"Unlikely." Torrent replied, "I'd say that this guy was struck by something that swiped across the side of his head like this." and she waved her hand past the side of her own head to demonstrate.

"Like a claw?" Wolf suggested.

"Possibly. Though a club could have done the same." Torrent said.

"Okay, let's leave him where he is for now and see what we can find in the cockpit." Wolf ordered and Torrent set the skull back down on the floor.

A short set of stairs accessible through another hatchway on the far side of the crew area led straight up to the shuttle's cockpit where numerous control consoles ringed a small, central command pulpit that the stairs ended just behind. There were more skeletons here, including what Wolf took to be the shuttle's captain who had died while still stood in his pulpit and also the remains of a pair of servitors plugged into data interfaces. Alone among the remains the servitors were still standing, held upright by the extensive cybernetic modifications to their bodies but as with the human crew all that remained of their organic parts were whatever bone they had been left with after the Adeptus Mechanicus had finished with them.

"That station's empty." Wolf said, pointing to one of the control stations towards the front of the cockpit.

"The helm station." Veneel commented.

"How do you know that?" Vance asked.

"Because I have been in the control centres of voidcraft before Platoon Sergeant Vance." the psyker responded, "This may not be on the same scale as even a small warp capable craft but the controls for travel in realspace are almost identical."

"It makes sense." Wolf said, "Can't kill the pilot if you expect to land. Either he was already infected by the Genestealers or they were smart enough to keep him alive to infect while they got rid of everyone else. Though I wonder why they didn't just infect the entire crew?"

"Because one outsider can blend into one of the small settlements in this region better than an entire shuttle crew can." Vance pointed out and Torrent snorted.

"I'd have thought you'd know all about sticking out for being different." she added and Wolf frowned at her briefly.

"In any case I think we now know how the Genestealers got here." Wolf said before her microbead activated.

"Captain it's Quinn."

"Go ahead sergeant." Wolf responded.

"Rull just checked in. He says he's found something about a thousand metres away. Molla's heading to check it out now." Quinn told her.

"Okay sergeant, we're on our way." Wolf said and she hurried back towards the stairs leading from the cockpit with her command section following right behind her.

When they emerged from the shuttle most of the platoon was still in a ring around it, though they were now more widely spaced out to make up for the lack of First Squad in the formation.

"Rull called in from that way captain." Quinn said as he walked up to Wolf and pointed. Wolf instinctively looked in the direction he was pointing but saw nothing but the same bleak landscape she was now used to.

"Did he say exactly what he'd found?" she asked.

"Only that it was something he was going to need help checking out." Quinn said and Wolf looked at him blankly.

"Did you just say Rull found something he couldn't check out on his own?" Vance said.

"Yep. This is a first." Quinn replied.

"Well I'm not waiting to hear back from First Squad. There's nothing here for us to worry about so I want the entire platoon to move out and we'll see what it is that even has Rull stumped." Wolf said.

When the rest of Second Platoon caught up with First Squad they found Molla and his troops clustered around a hole in the ground while Molla peered inside it. The hole was less than a metre across and the shape was too regular for it to be naturally occurring despite its edges being weathered enough that it blended into the surrounding terrain almost totally.

"Where's Rull?" Wolf asked as she looked around for the elusive sniper.

"He headed off to try and find another way down." Molla replied. Then he waved Wolf towards him, "Come and stick your head down here captain." he added.

"This had better be serious." Wolf said as she and her command section headed towards him and the hole.

Crouching down beside Molla Wolf leant forwards and her eyes widened when she realised what had attracted Rull's attention in the first place, "Machinery?" she said when she heard the rhythmic pounding sound coming from down the hole and Molla nodded.

"Rull thinks it's a ventilation shaft of some kind. It's too narrow for us to get down so he went to find an actual way down to whatever's beneath us." Molla said.

"We can't wait for that." Wolf said as she looked around at the Catachans.

"Then what do you suggest captain?" Vance asked, "Like Molla said, that hole is too small for us."

"For most of you, yes." Wolf replied, "I bet I can fit though."

"Ha! You think you can handle going down that hole alone?" Torrent exclaimed and Wolf smiled.

"No, not alone. You're coming too. You're taller than me but you're skinny so you'll fit. Guardswoman Quinn will as well." she said, looking towards Bess.

"Hey hold on a moment." Quinn said, "My sister is here as a messenger."

"Shut it lbram!" Bess snapped, "I'm a guardswoman."

"You know I'd probably fit as well. Torrent's taller than I am." Gant pointed out.

"I know but you're needed up here to pilot your Sentinel. If we can find a better way in then we might need the extra firepower of its heavy flamer." Wolf replied. Then she looked at Torrent and Bess and added, "Okay leave any kit that won't fit in the hole up here and follow me."

Wolf and Bess discarded everything but their belt kit, handing their packs over to others in the platoon while Torrent also passed the satchel containing her field medical kit over to Vance who frowned as he took it.

"What's up sarge?" Torrent asked.

"I don't have a clue what to do with most of this." he replied.

"Then don't do anything with it. Just wait until we get back." Wolf said as she drew her las pistol and looked at the hole, "Okay let's do this." she then crouched down and crawled into the hole.

"Okay who else is thinking of filling that in right now?" Grey said out loud, smiling and Torrent also smiled and raised her hand.

"I heard that." Wolf called out from in the hole, "Now Torrent get your hand down and get in here."

"Busted." Molla said, grinning at Torrent and the medic sighed before crawling into the hole as well.

"Now I have to spend Emperor knows how long staring at the outsider's ass." she muttered just before she disappeared from view.

"No Tari, you can't go as well." Vance said to Molla.

"Okay I guess I'm bringing up the rear then." Bess said.

"If you don't come back I'm keeping your bike little sister." Quinn commented as he stood beside the motorcycle she had brought along, holding its handlebars.

"It belongs to the regiment, idiot." Bess replied before she too crawled into the tunnel after Wolf and Torrent. Inside the tunnel was just wide enough for the three female troopers and their belt kit. Descending at a shallow angle it began with enough light getting in through the entrance but got progressively darker until Wolf paused to take her flash light from her belt and shone it down the tunnel ahead of her.

"Are you sure that's wise captain?" Bess asked when she saw the light ahead of her, "Someone might see."

"Yes, me." Wolf replied as she inspected the tunnel wall, "The walls are getting irregular ahead of us and I'd rather not keep banging into bits of rock that are sticking out." and then she started to crawl forwards again. The further the three women crawled down the tunnel the louder the sound that had been just about audible from the surface became. It was also joined by another sound, a soft squeaking.

"Did you hear that?" Wolf asked, "I think that there are rats in here."

"Rats?" Bess said, "I hate rats."

"Really? I kind of like them." Torrent responded, "Fried or roast."

"You have rats on Catachan?" Wolf commented, "I thought that animals from Earth couldn't survive there."

"Not for long no." Bess said.

"But rats don't need to live more than a couple of months to produce another generation." Torrent added, "Plenty of rats survived the crash of the original colony ship and even the toxins that occur in almost every food source on Catachan weren't enough to wipe them out before they started breeding."

"Well I don't want any near me." Bess said.

"Too late to turn back now." Wolf replied and she continued crawling down the tunnel again. As she had warned the two Catachan women the walls of the tunnel became increasingly irregular and Wolf had to keep warning them about outcroppings that they might get caught on.

"Throne!" Torrent hissed when she suddenly found herself caught as she tried to crawl around a bend in the tunnel.

"What's wrong guardswoman?" Wolf whispered, concerned that the level of noise from ahead meant that they were getting close to the end of the tunnel.

"I'm caught. I think it's my belt. I knew I was too tall for this." she replied.

"Can't you just release your belt and wriggle out?" Bess suggested.

"You think I'm not trying that?" Torrent said, "It's caught underneath me and I can't get my hand in there."

"Quinn, how far over Torrent can you get?" Wolf asked.

"Hey, you're not abandoning me in this tunnel." Torrent exclaimed.

"Keep your voice down specialist." Wolf told her, "All I'm thinking is that Quinn can crawl far enough over you that she can reach your belt and cut through it. You may have to abandon some of your gear but at least you won't be caught any more."

"Fine." Torrent said, sighing, "Just be careful with that knife Bess."

"Don't worry, I know what I'm doing." Bess said and she crawled forwards again, squeezing over the lower half of Torrent's legs until she was able to reach up to the medic's waist. Taking her traditional Catachan blade from its scabbard she held this out, trying to slide it between Torrent's belt and her trousers, "Hold still Harriet."

"I'm trying." Torrent replied, "But there's another rock sticking in me that-" and then there was the sound of tearing fabric, "What was that?" she asked, her eyes widening.

"Err, I've cut through your equipment belt." Bess replied.

"Good, now get it off and let's get moving again." Wolf said.

"And the belt holding up your trousers too," Bess added, "Sorry."

"Sorry?" Torrent hissed, "How bad is the damage?"

"It's difficult to tell. Here, let me move your belt." Bess said as she pulled the two pieces of Torrent's belt apart.

"Oh great." Torrent said, "I can feel the draft already. They're never going to stay up."

"Then you'll just have to carry on without them." Wolf said and then she paused before adding, "Wait, you are wearing something under them aren't you? Only I remember the tale of you and the tree sap on Catachan when-"

"Of course I'm wearing something underneath." Torrent hissed, "Okay Bess you started this, you're going to have to finish it."

"What do you mean?" Bess asked.

"I mean I can't take off my trousers in this tunnel. You'll have to do it. Just cut them free and let's get this mission over and done with." Torrent told her.

"Okay, here goes." Bess said and there were more sounds of fabric being cut as she sliced down the legs of Torrent's trousers so that they could be removed before the three women could continue to crawl down the tunnel.

"Just make sure you don't get caught on anything again specialist." Wolf said as she started to move again. Further on the tunnel began to widen out and Wolf unexpectedly turned off her flash light when she noticed that there seemed to be more light coming from up ahead.

"We're getting close." Torrent said, also able to see the dim light shining past Wolf.

"I'll let the others know." Wolf replied, activating her microbead, "Wolf to Vance do you read me?" she transmitted but the channel was filled with nothing but static, "Molla? Quinn? Rull? Does anybody read me?" she added but once again there was nothing but static and she sighed, "Okay so we're out of contact. Let's see what's down here."

The three women moved further along the ever widening tunnel and it soon began large enough for them to be able to sit up in, at which point Wolf paused. The light here was better and the sound of machinery was now easy to hear. Looking ahead she could see that the tunnel continued to widen and she judged that it would not be long before she would be able to stand up in it, though she would have to crouch to avoid hitting her head on the tunnel ceiling.

"Wait here." she said, "I want to check out what's up ahead."

Moving on ahead Wolf found that was right about being able to stand up and did so carefully before continuing to advance with her las pistol in one hand and Catachan blade in the other until after just a few more metres she saw what looked like the end of the tunnel where it met a metal walkway of some kind and she came to a halt. Had she had her magnoculars with her then she would have used them to study what lay ahead but they were among the equipment she had had to leave on the surface and this meant that she had no choice but to carry on towards the walkway at end of the tunnel.

Wolf came to a stop just before the end of the tunnel and peered out into what was obviously a massive cavern beyond it. The tunnel entrance was located a few metres above the cavern floor, the walkway providing a means by which it could be accessed from within the cavern and this elevation gave Wolf an excellent view of what the cavern contained even without her magnoculars and what she saw terrified her. A settlement had been constructed inside the cavern and the noise of machinery was coming from several generators set up to provide heat and illumination as well as to power some of the other equipment the Genestealer cult had amassed over the more than one hundred years since the first of the aliens had arrived on Temperatus. This included a number of Sentinel power lifters, vehicles similar to the scout vehicles operated by Gant's squadron but with a large mechanical grasping claw in place of the weapon mounted on the side of the cockpit. Wolf could see several of these machines being used to move parts and supplies from a large flat bed truck that must have arrived only recently. The equipment and vehicles that the Genestealers had been able to obtain were not what scared Wolf though, instead it was the Genestealers themselves. After more than a century of breeding on the planet they had been able to expand their numbers from the handful that would have arrived on the shuttle to many thousands and these now filled the cavern in front of Wolf. Obviously possessing little sense of privacy, the Genestealers' nest was arranged in an open fashion with beds laid out on the cavern floor without anything to separate them from one another. From what details Wolf was able to make out the sleeping assignments seemed to be arranged in a circular pattern with more human appearing hybrids located on the outer edge of the nest while the earlier generations slept closer to the centre. Meanwhile the purestrain Genestealers themselves were all located at the centre of the nest, cluster around a particularly large specimen of the species that sat on top of a raised platform at the very heart of them. This creature was surrounded by a small unit of hybrids of various generations armed with human weapons and Wolf immediately realised that this had to be the patriarch that the magus had spoken of before he died.

Enginseer Cornelliuss had been correct in his suggestion that the Genestealers had made multiple breaks in the las line to prevent the Catachans of Second Platoon from making direct contact with their superiors beyond the limits of the wireless communication disruption and it was only when he reached the fifth such break that he was able to establish a link to the planetary communication network and he immediately established a connection to the nearest Adeptus Mechanicus data node and sent a data burst.

ENGINEER CORNELLIUS B5T-RD-3X REPORTING

LAS LINE HARDWARE DAMAGED BY ENEMY ACTION

CURRENT LOCATION GRID ECHO BAKER SEVEN CO-ORDINATES ONE FOUR TWO BY ZERO SIX ZERO RELATIVE

PRESENCE OF XENOS CLASSIFICATION: GENESTEALERS CONFIRMED

PURESTRAIN AND HYBRID SUB CLASSIFICATIONS

CATACHAN ONE-NINE MARK FOUR MARK TWO REPULSED XENOS ASSAULT AT 22:42 HOURS LAST NIGHT

CATACHAN ONE-NINE MARK FOUR MARK TWO NOW TRACKING ROUTE OF XENOS RETREAT

RELAY REQUEST FOR REINFORCEMENTS FOR CATACHAN ONE-NINE MARK FOUR MARK TWO TO SEVENTH DIVISION COMMAND

EXTRACTION FOR CORNELLIUS B5T-RD-3X REQUIRED

END OF LINE

Cornelliuss waited less than a second for a response but thanks to his implants he was aware of the passing of time while he did so.

TEMPERATUS NODE RESPONDING

DATA RECEIVED

INFORMATION ON ENEMY ACTIVITY LOGGED

REQUEST FOR REINFORCEMENT AND EXTRACT SUPPLIED TO SEVENTH DIVISION

AWAIT EXTRACTION

END OF LINE

Remaining connected to the las line just in case he needed to send any further transmissions Cornelliuss directed his servitors to form a perimeter around him, using their sensors to maintain a watch on the terrain around him in all directions. Once this was done he stood motionless at the end of the las line, obeying the instruction to await extraction.

Still waiting in the tunnel with Bess, Torrent felt something drop onto her and she gasped. It was far too soft to be a rock and she could feel it moving.

"Stay still." Bess said from behind her.

"What is it?" Torrent asked, afraid to try looking over her shoulder at what had just landed on top of her.

"There's a rat on your ass." Bess told her and then Torrent heard a squeak, "Throne there are more of them up there." Bess added as she looked up to where the rat had dropped from.

"Okay. It's just a rat. I'll be fine." Torrent said.

"Rats. Plural. Here comes another. I'm backing up." Bess said as she started to slowly crawl backwards in the tunnel before she saw a second rat drop down from the ledge where the animals were congregating and this one landed on the back of Torrent's neck.

"Feth this!" Torrent exclaimed, scrabbling forwards as quickly as she could.

"Hey Torrent come back." Bess said but the other Catachan paid no attention to her and so she followed after Torrent, not wanting to be left alone in the tunnel with the rats, "Wait for me." she said.

Torrent burst out of the tunnel onto the walkway, her arms reaching around behind her in an attempt to grab hold of the rat that had now crawled under her shirt.

"What are you doing?" Wolf asked.

"Rat. Rat-rat-rat." Torrent responded, ripping her shirt over her head and tossing it from the walkway to the cavern floor below before she realised that this left her standing in just her underwear and a pair of combat boots.

"Harriet what are you doing?" Bess asked as she emerged from the tunnel.

"Can I borrow a shirt from one of you two?" Torrent asked, embarrassed but neither Wolf nor Bess responded. Instead Wolf pointed out across the cavern at the Genestealers.

"We've got bigger problems." she said.

"Him on Earth." Bess said as she looked out across the cavern and saw the huge purestrain Genestealer in the centre of the others, "That thing's as big as an ogryn."

"I'm guessing that that's the so-called patriarch." Wolf replied.

"We need a way out of here." Bess said.

"Ideally with a route that will take us past some clothes." Torrent added.

"Well there's either the tunnel or we try and make it to that opening down there." Wolf said and she pointed to where the large supply truck was parked beside a larger tunnel opening, "That must lead up to the surface for them to have got that in here."

"No way am I crawling back up that tunnel we just came down." Torrent said, "I don't have any more clothing I can afford to get snagged."

"Then we head down there." Wolf replied.

"Lead the way captain." Bess said and then she turned to Torrent and held out her equipment belt, now held together only by the buckle and added, "And you can carry your own stuff from now on."

With las pistols and knives in their hands, the three women made their way along the walkway and down to the cavern floor. Staying close to the cavern wall they then began to make their way around the cavern towards the larger tunnel. Knowing that they would not stand a chance of defending themselves if the Genestealers caught them inside the cavern they focused on remaining undetected. This was made easy by the amount of equipment that the Genestealers had stockpiled, the crates being stacked around the edges of the cavern and all they had to do was dart from behind one to the next, getting ever closer to the tunnel. The problem came when they got to the open area where the supply truck was parked. By necessity this was large enough for the bulky vehicle to turn around in and that meant that there was a gap of about twenty metres from where the three women hid behind the last piece of cover and the entrance to the tunnel. In addition there was the fact that the tunnel itself contained no cover and there were several Genestealer hybrids, including those piloting their Sentinel power lifters in this area of the cavern.

"We'll never be able to sneak past them all." Wolf whispered.

"If we can't get past without them seeing us is there anything we can do to at least delay them coming after us?" Bess suggested.

"A bomb." Torrent said.

"We don't have anything more than a couple of grenades. that's nowhere near enough." Wolf pointed out.

"No. A bomb. Look." Torrent said and she pointed to one of the Sentinels that had just unloaded a cylinder of compressed gas from the back of the supply truck and was carrying it to where a large number of other cylinders were stacked up in low pyramids, "Put a shot from a las pistol into that lot and it'll go off like an oxy-phosphor shell."

"I'm impressed. For a woman with your taste in underwear you're pretty resourceful." Wolf said and Torrent frowned as Wolf aimed her las pistol at the cylinders, "Everyone together. We've got a better shot at this if we all try. As soon as they go up we make a break for the tunnel. Okay? Now!"

Then three women then fired their las pistols repeatedly towards the gas cylinders. The immediate result of this was that the nearby hybrids turned around and saw them in their hiding place, calling out for armed support. Then moments later a blast from Wolf's las pistol pierced one of the armoured cylinders. The gas inside was not combustible but the sudden release of pressure still sent the heavy cylinder flying off like a rocket, smashing everything out of its path and bouncing off the wall of the cavern. Then another shot from Torrent's weapon finally punctured a cylinder that held a flammable gas and it exploded in a massive ball of flame. The effect of this was devastating as other cylinders were burst open by the blast and also either flew off under the thrust of the escaping gas or exploded in a massive chain reaction.

"Run!" Wolf yelled and she and the two Catachan women raced towards the tunnel while the attention of the Genestealers was focused on the fire they had caused.

While the hybrids concerned themselves with the fire the massive purestrain Genestealer at the heart of the cavern turned to see what was happening and the ancient creature spied the three human women with whom it had no telepathic link just as they ran into the tunnel heading for the surface. The patriarch raised itself up and let out a roar as it issued the telepathic order for all of its descendants to give chase but before they could follow the order there was another explosion as the cargo truck parked near the tunnel entrance caught fire and the way out of the cavern was blocked by flames.

12.

The tunnel sloped upwards at a shallow enough angle that wheeled vehicles would be able to drive up and down it without going out of control and it was wide enough for large goods vehicles to pass one another while travelling in opposite directions. This enabled the three women to run along it as fast as they could until they finally came to the surface and found themselves beside a track leading off towards the horizon.

"Okay so now what? Eventually those things are going to come up that tunnel after us." Torrent said and Wolf reached to activate her microbead.

"This is Wolf to any units within range. Do you read me?" she broadcast but there was only static in return, "Okay we're out of range." she added as she looked around, "Mind you we can't have gone all that far yet so maybe we're still close enough to make contact another way."

"Like what?" Bess asked, "I'd suggest running but I don't know where we are. We could just end up heading in the wrong direction."

"I was thinking of bringing the others to us." Wolf said and she took her stub pistol from her belt and checked that there was round chambered. Then she held both that and her las pistol above her head pointing skywards and fired three rapid shots from each. Without the silencer attached to the stub pistol it produced a sharp 'crack' with each shot as well as a flash at the muzzle that was nevertheless much smaller than the pulses of light from the las pistol as it was fired.

"Do you think they'll see it?" Torrent asked.

"I hope so. Though perhaps we ought to take cover just in case." Wolf said and she looked towards an area of raised ground close by that looked like it offered a hiding place.

The three women quickly found a shallow dip in the otherwise raised ground that they lay down in. From here they could keep watch on the entrance to the tunnel while hopefully remaining out of sight to anything that emerged from it. However, it was not from out of the tunnel that they were first approached and the sound of running feet from behind them made them all roll over and point their las pistols in the other direction.

"Friendlies." Molla called out when he saw them.

"Sergeant Molla, you saw my signal then?" Wolf asked.

"No captain, it was Rull." Molla responded, "He spotted you firing into the air and alerted us to your position. Vance had us patrolling the area around the hole you went down and my squad was closest to you." then he smiled and added, "Plus he told us that Torrent here had stripped off so-

"Feth off!" Torrent snapped and Molla removed his shirt to expose his bare chest.

"So you don't want this then?" he asked, holding out the shirt and Torrent snatched it from his hand.

"The rest of the platoon is approaching sergeant." one of Molla's men then called out and he pointed to where the rest of Second Platoon including Gant's sentinels could be seen heading towards them and Wolf reached for her microbead again, knowing that by now they would be in range of her signals.

"I want the platoon deployed to cover the tunnel entrance. The nest of Genestealers is located at the end of that and they know that we have discovered them. We were able to delay them from using the tunnel but it won't keep them underground forever." she broadcast and then she turned to Bess, "You better grab your bike back off Sergeant Quinn and get going. Regimental command needs to know what's going on here."

"Okay, I'll follow this track. That must lead somewhere if the Genestealers used it to bring in supplies." Bess replied.

Second Platoon deployed along the high ground with their weapons pointing into the tunnel. With a gap of well over a hundred metres between where Second Platoon was deploying and the tunnel entrance there was enough room for Mayer's squad to target this ground with their mortars and so they set up their heavy weapons behind the rest of the platoon and began to prepare bombs for use. Molla and Grey's squads also deployed their heavy bolter and missile launcher to cover the tunnel as well while Gant's Sentinels stood ready to bring up their heavy weapons as well. Looking around her Wolf saw that the Catachans were all in position and ready for battle when all of a sudden she heard Veneel's gyrix growling and the psyker placed his hand on her shoulder.

"Captain," he said, his eyes wide, "they're coming. They're all coming." and as she looked back towards the tunnel Wolf heard the sound of hundreds of running feet.

"Contact!" Molla yelled when the first line of Genestealers, both hybrids and purestrains burst out of the tunnel.

"Open fire!" Wolf yelled although the Catachans were already taking aim and a barrage of fire slammed into the charging aliens. The mix of energy blasts, explosives and solid projectiles ripped through alien flesh and tore the Genestealers apart but the alien kept on coming and Wolf looked towards Gant's waiting sentinels.

"Gant now!" she yelled and the three walkers leapt into action, bounding towards the seemingly endless swarm. The missile launcher armed walker fired several fragmentation rounds into the aliens as the

Sentinels moved to attack and a portion of the swarm now turned towards the three machines.

"Now!" Gant snapped as the Genestealers got close enough and twin jets of flame erupted from the two flamer armed scout Sentinels, flowing over the screeching aliens.

With Gant's Sentinels moving closer to the tunnel entrance Mayer was forced to cease fire with his squad's mortars but the power of the flamers seemed to do the trick in pushing the Genestealer hoard back while the line of Catachans behind them picked off any of the aliens that attempted to get around the walkers. However, this changed as the patriarch itself appeared in the mouth of the tunnel and charged straight at the closest Sentinel. The lightweight walker's pilot turned his flamer towards the huge alien and discharged another jet of burning promethium. However, the patriarch continued to charge onwards and lunged at the Sentinel, ripping open the cockpit and then biting the terrified pilot in half as he attempted to escape. The patriarch then hurled debris from the wrecked Sentinel at Gant's machine the impact knocked her walker over and it crashed to the ground.

Gant struggled to free herself from her Sentinel, releasing her safety harness before crawling from the cockpit. Thankfully the patriarch was still several metres away from her and she was able to draw her las pistol and fire several rapid shots at the massive alien. Her sidearm proved to be totally ineffective though, failing to penetrate its naturally armoured hide. However, a single human armed with a pistol was not enough to keep the attention of the patriarch and instead it turned its attention towards the last of the Sentinels, the support vehicle armed with a missile launcher instead of a heavy flamer. The pilot of this fired at the patriarch as it charged at him, selecting an anti-armour krak round instead of a fragmentation missile in the hope that having a jet of molten metal punch through its hide would prove lethal where lesser weaponry had failed but the missile went wide and exploded harmlessly beyond the tunnel entrance. Before its pilot could fire a second missile the patriarch charged right into the support Sentinel, knocking it off its feet. Unable to right his machine the pilot attempted to get clear of it but before he could even get free of his harness the patriarch reached inside the cockpit with a clawed hand and impaled him through the chest.

Now alone Gant ran from the Genestealers, heading towards Second Platoon's line.

"Over here! We'll cover you." Grey shouted, waving his hand at Gant and she ran towards him. Thankfully the Genestealers still did not consider her much of a threat and while she ran the swarm continued to focus its efforts against Second Platoon's line.

With a continual stream of aliens pouring from the tunnel the Catachans found themselves firing almost continuously and this was having a dramatic effect on their supplies of ammunition. First to run out was Second Squad's missile launcher and soon after the belt fed heavy bolter of First Squad fired the last of its ammunition as well.

"Sarge we're dry." the gunner called out.

"Then switch to your lasgun and keep shooting." Molla responded, "But watch your ammo with that as well."

The lack of the heavy automatic weapon meant that now the purestrain and early generation hybrid Genestealers who attacked purely with their bare hands and claws were able to get closer to the Catachan line and although this brought them close enough for Quinn's veterans to engage them with their shotguns and Khor's ogryns to use their ripper guns it did mean that there was much less opportunity to deal with any of the creatures that made it through the barrage of fire before they made it to Second Platoon's line. This point was made clear when a first generation hybrid suddenly leapt towards Wolf's command section only to be stopped by a blast from Black's shotgun.

"Die alien!" he yelled as he fired a second shot into the hybrid's corpse.

"Conserve your ammo preacher." Vance told him, "There are more than enough stealers left."

"Especially that one." Wolf added looking at the giant patriarch as it decided that there was no more danger to itself from the Sentinels and turned its attention towards Second Platoon.

Without a telepathic link to any of the Catachans the primarch saw them as nothing but prey. However, among them the ancient alien could sense one with a mind more powerful than the others and out of instinct the patriarch began to charge towards it.

"It's coming for me." Veneel said, sensing the patriarch make contact with his mind before it started to come towards him.

"We need to bring that thing down." Vance said.

"But it shrugs off everything we've got." Torrent pointed out, remembering it run through the blasts of flames.

"Weapons check." Wolf said into her microbead, broadcasting to the entire platoon, "What support weapons do we have left?"

"Our melta is still fully loaded captain." Quinn responded.

"Get it to us. We've got incoming." Wolf ordered and at the end of the Catachan line Quinn looked at Jackson.

"Go." he told him.

"On it sarge." the melta gunner said as he got up and started to run. However, at this point some of the Genestealer hybrids coming from the tunnel brought with them a heavy stubber that they set up on a tripod

and began to fire at the Catachans. One of the projectiles from this hit Jackson and he tumbled forwards before landing in a heap.

"Jackson's down." Quinn told Wolf using his microbead, "I'm going to go after the melta myself."

"Hurry." Wolf responded as she watched the patriarch closing in on her command section, las blasts impacting on its exoskeleton without harming it at all.

Knowing that he was the alien's target Veneel suddenly leapt to his feet and reached out his hand towards the patriarch. Then his gyrinx arched its back and hissed at exactly the same moment as a psychic lightning storm burst from Veneel's fingertips and leapt across the gap between him and the patriarch. The Genestealer paused for a moment as the psychic lightning flowed over its body but then it let out a hiss and continued towards the psyker. Now though it did not run, instead it took one slow step at a time as if having to fight against the psychic lightning.

"I cannot hold it forever Captain Wolf." Veneel said, the mental strain he was under obvious in his voice.

"Quinn where's that melta?" Wolf transmitted over her microbead.

"I'm at it now captain and - Oh feth." Quinn responded.

"Sergeant Quinn, what's wrong?" Wolf asked.

"The melta's hit. It might be repairable but we'll need a cogboy for that." Quinn replied.

"Throne." Wolf said as she considered their options. She was about to order Khor and his ogryns to engage the patriarch in hand to hand combat in the hope that between them they might be able to kill the creature when all of a sudden Kline put a hand on her shoulder.

"Captain I'm picking up a vox signal." he said, "It's faint but there."

"From where?" Wolf asked, "No-one else is out here."

"Here." Kline said, passing her the handset and Wolf pressed it against the side of her head. Sure enough though the static she could just about make out a human sounding voice.

"Hello?" Wolf responded, "This is Catachan One-Nine Mark Four Mark Two. Identify yourself."

"Catachan One-Nine Mark Four Mark Two this is Catachan One Nine." the familiar voice of Colonel Shryke responded, "We are inbound from the south east and have you in our sights. Duck and cover. Over."

"Understood." Wolf said, her eyes widening and then she took deep breath before shouting at the top of her voice, "Incoming!" and she threw herself to the ground.

The rest of Second Platoon followed suit and moments later a brilliant beam of light came from overhead and sliced through one of the patriarch's legs. The creature screeched in pain as it collapsed, thrashing about helpless on the ground as a Vulture gunship armed with twin las cannons and racks of anti-tank hunter killer missiles under its wings flew overhead.

Behind this aircraft came three more Vultures only they did not make brief attack runs before flying overhead. Instead they decelerated and unleashed barrages of explosive rockets and auto-cannon shells from the weapons they carried under their wings as well as the heavy bolters mounted in their noses. A fourth Vulture then swooped down to hover directly over Second Platoon and there was a roar of rapid projectile fire as the rapid firing rotary punisher cannons it was armed with tore through the Genestealers and empty shell cases rained down on the Catachans below.

The Genestealers had nothing to counter this furious air assault. their only support weapon was the heavy stubber and although in desperation they tried firing this into the air its ammunition was unable to penetrate the armoured fuselage of a Vulture before a rapid burst of fire from a heavy bolter tore apart the heavy stubber's gun crew as well as the weapon itself.

Two more aircraft now descended towards Second Platoon but instead of being more gunships these were both Valkyrie transports and as they set down Colonel Shryke and his command unit disembarked from one while a unit of troops emerged from the other, all of them rushing towards Wolf and her command section.

"Congratulations captain." Shryke said as he crouched beside her.

"How did you find us?" Wolf asked.

"Your tech priest was able to relay a message via the Adeptus Mechanicus. Now shall we finish this?" Shryke replied and he reached for his microbead, "Pilot you are cleared to fire." he said.

"Copy that colonel. Missiles hot." the pilot of Shryke's Valkyrie responded and the aircraft rose back into the air and turned to face the tunnel entrance. Beneath each wing this aircraft carried a single Hellstrike heavy anti-armour missile and the Valkyrie's weapons officer now fired both of these directly into the tunnel where the warheads detonated. The combined blast was enough to collapse the tunnel entirely, burying any Genestealers that may have been close to the entrance and preventing those few left alive on the surface from retreating.

"That should hold them. Do you know if there are any other ways out of there?" Shryke said.

"Apart from a narrow ventilation shaft I only saw that one way out of the nest." Wolf said, "But what if they manage to dig their way out?"

"Don't worry captain. That only needs to keep them down there long enough for us to evacuate. The navy is standing by to finish this off." Shryke said.

Aboard another Valkyrie transport Wolf looked out of the narrow window set into one of the side hatches at the mushroom cloud now visible where the Genestealer nest had been. She knew from personal experience that close up an orbital bombardment was a terrifying thing to behold but from this distance it looked almost beautiful. Then after a few moments she returned to her seat, sat down and smiled.

"What's on your mind captain?" Vance asked.

"Oh I was just thinking that maybe now we could get that time off we came here for." Wolf replied and then she and Vance both laughed.