

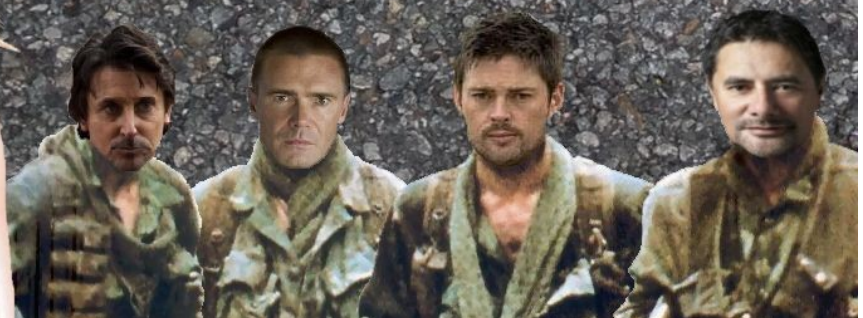


CATAGHAN ONE NINE MARK FOUR MARK TWO



DOWNTIME

BY STEPHEN J DUTTON



CATACHAN ONE-NINE MARK FOUR MARK TWO

6.1 : DOWNTIME

By Stephen J Dutton BSc (hons) BEng (hons)

A period between campaigns offers the soliers of the Catachan VII Division the change for some rest. However, despite the planet on which the Catachans are located is not as safe as it first seems as attacks on some of the Catachans turn out to be part of a darker plot...

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1.

For the first time in several years Lieutenant Emilia Wolf, commanding officer of the Second Platoon of the Fourth Company of the Catachan XIX Regiment, one of four regiments in the Catachan VII Division, felt that she could relax. Wolf was not a native Catachan and to her fellow Imperial Guardsmen she was referred to as an outsider because of this. Catachan was a death world, a jungle covered world that had a reputation as being the most dangerous planet on the galaxy to live on and its natives regarded anyone not born there as being incapable of understanding their existence. Previously a non-combat officer in a regiment from her own home world of Lyreria Wolf had been assigned to a Catachan when she had been captured by alien kroot and separated from her own unit. Since then she had been forced to adapt to life as a front line infantry officer with subordinates who did not regard her as one of them.

Right now though Emilia was sat in a bar filled with factory workers on an industrial world rather than in a tent in the middle of a jungle surrounded by hostile aliens and fellow humans who were not always much better. Following a string of combat deployments in which the Catachan VII Division had battled against numerous alien species, it had been diverted to the planet Temperatus where it was scheduled to be joined by reinforcements from Catachan to replace its losses. Often an Imperial Guard division would replace combat losses by absorbing units from other regiments that had been depleted to the point where it was not practical to rebuild their strength and what troops remained would be divided up among other forces. However, given the specialist jungle fighting skills of Catachans the Adeptus Munitorum recognised the benefits of maintaining them as a homogeneous fighting force as far as possible. Thus with a few exceptions such as Wolf herself all of the reinforcements would be native Catachans. Therefore, with no battles to fight the troops of the Catachan VII Division had been granted leave for the duration of their stay on Temperatus, a dull world where the sky was permanently tinged with varying shades of brown from the by-products of the planetwide industry.

"This place reminds me of home." Wolf said as another woman in a Catachan uniform approached her table and placed a pair of drinks on it. Like Wolf this woman was not a native Catachan either, in fact she was Wolf's own sister Elisa who had requested a transfer to the Catachan XIX Regiment after the Lyrerian XXXII Regiment had been almost totally wiped out at a time when the two units had been deployed to fight an ork invasion together and the sisters had been reunited. Unlike Wolf, Elisa had been able to retain her administrative role with the regimental headquarters, though she still found that the Catachans she served with looked down on her abilities as a soldier because of her status as an outsider.

"We hated home." Elisa pointed out, "That's why we joined the Imperial Guard."

"It's been more than ten years since we left." Wolf commented.

"Ten years to us." Elisa replied, "Taking into account the effects of warp travel I bet it's at least twice that back home." then she took a sip of her drink and looked around the bar where she noticed another woman in a Catachan uniform. Unlike the two sisters who stood barely one and half metres tall, this woman had the taller physique that was common to native Catachans. The woman was walking along the wall of the bar and seemed to be using it to remain upright, leaning on it with one hand as she staggered towards the doorway, "Hey Emilia, isn't that your platoon medicae?" Elisa asked, nodding in the Catachan woman's direction. "Torrent? Where?" Wolf responded and she looked around and saw Torrent for herself, "It is." she said, "And she looks drunk."

"I didn't think Catachans drank much." Elisa said.

"As a rule they don't. Getting intoxicated doesn't do much for survival on Catachan so they're not used to it. Just a few drinks and they're out like a light."

"Well I'd say she's had more than a few." Elisa said and Wolf sighed.

"I better go and see to her." she said, "If she goes back to camp like that she'll take a beating for it."

"Let her. She hates you." Elisa replied as Wolf got to her feet.

"I can't. Maybe I can sneak her back in or something. Now come on, I'll probably need help with her, she's bigger than me." Wolf said.

"A bigger ass hole." Elisa muttered as she got up and followed her sister across the bar towards Torrent.

"Torrent," Wolf said, "are you okay?"

The Catachan woman turned towards Wolf and blinked, enabling Wolf to see her bloodshot eyes.

"She's wasted." Elisa said.

"How much have you had to drink?" Wolf asked as she reached out to support Torrent.

"Just one and I'm fine. Just a little dizzy that's all. I don't need your help." Torrent replied, pushing Wolf's hand away.

"Oh yes you do." Wolf said, "Now come on, we're getting you out of here."

"So much for a quiet evening's drink." Elisa said as she and Wolf took Torrent by her arms and helped her

out of the bar.

Outside in the cool night air Torrent's legs suddenly buckled and if not for Wolf and her sister she would have ended up face down on the pavement.

"Emilia, we'll never get her back to camp without someone noticing what's up with her." Elisa said, "Let's just call a cab and she can take the beating she's earned. She knows the rules."

"I really ought to." Wolf said to Torrent, "But I think there's another way. Look." and she pointed towards a building just across the street that advertised rooms to rent, "We'll book ourselves in and I'll call camp to organise an extension on our passes while she sleeps off the booze."

"She won't thank you for this." Elisa said.

"I know. But she'll know that it was me that stopped her getting punched in the face for turning up drunk." Wolf replied.

The two sisters supported Torrent across the street before heading for the doorway beneath the sign that advertised the rooms and identified the structure as the KL-14 Hotel. On Temperatus city blocks were identified by a series of letters and numbers so the reference KL-14 identified the hotel's location better than a specific name would.

"Can I help you ladies?" the large man sat behind a transparent safety screen asked as soon as the three women came through the door.

"We need a room for the night." Wolf said.

"Just the one? Or one each? I'll still have to charge you for three people even if you all share so you may as well--"

"Just one room. We need to look after our--" Wolf began, pausing when she found herself about to say 'friend' and reconsidered it, just in case Torrent was lucid enough to hear and create a scene by objecting, "colleague." she said instead.

"That'll be forty-five crowns." the man said and Wolf reached for the purse of local coinage she had been issued with prior to leaving the Catachan camp, "Plus a deposit of thirty for cleaning the room."

"Thirty?" Elisa exclaimed, "That's ridiculous."

"Well your colleague looks like she's about to empty her guts." the man said, "If blankets need replacing then it's going to be you that pays for them."

"I've got the money." Wolf said, "Here, seventy-five crowns." and she tipped a number of polymer currency notes from the purse onto the counter in front of the man. There was more than the seventy-five he had asked for and Wolf was quick to put her own hand down on the notes before he could reach out and take them all. She then slid several of the notes, totalling seventy-five crowns through the small hole in the transparent screen.

The man grunted as he took the money before passing a key with a numbered tag back through the hole. Wolf took this and then she and Elisa carried Torrent past the reception booth and into the large open area in the middle of the structure. This was arranged as a common area for the hotel guests while the rooms were arranged in layers all around this.

"Okay, so which one's ours?" Elisa asked and Wolf checked the tag on the key she had been given.

"That one." she said, pointing to a room that was on an upper level.

"Oh great." Elisa said, frowning, "What's the bet that the lift doesn't work and we have to carry her up three flights of stairs?"

"Let's just get to the room." Wolf replied, "Then I can call the camp and sort out our passes."

Carrying Torrent to the room, Wolf and her sister found that despite asking for a room for three people there was only one bed that was designed for two and they threw Torrent onto it.

"Throne, how can they charge for this dump?" Wolf commented as she looked around.

"Don't blame me sister. I said take a cab and leave Torrent to her fate. Comm's over there." Elisa said, pointing to the communication unit built into one of the walls and as she sat down Wolf headed for the device. Unsurprisingly the communication unit required Wolf to insert money to get it to function, but she soon had a connection to the camp she and the others had set out from earlier in the evening.

"Fourth Company." a familiar voice said and Wolf smiled.

"Company Sergeant Stubbs, I'm glad it's you." she said, "I need to arrange to extend the passes for myself, my sister and Torrent."

"Are you all okay lieutenant?" Stubbs asked, "We're trying to get everyone back to camp."

"What for?" Wolf asked, confused.

"Turns out the locals aren't so friendly after all. We've had multiple reports of them trying to drug our troops." Stubbs said and Wolf turned to look at Torrent as she lay spread out on the bed.

"Drugged?" she said.

"Drugged?" Elisa repeated when she heard this and she hurried to Wolf's side, "What's going on?"

"I don't know. I'll find out." Wolf replied, "Sergeant Stubbs what exactly is going on?"

"More than one of our troops has had their drinks spiked." Stubbs replied, "Fortunately so far we think that everyone targeted was part of a group that intervened before anything too unpleasant happened. The worst

we've heard of is a guardswoman from second company. Some guy was dragging her out of a club when her squad mates came to her rescue. The guy got away but we're pretty sure that won't last for long. Your sergeants Molla and Quinn are furious, Molla's daughter and Quinn's sister are both out in the city somewhere and we're trying to figure out where. Now General Fortnam has ordered everyone back to camp so you better get back here quick."

"Look sergeant," Wolf said, "I think Torrent's been targeted as well. My sister and I found her looking like she'd downed a gallon of liquor but she insisted she'd hardly had anything. We can't carry her all the way back to camp."

"Okay, where are you? I'll get someone to come and get you." Stubbs said.

"A hotel. Cheap and nasty but at least we're off the streets. KL-fourteen. Room three one four." Wolf said.

"KL-fourteen. Three one four. Got it. Stay put and I'll send a vehicle." Stubbs said before he ended the conversation by hanging up at his end.

"How much of that did you catch?" Wolf asked Elisa.

"Pretty much all of it." Elisa replied, "Looks like Torrent has more than just avoid a beating to thank you for."

"Let's just wait." Wolf said, "Hopefully there'll be a transport here soon to take us back to camp and Doctor Altman can take a look at Torrent."

Torrent was in the bathroom being sick when there was a knock at the door and Wolf went to answer it.

"Who's there?" she asked, not wanting to risk opening the door to a stranger.

"Bess and Jenni." a voice the now familiar Catachan accent replied.

"Just tell that outsider to let us in before that old guy on the desk realises we're here." a second added and Wolf sighed before opening the door to allow Bess Quinn, the younger sister of the sergeant of Second Platoon's veteran squad and Jenni Molla, the daughter of First Squad's sergeant to enter. Both young women were native Catachans who had left their home world and become part of the XIX Regiment thanks to their relatives.

"Can you believe that guy tried to charge us ninety crowns just to come up and see you?" Bess said, pointing back out of the room.

"Sadly yes." Wolf replied, "How did you find us?"

"Easy." Jenni said, "We called camp to let my dad know we'd found an all night fighting arena he'd probably like and he told us what's going on with these sicko outsiders. Then he gave us the address of this place and told us to wait here with you."

"Then we had to crawl past the counter after telling that guy downstairs what he could do with his ninety crown charge." Bess added, "Do you think anyone saw you come here?"

"Undoubtedly." Elise answered, "We just dragged Torrent right cross the street."

"We didn't think that anyone would be interested." Wolf said.

"Are you armed?" Bess asked, looking at Wolf.

"Of course. Torrent has her knife and my sister and I have our las pistols. Only one power cell each though. We didn't expect to get into any gunfights."

"We should be ready to use them. Just in case." Bess said.

"Sure." Wolf agreed, nodding, "Jenni can you go and take a look at Torrent? I think someone spiked her drink as well. Bess, I think it's best if you take Elise's sidearm for now."

"Why?" Elise asked.

"Because she had more experience shooting one than some quill pushing outsider." Jenni said as she strode past Elise towards the sound of vomiting.

While Jenni and Elise saw to Torrent, Wolf waited by the door and Bess made her way to the opposite side of the room where a window overlooked the street. From here she watched various groups of locals as they went past, looking for any signs that they were taking an interest in the hotel that the five women were now sheltering in.

They had been waiting for a further quarter of an hour before there was a sudden banging on the door.

"Open up!" the voice of the man from the booth yelled, "I know you've got more people in there. Do you think I'm stupid?"

"Go away." Wolf responded, "We'll be leaving soon."

"Not without paying me my money. I want two hundred crowns." the man shouted and then there was the sound of a key in the lock as he opened the door from the outside. Wolf rested her hand on her las pistol in its holster, prepared to threaten the man with the weapon but when he shoved the door open she saw that he too was armed. The cut down double barrelled shotgun he wielded was crude but Wolf had seen shotguns used often enough by her own troops to know how deadly effective they could be at close quarters and she decided against provoking him by drawing it.

"I knew it!" he hissed, looking at Bess and Jenni, "Three you said. Now pay me my two hundred crowns and get out or the cops will be cleaning up your bodies."

Just then Bess heard the sound of a vehicle coming to a halt outside the hotel and she looked out of the

window to see an Imperial Guard truck painted in Catachan colours now parked in the street. The road markings prohibited this and as other vehicle went past the drivers yelled at the trio of guardsmen who disembarked from the truck, only to quieten down when they saw the weapons they brandished.

"They're here." Bess said.

"Okay let's go." Wolf replied, "Elise, Jenni, pick up Torrent."

"Where the feth do you think you're going?" the shotgun wielding man standing in the doorway demanded, "You're not going anywhere until you pay me."

Wolf smiled at him.

"Look, you seem like a very stupid man." she said, "But how about you use your brain just once and realise that you already have seventy five crowns for a room that's not even worth five and get out of our way."

"Give me my money." the man replied and he raised his shotgun.

"Oh that was a bad idea." Wolf said, wincing and the man snarled at her.

"What are you going to do about it little girl? You'll never draw that las pistol before I get a shot off." he said and Wolf shrugged.

"Yeah, but I don't need to." she said and then she tilted her head to peer past him, "Sergeant Molla, Sergeant Quinn, Corporal Mayer. Explain this man's situation to him."

The man suddenly became aware that there was someone standing on the landing behind him and he turned to face them. Before he could point his gun at the trio of newly arrived Catachans, Molla suddenly head butted the man and he cried out as his nose was crushed under the blow. Mayer then reached forwards to snatch the man's shotgun away from him and quickly ejected the two shells it contained and stuffed them into his pocket.

"Clear." he called out and Molla and Quinn looked at one another.

"Legs?" Molla said and Quinn nodded.

"Railing." he said.

The two sergeants then pushed the man up against the safety railing that ran around the edge of the landing to prevent people from falling to the common area below. Then grabbing the man's legs they tipped him up over it and held him upside down, screaming as he dangled above the common area.

"You know I don't think you've been a very good host." Wolf said as she stepped out onto the landing and looked over the rail, "In fact I'd like a refund."

"Feth you!" the man shouted.

"Bomber get down there." Quinn told Mayer and the corporal nodded before hurrying down the stair to stand in the common area beneath where the hotel employee was being dangled.

"Okay shake" Quinn said and he and Molla began to shake the man they held so that the contents of his pockets fell out, including numerous bank notes.

"What have we got Bomber?" Molla asked, looking down to see Mayer picking up the money.

"I'd say about a hundred and fifty." Mayer called out.

"That'll do." Wolf said and Molla and Quinn pulled the man back up over the safety rail.

"You won't get away with this." he said, snarling.

"Go ahead, call the cops." Wolf told him, "Even if they believe you they don't have jurisdiction over us and trust me, no commissar is going to want to risk a court martial of troops you threatened with a shotgun. So I think we'll be going now and nobody needs to say anything more about any of this." at that point there was a retching sound from in the room behind her and she smiled, "Oh and I think Torrent just threw up in your room. I'd clean that up if I were you. Otherwise all your other guests will realise what an improvement it is."

2.

"You got her just in time I think." Wolf said as the truck set off with Mayer at the wheel and Molla nodded.

"Yeah well with what's going on none of us is going to be dragging our heels." he replied.

"Do we know who's behind any of this?" Bess asked.

"Not really. We've got a description of the guy who was trying to drag that woman from Second Company off though." Quinn answered.

"I take that's not just being passed to the arbiters." Wolf said and Quinn and Molla both grinned, "What's so amusing?" Wolf added when she saw this.

"Rull's gone after him." Mayer said from the driver's seat, referring to Second Platoon's sniper and now Wolf smiled as well.

"Okay so we can safely assume that that guy's not going to be bothering any more women any more." she said.

"I hear General Fortnam's furious." Molla said, "Rumour is that he's been yelling at adepts all night and is demanding to send a delegation to meet with the Adeptus Arbitres tomorrow."

Wolf sighed.

"Oh great. We finally get some time off and all of a sudden our own general decides to declare war on the planet we're on." she said.

Major Trent, commanding officer of Fourth Company was one of the Imperial Guard officers that was shown into the fortified precinct house of the Adeptus Arbitres, the Imperium's law enforcement arm. With him were Major Devoe, Second Company's commanding officer and also the XIX Regiment commanding officer Colonel Shryke and Regimental Commissar Garratt. The group was shown into a meeting room where they were soon joined by a stern face man wearing black carapace armour.

"I am Judge Corvair." he said as he sat down opposite the Catachans, "I command the Adeptus Arbitres presence here on Temperatus."

"My name is Colonel Jayk Shryke. I command the Catachan Nineteenth Regiment. General Fortnam has asked me to speak to you about the multiple assaults on our troops." Colonel Shryke replied.

"Ah yes, the local police have advised me of these. Nothing out of the ordinary as far as I can see, a few attempting muggings of people unfamiliar with the planet."

"Muggings?" Major Trent exclaimed, "I've got a report from my company medicae that one of my people was deliberately poisoned."

"That was the finding of my company medicae as well." Major Devoe added.

"Yes, this is a common feature of many muggings on this planet." Judge Corvair replied, "As I am sure you are aware, the Adeptus Arbitres does not trouble itself with such trivial matters but we do monitor the reports from local law enforcement bodies for any signs that could point towards a larger underlying problem."

"And you don't see mass poisonings as a problem then?" Colonel Shryke said.

"I think what the colonel is saying-" Commissar Garratt began. To maintain their independence from the soldiers they may have to summarily execute, Imperial Guard commissars were never assigned to regiments from their own home worlds and so this meant that every commissar in a Catachan regiment was considered an outsider and treated accordingly with injuries and even deaths not unheard of.

"I'm saying that I'd consider the widespread use of poison to be an issue well worth looking into." Shryke interrupted and the commissar glared at him.

"There is nothing here that concerns the Adeptus Arbitres." Judge Corvair said and he got to his feet, "Now if you don't mind I have more important matters to attend to."

"I take it that we'll get copies of all those reports on poisonings?" Colonel Shryke asked.

"Oh very well. You can waste your time looking into them if you want colonel, but mark my words you are just wasting your time. Give it a few weeks and you'll be used to the locals' behaviour. Then these incidents will be just as ineffective against your people as they are against them." Judge Corvair said before he strode out of the room.

"Colonel what did you hope to gain from that?" Commissar Garratt asked and Colonel Shryke smiled.

"Permission to carry out a criminal investigation commissar." he replied, "What he said about the attacks doesn't make sense."

"What part of it?" the commissar said.

"The part about them being ineffective." Trent commented and Commissar Garratt's eyes widened.

"Of course. The judge said that there were reports of failed attacks by locals, not reports of successful ones."

"So what happens to the people who are successfully assaulted that they never report it?" Colonel Shryke added and Commissar Garratt nodded.

"Very well, I will authorise you to appoint what troops you think suitable to the investigation." he said.
"Temperatus isn't our ground though." Major Devoe said, "We'll need someone who knows more about how this sort of society works."
"And I think I know the perfect officer for it." Major Trent added.

When Wolf was summoned to Major Trent's command tent she saw a Chimera infantry fighting vehicle parked outside and the enhanced communication antennas mounted on the turret identified it as Colonel Shryke's personal command vehicle.

"What's the colonel doing here?" she asked Company Sergeant Stubbs when she entered the tent.
"He's here for your briefing lieutenant." Stubbs answered, "Along with the regimental leash. Plus ours."
"Oh great." Wolf said at the thought of attending a briefing with commissars, "Oh well, here goes." she added and then she walked towards the door leading to Major Trent's office and knocked on it.

"Come in." the major colonel called out and Wolf went inside, snapping to attention and saluting when she saw Colonel Shryke as well as Commissar Garratt and also Fourth Company's own Commissar Layne.

"At ease lieutenant." Major Trent said.

"Yes sir." Wolf replied, relaxing.

"Lieutenant," Commissar Layne said, "I understand that you had personal experience of one of the attempts to poison a member of our division last night."

"Yes sir. Guardswoman Harriet Torrent. Fortunately my sister and I found her in her intoxicated state before she could come to harm and we were able to find a safe place to wait before returning to camp. I understand that Doctor Altman has already cleared her to return to duty." Wolf said.

"That's correct lieutenant." Major Trent said, "But we didn't bring you here just for you to tell us about things we already know."

"The Adeptus Arbites have given us the authorisation to carry out an investigation into the poisonings." Colonel Shryke added.

"Such incidents have been happening for some time on Temperatus it would seem." Commissar Garratt said, "The arbiters have not considered them worthy of further investigation. On the other hand we do." and Colonel Shryke and Major Trent briefly glanced at one another, remembering how the commissar had been late to realise the potential significance of the attacks as well.

"I'll be happy to assist the investigators in any way possible sir." Wolf said.

"You won't just be assisting in the investigation lieutenant." Layne said, "You and I will be leading it."

"Me and you?" Wolf said in surprise.

"Yes lieutenant. A officer of the commissariat must lead an investigation and your personal history of growing up on a hive world may give you more of an insight into how the locals act." Commissar Garratt told her.

"Plus I understand that one of your platoon has already seen fit to attempt to track down one of the culprits from last light." Colonel Shryke added and Wolf remembered being told about Rull setting out to hunt down the attacker of the woman from Second Company.

"I'll be joining your command section for the duration of the investigation." Layne said, "The rest of your platoon can act in a support role. Light arms only though. I don't want anyone firing off anti-tank missiles at civilian road cars."

"Of course sir." Wolf replied.

"Take the witch as well." Major Trent added.

"I'm not sure that will be necessary colonel." Layne responded.

"Well I do." Major Trent said, "A sanctioned psyker might be able to open up investigative routes that simple questioning can't."

"If you think so major." Wolf said, nodding even though the order meant working with Fourth Company's sanctioned psyker Aloysius Veneel. Wolf had worked with the psyker on numerous occasions before and had witnessed at first hand the extent of the powers he wielded but she shared the same suspicion of the warp that almost all sane humans did, "May I ask what my remit will be exactly?"

"That's easy lieutenant." Layne said, "We will be investigating whether the assaults on our personnel in particular and the native population in general are part of some larger underlying scheme."

"And if they are?" Wolf said.

"Then we put a stop to it lieutenant. The nature of our agreement with the Adeptus Arbites give us full judicial authority. Of course that shall rest entirely with you and I. We can't have enlisted men carrying out summary executions now can we? The local population just wouldn't stand for it and we aren't here to cause trouble." Wolf hesitated when she heard this, knowing that causing trouble with civilians was one thing Imperial Guard troops in general and Catachans in particular were very good at.

"In that case if I can be excused I'd like to brief my men." Wolf said and Major Trent nodded.

"You are dismissed lieutenant." he said.

"Have your command section meet in my tent at thirteen hundred hours lieutenant." Layne added.

"Yes sir." Wolf said before she left Major Trent's office.

"Good news lieutenant?" Stubbs asked as she walked towards the exit from the command tent and she frowned at him.

"Frankly company sergeant I think having my own squad leaders forcing me to sleep in a straitjacket again would be more comfortable." she told him.

"Well I'm sure they'll oblige if you ask them nicely." Stubbs called out after her as she left the tent.

Outside the command tent, the camp occupied by the XIX Regiment was a hive of activity. The transports carrying fresh troops from Catachan had yet to arrive at Temperatus and tents needed to be prepared for them when they did. Glancing at her watch she saw that it was shortly before noon and Wolf knew that most of her platoon would be in the mess tent eating lunch. Only the single squad of abhuman ogryns that was attached to Second Platoon would be elsewhere, their table manners and hygiene being too poor even for Catachans to tolerate, would be absent.

"So what did the major want lieutenant?" Platoon Sergeant Vance, Wolf's second in command asked as she walked up to the table where the three other members of her command section other than Torrent and also the leaders of each of Second Platoon's other squads sat eating.

"Probably asking about how Torrent ended up getting her drink spiked." Sergeant Grey of Second Squad commented.

"Partially, yes." Wolf said, "It turns out that the local arbiters have sanctioned us to carry out an investigation." The Catachans at the table all stopped eating and looked towards Wolf.

"Did anyone point out to them that we're not cops?" Quinn said.

"For now we are. The arbiters have had reports of these sorts of attacks but ignored them. Now Colonel Shryke himself wants us to look into them." Wolf said.

"Fair enough." Molla replied, "We can start by heading back to that bar where Torrent got her drink spiked and beat some answers out of the owner. He must have some idea what's going on in his bar."

"I don't think that Commissar Layne wants us to start with beatings." Wolf said.

"Whoa, you never said anything about the leash." Grey said.

"A member of the commissariat is required to lead the investigation." Wolf explained.

"We'll soon sort him out." Quinn said, "We've done it before."

"No, not this time. If anything happens to him then another commissar will assigned or the investigation will be canned." Wolf said. Then she hesitated.

"I know that look. There's more isn't there?" Vance said and Wolf nodded.

"Major Trent wants us to use psychic support as well." she answered and there were groans.

"So the leash and the bolt magnet." Grey commented.

"At least the leash will spend most of his time watching the witch." Mayer said from the end of the table.

"Commissar Layne wants to go through the existing evidence at thirteen hundred with the command section." Wolf said, "That gives me just enough time to grab something to eat myself before. The rest of you should go over the Military Assistance to Civil Authority guidelines with your troops. We're under orders to take light arms only."

"Emperor-damned MACA." Grey muttered.

"What about the ogryns?" Molla asked.

"Commissar Layne hasn't mentioned them. I'm assuming they'll be coming along as well if we need them." Wolf said and Molla smiled.

"No need to worry about fire support then. Those ripper guns are as deadly as heavy bolters up close." he said.

3.

When Wolf peered into Commissar Layne's Tent she saw him sat at his foldaway desk reading from a dataslate while a cyborg servitor stood close by. Servitors were common enough in the Imperial Guard but the markings on this particular example suggested that it belonged to the Adeptus Arbites.

"Second Platoon command section reporting as ordered commissar.

"Ah lieutenant, do come in and take a seat." Layne replied and as the group of Catachans entered the tent and when he saw Torrent he pointed towards the second of the two chairs laid out in front of his desk, "Ah Guardswoman Torrent. Good to see that you have returned to duty. I've arranged for another chair for you." "Yes commissar." Torrent said as she and Wolf sat down. This left Vance as well as the unit's vox operator and grenadier without chairs so they instead walked across the tent and without being invited to sit down on the commissar's neatly made bed, prompting a brief frown from him before he turned his attention back towards the two women.

"As you can see the Adeptus Arbites have sent over this lexomat servitor." he said, "It has been loaded with all the information regarding previous assaults of this nature."

"There have been enough that it takes an entire servitor to keep track of them?" Wolf said.

"More likely the arbiters just didn't want to waste the time of one of their own people on this." Vance commented.

"Regardless, I have more than eight hundred case records. All involving the same sort of toxin and-" Layne began before his tent opened again and a slender man with a shaven head entered.

"I was ordered to report here." the sanctioned psyker Veneel said.

"Yes come in Adept Veneel." Layne said, "We were just starting. As I was saying, the reports all involve the same sort of toxin, a chemical that happens to be an industrial by-product created by a lot of the planet's industry."

"So it's easy to get hold of then?" Wolf asked.

"It shouldn't be." Layne answered, "According to what I've read the processes that lead to its creation are considered so dangerous that only servitors are used to carry them out. The by-product is then sealed up and taken for disposal. In theory no human being comes close to it, which is fortunate. It can be ingested or absorbed through soft tissue and continual exposure will lead to paralysis and death." then he glanced at Torrent and added, "Of course a smaller dose just results in the disorientation that you suffered. Now Guardswoman Torrent, could you tell us everything you remember about the events of last night?"

"Not much." Torrent replied, "I headed out into town and found a bar that looked okay. If I'd known she'd be there I probably would have thought twice about it though." and she glanced at Wolf, "I bought a drink and that's about it."

"What kind of drink?"

"Some weird fermented fruit juice the barman recommended." Torrent replied, "He said it wasn't that strong."

"And what did you and your sister order lieutenant?" Layne asked, turning to Wolf.

"Some local beer. Straight from the bottle." Wolf said, "Could it be something in the fruit juice?"

"If it is then we're dealing with more than just a dodgy bar owner." Vance said from across the tent, "Everyone in the bar would have to know and want to cause harm to Torrent."

"Oh you mean there could be a planet where the inhabitants don't like outsiders?" Wolf said, looking back at Vance.

"We don't poison our guests." he replied.

"No need." Torrent added, "A lot of them manage to eat, drink or touch something we tell them not to and poison themselves anyway."

"Four of the previous reports mention that bar so it is possible that a member of staff is involved." Layne said, "We'll start there. Lieutenant requisition transport and have your platoon mobilise. I don't think having them all storm into the bar at once is what we need, so just a small number need accompany us and your command section while the rest remain in reserve."

Wolf nodded.

"Mayer's mortar squad ought to do." she said, "They're leaving their heavy weapons here anyway."

"Very well. I'll leave you to get that organised lieutenant. Contact me as soon as we are ready to depart." Layne ordered.

Second Platoon mobilised in several, including one with an open topped rear transport area so that the notoriously claustrophobic ogryns would not need to be coaxed into getting aboard it. Leaving the Catachan camp, the convoy made its way through the city until they came to the bar where Torrent's drink had been tampered with. Given that it catered mainly to workers from the nearby industrial plants, the bar was closed

during the middle of the day when its clientele would be at work. It was clear that there were still people inside the building, however. There was a habitation unit built into the structure that was obviously intended to be lived in by the bar's owner and as the five Imperial Guard vehicles swung into the parking lot that the night before had been filled with private vehicles two of the employees could be seen carrying waste out to the large containers located behind the building.

"Hey!" one of the bar staff yelled at Mayer as he climbed out of the cab of the truck he had just driven there, "This is a private parking lot and the bar's closed. You can't leave those there." then the man's eyes widened as Mayer reached back into the cab and took out a las gun.

It was then that the other members of Mayer's six-man mortar squad as well as Wolf's command section and the attached commissar and psyker also disembarked from the truck and they approached the bar as a group.

"I take that this door is open." Layne said, pointing at the main entrance to the bar.

"Yes but-" the bar employee responded before the commissar interrupted him.

"Very good." he said, striding towards the door, followed by the others.

As he walked past the two startled bar employees, Mayer came to a halt and looked at them.

"Make sure no-one messes with my truck, okay?" he told them, "Otherwise those guys may get somewhat cranky about it." and then he pointed to the open topped vehicle where seven three-metre tall ogyrns all sat upright cradling their ripper guns. Then he smiled and followed the others inside.

There were more people at work inside the bar, restocking drinks behind the counter and carrying out minor repairs to furniture. All of these stopped what they were doing and looked around as the well armed Imperial Guard party entered the room. Layne calmly walked up to the bar, drew his bolt pistol and placed it on the bar itself.

"I would like to speak to the owner." he said, looking at each employee present in turn, "If that individual is present then they should make themselves known to me. Otherwise someone should run along and fetch them."

A young man at the far end of the room suddenly darted out of a nearby doorway and Wolf lifted her hand to the microbead communication headset she wore.

"This is Wolf." she said softly, averting her gaze from the bar employees, "A single male just left the room. Hopefully he's going for the owner but make sure no-one's trying to escape."

"Copy that lieutenant." Molla responded, "Do you want a full perimeter?"

"Not yet. Let's keep our profile as low as possible." Wolf said right as the young man reappeared with someone much older, "Strike that last order sergeant, he's back." she added before taking her hand away from her ear.

"I'm the owner of this establishment." the newly arrived man said, "What in the name of Him on Earth is going on here? Can't you see that we're closed?"

"And your name would be?" Layne asked.

"Dent, Alec Dent. My name is on the licence right up there on the wall beside your head."

"So it is." Layne replied, looking at the licence to serve liquor framed behind the bar, "Well Mister Dent, perhaps you can explain how a member of the Catachan Nineteenth Regiment came to be poisoned here last night, the poison being added to her beverage."

"Hey I've got nothing to do with that." Dent protested, "It's not my fault if your idiot soldiers don't pay attention to their drinks and someone slips something into them."

"Then you won't mind when we check all your taps and search this establishment for the presence of the toxin will you?" Layne said.

"As a matter of fact I do. There's work to be done before we open so I want you out of here."

"Oh I wasn't asking permission Mister Dent." Layne said and he reached out to put his hand on the grip of the bolt pistol lying on the bar, "Guardswoman Torrent, do you have the test kits?"

"Yes sir." Torrent replied and she walked around the end of the bar, making her way to where bottles were lined up on shelves behind it and taps were set into the bar for pumping drinks from storage containers beneath it. She then reached into the medicae's kit she had slung over her shoulder and took out something that looked like a lot of clear plastic tubes connected together in a row. Each of these tubes contained a colourless liquid and had a rod set into the top that Torrent was able to remove. Each rod was rubbed against a tap or dipped into an already open bottle before being placed back in its tube and Layne watched these closely as most of them began to change colour as the liquid inside became a dark blue.

"That's just alcohol." Torrent said, "The toxin would show up as yellow."

"What about the ones that didn't change?" Vance asked.

"Non-alcoholic." Torrent replied before she went to put a bottle back under the bar. It was then that she noticed a jacket stuffed under there as well and she removed this.

"Odd place to keep a jacket." Wolf commented and as Torrent put it down on the bar something inside it rattled.

"Interesting." Layne said and Torrent reached into the pocket to take out a small bottle that was filled with

what could have been either some sort of sweet or pills, "Test one." Layne told her and she nodded as she tipped some onto the bar before she crushed them under the butt of her las pistol. Then she dragged one of the testing rods through the resulting powder and put it back in its tube. Seconds later the fluid inside the tube turned a bright yellow.

"Now that is interesting." Layne said, "Who does this jacket belong to?"

"Vorgen, he's taking out the trash." Dent answered and Wolf reached for her microbead again.

"Does anyone have eyes on the guys taking out the trash?" she asked.

"Confirmed lieutenant, two of them round the back." Grey replied.

"Detain them, we need them both alive." Wolf ordered.

"On it." Grey said and out in the parking lot he promptly disembarked from the truck his squad was riding in, "Hey!" he called out to the two bar employees who were still loading waste into the large storage bins behind the bar, "Stop what you're doing and stay still"

The two men looked around to see Grey walking towards them while more Catachans were disembarking from the trucks and all of a sudden one of them turned around again and broke into a run.

"Suspect on the move, heading west." Grey said into his microbead, broadcasting the warning to the rest of the platoon as he and his squad started to run as well. Grey's squad ran right past the man who had remained by the waste bins, maintaining their pursuit of the man who opted to flee and it was only when Molla and his squad arrived that he was told anything further.

"Get back inside ." Molla told him, holding his las pistol in his hand as he pointed towards the nearest door into the bar and the man nodded before being escorted into the bar, "The other one's on the run lieutenant." Molla reported, "But he's got Grey and Quinn's squads after him."

Wolf looked at the bar owner.

"I take it that this is not Vorgen." she said.

"No, that's Toldor." the owner replied and Wolf sighed.

"Of course it is." she said.

4.

Grey, Quinn and their men yelled at startled passers by to get out of their way as they pursued Vorgen through the city streets. The sight of twenty well armed soldiers chasing someone down was enough to convince most civilians to let them pass but a few were so confused by the spectacle that they froze in place and more than one local was knocked aside by a fist or rifle butt. Vorgen had the advantage over the Catachans of being familiar with the ground but he was leaving a trail of angry people behind him as he pushed them out of the way in his efforts to escape.

"He's entering KL-twelve." Grey reported using his microbead, "Still moving. I don't have a clear shot." "Remember we want him alive sergeant." Wolf responded, her signal distorted with static by the distance and intervening objects between them.

Vorgen suddenly turned down a side street that took him off the heavily travelled main streets where the Catachans could not fire at him without risking hitting civilians. However, this was more than a tactical error and before any of his pursuers appeared at the end of the street he turned again, this time into an alleyway that he ran about half way down before suddenly coming to a halt beside a barred manhole cover. He kicked this with the heel of his boot twice, then paused and kicked it twice again. Then he crouched down and began to pull the cover up, using the bars for a grip. Once this was clear he stood up again and was about to begin climbing down before the Catachans could catch up with him. However, he failed to notice the small red dot that appeared on the side of his knee and before he could escape down the open hatch a silenced bullet suddenly passed right through the leg joint and he let out a scream as he collapsed on the spot. "This way!" he heard Grey calling out, "Rull's nailed him."

The injury to his leg did not stop Vorgen from continuing in his effort to escape though and he dragged himself to the edge of the hatchway and lowered himself through it. Below there was a vertical shaft that had handholds set into the wall that he used to try climbing down as blood continued to pump from his wounded leg. The injury was too severe for him to be able to put any weight on the leg and climbing down the handholds was slow going, so much so that the Catachans reached the hatch above him while he was still only half way down and he heard the sound of the slide of a shotgun being drawn back and forth to chamber a round.

"Okay you can carry on to the bottom but stay right there and I'll come down and get you." Quinn said, pointing his shotgun down the hatch.

Vorgen looked up to see several Catachan troops looking back down at him. Then he looked down the shaft he was descending and spotted movement in the darkness. Looking up again he smiled at the Catachans and promptly let go of the handholds he was gripping onto.

"No!" Quinn yelled as Vorgen suddenly plummeted down into the darkness, "Quick, get a light down there." he added as he slung his shotgun over his shoulder and started to climb down the shaft as well.

Grey reached into his webbing and produced a chemical light stick that he promptly activated and then dropped it down the shaft. The glowing stick bounced off the walls, tumbling past Quinn as he hurried downwards until it landed beside Vorgen at the very bottom of the shaft. Looking down Quinn saw that the man was not alone, two figures wearing dark cloaks were hunched over him and apparently going through his pockets.

"Hey! Get away from him!" Quinn shouted and then as he watched in horror an arm that terminated in a clawed hand emerged from under the cloak of one figure and was then plunged into Vorgen's throat.

"Mutants?" Wolf said as Second Platoon gathered in the parking lot.

"Yeah, I saw one of them with a claw." Quinn replied, "It didn't look like a weapon he was holding or some fancy cybernetic either. That was biological and it was part of his body."

"Vile creatures. They shouldn't be allowed within the city." Layne commented.

"They probably aren't." Wolf replied, "That would be why they're skulking about in the sewers."

"Perhaps we ought to let the arbiters know that they're down there. Then they can do something about them." Vance suggested and Wolf nodded.

"What about this Vorgen?" Layne asked, "What happened to his body?"

"You mean this?" Grey asked and he pulled back the cover from where Vorgen's body had been loaded into the back of the truck they were gathered around, causing Layne to recoil suddenly at the sight of the almost decapitated corpse.

"We should get him back to camp for Doctor Altman to examine." Wolf said.

"You think that there is anything to learn from this carcass?" Layne asked.

"Not all mutation is easily visible." Wolf pointed out, "Maybe this guy was heading for a place that mutants lived because he's one as well."

"Rull did say that he stamped on the grating in a very specific manner." Quinn said, "It could have been a signal to the mutants."

"Which makes their actions very interesting." Vance said, "They obviously didn't want us speaking to him."

"Commissar Layne I suggest we split up." Wolf said, "Sergeant Grey and Second Squad should take the body back to camp for analysis while the rest of us investigate the address we have for Vorgen."

"Agreed lieutenant." Layne replied and he turned to Grey, "Sergeant, you heard your officer. Get that body covered again and get it back to camp before it becomes a hazard to public health."

"Looks like we've attracted attention." Mayer said suddenly as he looked across the street towards the hotel where Wolf, Elise and Torrent had sought shelter the previous evening. Now the large man whose shotgun Mayer had taken was standing on the pavement outside staring back at them.

"He doesn't look too happy, does he?" Molla commented and Wolf shrugged.

"What's he going to do about anything?" she replied before walking towards her command section's truck and climbing aboard it.

Across the street the hotel manager watched as the Imperial Guard troops embarked on the trucks and they began to drive off. In particular he took note of the single truck that headed off in a different direction to the others, watching it until it had disappeared around a corner. Then he went back inside, returning to his booth and picking up the communicator he had there.

"They're moving out now." he said, "Two groups. There's a single truck carrying the body and from the looks of it you don't have long before it gets back to their base."

"You have done well brother." a rasping voice on the other end of the line responded, "Our lord will be most pleased."

"I live to serve." the manager said and then there was a 'click' as the individual he had been speaking to hung up on him.

5.

Traffic on the roads leading back towards the Catachan camp began to slow down and from his position in the truck's cab Grey saw that there had been some sort of collision that was blocking part of the road. There were three lanes of traffic heading in the same direction and the accident was blocking two of them. This meant that there was still enough room for vehicles to get past the accident but the three lanes had to merge into one and until the police arrived to direct traffic this meant that drivers were all attempting to force their way through the gap before someone from one of the others could beat them to it.

"I don't like the look of this." he said to the driver seated behind him.

"I'll pull out as soon as I can." the driver replied.

"Wait, we'll clear a gap." Grey said and he opened the small hatch in the rear of the cab that allowed him see into the transport area where most of his squad sat either side of the body, "Two of you stay put to watch that body." he said, "The rest of you out, we need to make a gap."

"Las guns sarge?" one of the guardsmen asked and Grey nodded.

"Semi auto only and no firing unless I say so." he said before sliding the hatch closed again and then disembarking from the cab.

The sight of the armed Catachans attracted a lot of attention from the drivers of the other vehicles in the road and it was easy for them to give directions while these drivers were focused on them. As his troops split themselves between the three lanes of traffic to try and clear a gap large enough for their truck to fit through Grey moved closer to the accident itself to try and make out what had caused it. Two light transport vehicles had collided with one another and Grey initially guess was that one of them had attempted to change lanes without its driver checking to make sure that there was a suitable gap first. Grey also noticed that his squad was not the only group of people making their way through the slow moving traffic. Heading towards him were several people, a mix of men and women wearing plain robes and attempting to hand leaflets to the occupants of each vehicle they came to. Most of the occupants just ignored them while others either tossed the leaflets back out of the vehicles or yelled abuse at the robe-wearing leafleters. This did not seem to phase any of them, however and they continued to make their way along the robe.

"Join us for worship brother?" one of them, a woman, asked when she reached Grey and she thrust one of the leaflets towards him.

"We need to clear traffic." Grey replied, simply stuffing the leaflet he had been given into a pocket without reading it, "Get your people out of the road." but the woman ignored him and carried on making her way along the road and handing out leaflets, "Emperor botherers." Grey muttered to himself and he reached for his microbead, "Listen up," he broadcast to his squad, "we've got a bunch of religious nut cases using the traffic jam to spread their tedious word. Watch out that they don't-" and then he suddenly stopped speaking as he noticed something beneath the robes of one of the preachers. Coloured bright orange, Grey easily made out the shape of a pistol grip and he knew instantly what it was – a flare pistol. Though such devices were not intended for use as weapons they could be deadly in the wrong hands and Grey could not think of any legitimate reason why a street preacher would be carrying one, "Stand to!" he snapped, "Detain the preachers, at least some of them are armed and I want to know why."

The other Catachans immediately started to look around, locating members of the religious group and moving to cut them off. Meanwhile Grey started to follow the individual he knew to be carrying the flare pistol, his hand resting on his own sidearm.

"Hold it right there holy man." the first of the Catachans to come face to face with one of the group handing out leaflets said, holding up one hand in front of him while holding his rifle vertically in the other, "Over to the side of the street."

"I have the right to spread the Emperor's word." the man replied and he held out the entire stack of leaflets towards the Catachan.

"Don't give me that-" the Catachan began, moving his hand to knock the papers aside but before he could manage this he felt a blade pierce his stomach and he cried out in pain. At the same time his finger tightened on the trigger of his lasgun and a single shot was fired skywards.

Panic immediately set in among the occupants of the vehicles and several of the drivers made a break for the gap that would take them around the accident at the same time, all of them crashing into one another and causing even more confusion. Others decided to abandon their vehicles and attempt to escape on foot. The fleeing civilians pushed past one another and several also attempted to push Catachans out of their way. This immediately proved to be a mistake as the Catachans responded with force of their own. None of them resorted to using their lasguns to shoot unarmed civilians but they did use them as clubs to knock their assailants to the ground if a swift kick, punch or headbutt was not enough to get them to retreat. When not dealing with the scattering civilians the Catachans raised their lasguns and sought out the robe clad

preachers. However, the first lasgun to be discharged was the one owned by the stabbed Catachan, his murderer taking the weapon for himself and turning it on the people around him. With the weapon currently set to semi-automatic fire mode he had to pull the trigger once for each individual shot he wanted to fire but he did not seem to care much about where these went and so he fired rapidly all around him. Drawing his las pistol, Grey fired at the gunman and his first shot hit the man in the head, producing a brief spurt of blood before the wound was cauterised and the man collapsed in a heap. While the man with the stolen lasgun had been firing the other robed preachers were producing weapons of their own, mainly simple stub guns but there were also a few cut down shotguns and upon seeing these the Catachans opened fire right away. As gunfire erupted all around him, Grey hunted for the individual armed with the flare pistol that he had been trailing and he saw the figure now holding the flare pistol in one hand just as he disappeared behind the Catachans' own truck.

"Target closing on rear of truck." Grey broadcast via his microbead.

"Copy that. We'll deal with him." one of the two Catachans still in the back of the truck responded and both of them got to their feet and readied their weapons just as the man with the flare pistol reached the open back of the vehicle. Before either Catachan could take aim he fired the flare pistol into the truck. The flash of the discharge made both Catachans duck as the projectile flew past them before striking the canvas cover stretched over the transport area and as the flare ignited it set fire to the cover. Rather than attempt to reload his now empty pistol the robed man instead hurled a glass jar filled with a dark liquid into the truck and this smashed open, spilling its contents over the body the two Catachans had been transporting as well as the floor of the truck around it.

"Out!" one of the Catachans yelled when he recognised the smell of an accelerant from his days of burning back the jungle on his home world and drawing his traditional Catachan knife he opened a large slice in the truck's canvas cover that the two soldiers leapt through moments before the first piece of burning debris came into contact with the accelerant and the entire transport section of the truck went up in flames.

Even more than twenty metres away from the truck Grey could feel the heat of the flames and he took cover, expecting the vehicle to explode at any moment. Grey saw the other members of his squad also seek cover in anticipation of an explosion while the already panicked civilians continued to flee the area. However, what surprised Grey was that the robed figures seemed to be simply vanishing. Just a few moments earlier they had been mixed in with civilians and guardsmen all around but now there only a handful of them remaining. Grey made his way towards the last place he had seen one of them, his las pistol held at the ready as he reached the vehicle that the figure had been using as cover while firing a shotgun at anyone who came into his field of fire. Leaping around the side of the vehicle Grey instantly discovered the reason why the robed figures were disappearing, they were abandoning their robes to blend in with the fleeing civilians and now a robe and a shotgun lay on the ground where they had been dropped by their owner. Looking around Grey could see large numbers of people fleeing the scene and he knew that there was no chance that his squad on its own could possibly detain them all without opening fire indiscriminately on them.

Just then the fire on the truck reached its fuel tank and the extreme heat ignited the promethium stored inside to produce a large explosion that sent a massive ball of flames skywards and shrapnel in all directions. "Feth!" Grey exclaimed as he ducked behind the vehicle beside him and then listened to the sound of debris falling all around him.

6.

"I don't like this." Wolf said as she and Layne led a small force consisting of her command section and Mayer's mortar squad up the stairs of the habitation tower to the floor where Vorgen's own hab unit was supposedly located.

"Why not lieutenant?" Layne asked, "We have encountered no resistance and I see no signs that anyone is attempting to pass on warnings about our presence."

"That's just it commissar." Wolf said, "Back home on Lyreria hab units like these were where the lowest parts of society that hadn't been expelled completely lived. Half the people in them were wanted by the law and most of the rest just hadn't been identified as suspects yet. Our arrival here wasn't exactly subtle, we've got a bunch of trucks parked out on the street in plain view downstairs and they're all clearly marked. That should have triggered some sort of response immediately."

"What are you suggesting lieutenant?" Layne asked.

"That they already knew we were coming." Vance commented, "No need to warn people to run if the guilty ones have already gone anyway."

"This could be an ambush." Wolf said and she came to a sudden halt, reaching for her microbead, "Sergeant Khor." she said.

"Khor ready." the deep rumbling voice of the leader of the ogryn squad attached to Second Platoon responded slowly.

"Khor I want your squad to disembark from your transport and form a protective ring around all our vehicles. Sergeant Molla I need you to do the same and Quinn you are to bring your squad to the base of the stairs so you're in position to support us or the troops guarding our transports."

"Copy that lieutenant. Expecting trouble?" Quinn asked.

"Possibly. Or we could have missed everything anyway." Wolf said before shutting off the microbead. It was then that a loud shout was heard from the direction of the Catachans' trucks.

"Ogryns out!" Khor bellowed and the ogryns obediently began to climb down from the back of their open topped truck before Khor waved at them to spread out. Wolf knew that the sight of an ogryn standing around three metres tall and wielding a belt fed ripper gun would be enough to put off many attackers who lacked access to the weaponry powerful enough to harm one of the abhuman soldiers.

Wolf then started to move again and her force continued up to the floor where they had been told by the bar owner that Vorgen lived. As soon as they stepped from the stairwell Wolf and Layne looked along the walkway they emerged onto to try and identify the hab unit they wanted and this proved to be rather easy.

"It would seem that someone else had the idea of paying his home a visit." Layne said when he saw the door below the identifying numbers wide open and he drew his bolt pistol, "With me." he ordered, waving the Catachans onwards. However, rather than immediately start to follow the commissar the Catachan troops looked towards Wolf.

"As the commissar said." she said, "Safeties off."

The Catachans hurried towards the open doorway and were not far behind as Commissar Layne charged right up to it ahead of them.

"Commissar! Wait!" Wolf yelled and Layne came to a halt just before reaching the doorway.

"What's wrong lieutenant?" he asked.

"Let my men check the entrance first." Wolf suggested and she looked at Vance who nodded back at her. The platoon sergeant then moved around Layne and crouched down.

"Wire." he said, smiling and he drew his knife so that he could use it to point out where an almost invisible trip wire was stretched across the open doorway.

"So someone was expecting us." Layne said as Vance inspected the wire more closely.

"Looks like its hooked up to something in a jar." Vance said, "This was meant to do more than just trip up the first person through the door and have them break their nose on impact. My guess is that we're looking at a small improvised charge and shrapnel. Probably just enough to send whoever triggered it back over that wall there and all the way down." and he pointed to the wall on the exposed edge of the walkway connecting all of the habitation units on this level.

"Great work lieutenant." Torrent commented, shoving Wolf.

"Yes indeed." Layne added, nodding in agreement as he failed to spot the sarcasm in Torrent's words, "If not for you I could have been killed."

"Bomber come take a look at this." Vance said and Mayer nodded before making his way to the doorway as well. Carefully he stepped over the wire and peered around the door itself to where the explosive filled jar was jammed between it and the wall, a small wooden wedge being used to keep the door in precisely the right position for the trap to work.

"Looks like a pull fuse." he said.

"Which means what exactly corporal?" Layne asked.

"It's like the pin on a grenade." Vance told him, "Pulling on the wire pulls on the pin."

"Can you defuse it?" Layne said.

"Easily." Mayer replied, reaching into a pocket and producing a multi-tool from which he unfolded a small pair of cutters that he then used to cut through the wire, "Clear." he added as the wire dropped to the floor without the fuse connected to the charge being triggered.

"Very good corporal." Layne said, "Now let's see what's inside this hab unit that whoever set that charge doesn't want us to see."

As the Catachans began to move into the habitation unit Wolf looked at Veneel and saw that the psyker was instead looking at the other units on the level.

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

"What?" Veneel responded, not paying attention.

"I said is something wrong?" Wolf repeated.

"Perhaps." Veneel answered, "I have a strange feeling, as if something is watching us from far away through many eyes all around us."

"I don't like the sound of that." Wolf said and then she looked at the members of Mayer's squad who had yet to follow her own command section inside the habitation unit, "Remain out here." she told them, "If Adept Veneel identifies a target then follow his lead."

"Yes lieutenant." one of the Catachans replied, nodding at Wolf before she went inside the habitation unit as well.

It became obvious very quickly that someone had been through the unit before the Catachans had arrived. Every cupboard and drawer had been opened and the contents removed. No effort had been made to hide the fact that this had been done, the primary objective obviously being to clear out any evidence.

"Somebody was thorough." Vance said as he looked at the row of empty cupboards in the habitation unit's sole bedroom.

"Easier than sorting out what could connect Vorgen to whoever did this." Wolf replied.

"At least we have the bomb." Vance said, "Maybe if we hand that over to Cornelliuss the Bastard he and the other cogboys will be able to figure out who made it."

"Lieutenant I want you to leave this hab unit under guard." Layne said, "Though nothing visible has been left behind perhaps something less obvious is still present."

"Like fingerprints?" Wolf suggested and Layne nodded.

"Precisely. Thankfully your troops seem to have avoided touching anything they didn't need to so there could still be something present that an Adeptus Arbites forensic analysis servitor can pick up on. In the mean time we shall conduct a canvassing operation of the other residents of this habitation block. I refuse to believe that this hab unit could be emptied without someone seeing something."

Wolf and Vance looked at one another and Layne frowned.

"You disagree lieutenant?" he said.

"Commissar, I agree that someone will have witnessed this hab unit being emptied." Wolf replied nervously, "But it's just that-

"It's just that none of them are going to tell us an Emperor damned thing." Vance interrupted, "At least nothing useful. Though a few might well end up informing on any neighbours they don't like much."

"Disgusting." Layne snarled, "To impede Imperial justice is treason and carries the harshest penalty."

"Then we'll probably have to put the entire neighbourhood up against a wall and shoot them." Vance said before the command section's vox operator suddenly passed the unit's handset to Wolf.

"What is it Kline?" she asked.

"It's Sergeant Grey for you lieutenant." Kline answered, "His squad was ambushed on the way back to camp and the body they were escorting has been destroyed."

Wolf took the handset and lifted it to her head.

"Sergeant Grey." she said, "Go ahead."

"Lieutenant my squad was ambushed on the way back to camp." Grey responded, "There was an accident that slowed traffic down, I suspect that it was staged but I can't prove it yet."

"Who attacked you sergeant?" Wolf asked.

"A group of about twenty to thirty individuals dressed in religious robes. They took advantage of the halted traffic to walk along the road acting as if they were just a bunch of Emperor botherers handing out pamphlets. When I spotted that they were using those robes to conceal weapons I ordered my squad to detain them and that's when they attacked. Fortunately I'd already deployed my squad to try and deal with the traffic or we'd all have been caught inside the truck when it got torched."

"Did you lose anyone?" Wolf said.

"Just one. Guardsman Midland. One of them stabbed him with something. The wound's odd though it doesn't look like a knife blade. We'll have to get Doc Altman to take a look at it and tell us what caused it. Apart from

that the weapons they had weren't really that effective, just a few old pistols and shotguns from the looks of it. I've seen better stuff in the hands of kids back home."

"Okay, what about Vorgen's body sergeant? I heard it was destroyed."

"That's right lieutenant. They fired a flare into the back of the truck and used some sort of accelerant to really get the flames going. All we've got left is ash."

"What about your attackers?" Wolf said.

"Not much more lieutenant. As soon as the truck went up they all ran for it. They ditched their robes and weapons and just blended into the crowd. The only things they took with them were the bodies of their dead, including the one who stabbed Midland."

at that point Wolf heard the sound of sirens over the vox link as well.

"What's going on there sergeant?" she asked.

"Looks like the local cops and fire department have finally turned up." Grey told her.

"Okay, in that case make sure that you secure any evidence that's left and get it back to camp. I don't want the locals taking anything." Wolf ordered and Grey smiled.

"You don't trust them? I'm impressed." he said.

"Juts call it a hunch." Wolf replied, "Wolf out." and then she gave the handset back to Kline and walked up to Layne again, "Commissar we may have a problem."

"Really lieutenant and what would that be?" Layne responded.

"It looks like whoever emptied out this hab unit was just one part of whatever it is we're dealing with.

Sergeant Grey's squad was attacked by another group that were obviously set on preventing us from examining Vorgen's body." Wolf explained and the Commissar frowned.

"This is unacceptable lieutenant. Loyal Imperial servants assaulted in broad daylight. Evidence destroyed. What sort of planet is this?" he said angrily.

"Commissar I recommend that we summon Enginseer Cornelius here immediately. If whoever is behind this was willing to ambush a squad of Imperial guardsmen on the highway I don't think that they'd hesitate to do the same to a squad we left to watch over this hab unit." Wolf said and Layne's expression lightened.

"On the other hand you think they will be too cowardly to launch a direct attack on our larger force lieutenant?" he said and Wolf nodded.

"Especially since we've got seven ogryns that can tear a man in half with their bare hands sir." she said.

"Very well lieutenant." Layne said, nodding, "Deploy the platoon to isolate this hab unit and summon Enginseer Cornelius with his servitors. While we wait I shall conduct interviews of the locals. Perhaps there is still enough loyalty to the Golden Throne left here that we will be able to get some leads on who did this."

Enginseer Cornelius B5T-RD-3X, known to members of Fourth Company as Cornelius the Bastard arrived in a convoy of three Rhino armoured personnel carriers marked with the iconography of the Adeptus Mechanicus. Each of these was operated by a single cyborg servitor rather than an ordinary human driver and the rear access ramps of the front and rear vehicles dropped open first to permit two small groups of gun servitors to disembark and scan the area for threats before the centre vehicle opened up as well.

"Enginseer." Layne called out as the red robed tech priest strode down the ramp, followed by the more human appearing Technician Nathin PL673. Unlike the tech priest himself, Nathin was a native of Catachan who had been identified at a young age as having a good technical aptitude and so raised and educated by the Adeptus Mechanicus.

"Commissar Layne." Cornelius replied, his voice electronically altered by the cybernetic enhancements made to his throat, "As per Lieutenant Wolf's request I have brought four forensic analysis servitors."

"Very good." Layne said, raising his voice as a heavy wheeled vehicle rounded a nearby corner and drove down the street towards the cluster of Imperial Guard vehicles, "In that case perhaps you should get them-"

"Cover!" Quinn suddenly yelled when he saw a figure climb onto the roof of the approaching vehicle and raise an arm with something held in it.

A single silenced bullet struck the man in his head before he could throw his bomb and he fell from the vehicle, landing between its wheels where his body was promptly crushed and ground into the road. The vehicle itself, a Goliath pattern truck that was used across the Imperium in industries that required something more than a soft skinned vehicle but that fell short of needing something with the resilience of a military fighting vehicle, then began to pick up speed and its driver angled the Goliath towards the centre Rhino where the forensic servitors could be seen inside it.

"Out of the way!" Quinn shouted as he fired his shotgun towards the Goliath, hoping to hit a vulnerable spot. As the Catachans scattered to take cover Cornelius held his ground, making use of his cybernetic optics to focus on the Goliath and feed the data to the gun servitors.

"Acquire closing vehicle." he said, "Fire for effect."

As one the gun servitors fired the heavy weapons they had mounted in place of their arms. Most of these weapons were belt fed heavy bolters that spewed out sustained bursts of mass reactive explosive tipped rounds. These detonated as they struck the front of the Goliath, blasting large pits in the thick frontal

structure. The combined fire from multiple heavy bolters rapidly reduced the Goliath to a point where it was no longer structurally sound and it came skidding to a halt but the servitors were not done yet. One of the cyborg fighting units was armed with a tank destroying multi-melta rather than an anti-personnel heavy bolter and it too lined up its weapon on the Goliath. The beam erupted from the multi-melta just as the Goliath was beginning to slow down and it struck the centre of the vehicle. There were few types of armour that could resist attacks from melta weapons, especially at short range and the beam burned all the way through the Goliath, igniting everything contained inside it that was combustible.

Even as the burning Goliath continued towards him Cornelius remained standing in place, watching as the flaming wreck decelerated.

“Get clear!” Quinn yelled but the tech priest remained still, watching the Goliath right up until it came to halt just under a metre in front of him.

“There was no need for such excitement Sergeant Quinn.” Cornelius said at last, turning towards Quinn, “I had already determined that the vehicle would not collide with me. Given that the threat appears to be over I shall now take my forensic analysis servitors to the habitation unit Lieutenant Wolf and Commissar Layne requested their presence for. I recommend that in the mean time the Goliath be extinguished. I project that the fire will have removed most traces of viable physical evidence but there is a measurable risk that the fire could spread if left undealt with.”

7.

"Take the body to the doc." Grey said as the corpse of Guardsman Midland was unloaded from the truck in a sealed body bag.

"I heard you suffered a casualty sergeant." a voice called out from behind Grey and he turned to see Mordecai Black, the Adeptus Ministorum priest who travelled with Fourth Company approaching. Though Preacher Black was a native of Catachan his fervent devotion to the Imperial Cult marked him out among the generally more pragmatic Catachans.

"That's right preacher." Grey replied, "I want the doc to take a look at the wound to see if he can tell us what kind of weapon was used. You can carry out your blessings after that."

"As you wish sergeant. If you want me to assist in arranging a memorial-"

"I think we'll pass preacher." Grey said and Black bowed his head slightly before turning to leave. Then Grey remembered something and he reached into his pocket to remove the crumpled leaflet that one of the robed figures had given him, "Hey preacher wait a minute." he said and Black turned back towards him, "What do you think of this?" Grey asked and he passed the leaflet to the priest.

"Let me see." Black replied as he began to study the leaflet.

The leaflet was printed on one side only and the top of the printed side identified it as being issued by the 'Church of the Approaching Emperor'. Immediately beneath this was an image of a man identified as the head of this church, a robed figure whose bald head was covered on top by a skull cap while a large collar extended up to the level of the top of his head at the sides and rear. The rest of the leaflet was then taken up by an explanation of how the spirit of the Emperor would make itself known on Temperatus and only those people that had shown themselves to be loyal would be accepted by him to help spread his word throughout the galaxy. Black frowned as he read on, seeing that the text also included criticism of the Adeptus Ministorum itself, calling it a organisation that had no mandate to represent the will of the Emperor.

"Heresy." Black said, "Though no worse than I've seen on dozens of other worlds before now. These groups spring up around a fringe leader, often a disgraced Ministorum priest who has been removed from his post and goes on to claim that he was expelled purely because he came to realise some truth that did not fit with Ministorum teachings. Most just fade away though a few grow and prosper."

"They ever start stabbing Imperial Guardsmen in broad daylight?" Grey asked and Black sighed.

"Sadly some do become violent. Especially when the local population refuses their definition of salvation or when the authorities decide to shut them down." he explained, "I take it that a member of this group was responsible for the death of Guardsman Midland?" he added and Grey nodded.

"Yes. Well maybe. I was given that leaflet by someone who was part of the group that attacked us and destroyed the body we were bringing back for examination. I think they staged a road accident to slow us down so I wouldn't put it past them to have stolen a bunch of these leaflets as well. Or maybe this church doesn't even exist."

"Perhaps I can find out for you sergeant." Black said, "Lieutenant Wolf is not here and let us just say that most of us Catachans do not have the correct temperament for theological debate."

"You mean we piss off outsider priests?" Grey replied.

"No offence intended sergeant."

"None taken preacher."

Grey was cleaning one of the stub pistols that Second Platoon had recovered from the wreck of an ancient starship and adopted as secondary weapons when the rest of the platoon returned to camp.

"Find anything useful?" he asked as the other sergeants entered the tent they all shared.

"Nothing." Vance replied, "The cogboys spent two hours going over that hab unit before just telling us that it had been scrubbed clean before we got there. The handful of samples that could still be recovered could have come from almost anywhere, even just blown in through the door or an open window."

"Which means that the attack someone decided to launch on us was a waste of time." Molla added and Grey looked up.

"It wasn't wannabe Emperor botherers in robes was it?" he asked.

"Looked more like miners." Quinn said, "They came at us in a Goliath and tried to throw a bomb. Rull picked off the thrower though and then The Bastard had his servitors turn the Goliath to scrap."

"Which means nothing got recovered from that either." Vance added and Grey smiled.

"What have you done Tyler?" Molla asked when he saw this.

"Oh I just got Botherer Black to do something useful for the first time in his life and find out who's behind all of this. Well hopefully anyway. I gave him the leaflet one of those robed idiots gave to me. It might be fake but I figure that if there's even a chance it's real then we should give it a shot. By 'we' of course I mean the

botherer.”

The tent then opened again and Wolf entered, sighing.

“Sorry for barging in guys but haven't you ever just wanted to get away from someone?” she said and Grey looked up at her.

“All the time lieutenant.” he said.

“Oh ha-ha. Very funny.” Wolf replied as she found a chair and sat down beside Quinn's bunk, “Having Commissar Layne looking over my shoulder while we're out on operations is bad enough but he actually expects me to eat with him so we can discuss the platoon's performance.”

“Well everyone knows that a platoon performs only as well as its commanding officer lieutenant. Perhaps you should step up and take the credit.” Grey commented and the other sergeants smiled.

“Well I told him I needed to debrief you all.” Wolf said and when Molla drew in breath to speak she suddenly held up the palm of her hand towards him, “No sergeant, not like that. Never like that. Not now, not ever, not with you.”

Molla shrugged.

“Is your sister doing anything tonight?” he asked and Wolf groaned, remembering how she had been reunited with her sister when she had found her sharing Molla's bunk.

“Not you I bet Tari.” Quinn said.

“Well Grey might have actually come up with a lead.” Vance said and Wolf smiled.

“Really?” she said.

“Someone had to and you outsiders weren't, so I stepped up.” Grey answered.

“Well don't leave me hanging. Tell me.” Wolf said.

“I told you how the group that attacked me were acting like Emperor botherers handing out leaflets?” Grey said and Wolf nodded.

“You did.” she replied, “Go on.”

“Well I got handed one of the leaflets and I figured it was possible that they weren't just acting. Maybe they really came from the Church of the Approaching Emperor so I asked our very own Botherer Black to check them out with the local Ministorum. Maybe they've heard of them.”

“Let's hope that pans out then.” Wolf said, “In the mean time I understand that Enginseer Cornelliis is going over the accelerant used in the attack on your squad, the explosive used in the booby trap at the hab unit and what little physical evidence we've recovered of any of our attackers.”

“Plus Doc Altman's got Midland's body. Maybe he can tell us what killed him.” Grey added.

“He was stabbed.” a voice just outside the tent said as the entrance opened again to reveal Doctor Altman standing outside, “May I come in?”

“Sure doc, pull up a bunk.” Quinn replied and Fourth Company's surgeon entered the tent as well and sat down on Vance's bunk, it being closest to the entrance.

“So what sort of weapon was used to kill Trooper Midland captain?” Wolf asked, using the doctor's military rank rather than his position.

“None.” Altman told her, “I think that his killer used his bare hand.”

“No chance doc.” Grey said, shaking his head, “I saw the wound and no human being could put a hole in someone like that with their bare hands.”

“Not a baseline human no.” Altman said.

“The killer wasn't big enough to be an Astartes or an ogryn doc.” Grey said.

“I'm sure he wasn't, neither of them have claws. That's how the killer was able to do so much damage. He, or rather it, must have had an extra arm that terminated in a hand with thick claws. I found evidence of three roughly evenly spaced and equally curved cutting edges.”

“Fething mutants.” Vance hissed, “That's all we need.” and then the tent opened again as Nathin peered inside.

“Come on in cogboy. Sit down and join the party.” Molla told him.

“Cheers.” Nathin said.

“So what's the Mechanicum found for us then?” Vance asked as Nathin entered and also sat on a bunk.

“Nothing conclusive.” Nathin replied, “Enginseer Cornelliis has run full spectrum analysis of-”

“Just get to the point cogboy.” Grey interrupted, “Where are these freaks getting their weapons from?”

“Freak?” Nathin said.

“It looks like we're dealing with mutants.” Wolf told him.

“Anyone home?” Major Trent's voice called out from outside the tent and Wolf sighed.

“Is there anyone not waiting to come in?” she said.

“I heard 'come in'.” Trent said as he and Stubbs entered the tent.

“Have a seat Major.” Molla said, getting up out of his chair.

“Thanks sergeant.” Trent replied as he sat down, “I've been onto the Adeptus Arbiters again to fill them in with what you found today.” he added.

“What? Feth all?” Quinn said.

"We know you've encountered mutants." Trent said, "As soon as I heard that I wanted to know how this world deals with them."

"And how do they?" Doctor Altman asked.

"Generally pre-natal termination or euthanasia at birth. It depends on when the deviancy is picked up." Trent said.

"Efficient." Altman responded.

"That's pretty much how mutants were dealt with on Lyreria as well." Wolf added, "What do you do on Catachan?"

"The same." Altman replied, "Even those that get through screening don't live long. Imperial law forbids arming mutants and no-one survives on Catachan without a weapon."

"Well here on Temperatus there are a number each year that escape detection at birth, they are either hidden by their parents or their mutations develop later." Trent began, "Judge Corvair says that her forces do their best to eliminate these as well but some of them escape to live outside the cities, scavenging for whatever they can find in the dumps."

"Major, would that include industrial waste dumps?" Nathin asked.

"I don't know. I don't see why not." Trent answered and Nathin looked at the members of Second Platoon present, "That would fit with our findings as well." he said, "The poison they use is a form of industrial waste, the accelerant was a type of rust remover used in the promethium industry and-

"We get it. The freaks are turning garbage into weapons." Grey said before the tent was pulled open yet again and Black stepped inside.

"The Emperor's blessings upon you all." he said.

"Thank you." Wolf replied.

"I hope this visit isn't to suggest a prayer meeting." Quinn said.

"I am always available for such things but on this occasion it is not the purpose of my visit." Black said, "May I sit down?"

"Sure, take my chair." Vance replied, getting up and moving to his bunk instead.

"Thank you sergeant." Black said and as he sat down he took out the leaflet that Grey had given him as well as his dataslate, both of which he laid down in his lap before he continued, "At the request of Sergeant Grey I paid a visit to the nearest chapel of Him on Earth." he said and he crossed his hands over his chest to make the sign of the Aquila before picking up the leaflet and dataslate again, "I explained who we are and showed them the leaflet that the sergeant provided to me."

"So what do the locals have to say?" Trent asked.

"The Church of the Approaching Emperor has been operating openly for approximately ten standard years." Black said, "That's about five local years. Though the Adeptus Ministorum believes that they have existed for much longer than that. Possibly as much as sixty to a hundred standard years."

"Obviously they don't consider them dangerous then. Otherwise they'd have had them declared as heretics." Molla pointed out.

"There is still some discussion about that sergeant. Much of the Church of the Approaching Emperor's activities remain unknown. The Adeptus Ministorum has sent agent to infiltrate and evaluate it but they either failed to be accepted or genuinely converted to its ranks." Black explained.

"Well if they're harbouring mutants then that's enough for them to be shut down." Trent said and then the tent flap was pulled open again and Commissar Layne entered the tent accompanied by Veneel.

"Ah Lieutenant Wolf, so you are here." he said and then he looked around at the others present, "And I see so is everyone else involved in the investigation. That will make things far easier. Now may I sit down lieutenant?"

"Oh, of course." Wolf said and she got out of the chair and made way for Commissar Layne, instead sitting on the nearby bunk beside Quinn. At the same time Molla moved out of the commissar's path as he approached the now empty chair and sat down on Quinn's bunk next to Wolf, leaning back and steadying himself with his arms. Moments later Wolf gasped and her eyes widened.

"Is something wrong lieutenant? You appear confused." Veneel said when he saw the expression on her face but she shook her head slowly.

"No. No I'm fine. Just fine." she replied.

"Excellent, then we can begin." Commissar Layne said.

"In fact commissar we'd already got a long way without you." Trent said and the Catachans all smiled at this not so subtle hint that Layne's presence was not needed, "We've established that our prime suspects are members of a religious cult that may be harbouring mutants and is scavenging the materials for attacks from waste dumps outside the city." Trent continued and Layne nodded.

"Interesting." he said, "This can be verified?" and he looked at Wolf, "Well lieutenant, you are supposed to be helping lead this investigation. What is your recommendation for our next step?"

"I, err, I-" she began.

"Lieutenant Wolf wants the platoon to move out at first light and investigate the sites used for storing

industrial grade waste." Vance interrupted, "Isn't that right lieutenant?"

"What? Oh yes. The waste dumps." Wolf said.

"We'll have to go in force." Molla added, "If there are mutants out there then I doubt they'll be happy to see us."

Trent nodded in agreement.

"I'll have Sergeant Gant and her sentinels placed at your disposal." he said, "Their firepower should be adequate to persuade any mutant rabble to back off while an investigation takes place."

"We could do with requisitioning a few heavy stubbers for the trucks." Vance said, "A few bursts from one of those will send most mutants running."

"Talk to Lieutenant Selena." Trent said, nodding.

"I'll let Enginseer Cornelius know as well." Nathin added, "You'll need servitors to examine anything hazardous."

"Sounds good to me." Quinn said, "Wouldn't you agree lieutenant?" and Wolf nodded rapidly.

"Then it's settled." Layne said, getting to his feet, "Second Platoon will muster at oh five hundred hours tomorrow morning and investigate the city's waste disposal areas." then he looked at Major Trent and nodded once, "Major." he added before exiting the tent.

"Well I don't think there's anything else we need to cover." Trent said, "So we may as well be off as well. Sleep well guys and try not to think too much about what you'll be wading through tomorrow."

"Kid's stuff next to having to deal with Anna Ass-wipe." Grey commented.

"Oh I'm sure Short Arse will be overjoyed to issue us with those heavy stubbers." Vance added, the two men making use of the nicknames applied behind the back of the company quartermaster, Lieutenant Anna Selena. These were derived from her unusually short stature for a Catachan as well as her responsibility for maintaining the supply of things such as toilet paper to the company.

"I better go and speak with Enginseer Cornelius." Nathin added as he then followed Trent and Stubbs from the tent.

"I'm just going to bed." Altman commented.

"And I must offer my final prayers to The Emperor before I retire for the night. Tomorrow I will speak with the local Ministorum again and see how much more I can find out about this Church of the Approaching Emperor." Black said.

"I will bid you good night as well." Veneel said and the three men all left the tent, leaving just Wolf and Second Platoon's sergeants inside it.

"Sergeant Molla," Wolf said calmly, "if you do not remove your hand from where it is I am going to scream very loudly."

Molla frowned.

"Huh?" he said.

"Your hand. Remove it." Wolf said and Molla held out both his hand in front of him to prove that he was not in contact with her.

"Not me." he said and everyone turned towards Quinn instead.

"Something wrong lieutenant?" he asked, grinning and then Wolf leapt to her feet and squealed as he closed his hand.

"I'm going to bed." she said.

"What, no apology for blaming me for something I didn't do lieutenant?" Molla called out after her but as she left the tent Wolf just raised her hand in an obscene gesture.

"I think that's a 'No' Tari." Vance said and Molla shrugged before turning back to Quinn.

"So how did it feel Ibram?" he asked.

8.

Although Temperatus was heavily populated it was far from being a hive world where tens of millions of inhabitants would be crammed into cities covering a relatively small area and there were large areas of the planet that were left unused. There was little in most of these places however, the waste from thousands of years of industry had polluted the ecosystem to such an extent that few of the native plant and animal life forms remained. Those that did tended to be the most basic of mosses and fungi along with a few hardier aquatic life forms in the deepest depths of the ocean where the intense pressure broke down many pollutants.

This left the land surrounding the city barren and empty as the Catachan convoy drove through it towards the current area used for landfill. Second Squad's destroyed truck had already been replaced and all of the transport vehicles had been fitted with pintle mounted heavy stubbers in their rooftop cupolas. In addition the convoy had been joined by a single Rhino that bore Engineer Cornelius himself as well as a small number of servitors that could be used to handle the most dangerous of waste. In addition to the wheeled and tracked vehicles, four lightweight Sentinel scout walkers strode alongside the convoy. Three of these mounted heavy flamers intended to burn through undergrowth while the fourth was a fire support vehicle that carried a missile launcher capable of firing a variety of anti-personnel and anti-armour munitions. The convoy was not alone on the road and every so often they encountered a servitor operated waste transport travelling to or from the landfill site. This consisted of a cluster of massive holes in the ground, each the size of a small starship and signposted with the class of waste it was intended to contain.

"Industrial toxins up ahead lieutenant." Mayer reported and Wolf looked up from the dataslate she had been reading.

"Okay turn off here." she said as she reached for the truck's vox set, "Wolf to Quinn." she signalled.

"Quinn here lieutenant." Quinn's voice responded.

"Sergeant can you put Commissar Layne on?" Wolf asked and she smiled as she said this, having specifically arranged for the commissar and Adept Veneel to ride with Quinn's squad in retaliation for his actions the previous night.

"Of course lieutenant." he replied and moment's later Layne's voice spoke.

"Go ahead lieutenant, Commissar Layne here." he said.

"Commissar the storage site for the city's industrial waste is right up ahead. I recommend that we start there." Wolf said.

"Very good lieutenant. Carry on." Layne replied.

"Lieutenant Wolf, Commissar Layne," the augmented voice of Engineer Cornelius said suddenly, "my auspexes are detecting movement in the area."

"Source?" Layne asked.

"Uncertain, the readings are erratic. However, it is certain that there are multiple lifeforms present spread over a wide area." the tech priest replied and Wolf raised the vox handset to her mouth again.

"All squads stand to." she broadcast to the entire convoy. I want a combat deployment. Secure an area fifty metres around the vehicles. Sergeant Gant do you read me?"

"Right here lieutenant." Gant replied as she piloted her flamer armed sentinel alongside the truck in which Wolf and Mayer's squad rode in.

"Advance ahead and scout out the area. I want to know what we're heading into here sergeant." Wolf ordered.

"On it lieutenant." Gant responded and then the four lightweight walkers darted ahead of the rest of the convoy, rushing down the slope that led from the road to the industrial waste store. The auspexes built into the sentinels were not of the same quality as those in the Adeptus Mechanicus Rhino but as they got closer to the waste storage area Gant also picked up signs of movement. These could only have come from creatures of human size or similar and Gant brought her squadron to a halt, "Stand to." she broadcast, "We've got movement on all sides." and then all of a sudden there was a sudden 'clump' as something solid bounced off the front armour plate of Gant's sentinel. Gant saw roughly where this had come from and she pivoted the cockpit of her vehicle to face towards it before unleashing a stream of liquid fire. This ignited the mound of waste that the mystery object had been thrown from behind and there were howls from the other side of it before the auspexes picked up more movement as whoever had attacked Gant's sentinel retreated.

"Sergeant Gant, report." Wolf said over the vox when she saw this.

"It's nothing lieutenant." Gant replied, "Someone out there chucked something at me but they don't seem to like fire." and then all of a sudden there was a larger barrage of thrown objects hurled towards the sentinels.

"I have no targets." one of the other sentinel pilots reported as the squadron searched for their attackers.

"We can't set fire to everything." Gant responded, "Lieutenant, any chance of some covering fire?"

Wolf did not respond to this directly but from behind the sentinels Gant heard the sound of powerful engines as the convoy picked up speed and then the heavy rattle of automatic weapons fire as the pintle mounted heavy stubbers were fired. The large calibre bullets from the belt fed weapons struck the piles of waste and plumes of debris erupted from each impact point. This suppressing fire was enough to prevent any further pelting of the sentinels with debris before the rest of the convoy arrived and spread out.

"Ogryns out!" Khor yelled from the back of his truck before it had even come to a complete halt and the seven massive humanoids all jumped down from the back of the vehicle.

"Sergeant Khor." Gant called out, using her sentinel's vox to amplify her voice, "Check beyond that mound." and she pointed towards the mound of waste that she had set fire to.

"Ogryns move." Khor ordered and as the Catachans were disembarking from their vehicles the ogryns advanced towards the mound, moving around it to avoid the flames.

The roar of ripper guns being fired alerted the Catachans to the presence of something beyond the mound and Molla waved his troops forwards as they climbed down from their truck.

"Let's move." he ordered, "Keep that stubber firing." then as most of First Squad followed Khor's ogryns around the mound the gunner in the truck's cupola continued to fire his heavy stubber over the top of the mound in short bursts to dissuade any counter attack.

As he charged around the mound Molla saw something covered from head to toe in rags move behind the ogryns and he fired his las pistol at the figure, producing a brief high pitched shrieking as it died. Behind him the rest of his squad started to fire at any movement they saw and there were further cries of pain as more of the covered figures were hit.

"Molla to Wolf, they're falling back." Molla transmitted using his microbead when he saw the covered figures start to withdraw, "Shall we follow?"

"Negative sergeant, don't get drawn away, we don't know how many of them there are out here."

"Understood lieutenant." Molla said and then when he saw Khor's ogryns continuing to advance he called out to them, "Khor! Stay put. The lieutenant doesn't want us getting too far away."

"Ogryns halt!" Khor then bellowed and the ogryns obediently came to a complete stop and watched as the remaining figures withdrew. One of Molla's troops walked up to one of the corpses that had been left behind and Molla called out to her before she could touch it.

"Berlin, stay back." he told her, "We don't know what sort of diseases that thing's carrying." and then he activated his microbead again, "We've got bodies around here. Any chance of a servitor to take a look at it?"

"Servitor activated Sergeant Molla." Cornelliuss responded, "Despatching to your position now."

"We need to check out the waste canisters as well." Wolf pointed out via her own microbead.

"Affirmative Lieutenant Wolf. I shall join you there." Cornelliuss replied.

"As will I lieutenant." Layne added and Wolf frowned, prompting a smile from Vance at her obvious displeasure.

The liquid industrial waste that Second Platoon had come to check on was stored in drums that in turn were kept in prefabricated sheds to protect them from the elements. The doors to these were fitted with locks but as Wolf approached the nearest of the sheds it was plain to see that these had failed to keep someone out.

"They went in through the wall." she said as her command section approached a large hole that had been cut in the side of the shed, the sheet of corrugated metal cut free leant up against the wall beside the hole.

"Clever." Vance commented, "I bet the servitors that deliver the waste are just set up to check that the door locks haven't been tampered with."

"You are correct Platoon Sergeant Vance." Cornelliuss said as he approached from behind the command section and overheard Vance's comment. Then the tech priest looked at Wolf, "Lieutenant Wolf, prior to our coming here I accessed all files relating to this site, including the instructions provided to the servitors. As far as I can tell the Adeptus Mechanicus does not run this facility directly. Instead the waste stored here is managed by a private company that uses the most basic models of servitor suitable."

"So unless they decide to send a human being out here to take a look they won't have a clue what's going on at their dump." Wolf commented.

"Correct Lieutenant Wolf. However, I am already drafting recommendations for a formal document of censure that I shall forward to the local temple of the Omnissiah." Cornelliuss said.

"I've heard enough about this." Layne said and he pointed to the doorway, "Adept Cornelliuss, would you be so good as to allow us inside?"

"Don't trust the hole commissar?" Vance asked but before the commissar could respond Cornelliuss spoke again.

"I do not recommend entering the structure without a respirator Commissar Layne. Even from this distance I am detecting numerous toxins in the air. The present level does not pose a threat to health but inside the concentrations may be much higher." the tech priest cautioned.

Wolf looked around at her squad.

"Masks on." she ordered and the Catachans reached for the bulky bags on their belts that contained their gas masks. Though not intended for use in handling industrial waste the filters would be sufficient to keep the

wearers' from inhaling the fumes for several hours. Meanwhile Layne just watched and Wolf paused before pulling her mask over her face and looked at him, "Aren't you going to put your mask on sir?" she asked, already knowing what the response would be.

"I didn't bring a respirator with me." Layne replied and Wolf suppressed the urge to smile.

"Don't worry commissar, I'm sure that Sergeant Quinn will be willing to assist you in searching the surrounding area while we're inside." she said and she glanced towards Quinn who glared back at her.

"Very good lieutenant. Carry on." Layne said, nodding as Wolf finished putting on her mask.

Led by Engineer Cornellius, Wolf's command section made its way right up to the locked door of the storage building and from beneath the tech priest's robes a tentacle like mechandrite emerged and the tip pressed up against the lock. Seconds later this released with a 'click' and Cornellius opened the door to reveal the rows of chemical drums inside. Entering the building the Catachans looked along the rows and saw no immediate signs that any of them had been removed. However, without an exact figure for the number of drums that were supposed to be present it was not possible to tell if any had been taken and the tracks left from dragging it across the dirt floor covered up afterwards.

"The airborne toxins are greater in concentration in this direction." Cornellius announced as he walked further into the building, making his way between the stacks of drums as he followed the chemical traces he could detect in the air. Unlike the Imperial Guard troops the tech priest wore no respirator, the extensive cybernetic modifications made to his own respiratory system was capable of dealing with airborne toxins at far greater concentrations than were present inside the storage shed. Cornellius halted when he reached a stack of drums three high and he began to inspect the uppermost drum.

"Is there something wrong with that drum?" Wolf asked and Cornellius looked at her briefly.

"The drum is sound Lieutenant Wolf." he replied, "On the other hand there is an issue with the contents." and he tapped the drum twice, first near the bottom and then higher up.

"Now that's interesting." Vance said as each tap produced a different sound. The first was the sound to expected of one piece of solid metal striking another gently while the next echoed when Cornellius struck the drum above the level of the fluid.

"I take that partially filled drums are not normally brought here." Wolf said.

"Correct." Cornellius answered, "Given the fixed volume of the drum, failing to fill it to the approved level is inefficient."

Wolf looked at her command section.

"Okay we know what to do." she told them, "Check them all."

"All of them? But there must be hundreds of them." Torrent protested.

"Two thousand four hundred and seventy-three if records are accurate." Cornellius said.

"So get started. That's just over four hundred each." Wolf added.

While Wolf's command section was occupied inside the storage shed the rest of Second Platoon was outside keeping watch. Each of the platoon's squads was deployed facing in a different direction while Sergeant Gant led her sentinel squad in a mobile patrol that circled the area beyond the perimeter set up by Second Platoon. Meanwhile Commissar Layne watched as a pair of servitors examined the body of the mutant. The creature's human origins were still obvious, despite the damage that had obviously been done to its genetic structure and it had the correct number of limbs in the correct places. However, instead of two ordinary eyes this mutant had dozens of tiny sensory organs clustered at the front of its head and each one had its own lid and lashes. Removing some of the rags that covered the mutant's body also revealed scales covering its lower arms and legs as well as the top of its head where its hair ought to have been.

Layne snarled in disgust at the sight of the creature and looked around to where Quinn's squad was deployed. Given that Second Platoon had deployed beyond the city limits where there were no civilians to get caught in their line of fire, the Catachans had brought their light support weapons along with them and this meant that Quinn's veterans had a pair of hand held flame-throwers among their weaponry.

"Sergeant Quinn." Layne called out and Quinn looked around without speaking, "I want this abomination burned before we leave. Do you understand?"

"Of course commissar. Whatever you say." Quinn said before turning away again and all of a sudden he heard Gant's voice through his microbead.

"Incoming vehicle to the west." she announced, "Goliath pattern."

"It could be someone heading in from the mines." Layne replied, "Sergeant Grey, take your squad and investigate."

"Moving out." Grey responded and he waved his squad forwards, leading them towards the road that led west. There was a large mound of earth at the side of this road and Grey deployed his squad behind this for cover before he crawled to the top and peered over, using a set of magnoculars to get a closer look at the vehicle driving towards them down the road.

As befitted a vehicle designed for use in the harshest conditions, the cab of the Goliath was enclosed and Grey could not make out any details about the driver but there were several people clad in overalls and so

Grey turned his attention to them instead and as soon as he did so he saw a familiar face.

"Throne." he exclaimed when he recognised the man who had fired the flare pistol into the back of his squad's truck the previous day and he activated his microbead, "This is Grey, I have eyes on the vehicle. One of the occupants was part of the gang that ambushed my squad yesterday. Do I have permission to engage?"

"Confirmed sergeant." Layne replied, "But I want prisoners."

"Understood." Grey said and he put his magnoculars away, "Okay we wait until they're right in front of us and then we take out their tyres. Now lock and load." he told his squad and they crawled up to the top of the mound of earth as well while Layne continued issuing orders to the rest of Second Platoon.

"Sergeants Gant and Khor, move to support Second Squad. If the enemy tries to retreat then cut them off. Adept Veneel, you as well. Everyone else hold position."

"Ogryns move." Khor ordered and the abhumans began to move towards Grey and his men.

Before the ogryns could reach Second Squad the approaching Goliath drove past the mound of earth and every member of the squad armed with a lasgun opened fire, their shots aimed low as they targeted the vehicle's bulky tyres. On the other hand Grey took aim at the man he had recognised. He too aimed low, firing a shot that struck the man just above his knee and sent him sprawling across the open topped rear section of the Goliath, screaming in pain and clutching at his injured limb. Moments later the tyres on the side of the Goliath facing Second Squad were ripped apart by the lasgun fire and the entire vehicle swerved towards the mound, sending the men riding on its back tumbling over the side onto the road.

"Back!" Grey yelled as he saw the oncoming vehicle and he squad quickly moved back down the mound. As it happened the Goliath did not make it to the top anyway, instead the front of the vehicle struck the base of the mound and buried the cab in it, throwing more dirt into the air.

"Move!" Grey snapped as the dirt began to land all around him and he knew that the Goliath had been disabled. Grey drew his long Catachan blade as he charged over the top of the mound and ran down towards the road where the vehicle's passengers had ended up. The closest of these recovered his senses quickly, having escaped unharmed when thrown from the Goliath and he leapt to his feet in time to meet Grey's charge. Grey fired his las pistol at the man but the shot narrowly missed his head. Ordinarily this would have caused the man to flinch as he was burned by the heat of the passing energy bolt but the man kept his composure well enough to lunge back at Grey, reaching out to grab the Catachan's wrists and push his weapons away. The two men struggled only briefly before Veneel arrived at the top of the mound of earth and called out to Grey.

"Sergeant Grey! Get down." he yelled and Grey dropped to the ground. As soon as he did this the psyker behind him unleashed a storm of lightning that engulfed Grey's opponent, forcing him to release his grip on Grey.

The sound of a stub pistol being fired made Grey look back towards the Goliath himself and he saw that one of his men had fallen, clutching at a wound to his arm while another pushed the muzzle of his lasgun through one of the Goliath's hatches that had been pulled open by the Catachans and fired a burst inside the vehicle. Hearing footsteps from behind him, Grey spun around to see another of the men who had been stood on the back of the Goliath charging towards him with a rusted metal bar raised over his head. Grey leapt aside just as the bar was being swung downwards and the man overbalanced, staggering past the Catachan sergeant and at that moment Grey thrust his knife blade into the man's side. Then he heard the sharp 'crack' of a lasgun firing from close by and looking around he saw one of his squad firing at another man who had been thrown from the Goliath as he was running away.

"Cease fire!" Grey yelled and then he activated his microbead, "Rull. Target heading south east. Follow him and report."

Without waiting for Second Platoon's sniper to acknowledge Grey then turned his attention back towards the crashed Goliath and saw that his men were in the process of dragging a pair of bodies from the vehicle. This left only one of its passengers active now, the man Grey had shot in the leg and he was in no shape to fight back as Grey and his squad closed in around him.

"Secure him." Grey ordered, "Let's see if that leash can make himself useful for once." it was then that Grey noticed something made of polished metal hanging around the injured man's neck and he strode up to him and snatched it away, "Now this is interesting." he said as he held up the pendent, "The same symbol was on those leaflets you and your friends were handing out yesterday. Perhaps you should try being more anonymous when committing treason."

"Sergeant Grey." Veneel said, walking up behind Grey and the Catachan looked at the psyker, "Watch this man carefully. I sense more to him than meets the eye."

"More to him?" Grey said, tapping the side of his head to suggest that his squad's prisoner was also a psyker.

"It is hard to describe to someone that lacks the sight. I can sense some sort of power within him but it is not what I am used to from others like myself. We channel our power directly from the warp but with him it is as if power is flowing into him from somewhere, or someone else." Veneel said.

“You heard him boys.” Grey told his men, “We could be dealing with a witch here. No offence adept.”
“None taken sergeant. This man is most definitely not sanctioned by the Adeptus Astra Telepathica. If he does have any power then 'witch' is the correct term to use.”
“Good. Anyway, if he even looks at any of us wrongly fell free to explain the error of his ways to him with your rifle butt.” Grey finished.

9.

A jet of flame set fire to the body of the mutant as Commissar Layne watched.

"Ensure that the carcass is fully destroyed sergeant." he told Quinn and the Catachan nodded.

"Of course sir." he replied before Layne turned and walked away, at which point he leant towards one of his troops and whispered, "At least the leash doesn't want to hang around near that thing even when it's on fire." Meanwhile Commissar Layne saw Wolf and her command section emerging from the storage shed.

"Ah lieutenant, what can you tell me?" he asked.

"Enginseer Cornelliuss has confirmed that the drums have been tampered with." she replied, "Some are completely empty while others are only part drained. We'll need to get all of the drums out of there to know exactly how big the problem is but I think it's fair to say that whoever's been taking the toxin wanted more than just a few drops to put in someone's drink." then she glanced towards the nearby flames, "Did you learn anything from the mutant's body?" she asked.

"Only that the mutation appeared to be due to genetic corruption rather than the warp. Obviously I ordered the body burned." Layne said.

"So I see." Wolf commented, "Has Sergeant Grey reported back yet?"

"Thought I'd deliver you both a present in person." Grey called out as he and his squad appeared, their bound and hooded captive limping along with them with his injured leg crudely set using the same metal rod that one of his comrades had attempted to use as a weapon when attacking grey, "You did want a prisoner didn't you Commissar Layne? Well here's a real prize for you." and then he kicked the prisoner to the ground, pulling away the hood at the same time, "This is the guy who set fire to my truck yesterday. Your evidence as well."

Layne smiled as he approached the prisoner.

"Very good sergeant." he said before addressing the prisoner directly, "Tell me what you are planning." he said.

"I'll tell you nothing." the man replied and then he spat a mouthful of blood on the Commissar's boots.

"Lieutenant Wolf," Layne said, looking around, "are your men skilled at loosening tongues?"

"If by that you mean can they beat information out of someone then yes, they are commissar." she told him.

"Your crude techniques may not be sufficient." Veneel said in response to the idea of using torture to extract information.

"Adept Veneel has informed me that our prisoner may be a witch." Grey said, "Though not an ordinary one." "His power may harden his resolve or inflicting pain could provoke a major release of psychic power." Veneel said.

"Not that shooting him in the leg did." Grey commented.

"That makes things more difficult." Layne commented, "It will take time to bring in specialist psychic interrogators to mind flay him."

"Alternatively we could just pay his friends in the church a visit." Grey said and he held up the pendent he had taken, "He had this around his neck. It's the same symbol that was plastered all over the leaflets he and his robed buddies were handing out yesterday."

"Good work Sergeant Grey." Commissar Layne said, reaching out and taking the pendent. Then he held it in front of the prisoner's face, "Your lack of co-operation will be taken into account when it comes to determining the means of your execution. In all likelihood you'll be burned alive at the stake rather than hanged or shot first."

"There was another guy we didn't kill lieutenant." Grey said and Layne frowned.

"Then why didn't you bring him with you Sergeant Grey?" he asked.

"He was running away. I didn't think trying to arrest him was the best option." Grey answered.

"You let him escape? The man's a traitor. I should order you demoted and flogged for such a gross dereliction of duty." Layne said angrily.

"Commissar before we go down that route I'd like to hear what Sergeant Grey has to say by way of explanation." Wolf said, knowing that although Grey did not respect her ability to command a Catachan platoon in the field he took his duties as seriously as any other Catachan squad leader.

"Well sergeant, how do you excuse your failure?" Layne asked and Grey smiled.

"He has to be running somewhere commissar and I thought it would be useful to find out where that was." he said, "When he gets there Rull will be right behind him."

"That sounds like a good idea to me." Wolf said and she then looked at Layne, "Wouldn't you agree commissar?" she added.

A merchant wearing brightly coloured clothing was speaking with the temple priest when Black arrived to

discuss the Church of the Approaching Emperor further and he glared at Black's far more savage appearance.

"Ah, Adept Black. It is so good to see you back here so soon." the priest said and he looked at the merchant again, "Adept Black is a ministorum priest serving with the Catachan Imperial Guard division currently on our world."

"Catachans?" the merchant said, snarling, "I've heard they're all brutes. Cannibals as well some of them. How in the name of Him on Earth do you tolerate them?"

"It's easy when you are one of them." Black replied and the merchant's eyes widened when he heard the distinctive Catachan accent.

"I must be going." he said suddenly and he hurried past Black on his way out of the temple.

"I apologise if I am frightening off your flock." Black said to the temple priest but the other man just smiled at him.

"Mordecai, you have done me a great favour. That man is always promising donations in public when others are around to hear him and then coming to me privately as he was doing just now to make excuses for backing out of his promises." he said.

"There are worlds in the Imperium where such behaviour will get you arrested." Black commented and the local priest sighed.

"Perhaps we are too tolerant for our own good." he said.

"It's that tolerance I am here about now." Black said.

"The Church of the Approaching Emperor?"

"The same. I need to know more about it. If they are up to something then perhaps the Catachan Nineteenth can help."

"You mean as outsiders to our world you may see things we don't?" the priest said and Black smiled, "Have I amused you Mordecai?"

"That word, 'outsider'. We Catachans use it as an insult."

"I meant no offence my friend."

"And I took none. It's just that I've never heard it said about us Catachans before." Black said.

"So what exactly is it that you wish to know my new friend? As I have already told you the inner workings of the Church of the Approaching Emperor remain a mystery to the Ministorum."

"But you must know something about who runs it and where they meet." Black said, "If only so you can send your investigators."

The local priest sighed.

"Sadly no." he replied, "The Church of the Approaching Emperor does not appear to maintain any fixed places of worship. At least none that we have been able to identify. Their recruitment seems to be on the basis of individual approaches to people or sometimes the leaflets they distribute give a time and place for more public meetings, though these are never in places they own."

"What about the man they follow?" Black asked.

"You know as much about him as I do. As far as we know he never meets with anyone who is not a member of his group. For all we know he doesn't even exist." the priest said, then he hesitated for a moment.

"You've just thought of something haven't you? Black said.

"Yes, there is one thing. As I said this group does hold the occasional open meeting and while these have never been in places we can connect directly to them, they are always in the same area of the city."

"Where?" Black asked.

"Near the canal where it passes by the treatment works for the city's water supply. There are buildings there that rent out office and meeting spaces. All of our agents went to meetings in such places. I'm afraid that's all the information I have for you."

"And I shall see that it is put to good use." Black said, bowing his head towards the priest before he turned to leave. On his way out he paused in front of a statue depicting the Emperor as he was supposed to have appeared during the Great Crusade to unite humanity ten thousand years earlier and again he bowed his head, this time making the sign of the Aquila as well.

When Black was gone the local priest made his way from the main chapel to his office where he picked up the communicator on his desk and entered a number he knew by heart.

"It's me." he said as soon as the call connected but before anyone could speak, "That Catachan priest was here again. I gave him the information you told me to. I'd be expecting visitors if I were you."

"That's okay, we're planning for it and we'll be ready." the man stood by a wall mounted communicator said before returning the handset to its mounting. Then he looked around to survey the array of vehicles and weapons that were being prepared in the warehouse he was stood inside. Most of the vehicle were variations on the common Goliath transport that were in the process of being modified to carry weapons. Many of the weapons available were simply adapted mining and heavy industrial tools but there were also a small number of heavy weapons that had been acquired from the black market or stolen directly from the

local planetary defence forces. In addition to the heavier weapons there was an array of small arms as well. Again these came from multiple sources, some stolen while others had been manufactured in hidden workshops around the city. Not all of these weapons were of good quality but what mattered was that the church's forces had them and that this meant they could put more members into battle now that the time was fast approaching.

"Dev's back!" someone called out and the man stood by the communicator turned to look out of a window where he saw the sole survivor of the team he had sent to the city's landfill area running along a footpath towards the warehouse. Hurrying to the nearest doorway he stepped outside just as the man named Dev arrived.

"Quick! Get inside." he said and he pulled Dev in through the doorway, "Now what's going on? Where are the others?"

"Mister Crowe, the Imperial Guard were at the dump." Dev responded, "They were lying in wait for us."

"Tell me exactly what happened." Crowe said.

"We had just arrived when they ambushed us. They shot out the tyres on the truck and I was thrown from it. I knew we didn't stand a chance so I ran. Fortunately they were too concerned with the others to come after me."

"You abandoned them." Crowe replied.

"I had to. I had no choice." Dev protested.

"Of course you did. You could have stayed and died." Crowe said, "Frankly I'm glad that you didn't. We've set a trap of our own for the Imperial Guard and you're going to have the chance to get your own back very soon. In his name." and then both men looked around to where a large image of the Church of the Approaching Emperor's leader was fixed to the wall.

"In his name." Dev repeated, a smile spreading across his face.

10.

"So let me get this clear," Regimental Commissar Garratt said when Wolf and Layne arrived at the XIX Regiment's headquarters with major Trent to report to Colonel Shryke about their investigation, "you started out by investigating a series of assaults on our personnel and now you're here telling us that there's a heretical cult led by an unsanctioned psyker at work in the city stockpiling industrial toxins?"

"Yes, that is where our investigation is pointing sir." Layne replied.

"And what are your thoughts lieutenant?" Shryke asked.

"We can't let this go colonel." Wolf said, "I know it ought to be a job for local forces but I don't know if they can handle a psyker. On the other hand I'm confident that my men can with the correct support."

"You mean psykers?" Shryke said and Wolf nodded.

"Adept Veneel at least. If you could get us more then I'm sure that would be beneficial." she said.

"There is that choir with General Fortnam's divisional headquarters colonel." Trent pointed out, reminding Colonel Shryke of the unit of wyrdvane psykers attached to the division. Individually these psykers lacked the power of a psyker like Veneel but when they acted together and pooled their power they could still unleash terrifying energies.

"Combined with Adept Veneel that should prove sufficient for dealing with a single witch colonel." Layne added and Garratt nodded in agreement.

"Okay I'll speak to the general. Now what sort of force are you thinking of deploying major?" Shryke said.

"Apart from adding that psychic choir and Veneel I was going to leave this to Wolf and her platoon. They've been moving around without causing too much disruption and mobilising a larger force could take time."

All of a sudden the door to Colonel Shryke's office burst open and Vance rushed in.

"What is the meaning of this?" Garratt demanded.

"Sergeant Vance, what's wrong?" Wolf added.

"Rull's back." Vance said, "He followed that guy from the dump all the way to a warehouse by the canal that runs through the city."

"That is where Adept Black said the group is known to hold meetings." Layne pointed out, "It's only natural that they would have a headquarters there."

"I don't know about headquarters, but they've got a fething armoury there." Vance replied, "Rull said he saw enough weapons to equip a company of troops, including Goliaths being converted into gun carriers."

"What sort of weaponry are we talking about here sergeant?" Shryke asked.

"Rull said a lot of it looked home made, simple stub guns and converted industrial tools. But it looks like they've got contacts in the PDF as well. Rull saw crates marked with official stamps."

"Do they have men to bear these arms?" Commissar Garratt asked.

"About a hundred or so from what Rull saw." Vance answered.

"If we delay that number could double." Trent said and Wolf nodded.

"Colonel if Second Platoon moves out now then maybe we can take them by surprise. At the very least we can survey the area before calling for reinforcements." she said.

"I thought you'd say that." Vance said, "I left the others getting ready to move out."

"We'll need transport though." Wolf added, "And I don't just mean those trucks we've been driving around in."

The barge was typical of the hundreds that made their way along the canal every day carrying cargo towards the port city on the coast of the continent. However, the cargo that this particular barge carried was human. Quinn and his squad of veterans had concealed themselves under tarpaulins on the deck of the barge to make it appear loaded while whatever ballast could be found had been tossed into the hold to make it sit lower in the water so that it would appear to be fully loaded.

Quinn peered out from under the tarpaulin towards the warehouse that Rull had identified as being the one used by the Church of the Approaching Emperor as its armoury.

"There's a dock." he said quietly, "That should be useful. Downs, Moss, prep the boats."

Their actions still concealed by the covers on the deck of the barge two of Quinn's squad dragged a pair of large canvas bags towards the stern and opened them up to reveal the inflatable packed boats inside them. For now the two veterans left these as they were, waiting to be told to do so before they pushed them over the side of the barge and inflated them.

"I see two sentries on the dock." he said into his microbead when he spotted a pair of men whose long overcoats did a poor job of concealing the crude sub machine guns they carried beneath them and just seconds later the two men collapsed and fell into the water one after another as they were struck by silenced sniper fire. Then there was the sound of a third body falling into the canal as another sentry on the opposite bank that Quinn had not noticed was shot before he could raise the alarm, "Nice one Rull." Quinn transmitted

before shutting off his microphone, "Okay, let's go." he said and Downs and Moss pushed the bags holding the inflatable boats over the back of the barge, keeping hold of the rope lines that protruded from them.

As soon as they hit the water the boat automatically inflated, forming a pair of small craft each large enough to carry half a dozen fully equipped men. While Downs and Moss held the boats in position behind the barge the rest of the squad climbed into them until their comrades were the only ones left aboard the barge and then they too climbed into the boats.

Quinn's men paddled their way to the bank of the canal, with one man in each boat pointing his shotgun ahead to cover the dock as they made their way stealthily towards it while the servitor controlling the barge continued along the canal as if nothing had happened. As soon as they reached the dock the Catachans disembarked from their boats without a word. The boats themselves were pushed beneath the part of the dock that overhung the water so that they would not be discovered and then Quinn led his men up the ramp leading towards the warehouse.

Knowing that there were two primary entrances to the warehouse, one on the side facing the dock and the other facing the street at the front of the building as well as a single smaller side door Quinn split his squad up. Leaving four men to cover the door near the dock, he took the others around the side of the building.

The veterans crouched as they moved, making sure that they stayed below the level of the windows so that they would not be seen from inside. As they approached the small side door Quinn heard the sound of it opening and he quickly drew his knife while behind him one of his men pointed a shotgun towards the door. A lone woman stepped out of the warehouse and immediately took a pack of Iho sticks from her pocket. She had just put one in her mouth and was about to light it when she noticed Quinn lunging towards her. Before she could scream he thrust his knife under her ribs, aimed upwards so it punctured one of her lungs on the way to her heart and she died without making a sound. Catching the body before it could hit the ground, Quinn placed it against the wall and then signalled to two of his men to remain by the side door while he led the rest of his squad towards the front of the warehouse.

The four Catachans came to a halt at the end of the side wall and Quinn peered around the front of the building to where he saw a cluster of men armed with the same style of home made automatic slug throwers as the sentries by the canal had been. Pulling back around the corner, Quinn held out his hand to the squad's vox operator and the man passed him the handset.

"Quinn to Wolf." Quinn said softly.

"Wolf here sergeant. Go ahead." Wolf's voice responded.

"Lieutenant my squad is in position. I've got people on all three entrances and the sentries by the water have been dealt with. But we've got about half a dozen out front, think you can deal with them?" Quinn said.

"No problem sergeant. Be ready to move when we arrive. Our ETA is six minutes." Wolf told him.

"Understood. See you in six minutes." Quinn replied and then he passed the vox handset back to its operator.

Each of the other squads that made up Second Platoon was at that moment flying above the city in Arvus lighters belonging to the Imperial Navy. Ordinarily Imperial Guard aerial assaults were carried out using some variant of the well armed Valkyrie transport, using its formidable armament to provide support for the troops on the ground. However, the design of the Valkyries was very distinctive and the sight of a group of these craft flying above the city would have risked alerting the members of the Church of the Approaching Emperor to the upcoming raid and for that reason alone Wolf had requested the use of the more ubiquitous Arvus pattern lighters. These box shaped craft were common in civilian as well as military service and they were a common enough sight in the skies over the capital that few people ever bothered to look up when one flew over.

"Pilot begin your descent." Wolf told the lighter's single pilot, "Signal the others to follow in accordance with the plan."

"You sure you're okay doing this?" Vance asked as Wolf then checked her descent harness again.

"I'll be fine." she replied, "This isn't the first time I've done a rope drop."

"The top link of your harness isn't fastened." Torrent then pointed out, reaching out to indicate the problem and Wolf frowned as she hurriedly finished fastening her safety harness. The harnesses that the Imperial Guard troops wore was designed to grip the rope they would be sliding down. In order to release the grip it was necessary to squeeze the roller mounted on the harness' front. If this was released then the harness would grip the rope again and the wearer would stop moving. This way if they were incapacitated for any reason they would not fall straight to ground and injure themselves.

"Target ahead." the pilot called out, "Two minutes." and Wolf nodded as the ramp at the rear of the lighter opened.

"Okay this is it. Everyone stand by for deployment." she added.

The first lighter to deploy its passengers did not drop them from the air. Instead its pilot flew right over the warehouse and set his craft down on the far side of a neighbouring building where it was out of sight of the cluster of people outside the front of the warehouse.

“Go! Go! Go!” the pilot shouted as the ramp dropped open but his passengers did not react until their own squad leader spoke.

“Ogryns out! Khor yelled and the abhumans rushed forwards, exiting the cramped interior of the lighter that had barely been large enough to contain them as fast as they could.

Even though they did not see where the lighter landed or who got out of it, the sentries posted outside the warehouse still looked upwards as the craft flew over and in this moment of distraction Quinn and his men struck.

“Go!” Quinn said and he and the rest of his team leapt around the corner and opened fire at the sentries. Out of the four Quinn and his squad’s vox operator were armed with shotguns, the other two veterans carried a flamer and meltagun. However, none of these weapons were suited to a stealthy assault and so all of them were slung in favour of silence stub guns they carried as backup weapons. Firing these as rapidly as they could, the four veterans sent a hail of bullets at the sentries before they even knew that they were under attack.

Just as the sentries were falling, the Arvus lighters carrying the rest of Second Platoon descended over the warehouse and hovered right above it, the Catachan troops sliding down ropes onto the roof. As she landed on the roof Wolf reached to release her harness so that Commissar Layne could follow her down but she found that the mechanism appeared jammed

“What’s the hold up lieutenant?” Layne asked via his microbead as Wolf continued to struggle with her harness while the rest of her command section came down the other rope.

“My harness is jammed. I can’t release from the line.” Wolf replied.

“All down apart from the leash.” Vance told her as Veneel then landed on the roof beside Wolf.

“I knew you’d screw this up. Just cut the line.” Torrent said, drawing her knife and dashing over to Wolf. Then with a single stroke of her blade she cut through the rope connecting Wolf to the hovering lighter, leaving it slightly too short for someone to be able to slide all the way down from the lighter to the roof.

“Commissar can you transfer to the other rope?” Wolf asked.

“Negative lieutenant, there’s no time.” Layne replied, “The lighters are pulling out. We’ll discuss your error back at camp. Layne out.” and then in unison the hovering lighters ascended away from the roof and flew off before the occupants of the warehouse came outside to see what was going on.

“Told you it would work.” Torrent said and Vance smiled.

“Yes you did.” he said.

“Told him what? Torrent, what did you do?” Wolf asked.

“Your medicae applied surgical adhesive to the line release on your harness lieutenant.” Veneel said, “When you closed it, it locked in place.”

“Now we don’t have that leash breathing down our necks.” Vance said and Wolf frowned.

“And I’m the one who’ll be in trouble for it.” she said and Torrent shrugged.

“So?” she asked.

“Just ask the cogboys for some solvent when we get back.” Vance said, “Nobody will be any the wiser. Now shall we get moving or would you rather wait here on this roof all day?”

“Let’s move.” Wolf ordered.

Every squad in Second Platoon made their entry into the warehouse simultaneously. Quinn’s veterans forced open all of the doors together and tossed in stun grenades, the massive burst of light and sound produced by these disorientating the occupants long enough for the squads on the roof to trigger breaching charges that cut holes in it large enough for them to drop more ropes down through. There was no time to fix harnesses to these ropes and so the Catachans then slid down them without any form of safety precautions, instead relying on their own skill and the limited distance they would have to fall should anything go wrong as they made their entry into the warehouse.

Despite the use of stun grenades, the sheer size of the warehouse combined with the sections of the building that were walled off from the rest meant that some of the cultists inside remained unaffected and the sound of the multiple explosions alerted them to the fact that they were under attack. Emerging from an office with a pistol in his hand, one of the cultists was just in time to see a member of First Squad land right in front of him with his back towards him and he shot the Catachan before he could turn around. The cultist’s victory was short lived, however as Molla himself then landed right in front of him as well and head butted him hard enough that his pistol fell from his grasp as he staggered backwards before Molla followed this up with a shot

from his las pistol to the cultist's chest.

Elsewhere Mayer and his small squad came down on one of the raised walkways above the main area of the warehouse. This was deliberate on Mayer's part and he and his men quickly unslung their lasguns and aimed them downwards.

"Eight o'clock!" Mayer snapped as he saw several cultists hurriedly unpacking a heavy stubber and belts of ammunition. Knowing that this weapon could tear through the Catachan's light flak jackets, Mayer and his men opened fire on the cultists from above. Partially sheltered by the crates filled with weapons and ammunition, the cultists were able to take cover as soon as the first of them was hit but Mayer's squad succeeded in preventing them from getting the powerful belt fed weapon into action while the rest of Second Platoon was entering the warehouse.

Still using their silenced stub pistols, Quinn's veterans came through the warehouse doorways as soon as they could after the stun grenades had gone off and they did not give the dazed cultists they saw time to recover their senses before opening fire on them. When their magazines were emptied most of the squad switched to their shotguns, only the three armed with the squads support weapons, two flamers and a meltagun, reloaded and kept firing with their pistols in the confined space of the warehouse.

When her command section dropped through the roof and landed towards the rear of the warehouse Wolf let the rest of the squad concentrate on shooting at the nearby cultists while she did her best to take in her surroundings, attempting to isolate whatever leadership the cultists had so that it could be targeted. She could see that the description of the size and scope of the Church of the Approaching Emperor's supply of weapons had been accurate. There were hundreds of crates in the warehouse as well as light vehicles and several more heavier Goliath trucks for transport. Worryingly Wolf also saw that the church had been able to add an armoured vehicle, a light tank that sported an auto cannon in its turret. This was of a design not used by the Imperial Guard and far lighter and less well protected than an Imperial Guard Leman Russ main battle tank or space marine Predator medium tank but it could still prove deadly against a force that lacked armoured support of its own.

"In there lieutenant." Veneel said suddenly from behind Wolf and he pointed towards an office at one side of the warehouse, "Whatever power these cultists have, it is strongest in there."

Wolf was about order her squad to advance towards the office when all of a sudden three cultists armed with crude sub machine guns appeared between her and the door and opened, forcing her squad to take cover behind a van that began to rapidly fill with holes as the cultists attempted to shoot straight through it.

"Can anyone get to the office along the east wall?" Wolf signalled using her microbead, "Adept Veneel has identified that as the source of the enemy's leadership."

"Lieutenant this is Mayer, I see more than a dozen enemy around that door. We can't hit them from this angle."

"This is Grey, we're heading there now but there's a lot of fire." Grey added.

There was then a loud roar as Khor and his ogryns arrived and came charging through the large front entrance to the warehouse that Quinn and his men had left open and as soon as the abhumans entered the building they began shooting. The sound of seven ripper guns firing together drowned out almost every other sound as the ogryns fired almost indiscriminately, Khor pointing out the directions that they were to focus in. Though powerful, the ripper guns were still just shotguns and they lacked the same penetrating power that even lasguns possessed and so the immediate effect of this fire was to force the cultist force present to seek cover while their stockpiled crates of weaponry bore the brunt of the ogryns' assault. Taking maximum advantage of this, the Catachans pushed forwards wherever they could and one of Quinn's veterans got close enough to an office that he was able to toss a fragmentation grenade through a hole that had already been blasted in the wall. Seconds later there was an explosion and the door to the office was blown outwards by the force of the blast in the confined space.

Realising that the sheer firepower possessed by the ogryns was more than a match for any small arms an ordinary human could use, a trio of cultists made a break for the light tank that was close by their position. A shot from one of Mayer's squad struck one of the three and he fell dead just short of the armoured vehicle while the other two were able to quickly clamber inside. They were not merely seeking shelter from the Imperial Guard's shooting, however and seconds later there was a rumbling sound as the tank's engine started up and this was followed by the turret swinging around to point in the direction of the ogryns. The sound of the auto cannon as it fired a single round echoed around the inside of the warehouse, momentarily stunning everyone inside apart from the pair of cultists inside the tank itself. The projectile fired from the cannon was intended to be able to destroy light armoured vehicles while still being able to at least harass more heavily armoured ones and so when it struck one of Khor's squad it punched a hole the width of a man's fist right the way through the abhuman and still had sufficient energy as it came out the other side to also penetrate the wall of the warehouse.

"We have to take out that tank." Wolf ordered, "I don't care how."

Nodding, her command section's grenadier holstered the stub gun he had been using and unslung his grenade launcher. Working the selector, he chambered an armour piercing krak grenade and launched the

projectile at the tank. The round struck the vehicle on the side and blew off one of its wheels, but aside from rendering the tank immobile it did nothing to prevent it firing again. Before this happened though the tanks turret turned in the direction of Wolf's command squad and then the heavy stubber mounted beside its main gun opened fire, sending a hail of bullets towards them and cutting down the grenadier before he could get off a second shot.

"Jackson!" Quinn snapped as the tanks turret began to turn back towards the ogryns, "Melt that thing." "Gladly sergeant." the other veteran replied as he holstered his pistol. Then he unslung the meltagun from his back and engaged the power up sequence.

The tank fired a second round from its main gun towards Khor and his ogryn squad but this time the shot narrowly missed the abhumans, instead passing through the warehouse wall and continuing into the grounds of a neighbouring building where it struck a container of something volatile that promptly exploded to send a plume of fire skywards. Inside the tank the gunner hurried to adjust his aim as the ogryns retaliated by firing their ripper guns at the armoured vehicle. They had little hope of inflicting any damage against the vehicle's armoured hull but they still tried anyway.

"Melta firing." Jackson called out as he aimed the specialist weapon. Meltaguns fired incredibly powerful beams of energy over a limited distance but inside the warehouse this lack of range was not an issue. Aimed centrally at the side armour of the tank rather than the slightly thicker front plating, the beam from the meltagun burned right through its hull in an instant and passed through the fighting compartment. The Catachan had deliberately aimed away from the vehicle's fuel tanks to try and avoid triggering an explosion inside the warehouse that could have brought the entire structure crashing down around Second Platoon. The path of the beam took it right through the gunner's position and the man screamed briefly as he was roasted alive inside the tank. Though the beam missed him by more than a metre, his comrade did not have any opportunity to escape from the tank. On its way out of the far side of the vehicle, the melta beam burned its way through a case of ammunition for the heavy stubber in the turret and all of the rounds contained inside it were triggered at once. Lacking the power to pierce the tank's armour, these bounced around inside randomly and the driver was hit repeatedly and died in moments.

With the tank destroyed there was nothing to stop Khor leading his ogryns onwards and he grinned as he stood up straight.

"Ogryns! Charge!" he yelled and the remaining half dozen abhumans roared loudly as they charged towards the nearest group of cultists, five men taking cover behind a stack of cases marked as the property of the planetary defence force. Their hiding place proved to be no protection against the massive abhumans who simply smashed right through the barricade, kicking the cases aside in their rush to get at the cultists behind them before swinging their heavy ripper guns like clubs and beating the cultists to death.

Wolf saw that a pair of cultists who had been blocking her command section's advance towards the office Veneel had singled out as the key location inside the warehouse had suddenly broken from cover and she shot one of them in the back while Vance placed two shots into the other, the first into the man's leg so that he fell face down onto the floor and then a second shot to finish him off before he could make any attempt to take out any of the Catachans before he died.

"Come on." Wolf said, "We can make it." and she began to run toward the office herself.

"Lieutenant get down!" Molla yelled from close by and all of a sudden wolf was knocked off her feet as the Catachan squad leader tackled her moments before a burst of bullets flew over their heads, "Looks like those two aren't the only ones on the move." Molla commented while he was still lying on top of Wolf.

"Well perhaps if you get off me I could see for myself." Wolf replied as she wriggled out from under him. Then she looked around and she saw that Molla was right. All around the warehouse the cultists were retreating away from Second Platoon, however they were not making any attempt to reach any visible exit. Instead the office was where they were falling back to.

"The office!" Wolf shouted, "Secure the office!" and then there was a crackling sound as Veneel unleashed a storm of psychic lightning that engulfed a group of cultists before they could make it to the office door. This gave Wolf's command section as well as First Squad the opening they needed to charge up to the office door and a swift kick from Molla to the lock broke it open. As the door crashed open Wolf and Molla both got a look at what was inside and they saw three robed men standing behind an ordinary looking desk. One of them was taller than the others and the pair immediately recognised his face from the leaflet Grey had been given when his squad had been ambushed as the publicly declared leader of the Church of the Approaching Emperor. Molla pushed ahead of Wolf and aimed his las pistol at the cult leader but before he could pull the trigger the other man swept his arm out towards Molla and in the process he unleashed a wave of psychic power that manifested as a powerful telekinetic blast that hurled Molla back against the wall. One of Molla's men leant around the door frame and fired a swift burst from his lasgun that struck one of the other men before the third suddenly dropped his robe as he raised a simple revolving stub pistol and aimed it at the Catachan. In the process of doing this he revealed that he possessed a third arm that ended in a three clawed hand. Firing the pistol until the cylinder was emptied, the mutant hit the Catachan several times only to then be shot by Wolf. However, his action delayed the storming of the office long enough for the cult

leader to duck behind his desk and vanish from sight.

"Torrent, check on Molla." Wolf ordered as her command section rushed into the office. Then she and Vance both circled around the desk from opposite directions, making sure that if the renegade psyker attempted to make use of his powers again he could target only one of them. This proved to be unnecessary though when they both rounded the desk to find an open trap door behind it but no sign of the cult leader, "Oh great." Wolf said, looking at Vance, "Where do you suppose that leads?"

"Down." Vance replied.

12.

Another stun grenade was dropped down the shaft beneath the hatch to clear out any cultists that may have been lurking at the bottom, waiting for the first Imperial Guardsman to climb down after the leader. Quinn and his veteran squad then descended down the ladder and found them selves in a crude chamber that had been dug beneath the city. Three equally crude tunnels led from this chamber. The floor of both the chamber and tunnels was made of stone and although it was scuffed in places there were no fresh tracks to indicate which way the cult leader had fled.

"Oh great. Cultists in tunnels." Quinn said, "Last time we were in one of these we ended up in the middle of a human sacrifice."

"What was that sergeant?" Wolf asked as she climbed down the shaft with her command section as well as Veneel after Quinn's squad.

"Just remembering happy times lieutenant." he answered, "So which way do you want to go?"

"Adept Veneel, do you sense anything?" Wolf said, turning to the psyker.

"That way." he said pointing down one of the tunnels, "But we should be cautious. There is something else down here with us, I'm certain of it."

"Sergeant Quinn lead the way please, but proceed with caution." Wolf said and Quinn nodded as he raised his shotgun and began to advance down the tunnel. Then Wolf activated her microbead so that she could talk to the troops she had left up in the warehouse, "There's a tunnel system down here." she signalled, "It's pretty cramped so everyone with a rifle had better switch to their sidearm. I want Corporal Mayer's team to hold the chamber at the bottom of the shaft while Khor's ogyrns hold the warehouse, the last thing we need is to be cut off"

"Understood lieutenant. We're on our way down." Molla responded.

As Second Platoon followed the mysterious tunnel beneath the city they found that although it was winding there were no junctions, suggesting that it had been dug to specifically connect two locations together. Wolf attempted to use her dataslate to plot where under the city they were located, but the signals required to determine a position could not penetrate the tunnels and so she gave up, putting the device back in her webbing. Just as she was doing this Quinn brought the platoon to a halt.

"Something different up ahead." he signalled using his microbead.

"Can you be more specific sergeant?" Wolf responded.

"The tunnel slopes upwards ahead. I think that we're about to reach wherever it is that this tunnel leads." Quinn replied.

"Very well sergeant, proceed." Wolf told him.

Moving up the tunnel Quinn saw that it came to a sudden end in a solid looking door that was set into a concrete wall and he and his men positioned themselves to move through it, Quinn and one of his men placing themselves either side of it while the others hung back to cover the opening.

"On three." Quinn said and the Catachan on the other side of the door nodded., "Okay. One. Two. Three!"

Quinn then fired his shotgun twice, blasting the door off its hinges before the other Catachan dived through the opening into the room beyond. Quinn was right behind the first man through the door and he watched in horror as an alien with four arms, two of which ended in three clawed hands just like the mutant in the warehouse leapt down from one of the shipping containers that filled the massive chamber that the Catachans had emerged into. This creature let out a screeching sound as it descended and the Catachan who had led the way through the door raised his shotgun. However, this gesture was too little and too late as the creature landed right in front of him and with a single swipe of a clawed hand it ripped open his chest. "Genestealer!" Quinn yelled and his shotgun boomed as he fired it. The creature let out another screech and staggered backwards before Quinn shot it again and it collapsed.

Behind him the rest of his squad began to rush through the doorway, spreading out before they could be attacked while clustered together.

"Watch out above you." Quinn warned them, "These things jump."

"Sergeant Quinn, what happened?" Wolf asked as Second Platoon's command section came rushing out of the doorway behind him.

"Looks like Temperatus has got itself a Genestealer infestation lieutenant." Quinn replied and he kicked the corpse of the creature lying dead on the floor.

"That explains the strange psychic connection I sensed." Veneel said, "It is known that Genestealers shared a telepathic link with their brood."

"And by brood you mean-" Vance began.

"Those mutants with the extra arms." Torrent interrupted, "They're hybrids. Part human, part Genestealer."

Wolf turned around as Molla and Grey were leading their squads out of the tunnel behind her.

"How much of that did you two catch?" she asked.

"Enough." Molla replied.

"Good." Wolf said, plucking a krak grenade from her webbing and passing it to Molla, "Sergeant I want you to collapse that tunnel. This place is obviously some sort of nest for these things and I don't want any of them escaping."

"What's your plan?" Vance said as Molla was taking the grenade.

"Simple," Wolf said, "after the tunnel is collapsed we exit the building and surround it. Then we burn it to the ground."

"What about the contents of all these containers?" Grey asked, looking around at the large shipping container that filled the building.

"If there is any genuine cargo in any of them then the owners can file a claim with their insurers. But I'd rather not be facing Genestealers in close combat." Wolf said.

"Okay you heard the lieutenant." Vance said, "Let's move."

As most of Second Platoon's squads began to move away from the tunnel entrance Molla stepped back inside and went several metres along to make sure that he was well underground as he looked up at the ceiling. Spotting a narrow crevasse, he pushed the krak grenade up into it so that the explosive was wedged in place but there was still room for the lever to be released. Then he pulled out the pin and ran back out of the doorway.

"Fire the hole!" he shouted and seconds later there was an explosion as the shaped charge contained inside the krak grenade went off, directing the full force of its explosive content upwards. This shattered the rock above the tunnel and the ceiling fell in, blocking the tunnel completely. Molla knew that the explosive power of just one krak grenade would not collapse enough of the tunnel to prevent someone with even basic digging tools from clearing it eventually but he also knew that with what Wolf had planned there would be no time to dig through the debris now blocking it.

"That's our job done." he told his squad, "Now let's get out of here before any more of those Genestealers can find us."

The size of the storage facility meant that the Catachans switched back to their primary weapons rather than using their more compact stub pistols and as they moved between the stacks of shipping containers in search of an exit they opened fire at the slightest hint of movement from any direction.

The presence of further Genestealers inside the building was demonstrated when a clawed hand tore through the metal of the container it had been hiding in as if it was nothing more than paper. However, in creating an exit for itself the creature also gave away its presence to Wolf's command section just outside and as the Genestealer was widening the split it had just created it was met with a volley fire from the las pistols of Wolf, Vance and Torrent as well as the lasgun belonging to Kline.

The alien screamed in pain from each hit until a lucky shot pierced its brain and it dropped dead on the spot but this was not the end of the matter as a second of the aliens leapt over the body of the first and through the hole and it landed right on top of Wolf, knocking her to floor. Pointing her las pistol upwards at the Genestealer, Wolf was about to fire it when the alien knocked her hand aside and sent the weapon flying from her grasp. However, Vance reacted before it could strike more directly at wolf and as the Genestealer brought down a clawed hand the Catachan was swinging his traditional blade towards it. Meeting one another in mid swing, the long knife blade sliced right through the Genestealer's arm and a clawed hand fell on top of Wolf, prompting her to scream and push it away as she was sprayed with alien blood. The Genestealer then turned towards Vance as if to attack him but as it opened its mouth he thrust his las pistol forwards and fired a shot directly into its brain.

"Come on lieutenant." Vance said as he reached down to pick up the severed Genestealer's claw, "We can't be lying about all day."

Wolf frowned as she got to her feet and looked for her las pistol.

"It's over here." Torrent told her, kicking the pistol back towards her.

"Thanks." Wolf replied as she picked it up and double checked it. As she did this there was a shout of warning from somewhere out of sight that was accompanied by the telltale flash of lasgun fire directed upwards.

"The roof!" Grey broadcast using his microbead, "They're in the fething roof."

Looking upwards the Catachans saw that the roof of the storage facility had metal rails suspended from it. These permitted servitor-driven cargo cranes to move around, picking up and collecting storage containers from anywhere and delivering them to the loading bay. However, while there was no sign of any of the cranes it was obvious that there were Genestealers living among the rails. These were not the purestrain alien killing machine though, instead they possessed the all too human features of hybrids, the descendants of human parents who had been infected by the gene altering bite of a Genestealer. Unlike the examples encountered thus far by Second Platoon that could have passed for human with the aide of a heavy coat and hat to cover any physical abnormalities, these were from earlier generations, when the original Genestealer infection was stronger and there was no hiding what they were.

Fortunately the structure was so tall that for the creatures to simply drop straight down to the floor would injure them and so they could be seen making their way towards the metal supports positioned at regular intervals to keep both the tracks and the roof itself from falling. The flashes of lasgun fire from Second Squad could be seen striking out towards one of these and there was a screeching sound as a hybrid was hit mid climb and lost its grip, sending it plummeting to its death.

"Quickly." Wolf said, "We have to find a way out of here."

"Over there!" Torrent exclaimed and she pointed to where the stacks of containers could be seen to come to an end at a concrete wall.

"Good work." Wolf responded, "If we follow that we're bound to find an exit."

Elsewhere among the maze like stacks of containers Quinn and his squad came to an open area, most of which was at a lower level than the floor around it. This lower portion ran right up to one of the walls where a large open doorway identified it as a loading dock. In addition to providing his squad with an exit the view through the doorway revealed where the tunnel from the canal had led the Catachans. Outside Quinn could see the control tower of the city's aerospace port as well as numerous aircraft and orbit capable shuttles lined up along the terminal structure.

"Looks like these thing set up a nest right where they first arrived on the planet." Quinn said to his squad.

Then he activated his microbead, "I've found the loading dock." he signalled to the other squads of Second Platoon. Listen for my shots." and then he fired his shotgun twice in rapid succession up towards the roof.

"Great work sergeant." Wolf responded, "We've just spotted a fire exit. We'll meet you outside. Just be ready to torch this place."

As Quinn's squad rushed out through the open doorway he had his men deploy to watch more of the building. Fortunately there appeared to only be a handful of windows that were high up on the wall as a precaution against burglary and so his remaining men were able to cover the entire side of the building. He made sure to keep the two veterans armed with flamers close to him from where they could easily discharge their weapons into the loading bay.

"Sergeant Quinn!" Wolf called out and Quinn turned to see her running towards him on her own.

"Lieutenant." he said, "What happened to Vance and the others. Are they-"

"They're fine. I left them by the emergency exit." Wolf said without giving him chance to finish his question, "Now what about First and Second Squads?"

"Well here's Grey now." Quinn answered, pointing into the loading bay just as Second Squad arrived and jumped down to leave the building.

"Sergeant I want your men to spread out around the wall on the far side of the building." Wolf told them as they were exiting the structure, "Make sure that there are no exits we've missed. Go that way, my section is covering the other wall."

Grey just nodded and waved at his squad to follow him.

"That just leaves Molla." Quinn said.

"We'll give him as long as we can." Wolf said, "But if it looks like the Genestealers are trying to get out then we'll have to torch the building anyway. We'll try and direct him to the same door my section got out through if that happens."

Quinn did not reply to this. He knew how serious a Genestealer infestation could be, but that did not take anything away from the fact that Wolf was talking about setting fire to a building that still had Catachans, men and women Quinn knew and consider friends, inside it.

An alien screeching sound then caused Wolf and Quinn to both turn their attention back towards the loading dock as a purestrain Genestealer leapt down from the closest storage container visible through the open doorway. Wolf was about to give the order to use the veterans' two flamers to kill the creature as well as set fire to the building when a burst of fire from a lasgun struck it from behind and it tumbled forwards as it died.

"Waiting for me?" Molla asked as First Squad came running out of the loading dock towards where Wolf and Quinn were stood.

"Sergeant I don't think I've ever been so glad to see you." Wolf responded and then she turned to Quinn,

"Okay torch it." she said and Quinn nodded before looking at his men.

"You heard the lieutenant." he told them, "Make it burn." and the two flamer armed veterans fired their weapons together, sending jets of burning promethium into the building.

"So do you think that guy we followed into there got out ahead of us?" Wolf said as Second Platoon watched the building continue to burn. The aerospace port's dedicated fire department had responded to the flames in a matter of minutes, only for the confused watch commander to be ordered at gunpoint to keep his men back and allow the flames to do their work. The firefighters and their equipment were still deployed around the burning building, but they were limiting their role to making sure that the flames did not spread to any of the aerospace port's other buildings.

"Does it matter?" Vance replied, "We know that their cult was bigger than what we saw. There were weapons in that warehouse for a force several times as big as the one we fought and we've no idea how many more of

those armouries they've got.”

“The man we've been assuming was their leader, their magus, looked human.” Veneel pointed out, “He was obviously of a later generation of hybrid. That means that the Genestealers have probably been on Temperatus for around a century. That is a lot of time for them to be able to spread out and infiltrate the planet's society and government.” and Wolf nodded in agreement.

“That means that even some Imperial authorities must be suspect.” she said.

“There could be Genestealers anywhere.” Vance added and at that moment Wolf felt something on her shoulder. Looking around she saw the unmistakable sight of a Genestealer's claw resting beside her head and she leapt back, screaming out loud as she reached for her sidearm. However, as she moved the claw fell to the ground and as the Catachans around her laughed she saw that it was the severed claw that Vance had taken as a trophy after saving her life.

“You bastards!” she shouted at the laughing Catachans, “You fething bastards. You terrified me.”

“That explains the smell then. Just like when we first met.” Grey commented and Wolf scowled at him angrily.

“You know I don't think that's ever going to get old.” Vance said as he picked up the claw and waved it in Wolf's face, prompting another scowl from her.